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Xi Dada loves Peng Mama¹

Digital Culture and the Return of Charismatic Authority in China

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Abstract

With Xi Jinping's consolidation of political power in China, a personality cult has increasingly emerged. In this article, we analyze online documents and state news media to argue that this phenomenon is driven in part by local government officials and traditional media but most significantly by individual Chinese 'netizens'. The current personality cult phenomenon is thus primarily society-driven and bottom-up rather than state-driven and top-down. We argue that the rise of this personality cult around Xi has its roots in national anxiety in an important transitional period in China. While some worry about a possible return to the politics of the Cultural Revolution by encouraging this personality cult, others are responding to economic anxieties and to the social anxieties occurred by social injustice greatly due to official corruption. We conclude that the possibility of society-driven personality cults will increase over time, as a paradoxical corollary of the potential of new media to allow for the democratization and opening up of politics and culture to new voices.

Keywords: China, Cultural Revolution, charismatic authority, new media, personality cult, political religion, social anxiety, Xi Jinping

'Beware the cult of Xi' was the cover page headline of the April 2nd 2016 issue of *The Economist*. Representing Xi Jinping in a traditional Mao-style collarless jacket, its theme was indicative of growing international worries about whether the

consolidation of power within the Communist Party under Xi implies a growing personality cult for in 21st century China. It drew upon the growing evidence of symbols of such a cult, as well as concrete practices, drawing upon Max Weber's distinction between bureaucratic and charismatic forms of authority. This paper analyses the broader social context for the personality cult for Xi, as well as the form, content and characteristics of the representation of Xi in the cult phenomenon, considering the socio-economic context of contemporary Chinese society and the societal conditions under which a personality cult for Xi could emerge, as well as the role played by online cultures in such a formation. It also considers the contribution that a case study of personality cults in China can make to wider debates surrounding the 'new populism' and the rise of self-styled authoritarian leaders in countries such as Russia, Hungary, Turkey, the Philippines and – in the eyes of some – the United States under Donald Trump.

Enduring Paradoxes of Post-1978 Chinese Modernization

When Deng Xiaoping came to power in China in 1978, and was tasked with returning China to some degree of normality in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, upon coming to power in 1978, modernization was actively embraced as a guiding meta-concept that could simultaneously allow for the implementation of economic reforms that would industrialize the Chinese economy and lift living standards, while

also demonstrating a degree of fealty to Marxist ideology in terms of advancing the forces of socialist production, thus negating the criticism that market reforms were taking China on a 'capitalist road'. The legacy of Deng was that 'exploiting capitalism' was a necessity in the context of global modernization, and that an essentially pragmatic approach to the tasks of economic management was a necessity in order to achieve 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Jiang Zemin's concept of the 'Three Represents' aligned the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with 'the advanced development of the productive forces', and all who contributed to such development (including, importantly, entrepreneurs) (Dickson, 2004), while Hu Jintao proposed a 'scientific outlook on development' that would reconcile economic growth with a 'harmonious society'.

The tenor of such discussions has changed under Xi Jinping's leadership. While Xi's speeches continue to refer to the goal of 'socialist modernization', and adhere to formal principles of Deng Xiaoping Thought, this has been framed much more explicitly around the principles of scientific socialism and the 'Four Cardinal Principles' of adhering to the socialist path, the people's democratic dictatorship, the leadership of the CCP, and the primacy of Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought (Xi, 2016a). In particular, Xi's renewed stress upon Mao Zedong Thought has been seen by many in the West as marking a return to Communist rule based upon ideology, after the relative pragmatism associated with modernization discourses in the post-Deng era.

The question of Xi's similarities and differences to Mao, and whether concerns about a renewed personality cult are justified, will be returned to below. But it is no surprise that, after 30-plus years where modernization discourses have been in the ascendancy in China – even with socialist and/or Chinese characteristics – these discourses no longer hold the broad appeal that they once had. First, and most obviously, the sustained period of economic growth in post-1978 China based upon export-led manufacturing, low-wage labor and a market economy has generated multiple sources of social, economic and environmental tension. Studies of relative income inequality find that China has gone from being a relatively egalitarian society in the 1970s to one of the most unequal societies in the world, with the Gini co-efficient standing at 0.469 in 2014, a higher level than that of the United States (Qi, 2015). Rising socio-economic inequalities, combined with growing evidence of industrial unrest and other forms of social protest, raise the specter of China becoming an increasingly class-divided society, with adverse consequences for the legitimacy of the CCP. There are also growing ecological problems arising from rapid, energy-intensive economic growth that are apparent throughout China, particularly in its major cities, and the awareness that, as a middle-income economy, it can no longer grow at the rates that characterized the period from the 1980s to the 2000s.

A second paradox of China's embrace of modernization was that it came at a time when the Western discourse of modernization, which was at its peak in the 1960s, had

come to be increasingly under question, both in the West and in the developing world. A curious consequence of China's isolation from the world during the Cultural Revolution was that its intellectuals had little exposure to the critiques of modernization theories and Western models of development that were associated with dependency theory. Such theories, associated with neo-Marxists such as Andre Gunder Frank, Paul Baran and Samir Amin, had a definite affinity with Mao Zedong Thought, in their conception of the world divided between a western imperialist core and a dependent 'Third World' periphery.² But there was little exposure to this work within China, and when Chinese social science intellectuals re-established contact with Western universities in the 1980s, they were often referring to theories and theorists that had been out of vogue in those institutions for some years. More generally, as Wang (2009: 3) has observed, 'modernization theory [as] a product of Western scholarship, has an Achilles' heel in that it is inherently Western-oriented and Eurocentric.' The question that arises, of course, is whether China's modernization, as with the turn towards a market economy, is taking it in the direction of Western consumer capitalist society? While it can be proposed that China is pursuing a socialist, 'people-centred' modernization that differs in type from the West (Cao, 2009), it is not surprising that adoption of a Western model as the pathway for China's development raises uncomfortable questions for Party leaders and intellectuals.

A third point relates to Max Weber's conception of modernization. For Weber, modernization was marked by the turn from *charismatic authority*, 'resting on

devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person', to *legal authority*, where 'obedience is owed to the legally established impersonal order ... [and] extends to the persons exercising the authority of office under it by virtue of the formal legality of their commands and only within the scope of authority of the office' (Weber, 1978: 215-216). In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the proclamation of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China in 1982 and subsequent measures to ensure the rule of law and to set limits to arbitrary bureaucratic rule have been important. But the Weberian conception of legal rationality clearly sets limits to political authority, with constitutionalism, multi-party democracy and regular elections being viewed as the ultimate constraints placed upon political leaders directing the power of the state apparatus towards their own personal or group interests. Therefore, while the Cultural Revolution demonstrated the need to set limits to charismatic authority, lest it become the means by which political terror and economic stagnation would result, it is also difficult for China under the leadership of the CCP to fully embrace rule through legal-rational authority, as the absence of a clear separation of powers between the CCP and the institutions of the Chinese state continue to raise concerns about the legitimacy of such rule. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that there would be a return to tradition on the one hand, as seen with the return of Confucianism as an ideology of the Chinese state (Billioud and Thoraval, 2009; Hartig, 2014), and charismatic forms of authority on the other.

The 'Personality Cult' Concept

The concept of a 'personality cult' is often associated with Nazism, Fascism and Communism, and leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and Joseph Stalin. Of these, Stalin has had the most lasting significance, as the worldwide expansion of communist regimes from the 1940s saw the concept of personality cult exported to Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. In communist Poland, for instance, Boleslaw Bierut claimed himself to be 'Stalin's most faithful pupil', allowing his own persona to dominate the Polish public realm, including portraits, poems, national celebration of his birthday (Main, 2004). In contemporary North Korea, the Kim family maintains an iconography that has clear lineages in the Stalinist model of the personality cult.

Generally speaking, personality cults have four common features: the use of ideology as a surrogate 'political religion'; using various symbols to dominate social life; the turn to charismatic authority; and the use of media to amplify the cult. First, the link of personality cult to a dominant ideology arises out of using the logic of deduction to transform an idea into a premise which becomes the only demonstration for truth to explain the past, the present, and the future. Notably, history is often rewritten in order to establish the link between present leadership and the preceding historical figures in order to legitimize his or her own rule. For example, Stalin encouraged to rewrite history to magnify his own role and place himself at the center

(Davies, 2004), Saddam Hussein also turned to the available historical knowledge so that he came to be associated with many ancient leader-heroes to underline the deliberately fabricated historical continuity and ruling legitimacy (Abdi, 2008). As a result, the distinction between fact and fiction and between true and false is blurred, as Hannah Arendt (1953, 1962) argued in her famous account of the ideology of totalitarianism. More importantly, either history or reality has only one version on offer, depending upon the demands of the 'helmsman' and the power of the leader who can fabricate it. As Arendt vividly put, 'The assertion that the Moscow subway is the only one in the world is a lie only so long as the Bolsheviks have not the power to destroy all the others' (Arendt, 1962: 350).

Gentile (2006) has argued that personality cult is actually a form of the sacralization of politics, that is, politics as religion. By developing a coherent system of beliefs, values, myths, rituals and symbols, political religion manages to create an aura of sanctity on a person or an object, leading to worship and devotion so that the masses' belief in political myths can be strengthened and consolidated, and the masses are consequently motivated easily by irrational and mythical thoughts (Gentile, 1990, 2006). It is from the perspective of ideology that we can identify the religious dimension of personality cults in the modern era. Gentile underscores that political religion gets its greatest presence and intensity in totalitarian countries (Gentile, 2006).

Second, in keeping with the notion of personality cult as a political religion, various symbols are mobilized to dominate social life. The typical case is Stalin who mobilized all the symbols possible in service of his personality cult, including portraits, road names, city names, songs, and official biographies. Similarly, many symbols for the personality cult of Mao were created during the Cultural Revolution, including his godly portrait, the Red Book of Treasure, worship rituals of 'asking for instructions in the morning and reporting back in the evening', loyalty dances, and other rituals of obedience to Mao Zedong Thought. Also popular in this period was shouting slogans such as the 'Three Loyalties' (loyalty to Chairman Mao, loyalty to the Mao Zedong Thought, and loyalty to the proletarian revolution route laid out by Chairman Mao), and the 'Four "Boundless"' (boundless worship of Chairman Mao, boundless love for Chairman Mao, boundless belief in Chairman Mao, and boundless loyalty to Chairman Mao) (Leese, 2011).

The third key element of personality cult is charismatic authority. Max Weber (1991) famously differentiated legitimate authority into three types: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic. Compared with the other two types, the 'charismatic structure knows nothing of a form or of an ordered procedure of appointment or dismissal' (Weber, 1991: 246). Charismatic authority is innately hostile to bureaucracies, which are based on rational rules and normal routine, as charisma 'knows only inner determination and inner restraint' (Weber, 1991: 246). In the case of the Cultural Revolution, charismatic authority was used by Mao to mobilize the

masses effectively in undermining routinized bureaucratic regulation with calls to 'bombard the headquarters' or challenge those in institutional power; Andreas (2007) has described this as 'charismatic mobilization'.

But charismatic authority as a way of legitimation is inherently unstable, which is why it must be 'constantly being proved' in order to be maintained (Weber, 1991: 248). This is where the role of mass media comes in, and the capacity to 'manufacture' charisma. According to Glassman, media technologies are employed to manufacture charisma, and to:

Create an atmosphere in which the political leader seems ever-present and larger than life. Since the charismatic relationship functions best when the group feels a personal, trusting, infantilizing bond with the leader, the constant presence ... helps manufacture such leader-led relationships (Glassman, 1975: 630).

Strong and Killingsworth (2011) have observed that Stalin used the media to manufacture his own charismatic authority, which in turn took the cult of personality as a technique to construct legitimacy. On the one hand, Stalin developed an atmosphere of the Lenin cult which was used as the source of his legitimacy and his power base as well, and on the other, he transformed himself successfully to a charismatic leader through the personality cult. Regarding use of media for manufactured charisma and the personality cult, Hitler also used all available media technologies – notably radio –

to combine culture and politics, in order to construct for himself a heroic and divine public image (Munn, 2012). The question today is whether, in the transition from broadcast to digital media, such forms of 'communication power' (Castells, 2009) remain viable in an era of decentralized digital media networks.

Anxiety as a Social Phenomenon

Widespread anxiety is one of the most prominent features of what Ulrich Beck has termed 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), dominated by various uncertainties and insecurities. Beck described risk as 'the way of being and ruling in the world of modernity' (Beck, 2006: 330), and multifaceted anxieties have become an integral part of the human condition, including anxiety about terrorism attacks, global warming, economic downturn, being laid off, food safety, and many other factors. Mythen (2004: 138) observed that 'the cloak of anxiety which hangs over the risk society, leaves individuals in a state of permanent watchfulness', while Bauman (2006) referred to the state of constant anxiety we live under today as 'liquid fear'.

Hunt (1999) suggested that anxiety was a generalized non-immediate apprehension to some perceived threat, risk, peril or danger, but that social anxiety required a concrete response by identifiable social actors. By contrast, Bourke (2003, 2006) has argued that anxiety is best to be considered as part of a language game, in that anxiety as an emotion normally experienced through generic and narrative

conventions, and constitutes a core element of the link between individual and the social. Jackson et. al (2012) have suggested that anxiety should be located in the social, rather than primarily as a matter of individual psychology. As they put it, collective anxiety embedded in routine practices in modern society is best understood as a social condition, rather than as a simple aggregation of individual experiences. As a social phenomenon, collective anxiety is socially constituted and culturally mediated.

Is there a Personality Cult emerging around Xi Jinping?

It is important to note that, in the Chinese context, there are leadership behaviors that may be viewed through the prism of a personality cult in other contexts, but not in China. The Chinese political tradition of 'Serving the People' has been one of the basic tenets for the CCP. In order to be seen to be serving the people, almost all modern leaders have sought to establish in public, and through the media, a public image of friendliness to the people. Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have spent a Chinese spring festival with mining workers underground, or with peasants in remote areas. They also like to be seen as talking to elderly people when visiting a village, or holding a child in their arms. These are traditions and rituals routinely observed by top leaders in China. Hence, Xi's lining up for breakfast at the Qingfeng Steamed Stuffed Bun Shop in Beijing or visiting Nanluogu Xiang, a popular shopping district in Beijing, is best placed within such a CCP tradition that can be readily

understood and recognized. Xi even publicized some of his family photos on media as soon as he became the General Secretary of the CCP. In the photos, he pushed the wheelchair of his father, held his mother's hand for a walk, rode a bike with his daughter at the rear, and so on. These are attempts to illustrate that he is an ordinary man among the people and just like us. More importantly, it conveys a meaning that he values the family, respects the elderly, and cares for the young, which is a long Chinese Confucian tradition. From this perspective, Xi is represented as not only in line with the CCP tradition but also with that of traditional Chinese culture; he is not only a good leader but also a good son, husband and father. We need to be careful, then to claim, as Lam (2015: 80) does, that Xi meticulously constructs 'a virtual personality cult', because being seen to 'serve the people' is a more general ritual for Chinese leaders.

The leadership of the Tibet region has been notable for pushing the personality cult of Xi. On 5th March 2016, the opening day of the 4th Plenary of the 12th National People's Congress (NPC), all members of the Tibet delegation wore two badges bearing Xi's portrait (See Figure 1). The strong governmental background of the Tibet delegation immediately attracted national attention to look for its hidden meaning. Was it for the central government to take the Tibet initiative as indicative of top-level thinking or not? The case was NOT, and all media were forbidden to report the event of Xi's badge again. In a similar vein, the then Hunan Provincial Propaganda Minister Zhang Wenxiong directed artists to create a folk song 'Do not know how to call you'

(*buzhi zenme chenghu ni*), depicting Xi Jinping's inspection visit to a local minority village in Hunan in 2013. Though the song and the events were reported in the local media of Hunan Province, they were not shown in the national media nor was information disseminated online; indeed, Zhang was sacked and investigated in October 2015.

Insert Figure 1 here

Regarding the central media level, the three media giants (the *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and the China Central Television (CCTV)) were inspected by Xi on 19th February 2016. This was Xi's first inspection since he came to power, hence all the media giants elaborately planned and carefully prepared for the event. The *People's Daily* invited Xi to connect the leader of Chixi Village in Fujian Province via the People's Net; Chixi being a poor village which was Xi's own aid station for lifting people out of poverty for years. Similarly, Xinhua News Agency specially arranged for Xi to contact its reporter who was sent to Zhengding County, Hebei Province, where Xi was the Party Committee first secretary of the county between 1983 and 1985. As with the *People's Daily*, the main content was to report to Xi the great changes that had occurred, implying that all the success achieved there was due to its association with Xi. CCTV posted slogans to show its loyalty to Xi on the HD Screen located at the site of inspection, saying 'CCTV's surname is the Party, (with) absolute loyalty, requesting you to examine' (See Figures 2). All of these

fawning words and conducts were in preparation for Xi's subsequent speech about news work, which reemphasized the Party nature of the media and the persistence of the Party over news organizations.

Insert Figure 2 here

This state-driven campaign to venerate Xi as leader was contested by Ren Zhiqiang, a property mogul as well as an active contributor on social media, who directly challenged Xi's speech and argued that media could bear the surname of the Party only if it was subsidized with the Party's money instead of that of the state. Ren's comments caused hot debates online. Some of the official media either offline or online launched a fierce fire at Ren, which had no substantive arguments, but rather employed Cultural Revolution-style denunciations such as wielding the stick (to chastise you), seizing the pigtails (to seek your faults), and putting the hat (to stigmatically classify you) (e.g., Qi, 2016; Mao, 2016; Wang, 2016)³.

Xi Online: Chinese netizens' veneration of Xi Jinping

Compared to these official veneration of Xi's leadership, the netizens' personality cult of Xi is more diverse and complex in its motivations. The most popular form is that of eulogy songs. A typical example is *Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama*, which is very simple in terms of its lyric and melody, as its composer (Liu, 2014) has

noted. After *Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama*, a series of such red songs have followed, such as *Be A Man as Xi if You Want to Be*, *Marry A Man as Xi if You Want to Marry*, *National People's Idol Xi Dada*, and *China Has Brought Forth A Xi Dada*. However, all the songs do nothing but repeat the tropes of *Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama*, of courage, anti-corruption, and the loving couple.

Poem writing online is also popular, yet it is comparatively less widespread. Typical examples are two poems, one is 'General Secretary, the sight of your back and the look of my eyes' by Pu Liye, a deputy director at the Xinhua News Agency, and the other is 'Glory for Chairman Xi' by Liu Xinda. Whereas the latter is nothing but primarily copying Mao's well-known poem 'Snow', the former uses the poem to depict the author's eyewitness and feelings during Xi's inspection of his working institution Xinhua News Agency⁴. Another form of personality cult for Xi is shouting the 'long-live' slogans. 'Long live' was commonly used to call the Emperor in the feudal era in China, but since the establishment of the PRC, it was only used to refer to Mao in the political slogan, 'Long live Chairman Mao'. No other leaders afterwards had ever been referred to like this. But a few netizens shouted online to refer to Xi Jinping, 'Long live Chairman Xi'⁵.

While shouting 'Long live' slogans make Xi resemble Mao in terms of deification, the red songs and poems attempt to represent Xi as an ordinary man. The most famous red song, '*Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama*' has as its first sentence 'China has brought

forth a Xi Dada'. This line is actually copied from 'China has brought forth a Mao Zedong', one of the sentences in the classic red song 'The East is Red' to eulogize Mao, but the whole song is dominated by constructed 'love' between Xi and Peng:

Xi Dada loves Peng Mama,
Such love seems a fairy tale;
Peng Mama loves Xi Dada,
The land with love is powerful.
Man should learn from Xi Dada,
Woman should learn from Peng Mama,
To love like He and She,
Warm love can warm us all.

On the one hand, by glorifying Xi and Peng as husband and wife, the song depicts them as a typical Chinese couple among us, reducing the normal gap between top leaders and the populace as in the Chinese tradition. On the other hand, the emphasis upon 'love', an eternal human theme, not only greatly downplays the song's political color, but also successfully uses human nature instead of political nature to construct the public image of Xi. Meanwhile, as discussed above, Xi and his publicists would like to build a public image of Xi as a good leader as well as a good son, husband and father. Hence, *Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama* coincides with Xi's intended public image. As a result, the song's video online gained millions of hits and

their composers attracted the attention of media and even some local propaganda departments as well.

Whereas the red songs focus on Xi's couple as the symbol of love, Pu Liye's red poem '*General Secretary, the sight of your back and the look of my eyes*'⁶ tries to situate Xi in the context of brotherhood. By using 'you', the second person pronoun which often suggests an intimate and familiar relationship, Pu turns the whole poem into an imagined personal conversation between he and Xi:

Today, we finally heard your thoughtful words

Closely like listening to a brother

You cupped your hands with respect and smiled

'Wish everyone happy Chinese new year and an auspicious year of monkey.'

General Secretary, the sight of your back and the look of my eyes

.....

You stride forward with your head held up high

We will keep our voices high

While building an imaginative atmosphere of a family and highlighting Xi's great image striding with 'head held up high', the poem also expresses a kind of self-imagination of the relationship between Xi and the media.

Assessing the Red Poems and Songs

We would argue that the virtual personality cult for Xi is driven from the bottom-up rather than the top-down. After local governmental activities were banned and the central media attempts had been undermined, the virtual personality cult has been on the rise in different forms. They have emerged out of spontaneous online citizen behavior, and since these representations for Xi do not have negative effects in terms of political influence, the central government has allowed this situation to go as it is. The central government has neither officially encouraged nor forbade online expressions of adulation towards Xi Jinping and, from this perspective, it is a phenomenon driven not by the government, but by the netizens themselves. This is in contrast to other historical personality cults, which emerged as top-down phenomena driven by the ruler himself. However, the virtual personality cult for Xi has never gained his own public support, which is in sharp contrast to Mao, who publicly endorsed his personality cult in a Politburo meeting in Chengdu in 1958 in the following terms:

There are two kinds of personality cults. One is correct cult, for instance, to the correct things of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, we must worship, worship them forever, not worship is impossible. The truth is in their hands, why not worship? (Mao, 1958/1999: 369).

Rather than deifying Xi as godlike and extraordinary, the virtual personality cult

is dominated by popularizing Xi as an ordinary man, a family member, or a brother. Whereas the personality cult for Mao who was represented as being high above the mass, Xi is more commonly depicted online as plebian, an ordinary Chinese man. This is not only because of the very clear differences between Xi and Mao in terms of personality, historical accomplishments, power base, and especially the social context, but also due to facing a public who have historically experienced the nihilism to politics after the ten years' Cultural Revolution and not believed in such political myths any more (Ci, 1994). In other words, the personality cult for Xi has to adopt a strategy to reduce and pull closely the mental distance in order to make it much more easily accepted.

The rise of new media, which acts in China as an emerging public sphere full of contestation around framing (Yin, 2014), the personality cult for Xi is contested virtually. In addition to a range of comments critiquing the cult of Xi, others have ironically appropriated the form and narrative of the red songs and poems to meet head-to-head the literature advocating the personality cult for Xi. After Pu's poem '*General Secretary, the sight of your back and the look of my eyes*' came into being, another poem was immediately published online with the same title but a quite opposite orientation, under the name of Cui Yongyuan, a famous CCTV anchor as well as active online commentator:

DO be careful of those disgusting glory,

... For them, the ideal will come true if successful to please you and make you happy,

They seem especially unexpected,

Actually yesterday they were already noticed and arranged the scene,

They were seemingly working as usual,

Actually they gathered there much earlier to prepare to applaud together,

YES, General Secretary, all these are like theatre performing (Cui, 2016).

.....

Using the same tone of second person pronoun 'you' and creating a same conversational narrative, the poem has the opposite orientation to *Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama*. It manages to deconstruct the 'sacred' meaning and feelings embodied by the original, and sheds light on the essence of the personality for Xi as nothing but 'theatre performing'. Such a paradoxical phenomenon, which is very common in Chinese online public culture, greatly reflects the conflicting views among Chinese netizens as to Xi's personality cult.

National Anxiety and the Cult Phenomenon

Since the evidence of a personality cult for Xi is to a greater extent society-driven rather than driven by state agencies, it is best considered from a societal perspective⁷. Zhao Yunxi provides an interesting insight into contemporary China in his essay 'Uneasy China':

Contemporary China's biggest feature is that it is entering a period of comprehensive anxieties, including anxiety about politics, anxiety about economy, anxiety about belief, and anxiety about survival. All the people, from political leaders, various sorts of elites, to the ordinary civilians, are devoid of the sense of security. Wild growth of China for decades have not been accompanied by the establishment of an effective spiritual order, political order, economic order and social order. In the context of spiritual cohesion being lost, basic political ethics, economic ethics and social ethics are all at loss. As a result, all the power, wealth and glory have lost their legitimacy and sustainability, and are unable to withstand the legal and ethical check or scrutiny, and thus all lost the sense of security. (Zhao Yunxi, 2015).

As this analysis has sought to demonstrate, China is now a society full of uncertainties followed by anxieties, and the rise of a bottom-up personality cult for Xi can be seen as one symptom of such anxieties.

A recurring source of political anxieties is the possibility of a second Cultural Revolution. 2016 was the 50th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution, which was the peak point for the personality cult of Mao Zedong. The collective memory of the Cultural Revolution is terrible, with its national devastation of China's economy, society and culture, its educational institutions and a generation of Chinese people. That is also why Deng Xiaoping (1994: 94) claimed that, 'The greatest setback is the

"Cultural Revolution", and Xi Jinping (2016b) has also publicly classified the Cultural Revolution as 'the ten years' calamity' in accordance with the official narrative of the CCP. Yet while China has undergone huge changes after adopting the reform and opening up policy in 1978, the basis of the political system remains intact, and it was this system that enabled the Cultural Revolution to happen. In other words, the thinking that lay behind the Cultural Revolution has not been completely eradicated, and is still deep rooted in Chinese politics and the mass culture as well. The example of fighting against Ren Zhiqiang mentioned above is evident. In this uncertain context, some decide to encourage a personality cult for Xi, since historical experiences such as the Cultural Revolution had vividly demonstrated a living wisdom in China, that is, 'those who bow to me will prosper, and those who resist will perish' (*Shun wo zhe chang, ni wo zhe wang*). Those who endorse the personality cult are most likely to be employing a kind of survival strategy based upon deeply embedded anxieties for the possible return of the Cultural Revolution. Such survival strategy has also been adopted by some people in the Chiang Kai-shek era in Taiwan (Taylor, 2006) and the Saddam Hussein era in Iraq (Abdi, 2008). On the other hand, those who argue strongly against personality cult as nothing are expressing the same anxiety for the possibility of a second Cultural Revolution. To put it simply, the political anxiety is the same, but the strategy varies. In other words, their contestation around the personality cult is essentially two sides of the same coin. The typical example is that, while most provincial secretaries of CCP competeto claim Xi as the 'core' and shout in their respective provincial organs to 'Resolutely safeguard the core

of General Secretary Xi Jinping' (*Jianjue weihu xijinping zhege hexin*), those public intellectuals have shown in various ways their anxiety of the resurgence of the Cultural Revolution. For example, Zhao Zongbiao (2015), a well-known news commentator, has used such a striking sentence as the title of a commentary in saying 'We have only one hour's distance from the second Cultural Revolution'.

In addition to political anxiety, there is economic anxiety. In a market society which is dominated, not by the rule of law, but by complicated and sometimes arbitrary relationships with political authority, almost nobody's wealth is able to be guaranteed into the future. The fear of either a lack of wealth, or no guarantee of being able to keep one's wealth, goes hand in hand with aspirations to achieve much more commercial success in an attempt to ensure economic safety. In fact, some of the personality cult for Xi is really driven by such commercial concerns. Consider Li Yousheng, the composer of *China Has Brought Forth a Xi Dada*. In his online interviews, it is hard to find his affection or devotion to Xi, but there is much energy devoted to portraying himself as a miracle, since he was an industrial worker who became a web celebrity with only middle school level of education. Meanwhile, after he composed the 'red' song *China Has Brought Forth a Xi Dada*, he was invited to found Anhui Double Stars You-Heng Cultural Media Company. Even his appearance fee has been highlighted, 'Today's Li Yousheng has already become a web celebrity popular everywhere in China. It is said his appearance fee has risen to 30,000 Yuan, and many commercial companies are willing to sponsor his activities' (Tom, 2014).

For Li, the personality cult for Xi provides a route to commercial success, and why he is interested in the 'red' songs is due to the opportunity to bring him economic gains.

As fame is a useful way for people to make money, some of those encouraging the personality cult for Xi are therefore intended to attract the attention of the mainstream media instead of online only. Since the annually Chinese Spring Festival Gala organized by the CCTV is a golden chance for the artists to be turned into a star, for instance, Yu Runze, one of the composers of the song '*Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama*', clearly expressed his wish to perform on the Gala in different occasions, as seen in this interview with *Chinese Business View*:

Chinese Business View: Some netizens comment, this song should be brought the Spring Festival Gala to sing.

Yu Runze: Ha ha, no better than that. If (it) can go to the Spring Festival Gala, that is indeed a best thing.

Chinese Business View: Has the CCTV contacted you already?

Yu Runze: CCTV has no such actions so far, hope they hurry up to contact us (Liu, 2014).

It is the same for Li Yousheng, and it is reported that, 'though his achievement is not small already, he has much bigger ambition and has already stared at the stage of the CCTV's Spring Festival Gala' (Tom, 2014).

Social anxiety is the final contributing factor to the phenomenon of a personality cult for Xi. In China, widespread official corruption has become a major source of social anxiety, and is thus a primary target for the public to attack. Actually China has never stopped the fight against official corruption since the market economy was introduced at the end of 1970s, but it has often been ineffectual or half-hearted, as the folk saying has claimed, 'Fight the flies but spare the tigers'. Nonetheless, Xi seems determined to terminate such a conclusion and fight flies and tigers together: 'In our vigorous campaign against corruption, we have punished both "tigers" and "flies", corrupt officials irrespective of ranking, in response to our people's demand' (Xi, 2015). Since he established power, a lot of high-level officials have been sacked or even sent to prison, including former member of the 17th Politburo Standing Committee Zhou Yongkang. In the meantime, Xi has repeatedly stresses the people support-orientation of the anti-graft drive, 'If we let these problems go unchecked, we will risk losing the trust and support of the people. That is why we demand strict enforcement of party discipline as the top priority of governance' (Xi, 2015). Yet the campaigns are frequently interpreted as political purges, or as power struggle between different factions within China's governance system (Wang and Zeng, 2016), and Xi's anti-graft campaign has won him mass support.

Anti-graft struggles not only alleviate to some extent the degree of social anxiety caused by official corruption, but also appeal to the mass calling for social justice. The anti-corruption fight therefore forms a solid basis for the emergence of

personality cult for Xi, especially among the mass of the population. With no popular expectation of change in the political system being realized in the near future, the cult of Xi, for some Chinese, embodies the hope for changing the current reality which is filled with social anxiety for injustice due to official corruption. That is also why almost all the Red songs and poems to eulogize Xi call into attention his courage to challenge either 'flies' or 'tigers' and the social meaning of fighting corruption, e.g., social justice, national hope, people's luck. However, given that Chinese corruption has deep institutional roots, the scope to address corruption within the existing political-institutional framework appears paradoxical. Hence, as online comments have already demonstrated, '(only) Zhou Yongkang is the biggest tiger? ... '. While such a discussion is definitely beyond the scope of current research, one issue is clear: for China, the proposition that Xi can fight corruption by way of developing his personality cult is most likely to generate even further national anxiety, leading to a seemingly endless circle of 'hope-anxiety-greater hope-greater anxiety'.

Conclusion

By analyzing the phenomena of the personality cult around Xi Jinping in China, we have argued that it is primarily society-driven rather than being driven by the central government or by Xi himself. It is highly contested, and has unfortunate historical antecedents in China. Generally speaking, the phenomena can be roughly divided into three categories: local government; the central media; and the netizens.

Whereas the first two categories' attempts to forge a personality cult were either forbidden or thwarted, the netizens' endeavors are thriving. By composing 'Red' songs, writing 'Red' poems, shouting 'long live' slogans and other behaviors, a tide of personality cult for Xi has emerged online.

As the personality cult for Xi is primarily society-driven, it is best to be understood from a society-centred perspective rather than a state-centred one. While there is no denying the existence of a real cult of Xi, underlying national anxieties may be the primary driver of it. Being uneasy is one of the most fundamental characteristics of contemporary China. Politically, the experience of the Cultural Revolution continues to cast a shadow over China, and in some cases encouraging the personality cult is a way of guaranteeing political safety. In other cases, promotion of the personality cult is due to economic anxiety, and also to the possibility of commercial rewards. Finally, some are driven by social anxiety to embrace the personality cult for Xi, on whose shoulders many hopes for social justice, or at least significant administrative reform, now rest.

As for the personality cult, the theoretical implication which might be able to drawn from this research is that, in non-democratic countries, there is a propensity towards the cultural phenomenon of a society-driven cult of personality.⁸ Moreover, with societal anxiety deepening, this probability is likely to become stronger, and contemporary China provides an important case study in this regard. Combined with

existing literature on personality cults, it might be concluded that, with the shift in terms of the degree of anxiety, the society-driven personality cult is much more likely to happen than state-driven ones.

At the same time, the personality cult for Xi is doomed to be short-lived. Historically, personality cults have characteristically been driven officially by the leader themselves and their ruling groups, but neither Xi nor the Chinese central government have publicly shown an intention to promote such a cult, particularly as it has echoes in the disastrous experience of the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, it was reported that a recently issued official document clearly demanded that 'Xi Dada', which widely referred to Xi online, should not be used again on mainstream media. This is clearly an effort to avoid news becoming personal propaganda centered on one individual.

Bureaucratic authority in China has been established for more than 30 years since the Deng Xiaoping era, which is also at odds with a possible personality cult. It was noted that modernization has a paradoxical dimension in China, since there is the risk of political power reverting to bureaucratic rule or China being seen as a pale imitation of Western society, and both of these concerns have become more prominent since Xi Jinping came to office. Nonetheless, as Weber observed in the early 20th century:

Charismatic authority is sharply opposed to rational, and particularly bureaucratic, authority ... Bureaucratic authority is specifically rational in the sense of being bound to intellectually analysable rules; while charismatic authority is specifically irrational in the sense of being foreign to all rules (Weber, 1978: 244).

With the rise of the network society (Castells, 2010), digital and social media also provide a strong counterpoint to any potential cult of personality in contemporary China, and the extent to which Chinese politics has become 'desacralised', and unable to be based around a single 'Supreme Leader', should not be underestimated. In China, the thriving new media environment makes it possible for an online public sphere to emerge (Yang, 2007; Yin, 2014). Though online censorship is normal, and the permitted space for public expression is limited, alternative voices do have a space to exist in China. Fierce online contestation surrounding the personality cult for Xi is evident, either Ren Zhiqiang's challenging comments or Cui Yongyuan's ironic response. As Rees (2004: 8) argues, 'where the "public sphere" exists and retains its autonomy, where open, competitive structures function, the growth of such cults is limited'.

New media are a double-edged sword for politicians. They might be manipulated to manufacture charisma, but they also place politicians in an environment of greater 'global scrutiny' (Thompson, 1990: 17). They make politics disenchanting and desacralized by offering diverse or even competing narratives to deconstruct the

myths possibly bestowed on a politician. It is instructive in this regard to compare the Chinese case with that of contemporary Russia, where Vladimir Putin has constructed many of the attributes of a contemporary personality cult. But instead of the worship for great charismatic leader, 'Putin-mania' is frequently the source of popular humor and mockery, with symbols of Putin's manliness (Putin with his shirt off, Putin riding a horse etc.) being ironically remixed online for humorous or derogatory purposes, which 'have made the kind of monolithic leader cult that existed in the Soviet Union unsustainable in contemporary Russia' (Cassiday and Johnson, 2010: 697). Hence, generally speaking, the personality cult based upon charismatic authority is increasingly hard to sustain in societies where there is an advanced development of the Internet and digital media, as they rested upon an underlying top-down control of communications messages, alongside a monolithic conception of political and institutional power, that is far more difficult to sustain than it was in the era of Stalin and Mao Zedong.

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Figure 1

Two badges that the Tibetan delegation wore to the 4th Plenary of the 12th National People's Congress in April 2016



(source: <http://xw.qq.com/news/20160305053807/NEW2016030505380707>)

Figure 2

Slogan held up by CCTV staff when Xi Jinping visited, 19 February 2016



Source: screen shot captured by author from <http://tv.cctv.com/2016/02/20/VIDE5QqEawyKUwrzzXyYXNb160220.shtml>, 19 February, 2016.

Notes

¹ This is the title of a popular 'Red' song in China which eulogizes Xi Jinping and his love with his wife, Peng Liyuan. Xi and Peng are affectionately referred to as Xi Dada ('Uncle Xi' in the dialect of Shanxi Province, where the ancestral home of Xi is located) and Peng Mama in cyberspace as well as this song.

² In the field of communications, the Canadian theorist Dallas Smythe came to adopt an explicitly Maoist framework for analyzing global media and communication in the context of dependency theories. See Smythe, 1981.

³ The Cultural Revolution-style is actually objected to by Xi Jinping. Xi spoke with intellectual representatives and others on 29th April 2016 that, 'As to those comments and criticism coming from intellectuals, as long as the starting point is good, (we should) warmly welcome; (if they) are right, adopt them. Even some comments and criticism are biased or incorrect, (we should) have more tolerance, have more lenience, (and) insist on neither wielding the stick, seizing the pigtails, nor putting the hat' (Xinhua, 2016).

⁴ The poem was widely circulated on social media at first, but it was later hardly found online, yet it still appears on the website below: http://www.360doc.com/content/16/0219/21/142_535816980.shtml.

⁵ The slogan is available at: <http://bbs1.people.com.cn/post/2/1/1/140271237.html>; <http://forum.home.news.cn/post/viewPostSingle.do?id=133326778>.

⁶ Thanks to BBC's excellent translation, I just cite here the English version of Pu Liye's poem directly from its website: <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-35638005>.

⁷ As for the personality cult for Xi, we should not deny the fact that devotion to Xi greatly due to his determination against the corruption DOES exist among the public, although we also need to be cautious to conflate concerns about official corruption with popular enthusiasm for Xi himself.

⁸ Developments in the United States since the election of President Donald Trump in November 2016 suggest that this may indeed become a feature of democratic societies as well.