The Governance of China

The World According to Xi Jinping

China’s president has staked his reputation on fulfilling the “Chinese Dream.” Here’s what he envisions.

Reuters

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The Governance of China, a collection of the political theories of Chinese President Xi Jinping, is one of the most beautiful books I have ever read. I mean that quite literally: The book, as an object, is lovely. There are 515 pages of creamy, heavy, acid-free stock; gold-flecked endpapers; a full-page frontispiece portrait, complete with a facsimile of Xi’s signature; 22 glossy, double-sided photo pages; a silver-embossed, silk-bound cover; and a sturdy white dust jacket.
This is China’s new scripture, a book, published in October 2014, that the government has willed into being a bestseller. Chinese state media claim that over 5 million copies have already been sold around the world. Translators have labored to put the book’s 79 speeches and addresses into immaculate English, French, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and Japanese. They say it’s a hit in Bulgaria. Supplicants to the Communist Party, such as Mark Zuckerberg, have made a point of brandishing the book in public like the latest offering from Malcolm Gladwell.

Yet from all the available evidence, very few people outside of China—except maybe Bulgaria and Mark Zuckerberg—have read it. No major American news outlet has reviewed the book in detail. None of my journalist friends in Beijing has read it (one used his copy, which I borrowed, to buttress the wall of his cubicle). It’s a book that seems to matter more for the phenomena it has generated than for what it contains.

But at a time when economic tremors in China are rippling through world markets and the People’s Liberation Army is flexing its military might in unprecedented displays, understanding the content of this book—the most extensive compilation of Xi’s thought—takes on urgency. Xi, who will meet with Barack Obama this week in his first state visit to the United States, has staked his reputation on fulfilling the “Chinese Dream.” Across the 18 chapters of The Governance of China, the Chinese leader outlines a comprehensive ideology that points to where he aims to take his country, despite strengthening economic and geopolitical headwinds. Though not yet three years into his expected 10-year rule, Xi has already recentralized authority to an extent that could justify considering him the single most powerful human being on earth.

It’s worth exploring what such a man is thinking.

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You can’t blame people for not wanting to read The Governance of China. Even for someone interested in China and Marxist theory, passages like this, which begins the chapter called “Enhance Publicity and Theoretical Work,” are like freebasing literary Ambien:

Our publicity and theoretical work must help us accomplish the central task of economic development and serve the overall interests of the country. Therefore, we must bear the big picture in mind and keep in line with the trends. We should
map out plans with focus on priorities and carry them out in accordance with the situation.

Or sentences like this, which fly downward like portcullises of dullness five pages into the book, as if to forbid readers from entering any further:

The political report to the 18th National Congress of the CPC has charted a grand blueprint for bringing about a moderately prosperous society in all respects, accelerating socialist modernization, and achieving new victories for socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new historic circumstances.

(This is an accurate rendering of the flavor of the original Chinese. I read the book in English, but anyone familiar with the droning cadences of the Communist Party’s Mandarin propaganda will recognize the familiar abstractions, the insistent buzzwords, and the numbing repetitions.)

Even when you can keep your eyes open, the temptation to roll them is sometimes irresistible. Like when Xi compares governing China to “frying a small fish,” or exhorts the people to observe the “Three Stricts and Three Earnests,” or assures Tanzanians that they are China’s “Trustworthy Friends and Sincere Partners Forever.”

And yet beneath the clunky, neo-Leninist language, there is real substance. What emerged for me was Xiism—what I’d describe as an ethno-nationalist variant of Marxism, which holds that the people of China are heirs to a unique civilization and a utopian destiny that entitle them to a privileged position in the world. This destiny can only be achieved by following the moral leadership of Xi Jinping, who in his person (due to his birth and upbringing) embodies the virtues of the people and is their champion.

If Xi’s program is duly followed, Xiism promises a pinnacle of prosperity in 2049—precisely 100 years after the founding of the People’s Republic of China—at which point Xi avers that the Communist Party will “solve all the country’s problems” and the Chinese Dream will be fulfilled. China will be “strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious,” he vows, adding that in his view, “realizing the great renewal of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream in modern history.”

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It's either a scary or an inspiring vision, depending on how you view the consequences of China's aspirations to preeminence. For this American, at least, one of the more unsettling aspects of the vision is the degree to which the United States barely exists at all—neither as an enemy nor, to borrow Xi's description of the U.S. in 2014, as a partner in "non-confrontation, non-conflict, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation."

Xi’s utopian world, as mapped out in The Governance of China, is one in which the United States is an insignificant, faraway blip, and countries that China can manage mostly without fear (Russia) or regard benevolently as obedient tributaries (Tanzania) fill the void.