Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

Holbig, Heike (2018),
China after Reform: The Ideological, Constitutional, and Organisational Makings of a New Era, in: *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 47, 3, 187–207.

URN: http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-11857

ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

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<www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies, in co-operation with the Lau China Institute at King's College London, and Hamburg University Press.

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China after Reform: The Ideological, Constitutional, and Organisational Makings of a New Era

Heike HOLBIG

Abstract: In late 2017, the Chinese Communist Party proclaimed the "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." Most observers interpreted this step as just another update of the party's ideological canon to accommodate Xi's ambition to increase his personal power, following in the footsteps of Mao Zedong. This contribution argues that we can achieve a better understanding of the claim about a "new era," if this claim is analysed diachronically as an ongoing process of constructing "chrono-ideological narratives" that link past and future, as well as synchronically in the larger context of recent constitutional and organisational changes. It finds that the "new era" discourse might, in the longer term, have ramifications not only for China's domestic politics but also for the country's self-image in the international arena too.

■ Manuscript received 9 January 2019; accepted 7 May 2019

Keywords: China, Chinese Communist Party, Party ideology, chrono-ideological narratives, constitutional amendment, restructuring of Party and state organs

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Introduction

When the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) put forth the slogan "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" in late 2017, this marked not only an important personal achievement for China's new paramount leader but also a farewell to the reform period as we knew it – and mostly liked it.[1] As this contribution argues, the four decades of reform and opening up that had first been launched in December 1978 under Deng Xiaoping' leadership have been actively transformed into a "past" era during the first five years of Xi's leadership. It posits that the official discourse disseminated by the Chinese party state about a "new era" should not be dismissed as empty rhetoric or old wine in new bottles, but rather signals a paradigmatic shift in its governance norms and corresponding claims vis-à-vis regime legitimacy. More specifically, we should not limit our analysis to reminiscing about the personalist rule of Mao Zedong or China during imperial times, as many observers and much of the international media have done over the past few years. Rather, we need to understand the longer-term ramifications of the "new era" discourse for China's domestic politics as well as for its self-image in the international context too.

To elaborate this argument, the article proceeds in three steps. A first background section looks into the efforts made by the Party's propaganda machine since 2012 to reconfigure the official narratives of past and present, and to lay the foundations for the "new era" discourse in Party language. Second, the article analyses in some linguistic detail the ideological, constitutional, and organisational changes that have come in parallel with the launching of the "new era" since the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, including the far-reaching steps taken both during and after the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) Session of March 2018. Last but not least, as it is precisely the confluence of these three processes which creates strong potential for paradigmatic shifts in real politics, the third and final section assesses the implications of this for domestic politics and state–society relations – as well as for China's international ones too.

1 This is a revised version of a lecture given at the School of Languages and Cultures within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, on 15 October 2018.

Preparing the New Era Discourse – Xi Jinping's Chrono-Ideological Narratives

The "new era" discourse had not simply come out of the blue in the autumn of 2017, but in fact been in the "genes" of the fifth generation of leadership under Xi – who took over as paramount leader from Hu Jintao in 2012. The 18th Communist Party Congress of that year had been eagerly awaited, as the preceding decade had seen the growing perception both inside and outside China of political stalemate and inertia, a lack of leadership and political will to get things done, and of problems going unsolved. Back then, therefore, observers both at home and abroad saw a need for a power transition which would bring about a bold new vision and strong leadership at the helm.

When Xi took over as China's paramount leader in November 2012, he did not shy away from rising to these expectations. Rather, his new habitus as a more self-assertive, decisive, and sleeves-up type of leader seemed to confirm the purported image of him being the first party chief after Jiang Zemin and Hu to have not been handpicked by Deng, and the first one in the reform period, after the latter, who had struggled his way up to power – establishing himself as "a new helmsman with a greater degree of freedom to chart the course" (Mahoney 2014: 23). In the run-up to the 18th Party Congress and ever since, the official media have constructed new narratives of past and future which portray Xi as the architect of a now-dawning new age.

Here are a few examples of "chrono-ideological narratives" (Holbig 2015) that have emerged during Xi's first five-year term as Party chief: First, vocabularies clustering around semantic fields of time – past, present, and future – were used much more frequently in Party documents and mass media than before. These include concepts such as "history" (历史, *lishi*), "era" (时代, *shidai*), "modernisation" (现代化, *xiandaihua*), "rejuvenation" (复兴, *fuxing*), "innovation" (创新, *chuangxin*), "path" (道路, *daolu*), "struggle" (战斗, *zhandou*), "sacrifice" (牺牲, *xisheng*), "challenge" (挑战, *tiaozhan*), "crisis" (危机, *weiji*), "risk" (风险, *fengxian*) and "opportunity" (机会, *jihui*), "target" (目标, *mubiao*), "expectation" (期待, *qidai*), "hope" (希望, *xiwang*), "dream" (梦, *meng*), and so on. While these terms per se are not new of course, their density and the way in which they are brought to-

gether to form larger chrono-ideological narratives suggests that the new leadership has been claiming a new vision for a new age, new potentials for the mobilisation of symbolic resources and support, and with that new claims for regime legitimacy (Holbig 2015).

Another example is, second, the notion of "Two Centenaries" (两个一百年, *liang ge yibai nian*), which had been widely used in Party jargon since 2007 already (Wang 2014). It refers to two future anniversaries that are deemed of high political significance: the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, to be celebrated in summer 2021, and the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), to be celebrated in October 2049. Since the first mention of the Two Centenaries, however, the focus had always been on the first milestone of 2021 – which had been regarded as the target year for the "comprehensive construction of a moderately well-off society." Now, with Xi's promotion to Party secretary-general in 2012 – whose term was, at the time, expected to end in 2022 – there was a growing awareness that the first milestone of 2021 was coming up fast – and, with that, there was a more urgent need to symbolically span a wider bridge into the future, lest the Party leadership soon run out of visions for the future. The newly conceived notion of the "Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" (中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦, *Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing de Zhongguo meng*), cited extensively in official documents since November 2012, helps do exactly this. As Party School theorists were quick to elaborate, the year 2049 will be the new strategic milestone which is supposed to see the culmination of two strategic targets:

> One being the completion of 'Chinese-style modernization' starting in the year 2021, the other being the realization of […] the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation which is supposed to take place by the year 2049. (*Renmin Luntan* 2013)

Moreover, for the long-term vision of the new leadership to be credible, it had to be anchored solidly in the past. Indeed, the new image of Xi was marked by a multitude of references made to Deng and the early reform period, compared to almost no mention of Jiang and only a few of Xi's immediate predecessor, Hu. In various "important speeches," Xi reminisced about Deng's groundbreaking theoretical achievements (Xi 2013a), and public billboards would boast reprints of well-known photographs of the former paramount leader in the good old days of the early reform period (*Xinhua* 2013a). Also, many

more or less explicit references to Mao have been found in official documents since then, hailing him as "a great figure who changed the face of the nation and led the Chinese people to a new destiny" and confirming that the Party would "hold high the banner of Mao Zedong Thought […] forever" (*Xinhua English Service* 2013). Other examples of Maoist language revitalised since 2012 include concepts such as the "mass line" (群众路线, *qunzhong luxian*), "flesh-and-blood ties" (血肉联系, *xuerou lianxi*) with the people, or revolutionary terms such as "leader" (领袖, *lingxiu*) to help designate Xi's new authority (*Xinhua* 2013b; Li 2017).

As a third and final example here, Xi made it very clear early on that he is the engineer, the architect, the great helmsman who will no longer "grope for stones to cross the river" (磨着石头过河, *mozhe shitou guo he*), as his predecessors supposedly did, but who will rather steer China into "deep" and "unchartered waters." The technocratic formula for this new mode of governance is "top-level design" (顶层设计, *dingceng sheji*), meaning a new emphasis on overall planning and the strategic coordination of reforms in the economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental fields instead of pursuing isolated ones in all of these fields – and always keeping in mind the "whole picture." Located at the apex of this hierarchically integrated and systematic mode of governance, of course, is none other than Xi, with him positioning himself and the Party as the motor of history, courageous innovator, and designer of the future (CCP Central Committee 2013).

A new genre of Party documents give proof of his elevated role: Since 2013, Party resolutions, opinion pieces, and other important documents have usually come with a separate exegesis by Xi. These "explanations" (说明, *shuoming*) are written from Xi's personal perspective; marked, among other things, by the interspersed use of "I" (我, *wo*) instead of the collective "we" (我们, *women*), "our country" (我国, *woguo*), or "our party" (我党, *wodang*) that are used in all other official genres. Of course, these explanations say, in a nutshell, the very same things as the Party documents that they refer to. Yet, the message that they convey is that Xi – if not identified as the documents' mastermind in the first place – is the one who has the sole power and authority to interpret the collective wisdom of the Party (Xi 2013b; for more recent examples, see Xi 2017, 2018).

As these examples demonstrate, Xi's role as architect of a new vision for China's future has been meticulously crafted since 2012, and his "new era" had, in fact, been dawning for some time before its eventual official inauguration in late 2017.

Inauguration of a New Era: Ideological, Constitutional, and Organisational Changes

Ideological Changes

The 19th Party Congress, which convened for a full week in October 2017, made headlines in the international press for enshrining "Xi Jinping Thought" in the Party's constitution. The move was widely interpreted as a manifestation of the personal power that Xi had amassed after only five years as China's paramount leader, putting him on a par with Mao and Deng. While this personal power dimension is indeed important, a close reading of official documents published in the lead-up to, and emanating from, the 19th Party Congress reveals much broader ideological messages besides.

Although the Central Committee's decision to enshrine Xi's guiding ideology in the Party's constitution after only one five-year term in office was striking, its precise formulation fell below the expectations of some analysts who had predicted a compact formula similar to "Mao Zedong Thought" (毛泽东思想, *Mao Zedong sixiang*) or "Deng Xiaoping Theory" (邓小平理论, *Deng Xiaoping lilun*). Bets were open, therefore, as to whether it would be termed "Xi Jinping Theory" (理论, *lilun*) or "Xi Jinping Thought" (思想, *sixiang*). In Sinified Marxist parlance, while "*lilun*/theory" refers to something more specific, the term "*sixiang*/thought" denotes a systematic set of ideas which have resulted from the successful integration of pure theory and practice – and thus bestow greater esteem on their alleged creator (Schurman 1968). In the end, those who had placed their bets on the more prestigious "Thought" were right, although the new formula turned out to be a rather wordy and cumbersome slogan. In English, it reads, as noted earlier, as "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era"; in Chinese, the formula is 习进平新时代中国特色社会主义思想, *Xi Jinping xin shidai Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi sixiang* (CCP Central Committee 2017). In this 16-character

Chinese version, 11 characters separate "Xi Jinping" from his "Thought."

While the term "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" had been in use for many years, the emphasis clearly is on the "new era" – thus giving Xi significant political clout as the architect of a bold new vision for the future. The claim about launching a "new era" is linguistically established through a set of three verb phrases, which had been used in this order for the first time in the "important speech" that Xi gave to ministers and provincial leaders in July 2017. According to Xi, since 1949 China had experienced a "historic rise from standing up, growing rich to getting strong" (从站起来、富起来到强起来的历史性飞跃, *cong zhan qilai, fu qilai dao qiang qilai de lishixing feiyue*) (Ren 2017). Very clearly discernible to his elite audience, the "standing up" referred to the Maoist period from 1949 to 1976, the "growing rich" to the one of reform and opening up launched by Deng in 1978, and the "getting strong" to a new period under Xi that is going to start in 2020/21 and will come to an end in 2049/50. Also, to make the 2049 milestone more palpable, Party futurologists have introduced a new intermediate target: situated halfway between the Two Centenaries – or for that matter, between 2020 and 2050 – the year 2035 is now marked as the milestone for the completion of the building of a "modern socialist country." This is to come before eventually reaching the rank of a "powerful country" or "great power" (强国, *qiangguo*), that by the middle of the twenty-first century (cf. Holbig 2017).

The claim about a "new era" now enshrined in the Party's constitution is bolstered by the Marxist notion of a new "principal contradiction" (主要矛盾, *zhuyao maodun*). Party theorists did not hesitate to remind people that each period of social development is characterised by one principal contradiction. By correctly identifying the current contradiction, so Marxist logic has it, the Party leadership will be able to adapt to the changing reality of society – and thereby further the socialist cause. As all Party members should know, the Mao era had been characterised by the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, thus centring on class struggle. In the reform era, the principal contradiction was "between the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people versus backward social production" (*Xinhua English Service* 2017).

Departing from his predecessors, Xi is now claimed to have identified a new principal contradiction characterising the most recent period of development. Although China would remain in the "primary stage of socialism" (社会主义初级阶段, *shehuizhuyi chuji jieduan*) – a formula invented in 1987 by then CCP general secretary Zhao Ziyang to justify the use of private ownership and market mechanisms in the reform period – for a while, the party had largely solved the problem of backward social production that dominated the reform era. Thus, the new principal contradiction is to be found "between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life" (美好生活, *meihao shenghuo*). In Xi's words, these needs include "demands for democracy, the rule of law, fairness and justice, security, and a better environment" (Xi 2017: section 1) – concepts which nevertheless remain largely contested in today's China. Two days after this speech, a biography of Xi was disseminated widely via online platforms that praised his development during the Cultural Revolution, and which hailed him as a charismatic leader whose personal "combat target" (奋斗目标, *fendou mubiao*) was to support the people's pursuit of a better life (*Xuexi Shibao* 2017).

Overall, the official texts justify Xi's pre-eminent status by attributing to him the correct analysis of the "new era's" principal contradiction and praising it as the latest achievement in the ongoing "Sinification of Marxism" (马克思主义的中国化, *Makesizhuyi de Zhongguohua*) – a process that had first begun a century ago. The official milestone to be achieved by 2049 has been reformulated accordingly. It includes the character "strong" (强, *qiang*); not only once as in the previous formula, but twice now: The new target is to develop China into a "strong ["great" in the official English translation] modern socialist country (社会主义现代化强国, *shehuizhuyi xiandaihua qiangguo*) that is prosperous and strong (富强, *fuqiang*), democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful." With this, Xi's authority is elevated to a moral high ground from which he will implement his ambitious agenda of China "growing strong" – both domestically as well as internationally – by the middle of the twenty-first century (Holbig 2017).

Constitutional Changes

The "new era" discourse has not only been enshrined in the Party's constitution, but also entered the PRC's state constitution enacted in 1982 too. In March 2018, the 13th NPC adopted the fifth constitutional amendment made to date. The four previous ones to the 1982 constitution (1988, 1993, 1999, and 2004) had mainly served to adapt the text to the ideological and theoretical innovations of each new leadership generation. In contrast, the recent amendment substantially changes the constitutional architecture. Whether we interpret this step as the late repair of a structural flaw and a turn back to the Leninist roots of one-party rule or not, it certainly renounces, finally, the previous fiction of a formal separation between Party and state powers (党政分开, *dang zheng fenkai*) that had been emphasised since the time of Deng (cf. Holbig 2018).

Over several decades, this supposed Party–state separation had been maintained by mentioning the leadership monopoly of the CCP in the constitution's preamble while not referencing the Party once in the main text. Instead, the latter – modelled after the principle of people's sovereignty – would detail the rights and duties of Chinese citizens as well as the set-up and competencies of state organs, with the NPC as the "highest state power" – all *as if* the party did not even exist. To be sure, everybody was aware that these "written rules" did not match the "unwritten rules" of Party leadership. However, the fiction of a formal separation of powers between Party and state served to legitimise the one-party regime as a "modern nation state" in the international context and as offering quasi-democratic checks and balances at home. The flip side of this legitimacy claim had been repeated criticism that the Party would disrespect constitutional norms and put itself above the constitution and the law. Since around 2010, constitutional theorists had increasingly voiced such criticism in the name of constitutional government. In the spring of 2013, the Party reacted by outright banning the debate – which was seen to be a pretext for introducing a Western-style capitalist system to China (Holbig 2014).

Against this backdrop, the constitutional amendment of March 2018 has spelt the end to the claimed formal separation of powers between Party and state. This it has done in a number of ways. Most importantly, the CCP's leadership monopoly is now incorporated in Article 1 of the constitution's main text (*Xinhua* 2018, including a

complete list of amendments). The idea of a separate sphere of people's sovereignty is thereby sacrificed, but at the same time this puts an end to the previous criticisms of the Party. If you will, the party no longer stands above the law – now it *is* the law.

This codification of Party rule is manifest also in an amendment to Article 27 of the constitution. It stipulates that all public servants have to swear an oath of loyalty to the constitution. Previously, only members of the CCP were required to make such a pledge. With the recent amendment to the national constitution, this ritual of loyalty now applies to *all* public servants – which in China includes managers of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and service agencies, doctors, teachers, academics, and the like. On the last day of the NPC Session in March of last year, Xi himself swore an oath of loyalty to "the constitution, the motherland, and to the people." The ceremony was unprecedented, and conducted with socialist solemnity. Xi raised his right fist in the Party salute, with his left palm placed on a copy of the PRC constitution – a gesture to be repeated by all state servants in the future, and one that gives the constitution great prominence in a public setting (McCahill 2018).

Another amendment of far-reaching significance is the creation of a new constitutional organ – the National Supervision Commission (NSC) (国家监察委员会, *guojia jiancha weiyuanhui*), which is to be established from the central level down to the county one. Interestingly, the new NSC is not ranked simply as one among many other state commissions or ministries, but is formally on a par with the State Council. This implies a high number of revisions being made across the constitution's main text, including a whole new section in its latter part, Articles 123–127 (*Xinhua* 2018). Practically speaking, the establishment of the NSC can be seen as an extended arm of the Central Committee's Discipline Inspection Commission. At the provincial level and below, the chairs of the two commissions are to be filled in tandem. This also implies that the nationwide anti-corruption campaign launched by Xi in 2013, previously directed mainly at Party members, is now being expanded to include again all public servants (Stepan and Muscat 2018).

Last but not least, and discussed most widely by the international media, the amendment has done away with the 10-year term limit for the state presidency. In terms of political power, this position traditionally had less leverage than the other two posts filled by the re-

spective paramount leaders since 1989: namely, CCP Secretary-General and Chair of the Central Military Commission. The terms of these two posts are not limited anyway. Yet, the recent removal of the presidential term limit is significant in that it will allow Xi – provided he remains in good health – to fill all three top posts well beyond 2022/23 (Lam 2018). A natural moment for his stepping down might be the year 2035 – which, as mentioned above, has been marked as an intermediate development target between 2020 and 2050. Above all, the amendment can be seen as a concrete manifestation of the merging of Party and state powers – which is also evident in the large number of organisational changes being made too.

Organisational Changes

On 21 March 2018, right after the end of the 13th NPC Session, the Party's Central Committee published a 40-page document entitled "Plan on Deepening Reform of Party and State Organs" (深化党和国家机构方案, *Shenhua dang he guojia jigou gaige fang'an*). This comprehensive restructuring plan lays out a detailed scheme of structural reforms not only of party-state organs, but also of the military, the armed police, mass organisations, and of local governments; all of these were supposed to be implemented within the next 12 months. Here are only a few of the most far-reaching organisational changes set to occur:

First, and similar to previous rounds of restructuring, State Council organs were streamlined to reduce overlapping competencies within the ministerial bureaucracy. After reorganising seven ministry-level organs and eight lower-level agencies, the State Council now consists of 26 organs in total. Among them are new ministries such as the Ministries of Natural Resources, of Ecological Environment, of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, of Culture and Tourism, of National Health, of Emergency Management, and of Veteran Affairs – army veterans have turned into a quite precarious social group whose protests over the past years have attracted the attention of the leadership.

Among others, the Ministry of Science and Technology is undergoing a thorough restructuring. It was upgraded to a super ministry, in charge of coordinating across ministries the implementation of the leadership's ambitious innovation policies – including collaboration with overseas partners. Substantial changes have been made in the field of macroeconomic regulation. For example, the competencies of

the previously separate banking and insurance commissions have now been merged into one new regulatory commission so as to more efficiently tackle existing risks in the financial sector. Concerning China's external relations, we should note the establishment of a new international development cooperation agency, a new state immigration administration, as well as a regrouped State Intellectual Property Office. Generally speaking, the staffing of various departments speaks for a high degree of continuity; the main recruitment criteria, indeed, seem to be technical qualifications and long-term performance (Stepan and Muscat 2018).

These recent organisational changes are, however, not limited to the usual streamlining of State Council organs. The more spectacular reorganisations, which can only be outlined very broadly here, are currently taking place within the Party's central headquarters. As mentioned before, the political system has so far been characterised by the formal separation of Party and state organs – resulting in overlapping competencies and institutional redundancies across the board. The recent restructuring scheme aims to do away with these redundancies by merging Party and state organs with similar competencies. For example, the previous two State Commissions for Religious and for Ethnic Affairs were abolished; instead, the United Front Department of the CCP's Central Committee now exercises unified leadership in these two sensitive policy fields, along with its traditional responsibilities in administering Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese affairs.

Another example is the Party's Central Propaganda Department, which now is to directly oversee the country's film industries as well as the press and publishing sectors – all administered by state organs before. Likewise, the previous State Commission for Public Service Management is now incorporated into the Party's powerful Central Organisation Department, which will manage human resources for all civil servants in the future. These are just a few among many more examples that could be given of the Party morphing into the state (Holbig 2018).

Last but not least, four of the Party's most high-powered "central leading small groups" (中央领导小组, *zhongyang lingdao xiaozu*) – which are in charge of coordinating respective policies across Party, state, and military organs – have been upgraded to the status of Party Commissions (中央委员会, *zhongyang weiyuanhui*). Among them are the

two "old" leading small groups for finance and economics and for foreign affairs, as well as two "new" ones for comprehensively deepening reforms and for cyberspace affairs – both of which had been first established only in 2014. All four of them are chaired by Xi, while relegating Premier Li Keqiang to the position of vice-chair even in policy fields that are the centrepiece of the Chinese government's executive competencies. Xi also chairs the National Security Commission, the Military and Civilian Integrated Development Commission, the Commission for Comprehensively Governing by Law, and the new Audit Commission – all of them located at central CCP headquarters, and in charge of specific policy agendas of the Chinese party state (Holbig 2018).

To give a concrete example of their leverage: before it was renamed the Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission in March 2018, the former Central Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms (aka 深改小组, *shengai xiaozu* in Chinese) had adopted a total of 270 programmes and policies since its founding in early 2014 (Holbig and Schachtschneider 2016). Among them were the introduction of the social credit system; the establishment of the Experimental Zones for Free Trade in Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangdong, and Fujian; as well as reforms related to SOEs, and the financial and judicial sectors (Shih and Heilmann 2018). More generally, according to the aforementioned new top-level-design style of policymaking the recently created Party Commissions are to be responsible not only for identifying policy-relevant issues and formulating political programmes, but also for implementing and evaluating the new policies devised. In a nutshell, these new commissions at the Party's centre now cover the entire process of policymaking across all major policy fields. The restructuring plan can be seen as completing the institutional reorganisation of the Party centre that had been launched during Xi's first five-year term. For his second term, the old and new Party Commissions can be expected to serve as the key decision-making bodies (Shih and Heilmann 2018). With that, the restructuring plan announced in March 2018 implies a major shift of executive powers from state to Party organs, although its implementation appears set to be delayed in some policy fields or at least to proceed at different paces – as far as can be gauged at the time of writing from anecdotic evidence.

Implications for China's Domestic Politics and International Relations

It is still too early to tell to how far and how quickly the paradigmatic shift observed at the normative level of party-state rule will translate into changes in actual politics. Nevertheless, as a last step in presenting this contribution's argument, the potential implications of the outlined ideological, constitutional, and organisational changes for China's domestic politics as well as its external relations are assessed. To start with the implications for party-state governance, it remains to be seen to what extent the comprehensive restructuring of Party and state organs just outlined will achieve its aim of increasing the internal efficiency and accountability of policymaking. On the one hand, the recent reorganisation will clearly reduce institutional redundancies, overlapping competencies, and bureaucratic slack. This might be particularly helpful in the provision of public goods such as environmental protection, or in reducing long-standing income disparities across the country. On the other, the Party's morphing into the state and the massive recentralisation of power could result in shrinking room for manoeuvre at the lower administrative levels, drying up information flows from below that feed back into top-level decision-making. This may pose risks to the regime's flexibility and adaptability in the longer term.

Judging from the ideological changes analysed above, the party state has shifted the emphasis in its management of people's expectations and its previous focus on material needs to a new promise of a "better, more beautiful life." This should imply qualitative improvements in a variety of fields. Concepts such as "democracy" or "rule of law" will remain subject to contestation, but the more tangible aspects hereof should include things such as better schools or a more efficient healthcare system. If genuine achievements can be made herein, this will certainly prop up the party state's legitimacy – as will the continued efforts to combat corruption at all administrative levels.

At the same time, the recent ideological and organisational changes suggest that the Party will henceforth expand the scope of its social control, albeit in a selective manner. Public servants, entrepreneurs, urban youth, people working in cultural and creative industries, university students, and academics might be subject to more direct supervision, more intensive ideological education, and greater moral

training than in the past (Doyon 2017). As the incremental introduction of the social credit system has so far suggested, most citizens appear to be accommodating towards the increased presence of the party state in their daily routines in exchange for rising living standards and the promise of a good life. In economic terms, the restructuring of the Ministry of Science and Technology, the upgrading of cyberspace capacities, and other measures taken in the fields of research and development, big data, artificial intelligence, and so on might support the implementation of the country's ambitious innovation programme. This is despite the recent toning down of the "Made in China 2025 Initiative," which should mainly be seen as a diplomatic effort to de-escalate the ongoing trade war with the United States.

In the long run, Xi Jinping's "new era" could also have far-reaching implications for China's international relations too. As observed in the domestic sphere, the changes outlined above will not open up a completely new chapter in China's foreign policy but rather serve to reinforce trends that have already been observed over the previous five years. Among them has been the increasing self-confidence – if not assertiveness – of the Chinese party state in its handling of international affairs, with the turn away from Deng Xiaoping's maxim of "keeping a low profile and biding your time" (韬光养晦, *taoguang yanghui*) to a more proactive stance described as "striving for achievements" (奋发有为, *fenfa youwei*) (Chang-Liao 2016). In a similar vein are the PRC's growing ambitions to turn from norm-taker to norm-maker in multilateral institutions, as observable in the World Trade Organization or the G20 (Biba and Holbig 2017). Overall, the ideological promise of China being a "strong," "powerful," "great power," together with the constitutional strengthening of the position of the State President and the upgrading of the various party-state organs in charge of external relations, are indications that existing trends regarding a more assertive foreign policy will only intensify.

On 20 March 2018, Xi wrapped up the two-week session of the NPC with a 30-minute speech televised both at home and abroad. In it, he stressed that China's destiny was closely connected to the fate of other nations, that the Chinese nation would always contribute to global peace and human development, and that it would never strive for global hegemony or territorial expansion. In the same speech, however, Xi also vowed the Chinese nation would "take our due place in the world" and was ready "to fight bloody battles against our

enemies" in case of separatist efforts, including against activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan who wanted to "split China" (*The Guardian* 2018; SCMP 2018). With these kinds of assertive scenario in mind, it appears to be a very rational calculus to install a strongman leader at the helm who will defend the country's national interests over the long term – and particularly in times of crisis.

We will have to wait and see whether the Chinese leadership will indeed be more prone to calculated risk-taking in regional conflicts – maybe even in military ones in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea – in future. While the escalation of simmering tensions in the region cannot be ruled out, it seems that the political elite in China does not aspire to such a scenario – rather seeking to do all it can to improve the country's international standing. To achieve this goal, recent changes seem to signal an increased willingness to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international order, as first demanded by Robert Zoellick back in 2005 – a statement worth reading again, in light of the current reconfiguration of the global order occurring (Zoellick 2005).

This might include a more proactive role being taken in old and new multilateral institutions, the provision of global public goods in fields such as climate change mitigation, the upholding of free trade regimes, and more sustainable development cooperation schemes within and beyond the Belt and Road Initiative – as, for example, the establishment of a new international development cooperation agency suggests. The downside of recent changes, on the other hand, might be that Xi's pre-eminent role and resolute leadership style will only play into rising fears about China among Americans, Australians, and Europeans, who might further conflate China's leadership with that of Putin's Russia, Erdogan's Turkey, or other authoritarian regimes worldwide. If the international community comes to view the PRC through an increasingly negative lens, this might backfire and help fuel nationalist sentiments among Chinese at home and abroad.

To conclude, the substantial ideological, constitutional, and organisational shifts occurring in the Chinese party state mark the beginning of a "new era". In some ways, they may be reminiscent of Mao Zedong's rule; however, they have more specific implications for the present and future of China's polity. In view of the country's developmental achievements, the most significant of these implications are related to a new Chinese self-image emerging in the global

context. Particularly in light of Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" rhetoric, more assertive ambitions to "Make China Great Again" on the part of Xi's leadership do not seem too far-fetched. Overall, the party-state leadership appears to be positioning itself more powerfully in order to prepare for new kinds of norm-making or even norm entrepreneurship in multilateral settings – and maybe, but not necessarily, for future regional and international conflicts. In any case, we should be aware that in China's self-perception a "new era" has dawned, which might justify unprecedented forms of behaviour also on the international stage.

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