

ACRI Opinion

Australia - China Relations Institute 澳大利亚-中国关系研究院

Xi, Orwell and the language of Chinese politics

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October 27 2017

the interpreter

This article appeared in The Lowy Institute for International Policy's blog, *The Interpreter*, on October 27 2017.

The 19th Party Congress closed earlier this week with the announcement that 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' would be enshrined in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) charter. This eponymous ideological contribution is the first since 'Deng Xiaoping Theory' was posthumously written into the charter in 1997, and the only 'Thought' since 'Mao Zedong Thought' was introduced as the CCP's guiding ideology in 1945.

Even before this announcement, [commentators](#) were drawing [comparisons](#) between Xi and Mao. Australian scholar Geremie Barmé calls Xi the '[Chairman of Everything](#)'. Since early last year, such [allusions](#) have become popular, especially following Xi's designation as the Party's 'Core Leader' in March. Xi's anti-corruption drive, which some argue is being used to [consolidate his personal power](#) by purging rivals, is also reminiscent of Mao's campaigns.

An official [state media release](#) suggests that the Party charter will not shorten Xi's contribution to the more pithy 'Xi Jinping Thought' in the same vein as 'Mao Zedong Thought' or 'Deng Xiaoping Theory', but maintain its full, somewhat awkward title. This is a small but significant detail.

George Orwell wrote in his essay 'Politics and the English language' that 'political language...is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind'. In political language, Orwell said, 'one almost never finds a fresh, vivid, home-made turn of speech'. This is especially true of the CCP's carefully cultivated and scripted political language.

All political movements and institutions face decisions of continuity and change. The CCP leadership understands that at certain times it must change, or at least be seen to be doing so, in order to continue to rule. Evolution rather than revolution has been a bastion of China's political life since Deng Xiaoping took the helm. The CCP's political language is instrumental – it enables those in power to take ownership of certain ideas in order to increase their potency, and justify the Party's continuity and

change. Thus, each generation of leaders espouses a ‘new’ ideology, which is in fact simply an extension of and improvement upon their predecessors’.

For all Party leaders since Deng Xiaoping, ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ has been the guiding light.

The term was introduced by Deng Xiaoping in his [opening address](#) to the 12th Party Congress in 1982. Deng explained that China’s modernisation depended on adapting some ideas about political institutions from other countries and marrying them to existing concepts in China, rather than slavishly imitating them. This primarily meant implementing aspects of a capitalist market economy while maintaining the CCP’s unchallenged political authority. In short, ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ was devised to create the appearance of capitalism’s ideological compatibility with socialism.

This was complete anathema to the revolutionary roots of Mao’s CCP, and one reason behind the growth of a vocal minority in China who are inspired by and seek the reinstatement of Maoist political and economic ideology. Broadly speaking, neo-Maoists believe China’s economic reforms have led to the degradation or even the complete abandonment of the Communist and socialist path Mao espoused: looking after collective rather than individual interests.

Despite the trope, often used by the government, that China has ‘lifted more than 800 million people out of poverty’ since Deng’s reform and opening up program, neo-Maoists contend that not everyone has benefited from China’s economic development. They point to the increasing gap between rich and poor and urban and rural, as well as the lack of rights afforded to migrant workers. The growth of the private sector, they argue, has tarnished the Party’s mission, which has become increasingly characterised by greed and decadence rather than commitment to create the egalitarian and utopian society promised by its founding fathers. For new Maoists, ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ is not socialism at all.

Xi’s ‘Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’, then, does not represent a Maoist mission – it is the latest expression of the CCP’s post-Mao purpose.

In 2012, the work report presented by then-President Hu Jintao at the 18th Party Congress [stated](#) that the most significant project of the previous decade had been ‘bravely promoting the implementation of basic *theoretical innovation*’, and putting forward ‘*new thinking, new views and new arguments* closely connected to the support and development of *socialism with Chinese characteristics*’.

The [theme](#) of the 17th party congress (2007) led by Hu, was ‘hold high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics and strive for new victories in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects’. For the 16th Party Congress (2002), presented by Jiang Zemin, [it was](#) ‘fight to make a new breakthrough in socialism with Chinese characteristics’. Of Jiang’s 15th Congress work report (1997), then-Shanghai Party Secretary Huang Ju wrote in the *People’s Daily* that ‘it was a declaration by the Central Party, with Comrade Jiang Zemin at the core, to guide the entire Party, military and people *into a new era* and leap into the *new century*’. An editorial claimed that Jiang Zemin’s planned overhaul of state-owned enterprises would ‘make China’s updated socialist concepts enter a *new era* of enlightenment’.

Similarly, the ‘China Dream’ – another catchphrase with which Xi is closely associated – is not the first expression of the Party’s ambition for the ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’. References to the rejuvenation in Party media go as far back as 1981. In his political report delivered at the 13th Party Congress of 1987, Zhao Ziyang referred to the political project of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. A *People’s Daily* report in 2002 heralded the ‘spiritual power to realise the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’.

Xi is not fostering a cult of personality, but a cult of the Party. 'Xi Jinping Thought' is not his, but the Party's. He continues the tradition of his predecessors' contributions to the CCP's theoretical canon, all of which were intended to emphasise the Party's relevance and modernity. Xi's thought for a 'new era' is intended to justify the Party's Leninist-capitalist hybridity in the context of new challenges, both domestic and international. With debate about China's place in the world (and US President Donald Trump's incompetence disturbingly apparent), Xi's ambitious global Belt and Road program underway, and the growing complexity of the North Korean nuclear issue and South China Sea disputes, the CCP believes a new type of leader, whose name is worthy of immortalisation in its charter, is required to generate and maintain popular support and give the Party, and by extension the country, the global prestige and authority to which it feels entitled.

Xi may be adept at using the CCP's political language to his advantage. But he does so not with fresh, vivid or home-made turns of speech, but under the guidance of the Party apparatus. This may be a 'new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics', but it is not the first, nor will it be the last.

Note: Unless referenced, all translations from Chinese sources are the author's. References to People's Daily reports, unless otherwise indicated, were accessed via the newspaper's archives.

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