

# Politics on Display

*by Jinrui Xi*

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**What happens when the curtain is briefly lifted on Chinese opaque politics? This article examines the importance and reception of the 19<sup>th</sup> Chinese Communist Party Congress which took place last fall.**

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## **Absolute Security for the CCP Congress**

Maintaining stability over a society with more than 1.3 billion people in China has been an abiding priority for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This priority appears even more salient in the wake of its 19<sup>th</sup> Congress, a time when Beijing is set to cement its political centralization, foster a united national front and project a bright future for China in the decades to come. The Party's resolve to keep the society in order and ensure a successful operation of the CCP Congress permeates the Chinese society, from tightened security in the subways of major cities to a visible increase of paramilitary personnel presence on the Tian'anmen Square in Beijing, from a myriad of political meetings focusing on how to carry out the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress successfully to administrative restrictions, to the point of not even allowing academic conferences.

Incidents that would make the Chinese government feel most threatened are collective activities, for such occurrences provide more ripe opportunities for rival political mobilization or even unrest. As a result, the regime has resorted to its maximum capacity to disperse collective gatherings and atomize congregational events. In this digital age of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the most visible measure of the CCP's restricting governance is online censorship.<sup>1</sup> The CCP certainly understands the potential perils online freedom can inflict upon its domestic

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<sup>1</sup> Mu Chuanshan. 2017. China's Communist Party: 3 Successes and 3 Challenges. *The Diplomat*. <<https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/hong-kong-in-xi-jinpings-new-era/>>

governance, such as the social divides that social media caused in Spain in the midst of the Catalanian crisis.<sup>2</sup>

The Internet, as the Chinese government perceives, can be useful for the general good of the society, if properly controlled, but can be rather hazardous if left unchecked. To ensure a supportive online environment for the CCP Congress and block any possible pathways for potential uprisings, not only were VPNs – that many in China use to access foreign websites such as Facebook and Twitter – cracked down, regular web contents were also heavily monitored, to such an extent that many found it hard to even gain online access to university libraries. Yet, political events organized by the authorities have always enjoyed unobstructed green passes in China. Any other sector of the society must make way for political ambitions set by the central authorities. That was the scenario in China prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress.

## **Unveiling the Secret**

On Oct 25, 2017, I was teaching an undergraduate class on Comparative Politics in Jinan University, Guangzhou, China, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) unveiled its new leadership, the top seven Politburo Standing Committee members, in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, at the end of its 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.

The CCP Congress gathered more than 2,000 CCP members from across the country to hear the national report by President Xi Jinping, which is similar to the State of the Union Address in the US. Xi's marathon speech lasted for about three hours and covered all the areas concerning state governance, such as the economy, the military, China's sovereignty and social welfare. This report was later seen by the media in China as an indisputable blueprint for ideological indoctrination, national development and vision for the future. In the immediate wake of Xi's report, the entire assembly broke down into a series of "auditing" sessions, which were basically discussion forums of departmentalized issues.

These sessions were not designed, however, to debate on sweeping alternative ideas or plans, but rather to reinforce what had already been laid out by the central authorities. Important decisions in China are usually made in an opaque fashion. The unveiling part mentioned earlier occurred at the end of this grand political feast. It was broadcast live on most major TV channels and across the news outlets online. I clicked on one of them online and projected it on the screen of the classroom. It was not hard to find.

Though my students are not an ideal sample of public reactions for China, their reactions regarding the Congress can nevertheless provide us with useful insights into how it

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<sup>2</sup> Alvaro Santana Acuña. 27 Oct 2017. "Spain's Digital Civil War.", *Books and Ideas*, ISSN : 2105-3030. URL: <http://www.booksandideas.net/Spain-s-Digital-Civil-War.html>.

is regarded in China and even beyond. Students in my class chanted and clapped as President Xi Jinping led his men onto the platform and introduced them to the press. On screen now was a straight line of black suits with stern faces, the peculiar outlook of China's statesmanship. The group of gentlemen, solemnly standing on the façades of Xi, commands not only a high volume of respect and tribute from the Chinese public, but also represents the power core of a country with the world's largest population and second largest economy.

The exciting welcome by some students in my class of the new leadership was perhaps motivated by a mixture of different feelings. Some of that was simply a result of gazing upon something previously hidden being exposed. One of the chief characteristics of Chinese politics is its high secrecy, which, contrary to conventional perception, is not necessarily thought of as something shameful from the Chinese perspective, but rather as something noble. The candidate-selection and power assignment in Chinese politics are usually carried out behind closed doors. The top seven were not known to the public until the last moment, the moment when Xi led them out. The key is that the Chinese public seems to respect that. How the Chinese respect the opaque nature of the decision-making process in Chinese politics is perhaps partially explained by the increasing public trust the Chinese people put in the national government. Employing the latest empirical survey data, the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer reports that "trust in (the Chinese) government remains strong, which is an endorsement of the Chinese government's overall performance in steering the Chinese society and economy."<sup>3</sup>

Other feelings might arise regarding the reshuffle of the top seven. While Xi cemented his power in the new leadership, he brought in new blood and talents from different fields of the political spectrum. Students were probably excited to see the change and sense the freshness of these new faces. As one of my students posted online, "Wow, five new ones at once!" The new Politburo now incorporated a unique figure, Wang Huning, a political scientist by training and a former professor in Fudan University in Shanghai, China, who used to serve as an advisor to two previous Chinese presidents. His arrival in the Politburo impressed many Chinese and immediately brought to the fore his academic credentials and previous academic works. It was the first time in China's modern history for a scholar to serve among the top few (9 Politburo members in the past and 7 today).

The other four new members among the top seven have mostly served in the past in more functional departments as Xi's allies<sup>4</sup>. The incorporation of Wang Huning and the absence of a likely successor to Xi among the top seven both make the Politburo look more like Xi's cabinet with strategic advisors and aids than a power-sharing institution that used to afford more deliberation and power balancing.<sup>5</sup> The now more hierarchical power distribution

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<sup>3</sup> 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer. <https://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer>

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed profile of the top seven, see Pratik Jakhar. 25 Oct 2017. "Who's Who? Meet the Chinese New Leaders." *BBC*. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-41746245>>

<sup>5</sup> Xi, Jinrui. 1 Nov 2017. "Hong Kong in Xi Jinping's 'New Era'." *The Diplomat*. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/hong-kong-in-xi-jinpings-new-era/>.

in the Politburo suggests that Xi has now at his disposal more concentrated power and less disputed authority to achieve the grand and ambitious goals he has envisioned for China in the decades to come.

Some students showed their excitement for the unveiling probably due to their staunch support for the CCP and appreciation of its contribution to China's rise. Over its 96 years of total history and 68 years in power, the CCP has acquired the essential skills to build its legitimacy within the Chinese history, its culture and contemporary development. It has learned how to present it as what the public needs. The CCP has contended that the history and the future of China have been intertwined with and shaped by the CCP. The CCP has framed its legitimacy upon a historic narrative that China would not be where it is today without the CCP and, by the same token, it would go nowhere without the CCP in the future<sup>6</sup>. For example, in his 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress address, Xi devoted a considerable portion of his speech to the historic mission of the CCP, conjuring the vision of the tremendous responsibility the CCP ought to shoulder in order to steer China into a better future.

Another approach that the CCP employs to win governing legitimacy is through elevating the Party above the state<sup>7</sup>. Whereas political parties in most countries work to compete for power *within* the State, the CCP ranks itself as an even more supreme status *than* the State. Throughout the CCP's history, it has narrated its development as leading a once weak and fragmented China into an independent state with protected national sovereignty and prosperity. In that sense, the CCP "redeems" the Chinese state. For example, the title of the CCP is always placed higher than the title of the Chinese state. When introducing President Xi Jinping, the state media always announces his titles in this particular order: Party Secretary, President of the Country, Chairman of Central Military Committee Xi Jinping. The order of these titles matters, because the Party always comes first, even before the state, in all political affairs in China.

While the foreign media, during and right after the CCP Congress, were largely engrossed with the question whether or not Xi will appoint anyone as his successor in the next five years, the answer to this concern did not seem to bother the Chinese media as much. If Xi were to follow the unwritten norm in presidential succession as his two predecessors did, he was expected to bring onboard the Politburo someone who is much younger, young enough not to surpass the age of 68 when that person is to retire from the presidency three terms later. This figure, if he were to appear, would have to spend the following five-year term emulating Xi as the Vice President and then ascend to presidency in 2022. The age limit of 68 is another unwritten norm stating that top leaders must be younger than 68 in order to allow the best and younger talents to ascend to this prominent position. In Xi's new team, no

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<sup>6</sup> Zhu, Yuchao. "Performance Legitimacy" and China's Political Adaptation Strategy." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16.2 (2011): 123-140.

<sup>7</sup> Zhu, Yuchao. "Performance Legitimacy" and China's Political Adaptation Strategy." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16.2 (2011): 123-140.

such successor could be identified. This led observers in the West to worry that Xi might be willing to break the protocol of presidential turnover and may intend to stay in power for a longer period of time.

However, this is not a big problem for the Chinese. The Chinese public, controlled or manipulated by the regime, is full of confidence and hope for a better China. They are less concerned about whether power is transferred to the next leader but more about what that person, when in power, can do for China's good. In other words, the Chinese seem willing to sacrifice institutions, such as power succession and democratic elections, for political and economic expediency. An authoritarian leader, as long as he is wise and efficient, is better than one who goes by principles but is slow-motioned. This is actually a commonplace for many Asian countries. Using the second wave of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), Shin and Park (2008) find that people in most East Asian countries tend to favor economic development and governing efficiency over political deliberation and political moderation, such as democracy (pp. 54).<sup>8</sup>

The Chinese enjoy the current status of China compared to what it was fifty or sixty years ago. The remarkable political and economic achievements are highlights of Xi's first five-year term. The Chinese media exudes a strong sense of contentment over how Xi has cracked down corruption and offered a better and cleaner "political environment". The fast annual GDP growth rate, which is now significantly slower but still sits at 6.7 percent, as well as the considerable development in infrastructure help the Chinese find contentment in the status quo. Chas W. Freeman, a senior fellow at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs in Brown University, in an interview told the reporter that China is not trying to start a revolution, it is trying to make money.<sup>9</sup> While China is still a developing country and is still far behind in many key technology areas, the Chinese seem to look more forward than to look around. They are ready for tomorrow.

Other students remained silent the whole time. The reaction of my students to the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress bears a good resemblance to that of China's general public. In China, all who appear publicly must drum a positive note with the status quo of China and its ruling regime. Political dissent or dissatisfaction does not tend to appear in public, especially at the heightened moment of the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress. Political dissidents are under special scrutiny.<sup>10</sup> While those who are climbing the social and political ladder might feel content,

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<sup>8</sup> Shin, Doh Chull and Chong-Min Park. 2008. "The Mass Public and Democratic Politics in South Korea: Exploring the Subjective World of Democratization in Flux" in (eds.) Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin, *How East Asians View Democracy* (Columbia University Press: New York), 39-60.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Scott Tyson. Jan 21, 2018. "Return to China: One reporter finds a nation that has gone from bicycles to bullet trains." *Christian Science Monitor*. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/return-china-one-reporter-finds-nation-gone-bicycles-110001508.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Denyer. 11 Nov 2017. "China's All-powerful Leader Should Heed the Lessons from History, Former Official Says." *The Washington Post*. <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/chinas-all-powerful-leader-should-heed-the-lessons-from-history-former-official-says/2017/11/09/22e7987a-c39a-11e7-a441-3a768c8586f1\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.621b9d5222e5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinas-all-powerful-leader-should-heed-the-lessons-from-history-former-official-says/2017/11/09/22e7987a-c39a-11e7-a441-3a768c8586f1_story.html?utm_term=.621b9d5222e5)>.

those who continue to feel disadvantaged and marginalized very likely feel the opposite. The voices of those downtrodden are often silenced and swept under the rug, some by force, some by self-censoring.

This is another abiding characteristic of the Chinese politics: it encourages uniformity, not diversity; it stresses communal obedience, not individualistic uprising. In Xi's CCP Congress report, he brought up the word "unity" 33 times to stress the point that different social factions must lean toward the leadership of the CCP to maintain national unity.<sup>11</sup> This vocabulary is used mostly in reference to potential rivalries in and outside China, for example, other political parties in China<sup>12</sup> and Chinese nationals living overseas. A close read of Xi's address reveals that the word "unity" is used most frequently when he touches upon the unification efforts of the CCP. The term unification refers to the CCP's endeavor to bring different factions together under the CCP's rule. These factions mainly include, according to Xi's address, political parties, ethnic groups, intellectuals, religious figures, businesses, sovereignty as well as Chinese nationals overseas.

## **Different Reactions in China and Abroad**

The CCP Congress, upon its closing, sparked two kinds of reactions in foreign media outlets, such as CNN, Yahoo, the Guardian and others. The first kind of reaction mostly sounds the alarm, warning that Xi may not intend to transfer power in five years.<sup>13</sup> Power succession in China is seen as very important to the foreign media because the chief landmark of a country's political reform is the change of approach in transferring power from an administration to the next one, or to transfer at all. China experienced smooth power transition in the presidency three times over the past two decades: from Deng to Jiang in 1992; from Jiang to Hu in 2002; and then from Jiang to the current president Xi in 2012. Scholars saw this consistent transfer of power as a promising sign of China's genuine efforts in political reform.<sup>14</sup> Smooth power succession provides predictability in China's politics and offers a "window for hope" for lower-rank hopefuls to climb up to the very top. However, once this power transition protocol is jeopardized, scholars fear that more instability and discontent may build up in Chinese politics.

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<sup>11</sup> The complete copy of Xi's address (in Chinese) can be found here: [http://www.china.com.cn/cppcc/2017-10/18/content\\_41752399.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/cppcc/2017-10/18/content_41752399.htm)

<sup>12</sup> There are eight major political parties other than the CCP in China. These parties serve in mostly consultative roles and they must acknowledge that the CCP is the only legitimate ruling political party in China.

<sup>13</sup> The topic of power succession in China has galvanized significant amount of attention from the foreign media. Reports on this topic covered pages after pages. An example of such report is BBC. 25 Oct 2017. "Politburo boys band? An alternative take on China's new leaders." <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-41744945>>.

<sup>14</sup> Zeng, Jinghan. "Institutionalization of the Authoritarian Leadership in China: A Power Succession System with Chinese Characteristics." *Contemporary Politics*. 20,3 (2014): 294-314.

By contrast, the second kind of reaction is the fear of the potential challenge China may bring to the existing international order, as Xi sits ready to stage an international campaign to maximize China's international influence. In particular, Xi's One Belt and One Road (B & R) Initiative has become the flagship of his foreign policy. The B&R Initiative is an architect of international economic integration to be led by China. It promotes the idea that China should revive the ancient "Silk Road" by improving infrastructures and establishing trade deals across the Middle East, through South Asia and reach beyond as far as the continent of Africa.<sup>15</sup> This vision initially drafted by Xi has not only been widely advertised and intensively discussed in China via the CCP's propaganda institution but it has also been garnering increasing attention from the international society. This has caused some outcry from the western media, CNN for example, for the vacuum that Trump's isolationist foreign policy has left open for China.<sup>16</sup> China's rise is somewhat regarded with skepticism by the western countries as an attempt to challenge the status quo.

However, the foreign media have slowly started to grapple with the positive political and economic implications that China will cause to the world after the CCP Congress. More news articles emerge, casting the Congress in a more positive light. This is the second kind of reaction. For instance, in all non-US editions, the *Time* magazine issued its cover on Nov 2 with the title "China Won" in both Chinese and English, the first time in its history to use two languages. The *Time's* article by Ian Bremmer argues that, despite the many challenges China will face in the coming decades, such as its authoritarian political system, its economy possesses the strongest momentum to push for new growth. This happened just a week before President Donald Trump made his official visit to China.

Within China, the CCP Congress has produced a massive, nationwide "studying" of the national address Xi delivered at the opening of the CCP Congress. Studying sessions are arranged across the nation to best understand and put into actions what the address has called the Chinese people to accomplish. The central Chinese government has deployed dozens of "proclamation teams (宣讲团)" to every region across China to preach the doctrines established in the past CCP Congress. Each of these teams is welcomed by top regional leaders and government officials. According to data published by *Netease*, during the ten days from Nov 1 to Nov 10, proclamation teams headed by top officials from Beijing have covered *all* of the major administrative regions in China. Among the 36 team leaders from Beijing, three are members of the Central Committee of the CCP.<sup>17</sup>

Political endorsement of Xi and the policies of the central government is usually a popular event here in China, particularly in academic institutions. Many universities have opened independent Xi centers, investing a great part of academic grants to study Xi's vision

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<sup>15</sup> For more details on the B&R Initiative, refer to Robin Brant. 12 May 2017. "What Is One Belt One Road?" <<http://www.bbc.com/news/av/business-39881895/what-is-china-s-one-belt-one-road>>.

<sup>16</sup> Ben Westcott. 4 Nov 2017. "Why China Won 2017 and How Donald Trump Helped Them Do It." *CNN*. <<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/03/asia/china-us-xi-trump/index.html>>

<sup>17</sup> Netease. <<http://news.163.com/17/1113/08/D341OIE00001899N.html>>.

and strategy.<sup>18</sup> This CCP Congress will very likely shape China's political discourses, academic research, social dialogues and folk talks in many years to come. The ideological ambitions set at this Congress will likely dominate the political life here in China. For instance, rhetoric in official events must fall in good alignment with the Xi Jinping Thought. With more political power concentrated in his hands, Xi can now more effectively push for political and economic reform.

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<sup>18</sup> Simon Denyer. 1 Nov 2017. "Chinese Universities Scramble to Open Centers to Study President Xi Jinping Thought." *The Washington Post*. <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/chinese-universities-scramble-to-open-centers-to-study-president-xi-jinping-thought/2017/11/01/a845e664-bed8-11e7-af84-d3e2ee4b2af1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/chinese-universities-scramble-to-open-centers-to-study-president-xi-jinping-thought/2017/11/01/a845e664-bed8-11e7-af84-d3e2ee4b2af1_story.html)>