

China Leadership Monitor

CLM Insights Interview:

David Shambaugh, Author of *China's Leaders: From Mao to Now*

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David Shambaugh, *China's Leaders: From Mao to Now* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, August 31, 2021), 416 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1509546510

1. You have given Mao, Deng, Jiang, Hu, and Xi each a different label to characterize their leadership style. Can you explain briefly how you came up with these labels and why they best capture the style of these leaders?

I first wish to thank you for this opportunity to discuss my new book in this important forum—there is likely no more appropriate venue to discuss a book about *China's Leaders* than *China Leadership Monitor*. So, many thanks for the opportunity.

In the book I characterize each leader with a different descriptor that I think captures the main elements of their respective rule.

Mao was a *populist tyrant* because he repeatedly tried to tap into what today is called “populism”—appealing to the downtrodden, dispossessed, and disaffected elements of society—the rural peasantry and urban proletariat in particular. Mao was a deeply anti-elitist politician who repeatedly appealed straight to the “masses.” But he was also one of the “great” tyrants of the twentieth century—in the league of Hitler and Stalin. Tens of millions died as a direct result of his policies and countless millions were persecuted. These two elements—a leader who cultivated the masses yet also stigmatized and terrorized several segments of the population—stand in contrast yet capture a main contradiction of Mao’s rule.

I describe Deng Xiaoping as a *pragmatic Leninist*. We all know that Deng was pragmatic in his policies (mainly economic and foreign policy), as summed up in his famous statement that “it doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat.” The Leninist descriptor refers to his emphasis on rebuilding (from the wreckage of the Cultural Revolution) and ruling through *institutions* at all levels of the party and government. His “Four Cardinal Principles” established the primacy of the party and the political parameters that should not be contravened. While Deng gave all sectors of society new freedoms, he also was an “organization man” and he strengthened the institutions of control (the essence of Leninism).

I characterize Jiang Zemin as a *bureaucratic politician*. This is because that when he was catapulted to the top in 1989 Jiang had an almost non-existent power base—no real patrons (other than Wang Daohan), no ties to the main party factions, no real relations with the military, and no geographic base other than Shanghai. Many thus perceived him to be a brief transitional figure like Hua Guofeng. Yet, Jiang lasted in power for thirteen years. I argue that he overcame his initial weaknesses by cultivating various bureaucratic constituencies in the party,

government, military, internal security services, and other institutional organs. In each, he adopted *their* respective institutional preferences and made them his own—thus effectively co-opting them—showered them with resources and promoted their leading cadres and military officers. This was very astute strategically and tactically (it also reflected his own background in the State Council industrial bureaucracy).

Hu Jintao was a *technocratic apparatchik*: technocratic due to his training in engineering at Tsinghua University and subsequent work in the hydroelectric industry in Gansu province, and *apparatchik* because of his career of work in the inner-party apparatus.

I describe Xi Jinping as a *modern emperor*. He rules China during modern times as some of China's historical emperors did during the past: in singular control of the state and ruling apparatus, the purveyor of official ideological doctrine, the commander of military forces, a regal and aloof figure, a believer in China's greatness, and intolerable of dissent.

2. What is each leader's lasting legacy?

Mao's lasting legacy is mixed but generally very negative. On the one hand, he is the recognized by Chinese as the "father" of the republic, is seen as a leader who restored China's unity and dignity, was a philosopher-statesman, and the founder of the nation. On the other hand, his rule is defined by unrelenting and extraordinary repression and brutality, and he was personally responsible for causing great domestic chaos and retarding China's development.

Deng is to be remembered primarily for having overturned the deleterious effects of the Maoist era, having launched the country on "reform and opening," and having stimulated many of the processes that have resulted in China becoming a global power. Deng's accomplishments in foreign policy were also significant—establishing diplomatic relations with the United States, normalizing ties with the Soviet Union, and opening relations with Asian and European countries. Yet, the 1989 Tiananmen massacre is the most obvious and lasting stain on his legacy.

The positive elements of Jiang Zemin's legacy include overcoming China's post-Tiananmen international isolation; embracing economic policies which triggered an unprecedented boom; permitting "stealthy" political reforms; setting the military on the path to sustained modernization; and revitalizing the party. I find his legacy to have been pretty positive. If there was a significant downside, it was the dramatic expansion of social disparities and the proliferation of corruption.

Hu Jintao is often thought to not have had much effect on the country and to have been a very bland figure. At its end, his (and Premier Wen Jiabao's) period of rule was referred to as "ten lost years" (失去的十年). Yet this description may in fact be unfair. Some important policy initiatives *were launched* and some things were certainly accomplished under their watch—notably in social policy, party reform, and foreign policy—but the verdict of no accomplishments remains the prevalent perception both inside and outside of China. Above all, Hu's tenure was marked by a distinct shift in policy emphasis away from the growth-at-all-costs economic calculus and bias toward coastal China associated with the Jiang Zemin era—toward a new emphasis on the geographic prioritization of the inland Chinese provinces and on issues of

social equality, social justice, improving basic living standards and social services, environmental protection, poverty alleviation, reducing the burdens on farmers, public safety and anti-corruption, job retraining, and other “public goods.” It was a very commendable and progressive agenda, which was suitable to the time and stood in quite sharp contrast to the emphases during Jiang Zemin’s period of rule. Even though it was publicly popular and well-received during Hu’s first term, it simply faltered in its implementation during his second term. Perhaps with more retrospect and the passage of time, Hu Jintao’s historical reputation will be burnished for the better.

Xi Jinping’s legacy is, of course, incomplete. But if his period of rule were to end tomorrow, he would be credited on the one hand with restoring the strength of the Communist Party; cracking down on corruption; moving the military closer to world-class standards; pursuing an assertive foreign policy and abandoning Deng Xiaoping’s “hide and bide” strategy; and overseeing China’s ascension to true great-power status. On the other hand, his legacy would include rolling back many of the governing norms and political reforms introduced by Deng and then pursued by Jiang and Hu—returning China to a one-man neo-totalitarian dictatorship.

3. Which leader has the most astute understanding of foreign policy? Which leader has made the most disastrous foreign policy decision? Why?

I would say Xi Jinping has been the most astute. Mao and Deng certainly paid a fair amount of attention to world affairs, but I would say that their approach was at the “grand strategy” level and they did not know very much about the specifics and minutiae of other countries or international organizations. Jiang and Hu were both well-briefed leaders who really followed the guidance of advisers. Jiang was known to go “off-script” and improvise when speaking to other leaders, but both he and Hu Jintao allowed foreign policy to be set by the bureaucracy. Xi is completely different—he has a pretty deep grasp of the specifics of foreign countries, international organizations, as well as his own sense of grand strategy.

I think that Mao can be credited with having made the most disastrous foreign policy decisions (plural): allying with the Soviet Union; invading Korea; provocatively triggering three crises and near wars over Taiwan; attacking India; exporting revolution and supporting Communist movements against established governments all across the world; and isolating China in the world community. Even many developing countries shunned Mao’s China. Mao’s foreign policy record was not good.

4. Succession is the most difficult challenge for the party. One can claim that Deng, Jiang, and, to a lesser extent, Xi, all came to power due to unforeseen circumstances while their designated successors such as Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, Hu Yaobang, and Zhao Ziyang were all purged. Can you briefly explain why the party has not handled this problem well and what this implies for the succession issue facing Xi?

Orderly succession has been a chronic and systemic problem for all communist states over time, not just for China. Establishing rules and norms of mandatory retirement and orderly succession

were indeed among Deng Xiaoping's greatest accomplishments. Although there was still an element of chance and capriciousness (with his purges of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang and his appointments of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao), overall, the process of succession was systematized under Deng and followed by Jiang and Hu. It is Xi Jinping who has undermined and overturned these established procedures. In terms of heirs-apparent, this has also been a longstanding weakness of the Chinese system; as you note, several designated successors have simply been purged before they ascended to the top. This is another feature of the lack of an institutionalized leadership system in China.

5. There is an adage in Chinese called "*yidai buru yidai*," translated roughly as "each generation is not as good as its predecessor." In our academic jargon we call this leadership degeneration. Having studied five generations of Chinese leaders, do you think this is a real problem for the Communist Party of China?

Not really. When I look back over these five main leaders and the overall position of the country from one to the next, I see *linear progress*, not degeneration. Even under Hu Jintao, a period that was seen by many as a time of stasis or retrogression and as a leader who was not very impactful, I think that one has to conclude that Hu's decade in power was indeed successful on several scores. His tenure was noteworthy for its stability, predictability, and incremental improvements in domestic and foreign policy. Hu Jintao could credibly claim at the end of his decade in power that he had maintained social and political stability, had overseen considerable economic growth, paid attention to the less fortunate sectors of society, protected national security and continued military modernization, enhanced China's position and enhanced its reputation in the world. These accomplishments should certainly count as *successes*! Hu kept China's development train on the tracks, the CCP in power, the country out of a war, and he enhanced the nation's standing in the world—all important metrics by any standards.

While there have certainly been zigs and zags and ups and downs along the way, even sharp reversals such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, it seems to me that the overall trajectory of the country has been one of improvement from one leader and one regime to the next.

About the Author

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