Significance

Amidst the global circles of China watching and China reporting, hundreds of research articles, thousands of news reports and blogs have been written to make sense of Xi Jinping, the new helmsman of China. However, most seem to be partial or inaccurate. Reading Xi accurately is the basis of right policy making and strategizing about China. Yet, it is no easy task as Xi’s is a very eclectic leadership style; he has shown much more creativity than his immediate predecessors in Chinese communist history.

What we need to know

Xi Jinping is a maverick cosmopolitan nationalist. However improbable this may sound, he is making himself into a creative and effective synthesizer of Daoism and Confucianism, Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, and Deng Xiaoping-style capitalism. His eclectic populist leadership style is cemented by his effort to reduce the distance between the rich and poor, the powerful and powerless. Xi is casting himself as folksier and better attuned to the woes of ordinary Chinese than his predecessors, setting himself up as an example in following “the mass line” for the CCP. His name, Xi Jinping, could be literally understood as “practice the mass line”. While Xi, his last name, literally means “practice”, his middle name “jin” means “to be close” or “side by side” while his first name “ping” means “average folks”. He had not only taken a taxi ride in Beijing before he decided to give the taxi drivers a raise, but also ate an average folksy meal with money out of his own pocket at a typical dumpling chain store in Beijing to shame officials who are indulged with extravagant banquets and lifestyle using public funds on a daily basis. In the meantime, on his orders, luxurious vehicles of most local and central officials have been sold for cheaper ones and the bedrooms inside their offices have been removed and remodeled for public use.

While Xi appeals to Chinese elites by invoking the “China Dream” discourse, he often resorts to slang by way of narrowing down barriers between officials and the common people. Due to his popularity, many often call him “Xi Dada”, meaning “Uncle Xi” in the Shaanxi dialect – Shaanxi being the province where Xi is originally from. Xi has also updated and expanded the concept of Mao’s mass line and initiated online governance by ordering all CCP and government officials to go online with micro-blog accounts and wechat accounts and by setting up State Internet Information Office. In other words, Xi tries to not only synthesize East and West, but also to harmonize the two seemingly incongruent forces - - Marxism and capitalism – which make up a big share of Western modernity. In China, these two opposing forces manifest themselves in the form of Maoism vs. Dengism.

Xi in that sense can perhaps be construed as a Daoist in that the Daoist cosmic view, inherently dialectic and integrationist, equips him with a broad vision of the larger and broader common purpose above and beyond apparently opposing forces. That Daoist world view tends to see connections and potential
synergy above and beyond apparent opposites, dualities, and dichotomies which are characteristic of modern Western thinking and ideologies.

Xi is a Confucian in that Confucianism actively seeks to better the self and humanity through cultivation, not by force or violence. He revealed his deeply held Confucian ethos and set up his own moral example by returning one extra apartment under his wife’s name to the state for free; and by ordering the closure of his sister’s company to avoid the possibility of her vicariously drawing on his power and influence for private business gains. He also visited the Confucian Temple in Shandong, China, endorsing the Confucian classics on his must-read list on November 26, 2013. Most recently, on September 24, 2014, in Beijing, Xi delivered a keynote speech to the international conference commemorating the 2565th anniversary of Confucius’ birth, which also marks the fifth Congress of the International Confucian Association (ICA). He said there: “We should stick to the principle of making the past to serve the present and combine excellent traditional culture with modern culture, so that we can strive to have innovative development of traditional culture.” [1]

Xi Jinping seeks to remould the social order by punishing corrupt officials, disciplining himself, educating his citizenry, and cultivating humanity with classic Chinese humanism (i.e., via Confucian institutes). While it might be disappointing to some constituents at home and abroad that Xi has demonstrated little sign of becoming another Gorbachev or another pure Maoist, one should feel relieved that Xi is leading his country and indeed persuading the whole world to join him in revitalizing ancient Chinese civilization for the common good of both Chinese and the world. This common good is Confucius’ vision of datong, meaning, Greater Unity or harmony which, I think, is much needed in the deepening phase of globalization the world is undergoing.

In addition, Xi Jinping seems not to have objected to the re-emergence and deepening hold of Buddhism on Chinese society and understands the positive role of all religions including Christianity in building a harmonious society. [2] In fact, it is rumored that Xi’s wife, Peng Liyuan, is a devout Buddhist. [3]

Analysis

Xi is at once a Marxist-Maoist and Capitalist-Dengist besides being a Daoist and Confucian. While Daoism is a major source of his outlook and vision, Confucianism appears to be a major source of his cultural identity and ideal. Marxism and Maoism appear, on the other hand, to be a major source of his ideas and vision for maintaining the integrity and legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party he is leading. This ensures that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would follow the mass line and maximize equity and fairness domestically and would prepare for China’s fighting stance on the global arena if and when needed.

Xi is also pushing for both Moralism (德治) and Legalism (法治) in governance of the society, the two major competing traditions in ancient Chinese history. While he relies on moral education, drawing upon various traditional moral philosophies and religions such as Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Christianity and so on to uproot moral decay and promote social harmony, he is pushing for national governance, administration and execution by law to maximize justice and fairness. Contrary to Josh Chin’s blog on Wall Street Journal [4], Xi seems to be pushing for the rule of law so that courts would be
independent from local governments and every individual, no matter how powerful one is, has to be constrained by law. Xi’s popular phrase “to put power in the cage” shows his desire to have law shape and constrain the behavior of the CCP, the Chinese Government, and Chinese citizens. However, law is not the ultimate and only source of authority in Xi’s China. According to Xi, “the CCP leadership, the people as the master, and law-based governance form an organic synergy” of authority together. [5]

Capitalism-Dengism is a major source of Xi Jinping’s economic development strategies. It is not only a major tool for China’s economic prosperity, but also a major instrument for China’s future survival as a civilization. In conclusion, Xi seems to be forging a new trinity consisting of Daoism-Confucianism, Marxism-Maoism, and Capitalism-Dengism through invocation of the “China Dream” discourse. This new trinity is not only critical to interpreting Xi Jinping most accurately, but also helps shed light on what China is nowadays, how China sees the world, and how China wants the world to be like in the next decade or two.

I believe that such a portrayal of Xi can be supported by growing amount of evidence. In all likelihood, it represents Xi’s own ideal self-image, as well as the image preferred by most of his advisers and countrymen. Whilst some in the West and the rest of the international community may wish for Xi to assume more Gorbachev-like traits, wishful thinking is to be avoided for the sake of a better functioning global architecture.

Above all, Xi Jinping seems to be trying to become a master centralizer/synthesiser, attempting to amass all domestic powers under his control, and to elevate the status and position of China in Asia and the world. Elizabeth Economy puts it well: “Since taking office, Xi has moved quickly to amass political power and to become, within the Chinese leadership, not first among equals but simply first.” [6]

Xi seems to be an ambitious yet learning cosmopolitan nationalist. He is maverick leader aiming to both rejuvenate the Chinese nation and to advance Chinese civilization on the global stage. In my opinion, Xi’s ambition and vision is reminiscent of the following three figures of Chinese history. They are Emperor Qin Shi Huang (r. BCE 247 – 210), who united the seven Warring States; Emperor Li Shimin (r. CE 626 – 649) of the Tang Dynasty, who is known for having created the most open, diverse and prosperous epoch of Chinese history, and Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976) who founded the People’s Republic of China.

Mao’s success in thawing the US-China enmity through ping-pong diplomacy laid the very first foundation for China’s US-oriented open-door and economic reform policy and strategy that Deng would later pursue. If the Qin Emperor is said to have ushered in Chinese unity by means of Sino-centrism and Mao is said to have prevailed Western imperialism by means of nationalism, the Tang Emperor brought about the prosperity of Chinese civilization by means of cosmopolitanism. Xi’s “China Dream” aims at creating both a more united Asia and a more cosmopolitan and harmonious world along Chinese lines, that is to say in a mutually inclusive yet transformative (涵化) manner. [7]

As Cary Huang of South China Morning Post opined: “The ruling party deviated from hard-line Marxist ideology when Deng Xiaoping launched market reforms in the late 1970s. Since coming to office, Xi has been eager to fill the ideological void by emphasising both Marxism and traditional Chinese culture and
In terms of the role of the market in the Chinese economy, Xi is actually more sympathetic to the American model than his predecessor, Hu Jintao. Arthur Kroeber from the Brookings Institute rightly suggested that in Xi’s economic reform agenda “giving the market a decisive role in resource allocation – is potentially very significant, and should not be dismissed as mere semantics.” Obviously, Xi’s economic reform agenda runs counter to the principles of Maoist planned economy where the government plays a decisive role. To a modern Western eye, irreconcilable contradictions riddle Xi’s one single basket of a broad range of diverse solutions. This explains why some Western scholars complain that it is hard to understand Xi. As Ryan Mitchell states: Xi has a “difficult-to-pin-down ideological profile...in all, Xi’s ideological moves seem to share just one core feature: giving himself room to maneuver more freely.”

When it comes to foreign policy, Xi’s two-pronged strategy of assertiveness in the South China Sea and developing the Silk Road Economic Belt are aimed at reviving the Southeast China ocean-based Silk Road and the initiative to revive the Eurasian land-based Silk Road Economic Belt as a major venue to realizing his China dream. This is in a sense a Chinese pivot to West Asia in response to the US’ pivot to Asia that might avert a full-scale confrontation between China and the US. Xi’s somewhat exaggerated use of military means for the purpose of demonstrating national strength in the face of so-called “foreign hostile forces” or “factors of social instability” belies his Sun Zi-type of strategic thinking: forceful, yet tempered behind the scenes with economic diplomacy so as to win hearts and minds of neighboring countries and strategic rivals. The carrot therein is the setting up of a new Asia Infrastructure Construction Bank and the Silk Road Fund in addition to the earlier BRICS Development Bank.

Xi’s effort to establish the China National Security Commission and his new diplomatic vision of a shared destiny embedded in his inner-Asia and Africa platform seems to reveal his motive and purpose. Xi’s concept of centralization is in that sense different to the Western iteration of globalization. Xi aspires to extend China’s global influence by setting an example rather than by erecting military-economic-political structures around the globe in the American manner. In this context, Xi’s efforts seem to hanker back to China’s geo-strategic posture in pre-modern times, often called the all-under-heaven (tribute) system.

Still further, Xi appears to be a global patron of free trade and an advocate for a global market economy with China’s outbound investment skyrocketing and the creation of a more market-oriented infrastructure for inbound investment in the offing. On the one hand, he tries to allow private businesses to own some share of state-owned enterprises and, on the other hand, he has allowed the creation of dozens of free trade zones in China to adapt to US free-trade principles. With the enormous wealth and power China has accumulated, Xi appears to be slowly but confidently trying to shift the global power structure.

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11. Xinhua Net Beijing, “China Focus: Xi’s "belt and road" prioritize infrastructure”, 05/01/2015. Available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2015-01/05/c_133898488.htm