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Review: *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping* by François Bougon — a communist aristocrat

The Chinese leader rules despite a mass of contradictions, says Richard Lloyd Parry

Richard Lloyd Parry

The World Economic Forum in Davos, where the world's mega-wealthy and their hangers-on gather once a year to play at being intellectuals, was in a state of well-heeled alarm in January 2017. Britain's vote to quit the EU and the election of the aggressively protectionist Donald Trump were raising ghastly questions about the free market globalisation that is the Davos religion. However, reassurance was at hand in the form of a solid, dark-suited figure, who took to the podium with the confidence of an experienced helmsman in a squall.

It was true, he acknowledged, in a speech larded with proverbs and literary quotations, that globalisation had its problems — but to throw out the baby of capitalism with the bathwater of inequality would be a grave mistake. Nation must work with nation. International agreements such as the Paris climate accords must be honoured. “We should adapt to and guide economic globalisation, cushion its negative impact and deliver its benefits to all,” he urged. “One should not just retreat to the harbour when encountering a storm, for this will never get us to the other shore.”

How the plutocrats applauded. It was a perfectly judged riposte to the fulminations of Trump (who was in the audience). And yet this sagacious figure, the defender of global capital and multilateralism, was not Bill Clinton or Angela Merkel, but Xi Jinping, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, commander-in-chief of the People's Liberation Army and paramount leader of the most powerful socialist power on earth. The paradoxes, upheavals, intellectual contortions and frank hypocrisies that brought him to this position are the subject of this compact and accessible book.

Since Soviet and East European communism bellyflopped so unexpectedly in the early 1990s, the thing that everyone wants to know about surviving socialist leaders is whether they are “reformers”. Deng Xiaoping, who liberalised China's state-owned enterprises in the 1980s, was an obvious reformer of the economy, but a ruthless oppressor of the democracy activists who rose up in Tiananmen Square. When Xi ascended to supreme power in 2012, the obvious question was asked about him — François Bougon, an economics correspondent at Le Monde, has discreet fun with those Anglo-Saxon commentators, prominent among them the BBC's John Simpson, who saw in the new leader a “Chinese Gorbachev”.

Far from ushering in democracy, Xi has interned Uighur separatists in secret concentration camps, refused foreign treatment to a dying dissident who won the Nobel peace prize, and nibbled steadily away at the fragile democratic privileges granted to Hong Kong. He has turned

disputed rocks in the South China Sea into Chinese military bases and taken on personal powers that even Deng never claimed. Yet the crude opposites of reform and repression are inadequate to understanding a leader who is capable of defending climate treaties against Trump and crushing political opposition, without any sense of incongruity or contradiction.

Contradiction has been a central element in Xi's life, and one that he has turned to brilliant advantage, repeatedly extracting the best of both worlds. He was born in 1953 into the communist aristocracy, the son of a revolutionary hero, with all the hereditary prestige that such a lineage brings — but his father was purged when Xi was a boy, putting him at a useful distance from the disastrous ructions of the Cultural Revolution.

Like many of his generation, the teenage Xi was trucked out of Beijing to work in the fields. Prudently, he volunteered for Yan'an in northern China, known as the "Yellow Earth", a poor region, famous as the home of the legendary Yellow Emperor, and as the stronghold of Mao Zedong before his victory over the Nationalists in 1949. A British equivalent is hard to find, but, in its combination of the political and mythical, it is rather as if an Old Etonian were to go into Westminster politics after living for a few years among pig farmers in Sherwood Forest. "The northern plateaus . . . are my roots as a servant of the States," Xi has written. "I will always be a son of the Yellow Earth."

Xi is a ludicrous intellectual name-dropper, littering his speeches with references as diverse as Dickens, Hemingway, Turgenev and the Epic of Gilgamesh. Two figures from Chinese history stand out, however, and illustrate his radical conservatism. The first is Mao, the revolutionary hero whose crazed efforts to maintain a state of "permanent revolution" killed as many as 45 million Chinese in man-made famines.

Xi admires Mao for his peasant simplicity and revolutionary discipline, invoking him in support of his own crackdown on excess and corruption among party officials. He is Maoist too in his insistence on the primacy of the party, and his rejection of anything stinking of western notions of political pluralism; and in his promotion, in the form of eulogistic books, films and television programmes, of a personal cult of the paramount leader — himself. And he is agile in distinguishing between the regrettable "mistakes" (those millions of dead) made by Mao the man and "the scientific value of Mao Zedong Thought".

His second intellectual prop, however, is a figure despised by Mao — Confucius, the 6th-century BC sage, whose insistence on hierarchy, obedience and reverence for elders was understandably held to be a formula for backwardness, fundamentally at odds with revolutionary Marxism. To push the Great Helmsman with one hand and the Great Sage with the other is bonkers in theoretical terms. Where these examples from the past help is in justifying a repressive authoritarianism that rejects the mildest concession to more representative forms of government.

"The alliance of Confucianism and Marxism, which defies logic to an outside observer, is probably a means of compensating for the regime's weaknesses," Bougon concludes. "More than any other leader since Mao, he has understood that controlling the past is vital . . . under Xi Jinping's mandate there has been a return to pure historical orthodoxy and to the most hackneyed forms of control."

Without a unifying permanent revolution, and without the guarantee of continuing high economic growth that was Deng's legacy, he will need all the help he can get. As the US vice-president Joe Biden said after meeting him: "He's a strong, bright man, but he has the look of a man who is about to take on a job he's not at all sure is going to end well."

Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping by François Bougon, Hurst, 208pp, £12.99