

EXTRAORDINARY AND PLENIPOTENTIARY

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Special Supplement



The China Decade

■ Robert Lawrence Kuhn

Xi Jinping

The Chinese Dream of China's New President



I know Xi Jinping, China's new leader, and I shall tell you some of what I know.

Xi holds the three top positions in China: general secretary of the Communist Party of China, head of the ruling party; president of China, head of state; and chairman of the Central Military Commission, head of the military. Xi Jinping will likely lead China for a decade.

About six weeks after becoming China's top leader in late 2012, Xi announced what would become the hallmark of his administration. "The Chinese Dream," he said, when visiting the Road toward Rejuvenation exhibition at the National Museum in Beijing, is "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

The Chinese Dream is to achieve the "Two 100s": 1) The material goal of China becoming a "moderately well-off society" by 2020, around the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China; 2) The modernisation goal of China becoming a fully developed nation by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China.

The Chinese Dream has four parts: Strong China (economically, politically, diplomatically, and militarily); Civilised China (rich culture, high morals); Harmonious China (amity among social classes, minorities); Beautiful China (clean environment, minimum pollution).

What is "a moderately well-off society"? It is where all citizens, rural and urban, enjoy high standards of living in all aspects of life and society. This includes doubling 2010's GDP per capita by about 2020 (approaching \$10,000 per person), completing urbanisation by about 2030 (roughly one billion people, three quarters of China's population), achieving modernisation (China regaining its position as a world leader in science and technology as well as in economics and business), and appreciating Chinese civilisation and culture (China participating in all areas of human endeavour).

Who is this man responsible for making The Chinese Dream a reality?

Xi Jinping served for 25 years in China's administrative grassroots, running every level of government—village, county, city, province. He has lead three dynamic regions: Fujian Province, on the frontlines with Taiwan (37 million people; GDP \$270+ billion); Zhejiang Province, China's center of entrepreneurship (55 million people; GDP \$550+ billion; and Shanghai, China's commercial center (23 million people; GDP \$300+ billion). By population size, economic vitality and social complexity, Xi has lead the equivalent of three European nations.

Xi's reputation, said one literate minister, is "stable, serious, sophisticated, sincere." Xi's direct reports say he is easy to work with. "Don't tell me what you think I want to hear," Xi said to his staff. "Tell me what you really think." In describing Xi, Chinese officials call out about four characteristics: competence, knowledge, charisma, and leadership. They say he is thoughtful and compassionate, evincing professional leadership and personal trust. That's how people feel when they are with him. That's how I feel.

Xi has a quiet confidence undergirded by proficiency and experience. He is not given to radical change. His rule will be stable and steady—and with all China's problems, especially economic imbalances and social disparities, that's just what's needed. although xi was elected the Chinese way, there is general agreement that he is the right leader for the complex times.

Xi Jinping is the son of a revolutionary hero, Xi Zhongxun, who, under Deng Xiaoping, was a visionary reformer (a pioneering leader of Guangdong Province, the cradle of China's reforms). But in 1962, when Xi Jinping was nine-years-old, his distinguished father was purged and humiliated. A few years later, during the ideological madness of the Cultural Revolution, Xi Zhongxun was purged again. Jailed in one form or another for some 16 years, he was subjected to withering criticism and physical abuse.

It was a time of when China's urban youth were sent down to the countryside to learn from peasants, and as the son of an "anti-party" schemer, Xi Jinping was packed off to a poor, remote mountain village. He spent the next six years chopping hay, reaping wheat and herding sheep. He lived in a cave house. It took time but he adjusted to his new life, impressing older colleagues with his work ethic and personal modesty. He would carry a shoulder pole of twin 110-pound buckets of wheat for miles across mountain paths and

win wrestling matches with husky farmers.

He also read every book he could find. The locals went to his cave to hear his stories about history and the world beyond the mountains. Xi would scrounge for new books, reading them at night by the dim light of kerosene lamps, so he could learn and tell new stories.

Xi Jinping differs from his colleagues by his tumultuous experience as a youth and he was strengthened by the harsh experience. Although the offspring of a political leader (a millstone in Chinese politics), Xi cannot be accused of being pampered. Indeed, he is known for never losing his common man's touch. Xi said, "Many of my practical ideas stem from my life during that period, which has influenced me every minute, even till today. To truly understand the common folk and society is the most fundamental thing." For example, Xi has focussed on food quality. When leading Fujian Province, he improved the process "from farm to dining table."

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When, in 2005, I met then Zhejiang Party Secretary Xi Jinping, I gave him my book, the biography of former President Jiang Zemin. Smiling, Xi turned to a photo of Jiang singing with military women, and, pointing to one, said, "That's my wife!" Xi's wife, Peng Liyuan, is a famous folk singer in China—and until 2007 she was more famous than he!

When in 2006 my business partner, Adam Zhu, and I met Xi, he advised us how to tell China's story to the world. "To understand our dedication to revitalise the country, one should appreciate the pride that Chinese people take in our ancient civilisation," Xi said. "This is the driving force inspiring people today to build the nation. The Chinese people made great contributions to world civilisation and enjoyed long-term prosperity," he explained. "Then we suffered over a century of national weakness, oppression and humiliation. So we have deep self-motivation to build our country.

Xi explained that pursuing growth must be based on actual conditions. “We are always responsive to local realities by seeking truth from facts,” he said. “Before we implement new policies broadly, we always test them thoroughly at the grassroots level, gaining experience.” He stressed “people, not material, are what we focus on;” China’s driving force is science and technology (“we attach great importance to innovation”); and “in order to realise a well-off society, the biggest challenge is rural development.”

China’s leaders “constantly draw theoretical lessons from our work,” Xi said, “and use them to guide our practice.” These are not “long-winded theoretical exercises,” he added with a wry smile. “We don’t discuss these theories all day long without making any decisions. Leaders must be decisive and action oriented.” Xi Jinping’s personal motto: “Be proud, not complacent. Motivated, not pompous. Pragmatic, not erratic.”

In 2007, Xi was promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee—the nine leaders who ran the country (now seven). He oversaw the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which was a great success. Inspecting Hebei Province, Xi visited the county where he had worked in the early 1980s. His old colleagues were not surprised to find Xi to be the same person, still amiable and easygoing.

My own sense of Xi Jinping is that he is friendly, courteous, open-minded and engaging. A large man with a strong physical presence, he carries himself with the ease of someone comfortable with authority and empathetic with guests, yet with none of the airs of a high official impressed with his own status.

Recognising China’s “earthshaking change,” Xi advises officials to embrace more change—to “unswervingly continue to emancipate our minds and resolutely overcome the attitude of being satisfied with the status quo, the inertia of conservative and complaisant thinking, the fear of difficulties, and timid thinking.”

Xi’s people call attention to two traits needed for leading China: deep understanding of Chinese reality and broad appreciation of how the world works. Xi has visited 47 countries, eager to learn best practices from abroad in order to adapt them at home. He has visited the US five times and his daughter attended Harvard. Like his father, Xi is a pro-market reformer. When leading Fujian, Zhejiang and Shanghai, Xi met frequently with international business leaders, who regard Xi as someone who understands international commercial practices. Xi supports the private sector; I know this directly. His experience in Zhejiang Province, with small and mid-sized firms, gives him insight into the benefits, challenges and problems of private business.

Within his first month of national leadership, Secretary Xi directed officials to improve their work style and decrease their pomp and privileges. He decried the “empty talk” of long-winded speeches. Expensive meals and showy trips were banned.

It was a bracing challenge to the system, resonating with public anger and giving voice to public frustration. The new down-to-earth style was codified in a set of eight new rules. For example, official meetings were shortened, with no empty rhetoric and rigmarole. Official motorcades were curtailed. When leaders inspect local areas, there was “no welcome banner, no red carpet, no floral arrangement or grand receptions.”

Xi pledged to crack down on corrupt officials and strengthen checks and balances. “Power should be restricted by the cage of regulations,” he said. In the war against graft, Xi vowed to swat the “flies” (petty bureaucrats who aggravate the people) and tame the “tigers” (corrupt senior officials who amass fortunes). Xi’s words were strong, but the sacking of senior officials gave notice that this time there would be teeth not just talk. Xi acknowledged that fighting corruption was a long-term, complex and arduous task, and he called for enhancing the authority of the Constitution and the implementation of the rule of law.

For Xi, a sober realization of reality is not a recent revelation. In 2006, Xi told me that pride in China’s development should not engender complacency: “We should not overestimate our accomplishments or indulge ourselves in our achievements. Compared with our long history, our speed of development is not so impressive.” He called for China to aspire to “our next higher goal,” and to appreciate “the gap between where we are and where we have to go.” He described this as “a persistent and unremitting process.” We need to assess ourselves objectively, Xi stressed. “But no matter what, China’s development is driven by patriotism and pride.”

One challenge for Xi Jinping is now high expectations. A senior aide confided, “Xi is ready, but it won’t be easy.”

Robert Lawrence Kuhn is an international corporate strategist and investment banker who advises multinationals on doing business in China. A longtime counsellor to China’s leaders, he is the author of *HOW CHINA’S LEADERS THINK: featuring China’s new leaders including President Xi Jinping*. His biography of former President Jiang Zemin, *THE MAN WHO CHANGED CHINA*, was China’s best-selling book of 2005. Dr Kuhn is a frequent commentator on China (BBC, CNN, Bloomberg, CCTV).