



How to Lose Friends and Influence People: Upsetting the Balance in Xi Jinping's China

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Through his clampdown on corruption, dissent and relative freedoms, Chinese President Xi Jinping has alienated various groups within society. However, in the absence of a serious economic downturn and a rift within the Party's leadership, discontent is unlikely to unseat him for the foreseeable future.

Democratic leaders try to amass popularity as capital for the next election. Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) may not face elections, but neither can they ignore the governed. Xi has considerable resources in the popularity bank: overall prosperity has been rising; poverty falling; a war on corruption is well-received; and China's global rise is making it 'great again'.

Yet, Xi is also being prodigal in running down that capital. He is bringing back Marxist-Leninist ideology and politics not just into the working lives of officials – for whom favouring being 'red' over being an 'expert' is an unwelcomed reminder of the Cultural Revolution – Party membership now requires active study, participation and obeisance. Censorship, increasing control of culture and measures to align people's behaviour with Xi's vision of '[new China man](#)' increasingly weigh upon average citizens, who were becoming more accustomed to relative freedoms.

In January of this year, a conference of the top 400 Party officials [talked of looming turbulence](#), whether economic, political, external, or ecological. In such circumstances, has Xi been wise in offending many constituents within society?

Displeasing some groups was inevitable. Among them are elements of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the security services (or, to be precise, parts of them). The CCP leader's power ultimately rests with the PLA and security organs. Unsurprisingly, Xi had

to clear out the adherents of unreliable generals and of ex-Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang, who headed up security. Corruption charges were the mechanism. Those purged, their networks of supporters and their families will add up. To them might be added those who have lost out in the PLA reforms and downsizing. Others will have benefitted from promotions and many will have supported reforms aimed at making the PLA an army capable of fighting and winning wars.

For instability to threaten the Party's hold on power, several things would need to happen, predominant among them being a deep and prolonged economic slump

Support for the CCP in Hong Kong and Taiwan has taken a hit. The CCP's gnawing at Hong Kong's freedoms under the 'one country, two systems' principle has led to protests on an unimagined scale, damaged trust in Beijing and serves to threaten prosperity. To Hong Kong's seven million inhabitants might be added the [million or more Taiwanese](#) who currently live and work on the mainland. The CCP's threats and its actions against Taiwan, such as the [recent ban on tourists](#), and unrest in Hong Kong

are hardly selling to Taiwanese the benefits of unification.

The tightening of ideological and other constraints has surely stirred dissatisfaction in other groups, including not a few members of the Party itself. There are 90.5 million Party members, about 8% of the adult population. From January 2013 to July 2018, [over 1.3 million officials](#) were investigated for corruption. By now that figure may have risen to around 2% of all members. Many others have been investigated for discipline offences, particularly for using public money and cars for personal advantage. Most will have been punished, while opportunities to supplement poor salaries through bribery and other benefits have been curtailed. The consequences will have extended to their families. While clamping down on corruption might be acceptable in the interests of the country; the re-entry of the Party into all aspects of officials' lives is far less palatable. Party membership is no longer a box to tick for one's CV. Political participation is unavoidable, not least through new technology in the form of a mobile app 'Study The Strong Country', which Party members [must download](#) and which gives points for reading Party documents and speeches in their non-working hours. '[Self-criticism sessions](#)' are now back in the form of 'democratic life meetings'. The best way to visualise this is to imagine a Christian confession, but one carried out in front of and with the active participation of all members of a Party cell. During the Cultural Revolution,

First-year students participate in a military training session at Cixian First Senior High School, Handan, China. Military training for students is intended to instil patriotism, collectivism and concern for national defence. *Courtesy of Costfoto/SIPA USA/PA Images*



self-criticism sessions were brutal and humiliating. The change of name is unlikely to still disquieting memories.

The sacking of professors and think tank intellectuals, which [began as early as 2013](#), has alienated many of the intelligentsia. Tightened CCP control of education, particularly of universities, has been in progress for a few years and will continue. Marxism, updated as Xi Jinping Thought, is now an important area of the curriculum, while increasing surveillance in the classroom through informants or CCTV cameras mean that catching up on WeChat messages or sleep in class is riskier. Even neo-Marxists, who want to see a return to the egalitarian policies of a romanticised Mao era, are unhappy. A group at Peking University, which has supported workers and their rights, has been arrested.

Christians are also facing further restrictions. A war on the faith began with the removal of crosses from churches and has extended through demolitions of underground places of worship (namely those not affiliated with CCP-controlled churches) and a [push on sinicising religion](#), to the arrest of pastors and the breaking up of unlicensed congregations. Estimates

of the number of Chinese Christians vary. A 2018 government white paper put the number at [44 million](#), while Pew Research in 2010 gave a figure of [67 million](#). Christianity is a powerful force: to deal with it, the Roman emperor Constantine chose conciliation, while Xi is choosing persecution. Which is the wiser strategy?

Then there is private business. The push to insist that all businesses host Party cells (which will inevitably have a say in how the businesses are run), Xi's support for the state-owned sector and worries over property ownership (both physical and intellectual) add up to unhappiness for entrepreneurs. Recently, CCP leaders have spoken volubly about the need to support private business, largely related to access to finance, but it is too early to know whether that has made a difference on the ground.

There are other groups which it seems almost reckless for Xi to risk alienating. The middle classes, to start with. Back in 2015, a middle-class entrepreneur complained to the author that her friends saw worrying similarities between the Cultural Revolution and the CCP's renewed emphasis on politics in everyday behaviour. People are annoyed by increased censorship of

media, control of the internet and the politicisation of culture, and are being deprived of things they value, such as the simple pleasures of humorous internet exchanges or watching their favourite South Korean soap operas or [popular historical dramas](#). Slowness or outright failure in addressing environmental problems is not endearing the Party either (whether or not it is fair to blame the Party is not the question: in a system where the CCP claims credit for all good things, it is only reasonable that they accept discredit for the bad). The over 17 million people who have been [barred from travel](#) on planes and over 5 million from high-speed trains as a result of the social-credit system are also likely to be upset with Xi's efforts to instil 'trustworthiness' into Chinese society.

Young people also have cause to be displeased. It seems that the days when millennials could get on with the business of being young and possibly choose to ignore politics are ending. The regime has not helped its popularity among the young by controlling internet streaming and games, censoring the [#MeToo movement](#) and by [harassing LGBTQ groups](#).

Many rural migrants without urban registration were brutally expelled from

Beijing during the winter of 2017, leading to support groups being set up by registered Beijing residents (who are normally protective of the social services they might otherwise have to share with migrants). This has been seen in other cities. This group, numbering around 150 million, feels itself to be second-class citizens because they lack access to the social services enjoyed by those with urban registration.

Ethnic minorities are suffering from the Party's abandonment of its belief in using economic progress to weaken adherence to ethnic identity and religion, in favour of speeding up the process through control and repression. The plight of over a million Uyghurs in concentration camps in Xinjiang needs no elaboration. But ethnic assimilation (perhaps a euphemism) also continues in Tibet. Even China's Hui minority, which has been largely assimilated, is feeling the pressure, as its mosques and way of life is politicised with the CCP's special brand.

It is noticeable that for some years the Party has been very wary of military veterans, [numbering 57 million](#), according them special treatment when it comes to [finding employment](#). The government also recently [established a ministry for veteran affairs](#). This reflects not just the special place that the PLA has in Party history, but also the fact that veterans have known discipline and organisation, two qualities which would make their resentment a more potent threat. Even so, in recent years there have been [outbreaks of discontent by veterans](#).

Despite the grievances of all of these groups, it seems unlikely for the foreseeable future that rising discontent will lead to protests which could threaten the Party's continued rule. The water in the pressure cooker may be heating up, but its walls are getting thicker at the same time. Xi appears to have consolidated control over the security forces and the PLA, the ultimate guarantors of power. Meanwhile the Party has an ever-improving ability to anticipate and deal with trouble by developing controls based on combining information from recognition (facial, speech, gait, DNA) and geo-location technologies and big data, which are

being operationalised by machine learning and artificial intelligence. To these are added older systems of social control, such as the grid system that divides cities into parcels, each of which appoints watchers to report to police.

There have been protests in China for years. Figures are no longer published, but in 2010 evidence suggested that incidents of unrest happened [180,000 times per year](#). But the CCP has refined its ability to ensure that they remain local, not least by ensuring that it controls any group which might be able to organise (such as NGOs), or that they are quickly and rigorously suppressed.

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For instability to threaten the Party's hold on power, several things would need to happen, predominant among them being a deep and prolonged economic slump leading to severe unemployment and urban poverty, which would fall heaviest upon the roughly 150 million second-generation, second-class citizens born of rural-to-urban migrants. No wonder that at the National People's Congress in March, dealing with unemployment was at the top of the agenda, a fact reinforced by the announcement in May that the Party would establish [a Leading Small Group](#) (a cross-cutting CCP/government body) on employment.

A second indispensable precursor to instability would be disunity in the leadership, but at present there is no sign of this. Not only is the leadership dominated by Xi and his placemen; leaders are also keenly aware of the dangers of disunity: by studying the demise of the Soviet Union, the CCP can conclude that a leadership split, plus the absence of a strong leader, would spell doom. It would take a disastrous economic downturn or a struggle over who would be Xi's successor to cause a split, but neither seems imminent.

Xi may be losing friends, but his power and propaganda still influences

his people, even as his current actions increase domestic unhappiness and opposition. While this may not seem wise, Xi has probably concluded that the trend towards looser controls under his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao introduced risks which threatened the CCP's long-term hold on power. Xi may also be gambling that his model of governance can ensure China's continued rise and thereby silence opposition. In the meantime his security forces can deal with potential unrest.

For those outside China, Xi's treatment of the various groups considered above are a reminder of the differences between China's political, economic and value systems and those of liberal democracies. In the years when Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin led the Party, others could convince themselves that those differences were narrowing, but since around 2008, they have begun to diverge. Developments in technology, for instance in telecommunications and artificial intelligence, are exacerbating this trend because Chinese participation would bring threats to national security, which are less manageable than those posed by past technologies. So are demands for fair economic competition, to say nothing of US President Donald Trump's trade war. Meanwhile the Party's perennial scapegoat for its own problems is foreign interference. Hong Kong is a salient example: senior Party figures have [blamed events](#) on the US and the UK. As the Australian China expert John Garnaut [has said](#), "The key point about Communist Party ideology ... is that the party is and always has defined itself as being in perpetual struggle with the "hostile" forces of Western liberalism". Expect more turbulence in relations between liberal democracies and the People's Republic.

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