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INTRODUCTION
THE 'CHINESE DREAM'

On 17 January 2017, a communist leader found himself applauded by the global capitalist elite assembled at the exclusive ski resort of Davos. As the first Chinese leader to take part in the World Economic Forum, Xi Jinping made an impact and won approval. Before politicians and businessmen rattled by Brexit in the United Kingdom, and in the presence of the populist US president-elect Donald Trump, Xi championed globalisation and offered to heal their emotional ills:

> As a line in an old Chinese poem goes, 'Honey melons hang on bitter vines; sweet dates grow on thistles and thorns.' In a philosophical sense, nothing is perfect in the world. One would fail to see the full picture if one claimed something to be perfect because of its merits, or if something were viewed as useless just because of its defects. It is true that economic globalization has created new problems, but this is no justification for writing off economic globalization completely.

Three days before Trump's investiture as president, Xi defended the Davos participants' perceived and cherished world order, and implicitly criticized the solutions put forward by Trump, be it the closure of borders or restrictions on free trade. 'We should commit ourselves to growing an open global economy to share opportunities and interests through opening-up, and achieve win-win outcomes. One should not just retreat to the harbour when encountering a storm, for this will never get us to the other side of the ocean,' he said, adding a reference to another Chinese saying: 'people with petty shrewdness attend to trivial matters, while people with vision attend to the governance of institutions'.

Quite a PR victory for the man who sees himself as the advocate not only of world trade and international cooperation, but also of the Paris climate agreements. But who is this man, nominated general secretary of the Party in 2012, then reappointed for a second term five years later at the Nineteenth Congress? Who is this leader who has consolidated his power to such a degree as to have his name inscribed in the Chinese Communist Party constitution, a privilege that only Mao Zedong, founder of the Party, has previously enjoyed in his lifetime?

Without question, it can be said that Xi Jinping (pronounced "sh-yee gin ping") is the 'product' of a system. It is a system that was born at the end of the 1920s amidst the guerrillas of China's south-eastern mountains, who would go on to defeat Chang Kai-shek's Nationalists after the Long March and the Civil War. The country traditionally divides its leaders into generations. The 'Great Helmsman' Mao Zedong, the revolutionary leader and founder of the People's Republic of China in 1949, belongs to the first of these generations. From 1943 to 1976, he championed a permanent revolution, putting class struggle at the heart of his policies, mobilising the country in relentless political campaigns, and leading it dangerously close to collapse and chaos during the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping, 'the Little Helmsman' (1978–89), presided over the second generation, to whom fell the task of fixing Mao's deadly follies by opening up the country to capitalism and laying the foundations of its economic renewal.

Deng placed Jiang Zemin at the head of the Party (1989–2002) following an internal crisis brought about by the Tiananmen democratic movement, which ended in bloody repression and the side-lining of proponents of more daring political reforms. The fourth generation was personified by a leader devoid of charisma, the engineer Hu Jintao (2002–12). In contrast to his predecessor, Xi Jinping, representing the fifth generation, stands out—there is undeniably more to him. He possessed precisely the right amount of charisma and panache required to move effortlessly up the Party's ranks, yet without coming across as a threat to potential rivals. This perfect match with the system and its era has been particularly remarkable.

All the more so since Xi is, after Deng, the Chinese leader who has accumulated the most power, first as leader of the Party from 2012 and then as president from 2013. In this position, he has established his authority by following the tried and tested tactic of his predecessors: making sure not to commit any blunders and pampering the 'elders'—grandees such as Jiang Zemin, now in his nineties. To gain control of the Party's immense bureaucratic machine and circumvent potential opposition, Xi swiftly set up several 'leading small groups' that reported directly to him. In November 2012, he established a commission responsible for Taiwanese and Foreign Affairs, then, a year a later, one overseeing economic reforms. In January 2014, a national security commission was created; a month later came a cybersecurity and computerisation commission, followed by another on national defence and military reform; and, in June that year, a commission for economic and financial affairs. This strategy of encirclement has proven effective. Step by step, these special commissions have enabled Xi to impose his ideas on the Party's traditional organs, such as its Standing Committee, where he has to deal with representatives of different factions, born of political disagreement or personal rivalries. All of which has led the Australian sinologist Geremie R. Barmé to dub him 'China's CEO' or 'Chairman of Everything'.

Xi Jinping is also a *hong er dai*, literally a 'Second-Generation Red', the son of a revolutionary pioneer. It is his turn to make history, and hereditary legitimacy is not without significance for a leader who intends to fight on the ideological front. He is now called upon to preside over the fate of the world's second largest economy, at the precise moment when the regime needs to find a new model for development. Mao promoted class struggle—'a revolution is not a dinner party'—and Deng and his successors, the market, coining the now celebrated oxymoron 'Socialist Market Economy'. At the Nineteenth Party Congress in November 2017, Xi announced the beginning of a 'New Era' for China as a great power, pursuing its path to becoming the world's largest economy and intent on reclaiming the 'centre stage'.

When he first took office, time was of the essence. The Party was concerned about its survival. How could we tell, one might ask, when it comes to a regime as impenetrable as the Vatican? By means of selected readings. Wang Qishan, who spearheads the fight against corruption within the Party, distributed far and wide copies of Alexis de Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. Once published, the translation of this 1856 text was an overnight success. Yet what precisely is its argument? In essence, that the French monarchy was swept away by the Revolution even though the country was prosperous, and reforms underway to tackle corruption and inequality. It has all the trappings of a cautionary tale for today's China.

Was Xi one of those who read the text on Wang's recommendation? We cannot know. Power in China has increasingly sealed itself off as the country has asserted itself on the international stage. Jiang Zemin readily accepted interviews with foreign journalists; Hu did occasionally, but only collectively. Xi, on the other hand, never gives interviews to the Western media and his

close advisors are equally inaccessible. He does write a great deal, however. Since he started out as a mere local cadre in the 1980s, he has never ceased to pen articles, books, and speeches.

In fact, on 1 October 2014, China's national day, a 500-page volume was published entitled *The Governance of China*, a compendium of speeches and other texts by Xi Jinping compiled by the State Council's—or Chinese government's—Information Office and the Party Central Committee's Central Policy Research Office. In these texts, Xi expressed his views on a number of topics, from domestic policy to diplomacy. Foreign editions were soon available. The cover—always the same in every country of publication—features an image of the president redolent of 1960s portraits of Mao at the height of his personality cult. Easily spotted, the book made headlines when official Chinese media published a photograph taken at Facebook's Californian headquarters, during a visit by China's then chief internet censor, Lu Wei: a copy of the English edition featured prominently in Mark Zuckerberg's office.

If Xi at first castigated the evasive and overblown style of Party rhetoric, it now appears that he has come perfectly to terms with it. His speeches do not show any attempt at elegance. He has complied with the practices of the Party and slipped into its heavy stylistic mire, reproducing even its most exasperating mannerisms. It represents a form of 'Newspeak', where everything claims to be new ('new normal') and necessarily dialectical ('double non-negation'), and where no reality is safe from being declined into several points—'four consciences', 'four tones' or 'four completelys', 'eight obligations', 'two studies and one behaviour'. And yet it is in these declarations that Xi Jinping's sources of inspiration and political leanings reside, or at least where they can be glimpsed.

Xi Jinping does not only write; he also reads a considerable amount. At least, that is what he claims. His travels abroad serve as an opportunity for him to show off his literary knowledge. In 2015, during a visit to the United States, he claimed to have read the revolutionary Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, as well as the works of Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway:

> I was most captivated by The Old Man and the Sea and its descriptions of the howling wind, the pouring rain, the roaring waves, the little boat, the old man, and the sharks. So when I visited Cuba for the first time, I went specially to the Cojimar dam where Hemingway wrote the book. On my second visit, I went to the bar Hemingway frequented and ordered a mojito, his favourite rum with mint leaves and ice. I wanted to feel for myself what had been on his mind and the very place he was when he wrote those stories. I believe it is always important to make the effort to gain a deeper understanding of the cultures and civilizations that differ from our own.

In Russia, during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, he gave a list—and a long one at that—of his favourite Russian authors: Krylova, Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Nekrasov, Chernyshevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov. A month earlier, he had done the same in France: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Sartre, Montaigne, La Fontaine, Molière, Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Dumas *père* and *fils*, George Sand, Flaubert, Maupassant, Romain Rolland and Jules Verne. In Germany, too, he was sure to enumerate his reading habits: Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, Heidegger, and Marcuse. Too bad for Mexico, where the Chinese leader only cited Octavio Paz.

In October 2014, in a speech on arts and literature aimed at a local Chinese audience, Xi beat his own record in referring to 114 Chinese and foreign writers, painters, calligraphers, philosophers, musicians, dancers, choreographers, sculptors, and dramatists. Whether in coquetry

or vanity, his erudition apparently reached as far back as the The Epic of Gilgamesh, the mythical narrative from Mesopotamia, and the Vedas, the sacred texts of Ancient India.

When I asked the dissident writer Murong Xuecun about his president's passion for reading, he replied ironically: 'My friends came up with a list of all the books he claims to have read. It is impressive. He is doubtless the most well-read Chinese leader since the birth of China. But really, does he have time to read? I don't believe so. In China, it has even become a joke. One of my friends told me that straight after his Russian visit, where he claimed to love reading Dostoyevsky, Xi had also cited two Chinese writers who owe their fame to the internet. One is a nationalist author, Zhou Xiaoping. "How can someone who loves reading Dostoyevsky like Zhou Xiaoping?" my friend asked me. It makes no sense. So I don't believe that Xi Jinping has read all of books he says he has.' A videographer once made a parody montage of all these 'literary' speeches. Like most satire against the president, it was quickly censored in China.

But whether or not he is a gifted literary scholar, Xi Jingping faces a considerable challenge: to keep in power the party for which his father fought as a guerrilla in the northwest; and to find a new economic model more respectful of people's health and the environment, after thirty years of growth based on cheap labour and exports. Xi Jinping and the other 'red princes', descendants of the first revolutionaries now at the helm of the country, have been called upon to save their fathers' legacy. If all goes well, Xi will preside at the Chinese Communist Party's grandiose centenary celebrations in 2021.

How does he do it? How does Xi perceive his role? What are his beliefs, his convictions, as China, officially Marxist, has become an ultra-capitalist and profoundly unequal country threatened by corruption? This is what I shall attempt to answer throughout this book, drawing on interviews with Chinese and Western intellectuals, but even more so on readings of Xi's theoretical texts, which remain the best indicator of his intellectual education and influences; significantly, some of the more nationalist and aggressively anti-Western texts have not been translated into English by the state propaganda services.

Though he portrayed himself at the 2017 Davos summit as the international protector of free trade, against a protectionist Donald Trump, Xi is instituting a form of neo-authoritarianism at home, bolstered by a strong state. Xi is taking advantage of the economic and ideological weaknesses of Western democracies to carry forward China as the second-largest world power, treading a path between references to 1940s and '50s Maoism and harnessing a thousand-year traditional culture. He forges ahead in the name of the 'Chinese dream'—a reference borrowed from the rival United States, which China could supplant as the world's greatest economic power by 2030. But of what does this dream consist? To better understand this new Chinese way, one must follow in the footsteps of Pascal: 'China makes things obscure, you say. And I reply: China makes things obscure, but there is light to be found. Seek it out.'