



Life and soul of the party

BEIJING

China's leader has been good for the Communist Party but not for his country

THE Road to Rejuvenation", a permanent exhibition at the National Museum of China in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, tells the story of China's "century of humiliation". Beginning with the Opium wars, it recounts the rise of the Communist Party and the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. The display ends with cases of mobile phones and space paraphernalia, the fruits of one-party rule.

In November 2012 Xi Jinping visited the exhibition. He had just become China's fifth leader since Mao Zedong and this was his first public appearance as party boss. At the time, he was seen as an economic reformer. But his speech at the museum was not about the economy. It contained the first statement of a theme that was to become his slogan. Surrounded by the other members of the country's highest-ranking political body, the Politburo Standing Committee, Mr Xi talked about "the greatest Chinese dream [being] the revival of the Chinese nation". A ballad, "Chinese Dream", soon topped the charts. Posters of a chubby ceramic figurine in a red robe, who apparently embodies the dream, were plastered all over the country.

This September, on the eve of one of the most important events of his leadership, Mr Xi did it all again. At another exhibition of communist achievements, again sur-

rounded by his Politburo acolytes, he reiterated that the party's job was to pursue the "dream of national rejuvenation". The message matters. It shows where his priorities lie—not with the economy, but with the power of the Communist Party and China's standing in the world.

Five years after that first visit, Mr Xi faces a form of stocktaking. On October 18th he will open the Communist Party's congress, an event that takes place every five years and is the most important in the country's political calendar. Around 2,300 delegates will descend on the Great Hall of the People, opposite the National Museum, to revise the party's constitution and appoint a new Central Committee, the 205-strong elite that will govern the country for the next five years.

Normally, party bosses serve for ten years, so Mr Xi is at the halfway mark. If he follows recent precedent, he will appoint a successor at the congress (though there is no guarantee that he will do so). It is a good moment to ask: what has he tried to do and how successful has he been? And, regardless of success or failure, is he doing the right things?

Mr Xi sees himself as China's third transformational president, alongside Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Mao held the country together and established the

communist state. Deng set China on the road to riches and (in the official view) saved the party from the lure of democracy. Mr Xi's aim is to give China back its rightful place at the centre of its world and to save the party again, this time from itself.

He Yiting, vice-president of the Central Party School, the institution in charge of training senior officials, recently wrote that the modern history of China can be divided into three periods: Mao's; reform and opening up (ie, Deng's); and the period since 2012 (ie, Mr Xi's). A book published in July called "Xi Jinping's Thoughts" (a collection of essays) says in its introduction that "China needs heroes who can usher in a new generation of thinking and achievement, heroes such as Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping." Mr Xi presents himself as their true heir.

In command

His personal powers reflect his exalted sense of mission. He is president, head of the party and in July was referred to by state media as "supreme commander", a title last conferred on Deng. He bestrides the bureaucracy like a colossus, having swept away and replaced almost all the party leaders and local governors in China's 31 provinces, as well as much of the top brass of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). More members of the Central Committee are due to retire at the congress than usual so he now has a chance to put even more allies into top jobs. The congress is also likely to accord him a sort of ideological dominance by referring to his writings about communism by name in the party's constitution—something denied to his two predecessors. Doing this would make Mr Xi

► Xi China's ideological arbiter.

His predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, were appointed mainly to continue Deng's economic reforms. Mr Xi was appointed to save the party. The notion that the Communist Party might need saving will sound peculiar. Although China experiences tens of thousands of anti-government demonstrations each year, these are local affrays which are mostly reactions to greedy local governments. The party faces no national threat and seems to have bounced back from the traumatic events around Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Yet that is not how Mr Xi saw matters in 2012. To him, and to the elite who chose him as China's leader, the party faced an existential threat. Mr Xi was later to complain that "among party members...even senior cadres, there are those whose conviction isn't strong enough and who are not loyal to the party." Members were corrupt. They did not pay their party dues—2% of salary for those earning more than 10,000 yuan (\$1,520) a month. They no longer believed in communism. Some even talked about moving to a more democratic system of government.

Up the wrong path

To Mr Xi, this was a road to ruin. "If morale is low, organisation loose, discipline and ethics unchecked," he wrote, "[then] in the end we will not only fail but...the tragedy of the Emperor Chu [who was murdered in 202BC] might occur again."

It is not ancient history that frightens Mr Xi, however. It is the disintegration of the Soviet Union. For him, everything begins and ends with the party ("east, west, north or south, the party leads everything," he wrote). If it collapses, so will the country. Chinese leaders attribute the Soviet implosion to a failure of self-confidence by Russian communists and are determined that nothing like that should ever occur in China. Mr Xi has spoken of the Russians "not being man enough" to stand up for their party. From the start, he set out to be man enough.

He is well prepared to shore up the party's beliefs. He was head of the Central

Party School between 2008 and 2013. He was also head of the leading small group on "party building" (leading small groups are influential committees that co-ordinate the work of party and government). He has spent more time on the internal workings of the institution than anyone since Deng.

The best known of his campaigns is aimed at corruption. Since 2012 the main anti-graft body, the Central Commission on Discipline Inspection (CCDI), has begun disciplinary actions against 1.4m party members. But it is only part of a broader effort to instil discipline. At a meeting just before the congress, the Politburo reported that "for the party, strict self-governance in every sense will never end."

Discipline requires self-control. Mr Xi has instituted what he calls "democratic life meetings" for members to reflect on their behaviour and learn to set an example. It means attending ideology classes. Party leaders have always run ideological campaigns but Mr Xi has been unusually enthusiastic about them. In 2016 he even started an online campaign encouraging members to write out the party constitution by hand, like naughty schoolchildren. Mr Xi is putting the communist back into communist China.

Discipline requires loyalty. As an article in *Qiushi*, the party's main theoretical journal, put it earlier this year: "there is no 99.9% loyalty. It is 100% pure and absolute loyalty and nothing less." Institutions that fail to reach the required levels of groveling feel the consequences. Mr Xi has emasculated the Communist Youth League, once an influential group and the road to power for his prime minister, Li Keqiang, and his predecessor as China's leader, Mr Hu. Calling it out of touch, bureaucratic and arrogant, he demoted its chief, jailed one of the top officials and dismantled the league's school.

The party has to be knocked into shape, in Mr Xi's view, because he wants to double down on its control. Party members in companies—including joint ventures with foreigners—have started to claim the right to approve investment decisions. Academics, once permitted a limited freedom of in-

quiry, now find it impossible to conduct research into sensitive subjects, such as the Cultural Revolution. State-owned newspapers have been told bluntly that their job is to serve the party. It always was, of course, but previous governments had also encouraged them to report unwelcome facts. Mr Xi has also cracked down on anything that might remotely challenge the party's monopoly of power, arresting human-rights lawyers by the score and passing a new law to make life harder for charities.

On manoeuvres

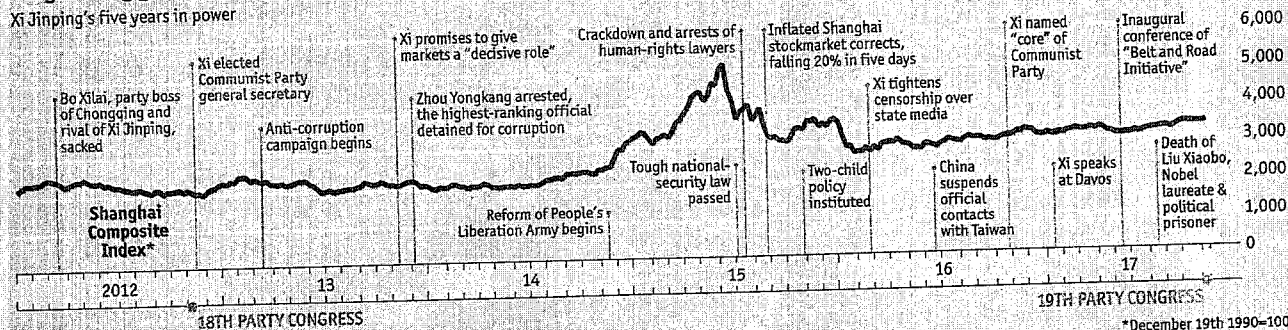
He has increased the party's influence over the PLA by expanding the role of the Central Military Commission, the body through which the party controls the army. In 2015 the commission took on many jobs previously done at military headquarters, such as supervising logistics. This year, its general office was upgraded, its director promoted and instructions from the office given the status of military regulations.

Above all, Mr Xi has shifted the balance of power between party and government. He has sidelined his prime minister, Mr Li, who is head of government. Prime ministers used to be in charge of the economy but the main institution for economic policymaking now seems to be the leading small group on deepening reform, which Mr Xi chairs. Wang Qishan, the head of the CCDI, said earlier this year that "there is no such thing as the separation between the party and the government." Compare that with a speech made by Deng in 1980: "It is time for us to distinguish between the responsibilities of the party and those of the government," the former leader said, "and to stop substituting the former for the latter." In his attempt to bolster the party's fortunes, Mr Xi has turned the clock back almost 40 years.

From his point of view, the campaign has been a success. When Mr Xi took over, the party resembled a company whose employees did not show up, did not believe in the business model and were fiddling their expenses on an epic scale. Now, people are paying their dues. There is no longer any public debate about "the Singa- ►

A tightening grip

Xi Jinping's five years in power



Sources: Thomson Reuters; The Economist

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‘pore model’ or anything that implies a future for China without the party.

Mr Xi’s personal authority has been enhanced, so far without serious public opposition. This is one of the dangers of his programme. So much depends on him personally that there is a risk everything will collapse when he goes. Or that he will be tempted to stay on and on. As one liberal commentator says, Mr Xi has offended too many people to walk away quietly. For good or ill, he has begun to make the party a more effective instrument of control.

But as he knows, that is only a start. Every leader since Mao has wrestled with questions about the Communist Party’s legitimacy, and Mr Xi is no exception. For years, economic growth provided the party’s “mandate of heaven”. But growth is slowing, inequality is rising, and middle-class concerns about housing, education and health care cannot be allayed by laddling on an extra point of GDP.

He has a dream

The dream of a rejuvenated China, again dominating “everything under heaven”, might be popular. And if Mr Xi can make the country respected abroad, that might translate into respect for the party at home. Hence his second concern—China in the world—reinforces his first.

As his visit to the museum showed, the dream of rejuvenation predated the election of Donald Trump. But Mr Trump’s America-first nationalism has given Mr Xi a chance to claim global leadership. In January 2017 he told the World Economic Forum in the Swiss resort of Davos that China should “guide economic globalisation”. A month later he added that it should “guide international society [towards] a more just and rational new world order.”

Vast sums back up the slogans. Mr Xi’s “Belt and Road Initiative”, his most ambitious foreign policy, involves spending hundred of billions of dollars on infrastructure in 60-odd countries in Asia and Europe. If it works, it could make Eurasian trade, centred on China, a rival to transatlantic trade, focused on America.

Mr Xi has been more assertive in pressing China’s claims in the South China Sea. Last year, a UN tribunal rejected those claims. China promptly persuaded the Philippines, which had brought the case, to disavow its legal victory in return for lavish investment. Mr Xi’s reform of the PLA has made the armed forces more outward-looking. They used to be organised mainly for defence and control of the domestic population. Mr Xi has built up the navy, created new “theatre commands” to project force abroad and has opened China’s first overseas military base in Djibouti.

And he has greatly expanded China’s influence-buying activities abroad. China has long supported instruments of soft power such as the Confucius Institutes,

which teach foreigners about the Chinese language and culture. Now, the party is also putting money into media operations in the West and trying to use overseas Chinese people as agents of state policy. In short, Mr Xi has disavowed Deng’s advice that, in foreign affairs, China should “keep a low profile and never claim leadership.”

It is impossible to say whether he has sprinkled the stardust of legitimacy upon his party, as he wants. An opinion poll in 2016 by the Pew Research Centre in America found that only 60% of Chinese thought their involvement in the global economy a good thing. On the other hand, this year’s cinematic smash hit is a “patriotic” film called “Wolf Warriors 2”, showing a Chinese soldier killing bad guys round the world. So perhaps bossing foreigners around might prove popular.

At any rate, if Mr Xi’s efforts have had mixed results, that is not because they have failed. As with his party reforms, he can congratulate himself on a job well started. China’s vast bureaucracy has lumbered into action behind the belt and road project. China is buttressing its claims in the South China Sea with new facts on the ground or, rather, in the ocean, in the form of military construction on artificial islands. The country is now widely regarded as a leader in global climate talks.

Perhaps the only serious setback to Mr Xi’s claim to leadership has come in North-East Asia. His unwillingness to rein in Kim Jong Un’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is keeping America more involved in Asia than it might otherwise be, and increasing the chances that Japan and South Korea might one day deploy nuclear defences of their own. That would hardly be in anyone’s interest, especially China’s.

Mr Xi, in short, can look back with some satisfaction on the twin goals he set himself. But there remains a more profound

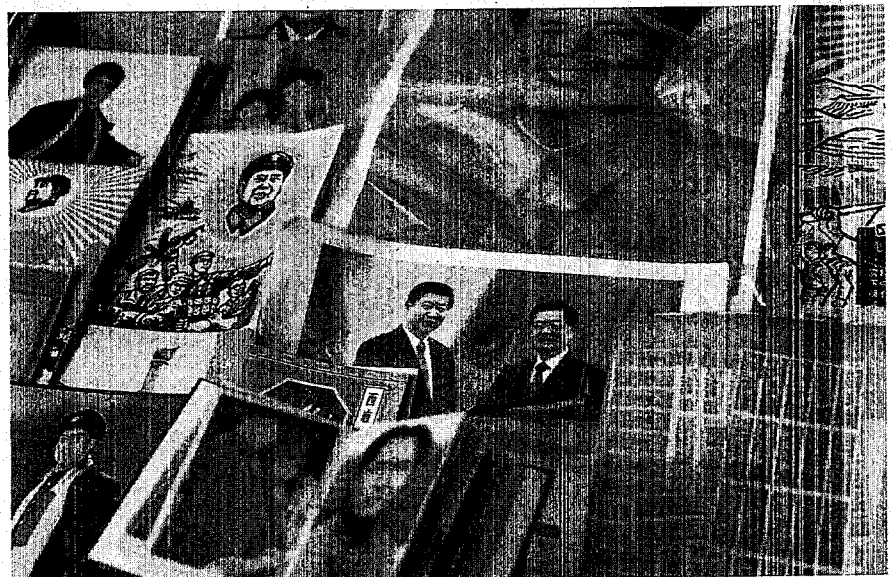
question, whether they are the right aims for his country. During the next decade, a number of slow-burning problems will start to blaze. Water shortages, historically one of China’s most severe challenges, will become acute. More poisoned air will be pumped out and more poisoned soil uncovered. The first generation born under the one-child policy are reaching marriageable age, bringing with it the excess of boys over girls that was exacerbated by population control. The vast debts built up by China’s local governments and state-owned enterprises will also have to be handled.

Outside the party

What these disparate matters have in common is that many of the best solutions come from outside the party. Environmental groups could put public pressure on polluters. A freer press could shine a light on all sorts of abuses, from corruption to fraud. More competition among firms, as well as harder budget constraints, would reduce the excess debt of state-owned enterprises and local governments.

But Mr Xi is going in the opposite direction. He is limiting the press, closing down civil-society groups and squeezing the space for public discussion. To do him justice, he is not doing this because he is turning his back on China’s problems. But he is determined that only the party may be allowed to address them. And if it fails, then the problems will not be addressed.

In 1980 Deng Xiaoping gave a speech to the Politburo in which he called for a clearer separation between party and state, gave warning against concentrating too much authority in one person (it is “liable to give rise to arbitrary rule”, he said) and argued in favour of a predictable, orderly succession. Mr Xi is rejecting all of Deng’s good advice. He himself might benefit. But China might not. ■



Mr Xi’s place in history