

DAVID SHAMBAUGH

CHINA'S LEADERS

**FROM MAO
TO NOW**



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CHINA'S LEADERS

From Mao to Now

DAVID SHAMBAUGH

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Dedication

*Dedicated Admiringly to the Memory of Roderick
MacFarquhar The Doyen of Chinese Leadership Studies*

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ever since I first started studying China and its politics in 1973 I have focused on a variety of aspects and dimensions of the Chinese political system, but none more consistently than its senior leaders and leadership. My first book in 1984 was in fact about a Chinese leader (Zhao Ziyang); it traced his life and career path from being a sub-provincial official in Guangdong province to becoming the national Premier and then General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party,¹ and other Chinese leaders have played a central role in many of my subsequent publications. Of course, leaders matter a great deal in the life and politics of all nations, but their impact is greater in certain autocratic systems—of which China is one. I have long been interested in the different dimensions of how Chinese communist leaders rule—their individual idiosyncrasies, how they interact with each other, what strategies and tactics they adopt, how they use the institutional levers of power and control at their disposal, how they impact Chinese society, and how they interact with the other leaders from other countries.

This book about China's leaders has thus been percolating in my mind for many decades. As I have taught my own university courses on Chinese politics during the past three decades, I have always adopted a leader-centric approach, and would assign individual biographical books and articles on different leaders, but I always wished that there was a single volume that covered China's main leaders and their periods of rule from 1949 to the present. The one that does successfully do this was edited by the eminent Harvard professor Roderick MacFarquhar;² in this volume and all others that he authored during his distinguished career,

Chinese leaders played *the* central role in his analysis. Rod unfortunately recently passed away in February 2019, but during his scholarly career he was truly the doyen of the study of Chinese communist “elite politics.” Rod was always most kind and mentoring to me (although I was never his student), I hold him in extremely high esteem, and therefore I admiringly dedicate this book to his memory and to all that he contributed to the scholarly study of Chinese politics. During the period 1991–1996 when I served as the Editor of *The China Quarterly*, the leading journal in contemporary China studies, which Rod founded in 1960, Rod was also very supportive and mentoring from across the Atlantic and his professorial position at Harvard.

While China has many leaders at any given time, who populate the approximately 25-member Political Bureau (Politburo) and the 7-member Standing Committee, there has always been one dominant “paramount leader” (much more than a *primus inter pares*). This book is about the five main individuals who have been in this position (Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping)—but it also definitely considers others who held the top institutional portfolios as party leader (Hua Guofeng, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang) as well as a variety of other Politburo members who have been significant political players in their own rights.

While the book is centered on the lives of these individual Chinese communist leaders it is also very much focused on their times as well. It is thus simultaneously a survey of the evolution of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) over the past seven decades. Taken together, I hope that the combined focus on leaders and their times will serve as a good overview and introductory text for students and readers who seek a comprehensive survey of the PRC. In trying to make this an accessible and readable account that

keeps the narrative moving along, inevitably I have had to make numerous judgments along the way concerning certain facts and events—providing sufficient detail but not so much as to bog the reader down. This has been a fine balance to strike—providing lots of detail but not too much. As Chinese politics (like all systems but perhaps more than most) are filled with lacunae, specialists and scholars of Chinese politics will inevitably ask, “What about this or what about that?” But I have intended this book to be more for the general public and students than for my scholarly colleagues, so I hope they will remember this when they read it.

Although I have been teaching this material for a long time and thought I had a pretty thorough grasp of the intricacies of different leaders’ careers and their periods in power, once I got into the research and writing I realized that there was still a great deal that I either had forgotten or did not know. I have done my very best to check, double-check, and be very careful about all the events and actors covered in this study—but any errors or oversights are, of course, my own. For certain periods and leaders I have sought the advice and expertise of some of my close and respected colleagues, who were generous enough to read over the draft text to help catch any errors and offer suggestions for improvement. Stanford University Professor Andrew Walder is truly one of the world’s leading experts on Mao and the Maoist era,^{[3](#)} and he was most gracious in reading and reviewing that chapter, as well as the introductory chapter. Robert Suettinger—now an independent scholar who had a distinguished career in the US Government as one of the CIA’s chief analysts of Chinese politics, as National Intelligence Officer for East Asia, and as Senior Director of Asian Affairs on the National Security Council—was kind enough to read the Mao chapter and parts of the Deng Xiaoping and Hu Jintao

chapters. Professor Ezra Vogel of Harvard University (recently deceased), who himself wrote *the definitive* biography of Deng Xiaoping,⁴ was kind enough to read and improve the draft of my Deng chapter. Robert F. Ash, my former colleague at the University of London's School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS), was extremely generous with his time and carefully read *all* of the chapters in draft—his careful eye and “blue pencil” caught countless things that merited revision. Bob also was a particular help with the sections in each chapter on China's economy, and helped to design some of the graphics in the book. I am enormously grateful to all four individuals—Andy, Bob, Ezra, and Bob—each of whom have been close personal friends as well as much-respected professional colleagues. I am also grateful to Harry Harding for steering me to broader studies of leadership (he too has been a close China colleague and friend for many years). I am also in debt to the two anonymous reviewers arranged by Polity Press—I do not know who you are, but I am sincerely grateful for your eagle eyes and constructive suggestions. Lastly, I am grateful to my student Miles Ogden-Peters for his research assistance on the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping chapters.

I am also indebted to the great team at Polity Press in Cambridge, England, for their highly professional support throughout the writing process. This is the second book I have published with Polity,⁵ and I cannot recommend the press more highly. Louise Knight, editor for politics and international relations, is an absolute joy to work with. Editorial assistant Inès Boxman has also been superbly helpful and hardworking on many logistical dimensions of the book, most notably tracking down photographs and permissions reproduced in this book. Evie Deavall has been a first-rate and efficient production editor, shepherding the manuscript through to publication. I am also grateful to

Ann Klefstad for expert copyediting and to Elizabeth Ball for compiling the Index. One of the great things about Polity as a publisher is their speed of production—this volume went from final draft manuscript to published book in six months! It was truly a team effort by all of these individuals. Altogether, working and publishing with Polity has been a very enjoyable experience.

While this book has been brewing in my brain for a long time and I have been teaching it for many years, I actually wrote it over a brief ninemonth period (May 2020–January 2021) during the COVID pandemic (it was one positive side effect of hibernating at home). Like all of my previous books over the past quarter century, it was written mainly at our summer home near Traverse City, Michigan and at our winter home in Arlington, Virginia. I am most fortunate to have such wonderful domiciles in which to live and be creative.

Last, but not least, I must again thank my wonderful wife Ingrid Larsen for her love and support throughout our four decades of marriage, as well as her patience and tolerance during the writing of this book. Our two wonderful sons Christopher and Alexander, now young professionals in their own right, are a constant source of pride and love for me. Our faithful golden retriever Ollie once again lay by my side and kept me company as I wrote this book, although sadly she passed away just before its conclusion. One could not ask for a better canine companion. Such family support has been critically important for me personally and professionally for decades, including during this project. I cannot be more grateful to them.

January 2021
Arlington, Virginia USA

Notes

1. David Shambaugh, *The Making of a Premier: Zhao Ziyang's Provincial Career* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984).
2. Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, third edition, 2011). Also see Jane Perlez, "Roderick MacFarquhar: Eminent China Scholar Dies at 88," *New York Times*, February 12, 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/12/obituaries/roderick-macfarquhar-dead.html>; David Shambaugh, "In Memoriam: Roderick MacFarquhar (1930-2019)": <https://www.soas.ac.uk/news/newsitem138486.html>.
3. Among his many impressive and insightful publications on the Mao era, see Walder's magisterial study *China Under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
4. Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013).
5. See David Shambaugh, *China's Future* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

CHAPTER 1

ON CHINA'S LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP

LEADERS MATTER IN ALL POLITICAL SYSTEMS—BUT IN SOME THEY MATTER much more. Leaders in totalitarian systems, or authoritarian leaders in single-party systems, are unconstrained by the checks and balances of democracies, and thus their actions are more determinative and have an outsized impact on their societies and the world beyond their borders. China is such a case.

This book assesses and contrasts the five main leaders that the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has had over its first seven decades: Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping. While a number of other leaders have served as President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and as Premiers (heads of government), this study focuses on the five principal Party leaders (Hua Guofeng, Hu Yaobang, and Zhao Ziyang will be folded into the Deng chapter, as their brief tenures at the top were not really long enough to merit separate chapters). The book is about the leadership styles of these five individuals, as well as about these men's times and records as paramount leaders. Each had a distinctive leadership style: I characterize Mao as a *populist tyrant*, Deng as a *pragmatic Leninist*, Jiang as a *bureaucratic politician*, Hu as a *technocratic apparatchik*, and Xi as a *modern emperor*. These descriptions tell us not only about the individual leaders' styles of rule, but also about different aspects of the Chinese political system itself. The main analytical approach is therefore to explore

the intersection between each individual's persona and style of rule with China's developments domestically and internationally. Readers will therefore not only gain an (admittedly compressed) survey of the last 70 years, but one seen principally through the lens of the leader's visions and actions during each period in power (Mao Zedong 1949–1976; Deng Xiaoping 1977–1989; Jiang Zemin 1989–2002; Hu Jintao 2002–2012; Xi Jinping 2012—). This book is primarily intended for students and readers who wish to gain an overview of the past seven decades of Chinese politics—in itself quite a task—but it is also a study for specialists who wish to dig inside the persona of each leader and try to understand how their socialization shaped their particular styles of rule.

One might assume that there has been much continuity of leadership style in a Leninist political system such as communist China. Actually, I find that there has been a considerable degree of *discontinuity* of style among these five leaders. This can be seen in particular in the different ways they each approached institutional bureaucracies of party and state, as well as varying differences over policies. Their differences are also evident in the manner that each performed their public roles, in how each approached the mass public, how each used the language of propaganda and ideology, and how each dealt with their contemporaries and subordinates. Each leader also approached the outside world and China's foreign relations in different ways.

Of course, each ruled at a different period of time—and thus confronted differing sets of policy challenges at home and abroad. Each was born, reared, and matured professionally during different decades; this is why each is said to have represented five different generations of leaders (五代领导人). They also therefore faced different tasks: only Mao had to build a regime and country from scratch—all the others inherited a system and nation-state,

to which their efforts can be said to have been additive and supplemental. Even though the system and country that Deng inherited from Mao had been deeply traumatized by the late Maoist era, the anarchy of the Cultural Revolution, and had to be rebuilt, the CCP and PRC nonetheless were well solidified by that time (1977). Deng's reforms did nonetheless constitute significant qualitative changes, albeit within the existing systemic framework. The post-1989 (Tiananmen massacre) China that Jiang Zemin inherited from Deng, and the policy adjustments he made, were also a significant departure from the 1980s—yet these changes were more to the superstructure rather than the foundation of the CCP operating system. Hu Jintao made minimal incremental changes to the system, although he (and his Premier Wen Jiabao) did launch a number of social policy initiatives (which largely went unrealized). Xi Jinping has certainly been a strong leader—the strongest since Deng (some judge since Mao)—but, again, the changes he has made to the system have been largely additive rather than fundamental and original.

They have certainly shown commonalities as well. As with *all* Chinese leaders since the “self-strengtheners” of the late Qing dynasty (1870s–1890s), they sought to build China economically, make it “wealthy and powerful” (富强), to maintain its territorial integrity and sovereignty, to protect its national security, to recover its lost dignity and respect, and to strengthen the country's position in Asia and the world.¹ All also sought to continually strengthen the Chinese Communist Party institutionally (Mao and the Cultural Revolution being the major exception, although it can be argued that Mao too was trying to remake and thus reinvigorate the Party). As leaders of “new (socialist) China” (post-1949) they had the common vision of reducing poverty and social inequalities, increasing literacy and education, reducing the rural-urban gap, eliminating social

vices, and maintaining social stability (the Cultural Revolution again being the exception). Yet the *means* and *approaches* for achieving many of these goals varied considerably among the five leaders. Thus, when conceptualizing the similarities and differences among these five leaders it may be analogous to think of a house or building where the foundation, walls, and roof remain the same—but the interior rooms and wiring were constantly being altered.

Perspectives on Leadership

It is also useful to view Chinese leaders through different prisms and paradigms that have been developed to analyze leadership and authority. When doing so, we also see differences. Max Weber famously distinguished between three types of political authority: *charismatic*, *traditional*, and *legal-rational*.² By Weber's criteria, all five leaders exhibited elements of each. All five were "traditional" in that they operated in—and continued—the patrimonial male-dominant, hierarchical political system that had characterized China since its inception. All five (to differing extents) were "legal-rational" in that they all were comfortable with and sought to build strong institutional hierarchies to administer both the state and society, and the decision bases for policy were taken more or less rationally and meritocratically within these institutions. Mao's post-1966 attack on bureaucracy could also be interpreted as a deviation—but, again, he was trying to *remold* the bureaucracy, not destroy it altogether. Mao was not an anarchist. Concerning Weber's third type of leadership, only Mao and Xi can be said to have been "charismatic" leaders—motivating the masses through personal populist appeal—the other three (including Deng)

were not. Jiang Zemin was certainly extroverted and gregarious, but that is not the same as being charismatic.

Another popular paradigm is of “transformational” versus “transactional” leadership, as famously put forth by the American political scientist James MacGregor Burns in his classic book *Leadership*.³ Transformational leaders, Burns argued, seek to transform society through ideas; they are generally intellectuals who pursue an ideological agenda. Three of our five Chinese leaders—Mao, Deng, and Xi—can be said to have been the former, as they all truly had a qualitatively transformative impact on society and institutions. Burns also defined four specific sub-categories of transformational leaders, into which I would place each leader: *ideational* leaders (Mao, Deng, Xi), *reform* leaders (Deng, Xi), *revolutionary* leaders (Mao), *heroes* (Mao), and *ideologues* (Mao, Xi). He also noted that transformational leaders “recognize and exploit an existing need or demand of a potential follower.”⁴ In this regard as well, Mao, Deng, and Xi all tapped into popular needs of the mass public—all three through deep nationalist yearnings as well as preference for “strongman” leaders, Mao through the appeal of egalitarian socialism, Deng through the opportunity of economic empowerment, and Xi through a preference for social order and crackdown on privileged corruption. Jiang and Hu were transactional leaders, “exchanging” the right to rule for incremental improvements in people’s lives and patronage of specific bureaucracies (what Burns described as “bargains with bureaucrats”). Jiang and Hu also acted more in what Burns describes as a “managerial style” (similar to a corporate boss), and were “consensus builders” rather than transformative proactive leaders. Jiang and Hu were also the most comfortable of the five operating within “groups” and “collective” leadership, both typical of the transactional style of leadership.

The academic field of “leadership studies” in the United States has burgeoned since the 1960s and has produced a vast literature as well as dedicated leadership schools on university campuses. One leading scholar of leadership (and practicing psychologist), Daniel Goleman, who is known particularly for his pioneering work on emotional intelligence, has identified six distinct leadership styles: *coercive* (demands immediate compliance), *authoritative* (mobilizes people toward a vision), *affiliative* (builds personal relationships with colleagues), *democratic* (forges consensus through participation), *pacesetting* (sets high standards for performance), and *coaching* (develops successors for the future).⁵ Mao, Deng, and Xi distinctly exhibited coercive tendencies. Mao and Xi, to a lesser extent Deng, were authoritative. Deng, Jiang, and Hu were affiliative. Deng, Jiang, and Hu were democratic. Deng, Jiang, Hu, and Xi were all pacesetters. Only Mao and Deng can be said to have been concerned with fostering (coaching) their successors.

Of course, leadership is also very culturally and system dependent.⁶ Leaders who would succeed in Europe would not likely succeed in the Middle East, for example, and those who are successful in autocratic systems are not appropriate for democratic systems (and vice versa). Nonetheless, it is interesting to consider leadership skills comparatively, as certain ones do transcend different political systems. Take, for example, the seven core leadership qualities identified by the American politics scholar Fred Greenstein for successful American presidents: vision, political skill, organizational capacity, public communicator, cognitive style (how a leader acquires and processes information), emotional intelligence, and moral character.⁷ If we were to apply these to China’s leaders, I would judge that Mao, Deng, and Xi all possessed vision. Mao, Deng, Jiang, and Xi all

possessed political skill (defined by Greenstein as being motivational and able to forge political coalitions). Deng, Jiang, and Xi all excelled at organizational capacity. Mao and Deng were poor public speakers, while both Jiang and Hu were rather robotic in their public presentations (Jiang was just the opposite in private). Only Xi was a good public communicator. Each had their own distinct cognitive style of processing information. So-called emotional intelligence—the ability to read and channel others’ emotional needs—is a key ingredient noted in many studies of leadership, as it naturally creates “followership.” The best leaders inspire and incentivize followers, and thus do not need to rely on other forms of inducement. I would say that only Mao and Xi, among our five leaders, possessed this skill. Finally, what about moral character? Here, all five strike out if measured by the repressive system they presided over and the personal use of arbitrary power each wielded. But, if measured on the basis of the behavioral type of Chinese Communist Party members and society’s citizens that each sought to foster—then we can say that all five advocated policies encouraging honesty, clean living, noncorruption, frugality, and other traditional communist values. There has been an additional expectation that China’s leaders should embody the traditional Confucian archetype of the caring, benevolent, and patriarchal figure (all five fit this paradigm).

Some leaders exhibit the character trait of narcissism (excessive interest in or admiration of oneself), and this has been extensively studied by political psychologists.⁸ When it occurs in leaders this personality disorder usually leads to a compulsive desire of the leader for mass adulation and the creation of a “cult of personality.” Among the five leaders in this study, it is clear that Mao had a severe case of narcissism, Xi Jinping has a very strong case, and Jiang Zemin had a mild case. Deng Xiaoping and Hu Jintao were

self-effacing individuals who were not so inclined (although in Deng's case the propaganda apparatus nonetheless still tried to create such a cult of personality).

An individual leader's lifelong socialization is also critical to understanding their behavior. It is well established in the fields of psychiatry, psychology, social psychology, psychohistory, political psychology, and psychopathology that pre-adult and early adult socialization are critical formative periods that do much to shape how a person behaves throughout their life. In particular, at least the following experiences and relationships have been identified as key influences: where one grows up and their standard of living; relationships with mothers and fathers; degree of maternal nurturing (or lack thereof); experiences in school and relationships with teachers; and relationships with peers. All of these encounters usually have far-reaching impacts on subsequent personality development. For example—for boys—maternal nurturing, a secure home environment, interactive siblings, financial stability, supportive primary and secondary school teachers, and inclusivity with a network of peers can all lead to a secure ego, confidence, and an outgoing adult personality. Conversely, antagonistic relations with fathers, a sense of neglect from mothers or abandonment by parents (even if they are away from home working), bickering with siblings, financial instability, harsh discipline from teachers, exclusion by peers—these experiences can all lead to an alienated, frustrated, angry, repressed, aggressive, insecure, insular adult personality type. This latter type is frequently associated with the development of strong anti-authoritarian and frequently narcissistic adult personality types. These two sets of general pre-adult characteristics have also been found across multiple national-cultural environments and are not simply characteristics of modern

Western societies. Indeed, in pre-modern agrarian or early industrialized societies they are quite common.

To what degree do these early family rearing and socialization features shed light on the five leaders covered in this study? One interesting commonality is that only one of the five (Jiang Zemin) grew up in a close-knit and stable nuclear family environment. All the others had very disrupted youths with absent or deceased parents.

Mao and his father had very strained relations, they clashed frequently, and Mao's anti-authority persona has been attributed to his deep antagonistic relationship with his father.⁹ His father made Mao work in the fields beginning at age six, something he resented. As Mao described his father in an interview with Edgar Snow in Yanan in 1937 (his only known reflection on his youth and family): "He was a hot-tempered man and frequently beat both me and my brothers."¹⁰ Mao told Snow that he grew to "hate" his father. Being unfilial toward his father, in such a patriarchal traditional culture, gave Mao an "Oedipus complex" (a Freudian reference to Greek King Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother), in the view of Sinologist and social scientist Richard H. Solomon, who authored a comprehensive psychocultural biography of Mao.¹¹ In sharp contrast to his father, Mao's mother was very nurturing and indulgent of her first son—thus providing him with a strong sense of self-confidence and a self-assured ego. As he described her to Snow: "My mother was a kind woman, generous and sympathetic, and ever ready to share what she had."¹² Mao was also very protective of his mother (sometimes physically) when she clashed with his father. There was much acrimony in the Mao family household. Mao's anti-authority trait deepened in primary school, where his teacher frequently punished and beat him. Mao described his teacher as belonging to

the “stern treatment school; he was harsh and severe.”¹³ After five years in this school and one too many beatings Mao ran away, never to return. These early childhood experiences proved pivotal for Mao—producing resentment of his father and authority figures, and instilling “revolutionary” traits in him at an early age.

In Deng Xiaoping’s case, his father was absent for long periods from the family residence in rural Sichuan, and thus Deng did not have much of a relationship with his father. His mother, like Mao’s mother, was loving, and doted on her first-born son. But she died when Deng was only 14. Deng then left home for middle school in Chongqing, also never to return. At just age 16 Deng had the wrenching experience of being sent on a long steamship trip to France for an overseas work-study program (which turned into much work and little study). Altogether Deng spent a total of six years abroad in France and one year in Moscow before returning to China at age 23. These early experiences on his own certainly bred a certain self-reliance in Deng. While in France Deng developed a liking for French food, liquor, and a passion for croissants. He found a series of odd jobs and factory work, but his schooling only lasted three months. Deng did find a peer group in relationships with other young Chinese and Vietnamese (including Ho Chi Minh) then studying and working there, many of whom were active in socialist politics following the Bolshevik Revolution (1917). One of these individuals who did play an important mentoring role in Deng’s life was Zhou Enlai, who was six years Deng’s senior and who brought him into the nascent Chinese Communist Party Socialist Youth League. Deng’s main job in the League was to produce propaganda pamphlets, for which he became known as “Monsieur Mimeograph.”

Hu Jintao was also deprived of parents early. His mother died when he was only 7, and because his father (a

merchant) was often away on business traveling throughout the lower Yangzi delta region, Hu and his three sisters were raised by an aunt. While the aunt was a good provider, Hu never had the security and familiarity of a close nuclear family. This likely contributed to his own self-reliance, and possibly also to the aloofness he displayed as an adult.

Jiang Zemin is the only one of the five leaders in this study to have had a fairly normal nuclear and extended family life, growing up in Yangzhou, Jiangsu province. His father was a writer and part-time electrician, and Jiang recalled later that his mother was doting and loving.¹⁴ The Jiang family was well-to-do and well-known in Yangzhou, an important cultural and commercial center for centuries. Jiang was one of five children. His uncle Jiang Shangqing and his wife were second parents to Jiang Zemin, essentially raising him. Jiang Shangqing was a leftist intellectual who was active in communist underground activities, arrested and rearrested by the Nationalists' police, and who had just joined the communist Red Army when he was killed in an ambush during the Japanese occupation in 1939, thus becoming a CCP martyr (giving the extended Jiang family a communist pedigree). Following his death Jiang Zemin's natural father Jiang Shijun offered their son to his brother's widow, as the couple had no male children of their own.¹⁵ This was not as disruptive for young Jiang Zemin as it might seem, as he had been living mostly with the aunt and uncle from an early age. Other than this anomaly, as described in [Chapter 4](#), Jiang's upbringing was quite normal and quite intellectual—which may have given him a secure self-confidence.

Xi Jinping was also thrust into the world at the tender age of 14, when he was sent from Beijing to rural Shaanxi province during the Cultural Revolution. His father had