

Xi Jinping: Political Career, Governance, and Leadership, 1953–2018

Alfred L. Chan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. xviii + 710 pp. £37.99 (hbk). ISBN 9780197615225

Xi Jinping: The Hidden Agendas of China's Ruler for Life

Willy Lam. London and New York: Routledge, 2024. xii + 222 pp. £34.99 (pbk). ISBN 9781032301402

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The two books under review share in part the same title, but they are written in different styles, with contrasting emphases in the content, and with often distinct and sometimes divergent arguments, thus making a good complementary pair to better understand China's supreme leader and the policy impacts he has brought to China and the world.

A massive volume, Alfred Chan's book is a combination of Xi Jinping's biography in the years prior to becoming Party chief in 2012 and a policy analysis of Xi's reign during his first term in power. The book is accordingly organized in two parts, part one covering the first 59 years of Xi's life and part two being devoted to his first five years as China's leader. In general, Chan argues that Xi is one of the most transformative political leaders of the 21st century, but his conclusion as to what kind of transformation Xi has brought to China's domestic governance and the country's relations with the rest of the world remains implicit.

With a "long time frame" that provides "a historical perspective on the larger issues of China's political, economic, and social developments" (p. 4), Chan's book is sweeping in scope, addressing virtually every aspect of Xi's life. The absence of coverage of Xi's governance record in the years since 2018, however, makes the book incomplete and, more often than not, leads to inaccuracies in the analysis of Xi's political programmes. This omission could be attributed to technical elements such as time pressures in the manuscript's production process, but it could be intentional – the author defends his design as it affords him "a certain historical distance" (p. 4). In fact, chapter 13 covers the 2018 constitutional amendment, including Xi's removal of his own term limits as state president. By that time, the question of where Xi would take China was much clearer than before, but the chapter's focus is on the party-state's administrative reorganization. Moreover, the chapter is highly descriptive as it is based on Chinese official sources, and thus, to a large extent, it avoids an analysis of the political and institutional implications of Xi's move. The comparison of the term limit issue in the Chinese one-party regime with that in the context of parliamentary governments is, at best, misleading. Still claiming those Chinese plans adopted in 2018 as "reform," Chan seemingly misses the point that Xi's transformation of China has been in a direction opposite to the one the country had taken during the post-Mao reform era.

Chan claims to "avoid[s] value judgments" (p. 4) in order to be neutral, objective and balanced in his treatment of Xi. Two questions arise in this regard, however. First, an author on a Chinese political subject has no other choice than make extensive use Chinese party-state official sources of information, but such sources per se are partisan and politically biased. Chan has an insufficient critical assessment of such information, especially in employing those sources for reporting on Xi's experience and on governmental policy announcements. For example, recounting Xi's life



experience in Liangjiahe, a village where he lived as a young farmer and became a CCP branch committee secretary, Chan's discussion of the impact of this experience not only skips over the later cult of Xi's personality (pp. 26–42), but he also cites a source to blame those who used this experience “to promote a cult of Xi in order to serve their vested interests” (p. 40) and thus avoids criticizing Xi himself. Second, Xi is a highly controversial figure with regards to his governance, and such controversies are usually due to different value systems in assessing his political performance. Chan sometimes cites contending points of view in commenting on Xi but, as the author of such a comprehensive work, he could have provided some in-depth analyses beyond extant, so-called value-judgments that would have greatly helped readers understand why Xi is so divisive and, more generally, what has been happening in Xi's China.

In addition, the selection of words and research materials in such narratives could be biased, which Chan cannot avoid. For example, in the early years of the Cultural Revolution Xi was “threatened with being packed off to the police and then a juvenile correction establishment” (p. 25), but, except for this sentence, there are no more details about why this happened and what Xi then encountered (was he sent to the police?), despite the fact that this experience was no doubt very significant for Xi's personality formation in his teenage years. In terms of wording, Xi was described as a “pauper” (p. 22) during that time, but some sources not cited in Chan's book indicate that Xi then was what might be called a rascal.

A praiseworthy effort by Chan lies in his conscious application of social-science theories in order “to turn the understanding of China into scientific knowledge, and to integrate China studies with the social science discipline” (p. 4). This is an ambitious goal that the book is far from having reached, especially when diverse theories at different levels of abstraction are fragmentally applied to explain one person's life, personality and political course with the lack of a coherent, theoretical approach.

Numerous slips can be found in Chan's book. Here are some simple examples: p. 18 quotes a Chinese expression *miaochun genzheng* (translated as “pure stems and roots”), which is not common in the Chinese language. Instead, there is a popular phrase *genzheng miaohong* (right roots and red stems) which, despite a similar meaning, has an obvious “revolutionary” colour. In the caption of the photo on p. 23, the source is *Zhongguo gongchandang xinwenshe* – was there ever a news agency with such a title? Xi's birthday is 15 June, not 1 June as recorded on p. 60. When Xi married Ke in 1980, he was not, as the book states, “at Xiamen” (p. 62).

Willy Lam's book corresponds to part two of Chan's in both content and structure, while it also devotes a chapter to Xi's rise to power, a topic covered in Chan's part one. It examines Xi's policies in ideology, politics, economy and foreign relations, but extends to a crucial aspect of Xi's governance that Chan's book pays less attention to – surveillance and social control mechanisms that use AI technologies and “legalistic” philosophy. Often making historical comparisons of Xi with previous CCP leaders from Mao Zedong to Hu Jintao, but more emphatically with Deng Xiaoping, it argues that Xi abandoned many of the key precepts of the reform era but followed Maoism, which yielded negative impacts on China's economic growth and its relationships with the world. In conclusion, Lam believes that Xi's status as “leader for life,” formalized at the 20th Party Congress in 2022, brings China unprecedented challenges, especially for the regime's ability to retain support from the Chinese people in the face of economic stagnation and international confrontations.

A veteran China watcher for decades as a journalist, a policy analyst and a scholar, Lam in his publications, including this book, closely follows China's real-life developments in elite politics, domestic governance and foreign policies, often with interesting insights, such as his argument about China's preference to “avoid[ing] decoupling from the international marketplace” (chapter five). Still policy-oriented, this book of Lam's is analytically rigorous, but without much attempt at constructing a theoretical framework. There are also some mismatches in contents and structure: what is highlighted in chapter titles and section subtitles may not be emphatically discussed in the corresponding chapters and sections.

A demanding reader might like to see more in-depth discussions in Lam's book of the fundamental comparisons of Xi with Mao, since Lam sees many similarities between the two leaders, even if today's China is obviously very different from that under Mao. For example, as the author talks about Xi's revival of Maoist "transformation" of the educated classes (p. 76), a question arises: can Xi achieve the same levels of brainwashing as Mao once successfully did? More importantly, does the presence of market mechanisms in today's China have a fundamental impact on politics, or, as the author highlights, can political repression continue notwithstanding any economic changes?

Generally speaking, both books are well researched in as much as they cite a huge number of sources, but they differ in size: Chan attempts to be comprehensive, while Lam tries to be concise. They cite each other, at least Chan cites Lam's earlier works many times. They even share some similarities in both personal (if I am allowed to mention these) and academic life: the two authors are political scientists, they have a Hong Kong background but now live in Canada, and both are prolific and well-respected writers on contemporary Chinese politics. Their different conclusions on what Xi means for China, therefore, raise an intriguing question: what factors determine scholars' divergent interpretations of the same political figure and his/her policies?

This is obviously not a proper place to explore the question, but reading the two books with the question in mind can be enlightening. For scholars as readers of both books, it might stimulate reflections on some fundamental issues in discipline building and methodology, as well as those regarding interconnections in research between social-science theories and real-life reality. Both books are also suitable for university undergraduate classes on contemporary China and for anyone in the wider public who is interested in China's politics, economy and foreign relations. It would be misplaced to read these books to find a role model – as many like to do so in reading famous leaders' biographies – in moving up the power ladder, as Xi Jinping successfully did. But reading them is certainly helpful to understand today's China.

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Factional-Ideological Conflicts in Chinese Politics: To the Left or to the Right?

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Less than two decades ago, when China's economic growth seemed all but unstoppable, many pointed to the country's experimentalist policy style as the cornerstone of the country's uniquely adaptive authoritarianism. Policy experimentation – delegated to local officials but carefully monitored by the central government – played a key role in China's pivot to marketization, with local experiments supported, encouraged and even sponsored by more senior patrons in the central party-state.

Olivia Cheung's terrific and informative study revisits the literature on policy experimentalism, but introduces a new perspective: instead of a process driven solely by pragmatic concerns and