



# THE BIG BEIGE BOOKS

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Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*,  
Volume I (2014), Volume II (2017), Volume III  
(2020), Volume IV (2022)

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« When he speaks in Chinese it doesn't do anything for me, » a colleague tells me, « but when I read it in English like this, it's already a lot more bearable. Maybe he thinks in English and things always go wrong in the Chinese translation! »

She's a colleague at the art academy in Beijing where I teach, and is flipping through my copies of *The Governance of China*, Volumes I to IV (2014, 2017, 2020, 2022). The author is General Secretary Xi Jinping, whose term in office is now indefinite due to a 2018 constitutional amendment. The volumes run to 2440 pages and anthologize ten years of 392 collected speeches, comments and interviews. In 2014, a riot erupted in the US because Volume I had been spotted on Mark Zuckerberg's table. Zuckerberg had also, it was said, ordered ample copies for colleagues. Henry Kissinger swears by them. Prince Andrew of the British royal family considers them a « landmark ». China experts

agree that this collection of four volumes (so far) is a must-have for those who want to know *where China is going* in this century. It must have sold millions of copies by now, at least in China. Sales in Europe aren't clear — maybe only a few hundred copies, according to *The Economist*. It is ranked 18.867 in the German Amazon's top foreign *Bestseller-Rang*. If you think China is the most important country of our shared global future and if you accept Xi Jinping as its most important political figure, then these are the most important unread books of our times.

I've now devoted several months, on and off, to plowing through all four volumes. One of the top reviews on Amazon suggests that the books are hard work. And they are. Years ago I heard from friends in China that soldiers and other government officials are required to read them online and have to give a sign of life every twenty minutes to prove they haven't dozed off. Others tell me that in post-Covid China, higher echelons of the Communist party are sent more and more on study trips in which reflection on the book is mandatory.

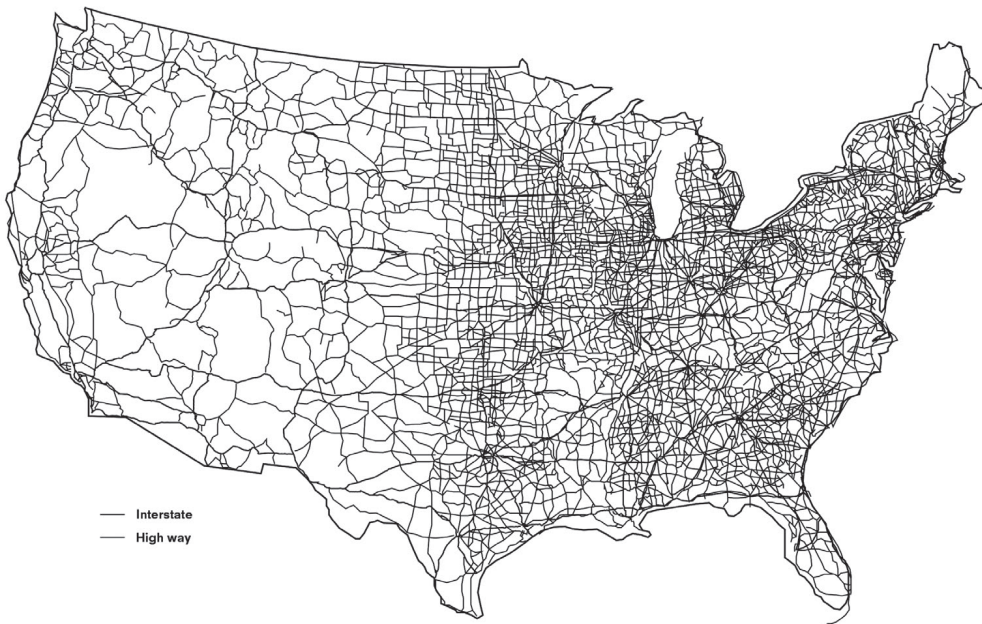


A spoiler for those who can't wait to learn whether the books live up to their title and reveal what Xi's plans for *The Governance of China* are;



**1974**

资料来源 | SOURCE: TIMES ATLAS OF CHINA, JANUARY 1974

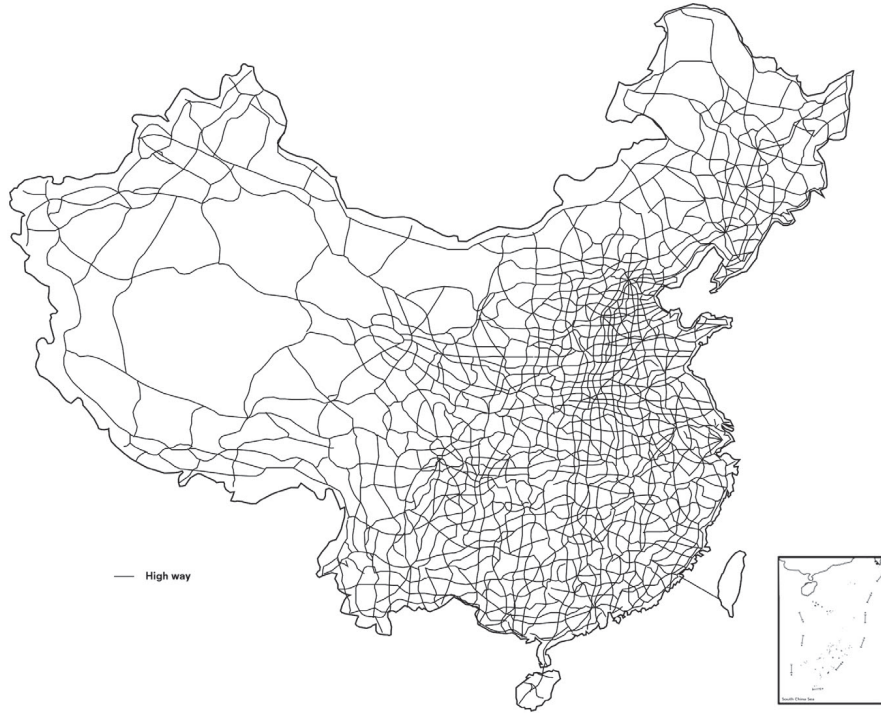


**1972**

SOURCE: THE NATIONAL ATLAS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, 1970

2019  
ATLAS  
by CAFA / AMO / MANN

These maps visualize the development of the Chinese countryside from the 1970s onwards. Rapid growth of different layers of infrastructure is juxtaposed with development in the US in the last fifty years.



**2030**

资料来源 | SOURCE: 中华人民共和国国家发展和改革委员会官方网站 国家公路网规划 (2013-2030)



**2018**

SOURCE: US DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION, 2014

HIGHWAY

” The vibe: sharp, smooth, incorruptible, certain, *eternal*. ▲▲

they’re there, and in pretty plain sight. Centenaries are one way to organize the pile, since Xi’s goals for China have revolved around two of them. The first was the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party itself, in 2021, a deadline he’d inherited from his predecessors for « the comprehensive construction of the moderately prosperous society in all respects ». When the deadline came, he announced that the goal had been achieved. (We will come back to the words *comprehensive* and *moderate*.) The Confucian version of a middle class for all. The second is 2049, the centenary of the People’s Republic, when the « rejuvenation of the Chinese nation » will have been achieved. Xi announced that aspiration in 2012, evoking an earlier ambition articulated by his predecessor, Jiang Zemin, in 1997. A rejuvenated nation means « prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally leading and harmonious », but it really means no longer depending on the West « in all respects ».

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But let’s do some unboxing. *The Governance of China* demands, first, to be judged by its cover. It looks like it was put together with WordPerfect 5.1, in defiance of all modern design aesthetics or publishers’ sales strategies, and as such it comes as a pleasant relief. The front cover has a beige background with, top center, an airbrushed portrait of the author in a 1950s style. The vibe: sharp, smooth, incorruptible, certain, *eternal*. Below, text in capitals: Xi Jinping in large letters, the title slightly smaller, both set in Times New Roman. There’s almost nothing on the back cover — no synopsis, no publisher, no respectable celebrity blurbs. Only a price tag (\$16.95) with an ISBN and the words: Printed in China.

Any book by a western leader — Barack Obama’s cover for *The audacity of hope* (2006), say — will seem baroque by comparison, a desperate cry for attention. The only decorative ostentation in Xi’s volumes is to be found in flakes of gold leaf in the endpapers.<sup>1</sup>



Each volume is organized into twenty or so thematic chapters — moving broadly from domestic issues like « Socialism with Chinese Characteristics » and « Culturally Advanced China », to international affairs with « Peaceful Development and Cooperation with Other Countries » or « A Community of Shared Future », and ending with the Party reform in chapters like « The CPC Leadership ». Each chapter includes about five or six speeches by Xi, full or extensive fragments, always organized chronologically. Although Xi’s compilers (unnamed) have clearly tried to be selective and to reduce redundancy, you keep almost hearing the same story over and over again. The effect is reminiscent of the Old Testament, and it generates an almost mantra-like echo: the Communist party is in perpetual need of its people and the people are in perpetual need of the party.

A few years ago, during a China-EU summit in Paris, I met a Chinese scholar who had done research into the editing process of Mao’s works, both political and poetical. She had reconstructed how for each of Mao’s publications, a selection of texts and poems was made with utmost care, how their choice and order were highly deliberated by a special governmental literary

1 Once at a book fair, a Dutch diplomat in China showed me the covers of all the translations, and they are all designed in exactly the same style. The Spanish edition’s over-long title is squeezed into the same line, making it almost impossible to read. Most translations of the title itself are quite literal, except for the German: *China regieren*, or *Governing China*, which somehow sounds more active and more personal.

department, and finally decided upon at the highest political levels. Specific sequences and selections of Mao's texts would be pored over for clues to his political course.

With Xi, I don't know how deep his involvement runs. A senior administrator at my art academy casually laughed when I asked him about the books. He was at that moment attending a six-week state course in the outskirts of Beijing for senior party cadres within the Communist Party. Every day he'd learn the official ropes when it comes to propagating state doctrine. I got the impression he appreciates the contact with the other comrades and the ever-important *guanxi* (networking) it brings. Ploughing through party doctrine is simply part of the deal, he seemed to suggest, like doing the dishes. And frequently the ideas in there are not bad at all, he says.

▮ The books feel Papal, though with a constant Hegelian reminder to *keep up with the times*. ▴

Speaking of Mao, in working through the Xi corpus, one is inevitably struck by pretty much every text's reference to predecessors — mostly Mao and Deng Xiaoping, depending on the topic and time. It imparts to the volumes a constancy that's probably strange to European readers. Imagine Macron invoking the glorious rise of Mitterrand, or Boris Johnson praising Tony Blair. Overall songlines are endlessly repeated: the party's efforts have set our path, which proceeds only upward toward our targets.

Xi's platitudes about justice, fairness, innovation, prosperity and progress are only marginally different from the boilerplate of Western politicians, but the constancy is unique. Where many political manifestos by Western leaders appeal to a Silicon-Valley-ish desire to break with current habits, to herald the new, to harness creative destruction, Xi's overriding rhetorical prism is one of an endless refining of what already exists,

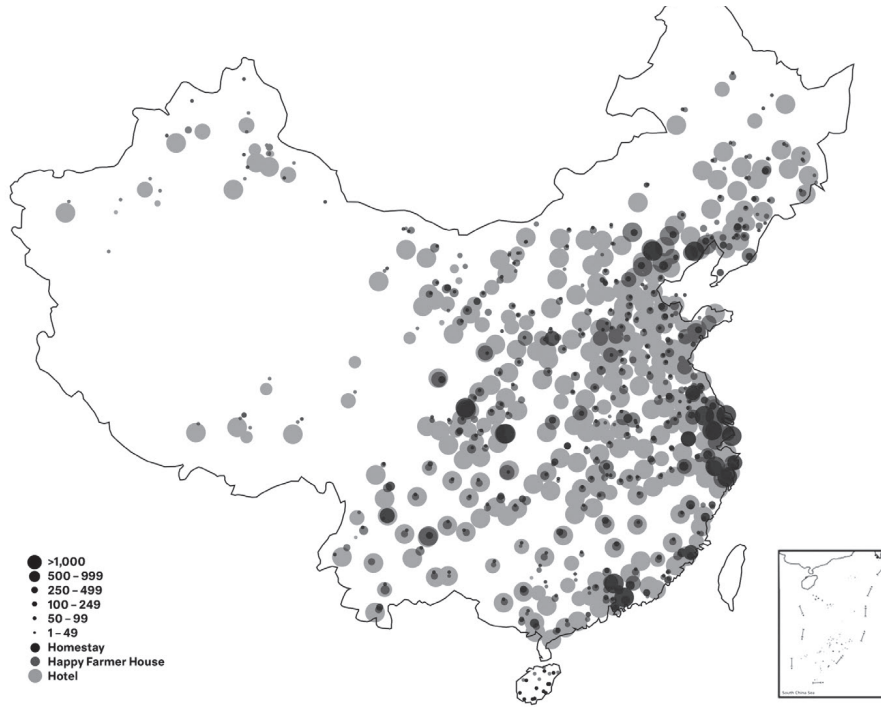
of sharpening, of standing on shoulders of giants looking back with pride at the past achievements of his predecessors and of the party, putting himself in a grand lineage but also clearly striving forward. The books, genre-wise, are more papal in that sense, though with a constant Hegelian reminder to *keep up with the times*.



China seems to have a thing for practical manuals. In the recent publications department of the National Library, I mostly come across wonderfully concrete books: how to repair a high-speed train, how to build a space rocket engine, how to do experimental organ transplantation.

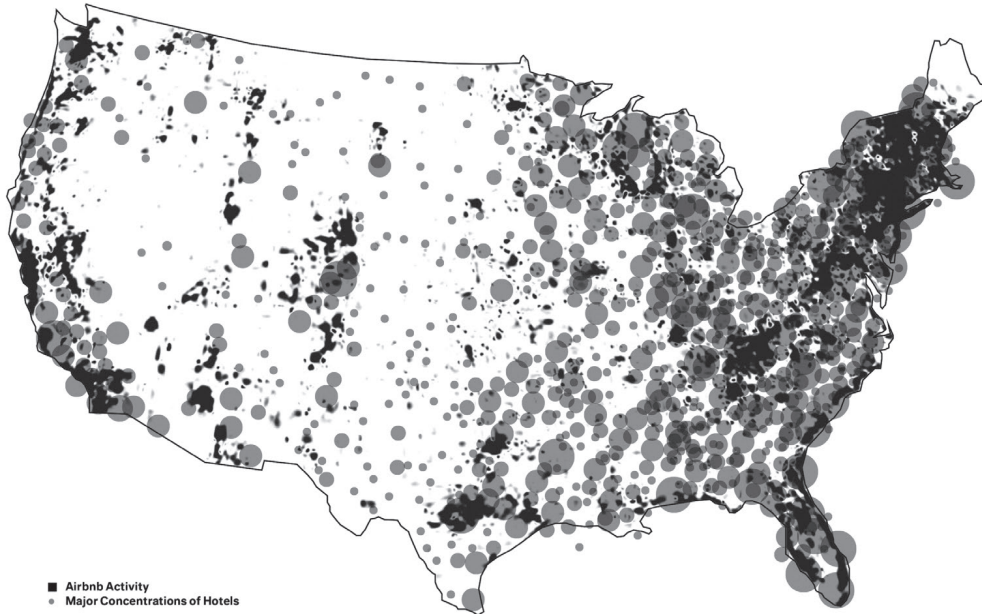
Xi, by contrast, often tends toward the vague. When I mentioned my plan of reading all four volumes, my students' reaction is: « Ah, so will you finally tell us what he means? » My students don't really share my fascination. What they get from the general secretary's words is vagueness, nothing of real value.

For instance, at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee in 2013 of the Communist party Xi introduced the « concept » of ecological civilization, which described the pursuit of harmony between man and nature, and between economy and society — or re-introduced it, having inherited the term from a predecessor, Hu Jintao. « Ecological civilization » a frequent slogan on walls and banners in villages throughout the Chinese countryside, and it crops up in all policy and development proposals at every level of government, without anyone fully grasping what it means. Xi called for increased ecological development as part of the plans presented in 2017 at the 19th National Congress of the Communist party, which led, for example, to more and larger organically-producing agricultural enterprises, all pushed by government support. But Chinese consumers remain skeptical of Chinese organic produce, or they're unable to pay for it, and financial problems continue to arise for these farmers. I remember hoping to



**2019**

资料来源 | SOURCE: BAIDU.CN, 2019

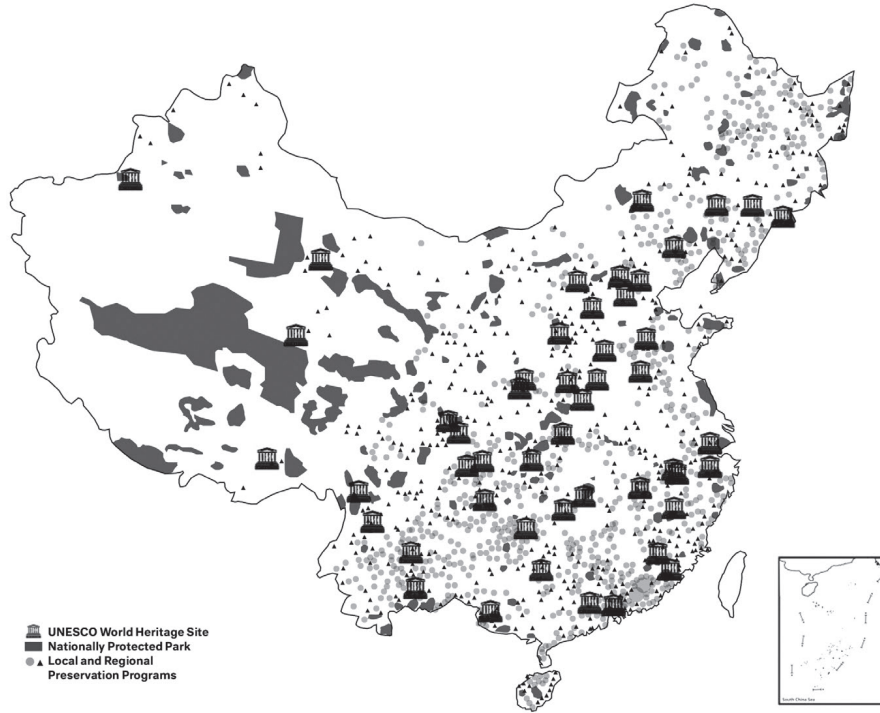


**2016-19**

资料来源 SOURCE: AIRBNB, 2019; EXPEDIA, 2016

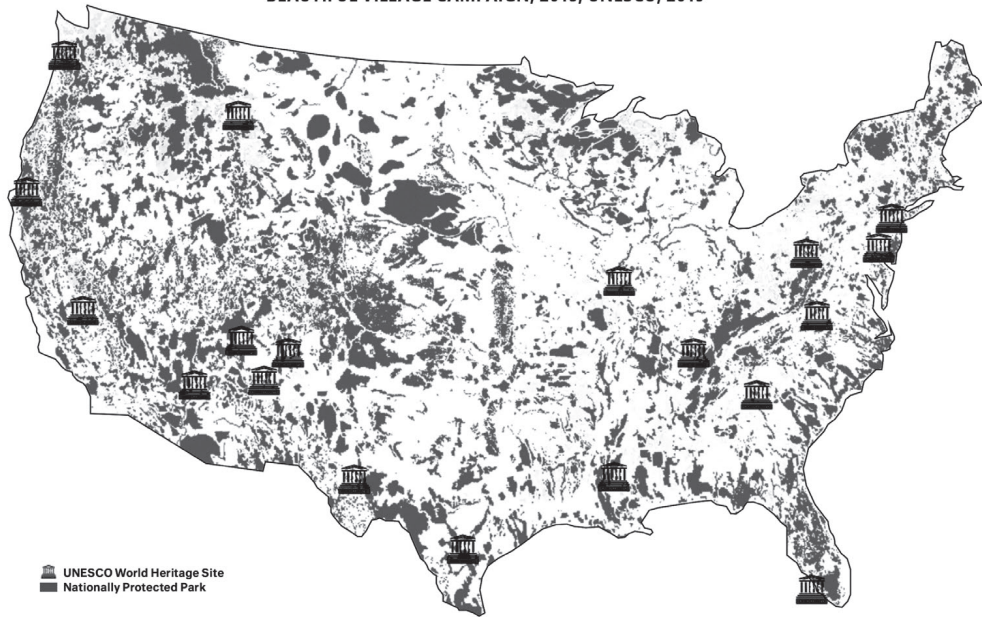
2019  
ATLAS  
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These maps visualize the development of the Chinese countryside from the 1970s onwards. Rapid growth of different layers of infrastructure is juxtaposed with development in the US in the last fifty years.



2019

资料来源 SOURCE: ANALYSIS OF THE NETWORK OF PROTECTED AREAS IN CHINA BASED ON A GEOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE: , 2015; BEAUTIFUL VILLAGE CAMPAIGN, 2015; UNESCO, 2019



2019

资料来源 SOURCE: THE NATURE CONSERVANCY, 2019; UNESCO, 2019



finally understand « ecological civilization » at the gigantic 2019 International Horticultural Exhibition held in Beijing, where the majestic Chinese pavilion dedicated to « ecological civilization » offered an immersive — nay, overwhelming — digital experience, with beautiful natural scenes from across China, all set in oversaturated colors, but it too left me without further clue.<sup>2</sup>



A good part of society, especially in the business community, is engaged with filling Xi's vagueness with meaning. Deciphering Xi is something like a national sport or word puzzle, resulting not infrequently in bombastic plans for new construction, or in overly ambitious investments, so as to get into the government's good graces — and hence in local disaster. Part of China's real estate crisis can be blamed on such project developers, now deeply indebted by projects that aimed to please these grand governmental ambitions.

It's the autocrat's elocutionary predicament. Where power is so concentrated, every word becomes a diktat, and where every word is a diktat, one *must* be vague, because too-clear instructions would spur both business leaders and CCP cadres to go all out in pleasing the party, to detrimental extremes. Then again, they might do it anyway, with the vague terms, too.



Xi entered office in 2012 as a justice warrior and crime fighter. His ascent to the position was by no means destined, but as an administrator in different Chinese provinces, Xi had made an impression in addressing corruption. Volume I reaches its most Churchillian heights when

” Where every word is a diktat, one *must* be vague. “

dealing with that theme. Consider a speech titled « Power Must Be 'Caged' by the System », from 22 January 2013:

We should fight corruption with strong determination, « leave marks when we tread on stones or grasp iron », persevere in our anti-corruption effort till we achieve final success rather than start off full of sound and fury and then taper off in a whimper. We must let the whole Party and the people oversee power, and demonstrate to the people continuous and real results and changes of Party conduct and the combat of corruption.

He hammers on party founding principles. He warns of punishment. He tasks his fellow officials to be diligent in catching both « tigers » and « flies » and executing « a punishment mechanism » for those found corrupt. These words animated Xi's early house-cleaning, in the party and the country, from the sacking and arrest of key party members and mayors (including Bo Xilai, the popular mayor of Chongqing) to the collapse of the luxury goods market.

2 Even at the art academy, Xi Jinping's words will be pondered for days. In August of 2019, the academy received a letter from Xi in honor of its centenary. As is often the case with the president's letters, it was published in several media outlets and thus caused a commotion at the school: Xi Jinping does not often talk about culture and education, which makes the letter's 780 characters special. He praises the academy's work, argues that all schools and universities in China should learn from it, proclaims that creativity has a very important role in all education in China. His vagueness reads like this:

We should carry forward the good tradition of loving the country and serving the people, upholding virtue and appreciating art, to educate the students with a heart of big love, and create works with the art of grand beauty, to keep in step with the times, to focus on the people, to serve the people with great works, to lead the trend with enlightened ideas and moral deeds, and to make new contribution to the development of aesthetic education in China with the cultivation of art talent and the creation of art.



Opposition to extravagance and waste, calls for strict enforcement of diligence and thrift — these stances won widespread acclaim from officials and the public. « There should now be a follow-up campaign to ensure that no one simply goes through the motions or follows the rules as a temporary measure, like a passing gust of wind, » Xi intoned. « We must do everything possible, and we must see things through from beginning to end. »

Such was the refrain in a Chinese economy that was then on speed, projecting unending growth. Construction boomed in China's largest cities as well as in rising, so-called Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, not to mention the gigantic infrastructural works, including the massive expansion of high-speed rail, highways and factories, or the unfolding e-commerce economy of WeChat, Taobao and many others.

Volume I places the « Chinese Dream » on the literal and rhetorical horizon, though the description isn't quite poetic: « Everyone has an ideal, ambition and dream », Xi announced in November 2012. The *Chinese* dream — an answer to the American Dream — « embodies the long-cherished hope of several generations of the Chinese people, gives expression to the overall interests of the Chinese nations and the Chinese people, and represents the shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation. » Framing the volume's second chapter, the « Chinese Dream » reflects a still-Western-oriented ambition.

« Chinese Dream » will fade to the footnotes in the later volumes. By Volume III that phrase has been consigned to a mere appendix to « Socialism with Chinese Characteristics », the larger framework that underpins almost all Xi's thinking. We can follow how Xi, throughout the volumes, increasingly stresses the signifi-

## “ The « Chinese Dream » will fade to the footnotes. ”

cance of a scientific Marxist understanding in the development of the state: China's evolution is not the result of ideology but of science. « Seek truth from facts » is one of Xi's favorite slogans, a maxim shared between Marxism and the ancient Chinese book of Han.

As a scholar who received his PhD in Marxist theory from Tsinghua University in 2002, his rhetorical devotion to the deterministic foundations of communism also seems to grow. Politics is less a succession of Churchillian *events* than a process to be analyzed and steered: China emerges as a controlled experiment conducted by the CCP, with the aim of creating a balanced, moderately wealthy society. The only thing that can intervene in the experiment is the changing demands of the people. In speeches directed at party cadres, he stresses the importance of listening to the people, for this (as he relentlessly repeats) is key to « keeping up with the times ».

On the topic of repetition: the word *comprehensive* ranks, alongside *dynamic*, among Xi's favorite words. It appears about four hundred times in each volume, from comprehensive strategic relationships with [name of country], to comprehensive steps towards reform, to a « comprehensive multilevel multifaceted way of creating favorable environments ».

*Moderately* is the other word I keep getting hung up on, specifically in the first two volumes, such as the aforementioned « moderately prosperous society in all respects » achieved in 2021. The term resonates back to the era of Deng Xiaoping, who was responsible for China's move toward becoming a more market-oriented economy in the 1970s and 80s. Hu Jintao deployed it, too. Xi seems to use *moderately* to hit the brake pedals now and again. It's not the sexiest political word one can imagine; in fact it may seem an obstruction to growth.

*Moderately*, that is to say, is a word related

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” If you mention you feel like eating fish or meat, you will most likely get both. ◀◀

to Chinese *uniqueness*, itself only definable in contradistinction to a non-Chinese norm — in this case the immoderate West. The term is also, on another frequency, aimed at the West, indeed may aim to assuage Western fears about China’s sudden rise. We might see *moderately* and *Chinese characteristics* as antidotes to the West’s association of communism with luridly dystopian novels, or with the Soviet past.



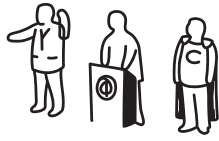
*Chinese characteristics* is also a convenient way to resolve, or seem to resolve, contradictions — such as the inherent contradictions between socialism and capitalism — or to get around making a choice at all. In daily life, either/or choices are avoided. If you mention you feel like eating fish or meat, you will most likely get both. Deng Xiaoping was a clever and pragmatic opportunist whose most famous expression was that « it doesn’t matter if the cat is white or black, as long as it catches the mouse. » Xi inherited this invention and has deployed *Chinese characteristics* as a brilliant catch-all modifier for anything from economic development to globalization to cultural position.



The Xi of Volume II — no longer the corruption fighter, now more statesman and scientist — remains open to the West, exploring spaces for multilateralism, win-win international cooperations. He embraces innovation-speak and tech-

speak, while also introducing a « New Normal of Economic Development » in 2014, anticipating a longer-term future with less growth. (It is a new section in Volume II.) He’s praiseful, celebrating growth and increasing prosperity, never explicitly critical of his own party, or other countries. Other changes to the volume’s organization reflect this shift: sections on party reform are moved down in the table of contents. A new section is introduced for the Belt and Road initiative, Xi’s massive global infrastructure program propounded in 2013. There are subtler adaptations, too, for instance the section on culture has been updated from « Culturally Advanced China » to « Cultural Confidence ».

Xi’s philosophical and literary allusions are one way to track his openness to the world. In a speech for a seminar on Philosophy and Social Sciences organized in Beijing in 2016, Xi lists classics of political philosophy he has read, from Plato’s *Politeia*, to Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of Law*, to the *Federalist Papers*, to Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom*.<sup>3</sup> Xi also has an appreciation for French literature, which he supposedly developed in his youth. A speech in Volume I quotes the Chinese geologist Li Siguang on the necessity of science — « Science exists because of new discoveries made by it. It would die without new discoveries » — and rhymes it with Victor Hugo’s *On William Shakespeare*: « Things created are insignificant when compared with things to be created ».<sup>4</sup> Hugo also guides a Xi speech on cultural exchange delivered at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in 2014: « Victor Hugo once said that there was a prospect greater than the sea — the sky; there was a prospect greater than the human soul. Indeed we need a mind that is broader than the sky as we approach different civilizations, which serve as water, moistening everything silently. »<sup>5</sup> He mentions how visits to the Paris Louvre, to the Mayan Chichén Itzá and to the Persian Samarkand made him humble: « It is my keenly-felt conviction that an attitude of equality and modesty is required if one wants to truly understand the various civilizations. » Both bespeak a Xi still in search of a symbiosis of kinds.



In some of Volume II's later speeches his deployments of foreign literature express a concern about the global geopolitical horizon. At the Davos World Economic Forum on 17 January 2017, just three days before the inauguration of US President Donald Trump, Xi defended globalization with Dickens (« It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. ») and challenged those who « once viewed [globalization] as the treasure cave found by Ali Baba in *The Arabian Nights* » but now condemn it as « a Pandora's box. » In the *best of times* column, Xi placed « growing material wealth and advances in science and technology »; *worst of times* included « global challenges » like terrorism, refugees, poverty, unemployment. But globalization itself was not the root cause; the problem was political instability, poor overall economic governance and inadequate regulations of finance. To that rhetorical end, he marshaled a quote from Swiss humanitarian Henry Dunant: « Our real enemy is not the neighboring country; it's hunger poverty, ignorance, superstition and prejudice. » Although never addressing the incoming US president directly, it seems clear the words were aimed largely at him. A few days later, at the annual assembly of the United Nations, he quoted from Herman Hesse's Nobel-prize acceptance in 1946, asking the assembly to serve « not war and destruction but peace and reconciliation. » Volume II includes talking points taken from Xi's meeting with President Trump in April 2017, under the title « There Are a Thousand Reasons to Make the China-US Relationship a Success ». Thus we see Xi's outstretched hand, persuading

the US to extend rather than decrease collaboration, all from the mantle of the responsible parent: « The two sides should properly handle sensitive issues and constructively manage and control their differences. »

The grand plans of the Belt and Road initiative were announced in Kazakhstan in September 2013, aimed at expanding trade and infrastructural development in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Xi's overtures to non-Western nations deploy more Chinese proverbs in the rhetorical service of win-win solutions, harmony and peace. « When we drink water from the well », he says in Tanzania, in a speech in Volume I, « we should not forget those who dug it. » In Africa, he stresses how China has always stood side-by-side with African countries in their struggles with the West. In his 2017 keynote at the « CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting » (the World Political Parties is an annual assembly of representatives of political parties, mostly not in power, and mostly from non-Western nations, hosted by China), he states that « All living things grow side by side without harming one another; the sun, moon and seasons rotate according to their own laws without hindering each other. »<sup>6</sup> For Chinese audiences, meanwhile, Xi's references remain predictably domestic: besides earlier Communist leaders, he invokes ancient Chinese philosophers and writers like Zhong Hui, Wang Anshi, Liu Xiang, Han Fei Zi and, more worryingly, Sun Tzu, author of the *Art of War*.

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More unboxing! A quite dramatic move is visible from Volume II to III. The layout is the same, but Volume III's frontispiece has changed. Before, Xi wore a dark suit with a red and then a purple tie. Now he has donned the classic Mao suit. Under the new portrait, the calligraphy of Xi's name has been renewed. (Calligraphy, in Chinese bureaucracy, represents a significant lyrical and personal expressionistic dimension of politics, discussed at length and appreciated in

- 3 « Develop Philosophy and Social Sciences with Chinese Features », 17 May 2016
- 4 « Transition to Innovation-Driven Growth », 9 June 2014
- 5 « Exchanges and Mutual Learning Make Civilizations Richer and More Colorful », 27 March 2014
- 6 « Meet the People's Expectation for a Better Life », 1 December 2017

all layers of society. In my own travels in China, I have found it's always easy to figure out who is in charge by locating where a calligraphy set is found in a government office.) Xi's calligraphy here looks less modest, more confident, maybe even arrogant.



Volume III spans from October 2017 to January 2020 and covers China's most unstable period in decades: its economic miracle is grinding to a halt, with slowing employment opportunities and declining growth numbers. Earlier strategies of encouraging economic growth through massive public investments in infrastructure and real estate, once successful, are losing their effect. Trump's strikes against China through trade tariffs unleash an economic war eliciting Xi's more defensive stance in turn. This Xi — Xi-3, if you will — has graduated to a posture of Olympian irritation, both within China and without.

Shifts in language signal Xi's worries. From Volume II to Volume III, « development » gives way to « high-quality development ». In Volume III, « Chinese dream » (already consigned to the footnotes), is finally replaced by the new slogan « The New Era », to which Volume IV adds « in the New Development Stage ». We find Xi putting his finger less vaguely and more closely on deepening domestic concerns, and we find him more direct in his criticisms. In a speech in Volume IV for a study group working on the implementation of the decisions of the 19th CPC Central Committee in 2021, he enumerates major shortfalls.<sup>7</sup> Among the « eight points » are lack of collaboration; redundancies in research and development; major imbalances in the market, both on the supply- and demand- side; the return of blind lending practices; and over-stimulated

▮ Before, Xi wore a dark suit with a red and then a purple tie. Now he has donned the classic Mao suit. ▮

consumption. These worries are broadly felt in China. Years of economic productivity made it possible to ignore them, and now, in the crunch, Xi emerges as a rather « standard » politician struggling with economically tough times, and having to throttle his experiment harder in order not to fail.

In volume IV, covering February 2020 through May 2022, the ever-more cautious Xi warns of more bad weather to come, and not only in light of COVID-19. Most of the pandemic-related texts grandstand the success of China's approach, and they've clearly not aged well. COVID-19's first mention comes on 3 February 2020, in a chapter devoted to « Epidemic Response and Social-Economic development ». It's a short response to the early outbreaks around Hubei province, demanding increased public awareness and a coordinated response from the party members. The COVID-19 speeches celebrate, in different ways, China's strength in combatting the virus. The last of them, in March 2022, assures the public of the justness of the state's pandemic control measures, nine months before the radical U-turn that erased those measures practically overnight. It's a safe bet that Volume V will see the topic disappear from its table of contents. (Apologies or admissions of error are not the Governance of China's editorial remit.)

As for the rest of the world, Xi remains in the latter volumes an ardent spokesman for multipolarity who has become deeply annoyed at the other poles, or at least the Western poles. From his perspective, or at least in his words, China had made abundant attempts to form a new relationship with the western world, but you can taste his disappointment with the West's arro-

<sup>7</sup> « Move Faster to Create a New Development Dynamic », 11 January 2021

gance and cultural insensitivity — its antagonism to « China » as a monolith or an abstraction.

Where's the respect? Xi is agitated by the West's posture of criticism, not least because it both obscures — and obstructs praise *for* — what China has achieved: massive alleviation of poverty while also driving (on the cheap) the West's own unequal and contradictory economic growth. Western scorn seems to have led him, by Volume III, to the conclusion that Western attention will always focus on the negative. Both in the content and the selection of speeches — mainly from conferences with African, Arabic, Latin American and Asia-Pacific nations — the absence of the West is abundantly clear.

This disappointment, in turn, feeds at times into a contrary overtone of Chinese superiority. A speech in October 2020 commemorates the seventieth anniversary of China's participation in the Korean War (published in a section called « Confront Challenges Head-On ») celebrating that participation as « a declaration that the Chinese People has stood upright and tall in the East. » The speech's title makes obvious the parallel to the present: « Carry Forward the Spirit of the War to Resist US Aggressions and Aid Korea in the Great Historic Struggle. » The historical shots across the bow are only barely veiled: the Korean War, he says « left the world in no doubt

▮ This Xi — Xi-3, if you will — has graduated to a posture of Olympian irritation, both within China and without. ▮

that no country or military, no matter how powerful it might be, can prevail if it stands against the trend of world development, abuses the weak, pursues a regressive agenda, or indulges in aggression and expansion. »

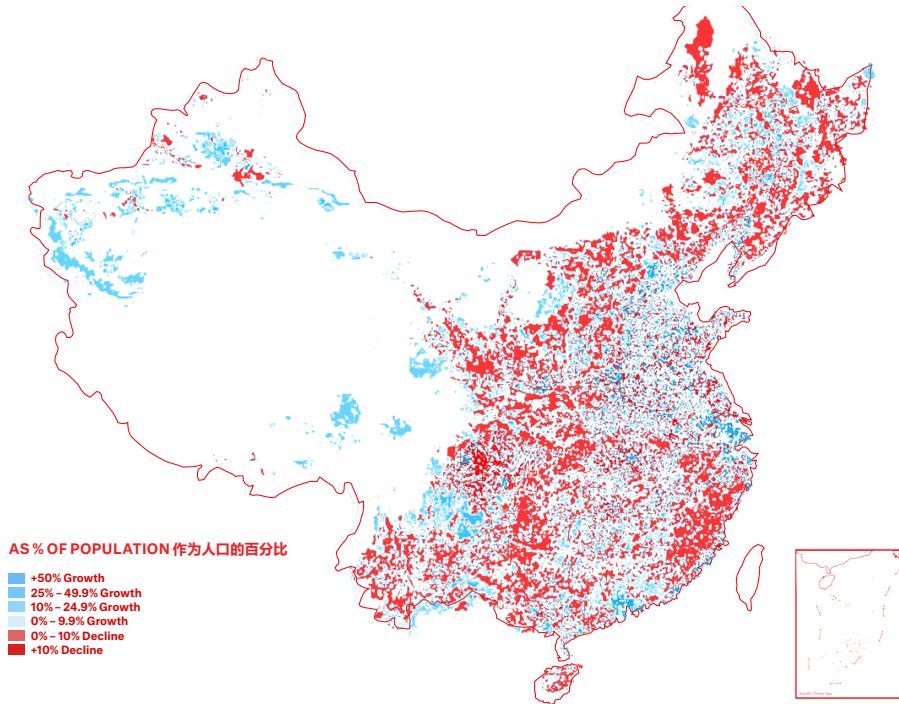
It is in the period spanned by Volumes III and IV that the broader world was awakened to Uyghur and Kazakh internment in China's western provinces. The government's attempts at « modernizing » its Wild West mainly by sending its eastern Chinese Han population (which make up for more than ninety per cent of the Chinese population), led to severe clashes with minority cultures in the area. None of the volumes makes any particular reference to the matter. This makes it a curious experience to read Xi's regular paeans to other ethnic minorities in China, most specifically in the first two volumes when he persistently mentions their importance for China's respect for all cultures, and acts as a spokesperson for the repressed and underprivileged.<sup>8</sup>

8 For example, see « The People's Wish for a Good Life Is Our Goal », from 2012: « During the long history the Chinese people have worked with diligence, bravery and wisdom, creating a beautiful homeland where *all ethnic groups* live in harmony and developing a great and dynamic culture. [...] Our responsibility is to bring together and lead the whole Party and *the people of all ethnic groups* to free their minds, carry out reform and opening up, further unfetter and develop the productive forces, solve the people's problems in work and life, and resolutely pursue common prosperity. » Or the speech titled « Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era », from 2017: « On behalf of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, I express our heartfelt thanks to *the people of all ethnic groups*, to all other political parties, to the people's organizations, and to patriotic figures from all sectors of society, to our fellow countrymen and women in the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions and in Taiwan, to overseas Chinese, and to all our friends from around the world who have shown understanding and support for China's modernization. » (emphasis mine)



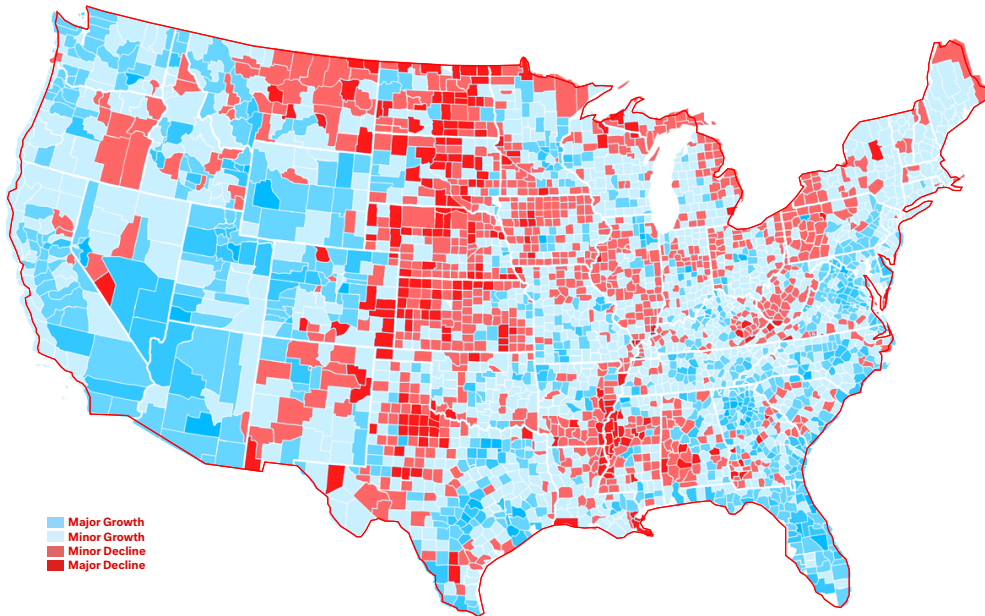
From Xi's mantle, the multi-polar world was, so to speak, *a given*. China did not create it, but rather emerged within it. It set the terms of China's controlled experiment; to imperil those terms imperils the experiment.

These are the upper harmonics that vibrate in his speeches before the United Nations. Xi's first speech in front of the general assembly in New York, in September 2015, still expresses an



**2000-2010**

资料来源 SOURCE: BBSR BONN, 2015

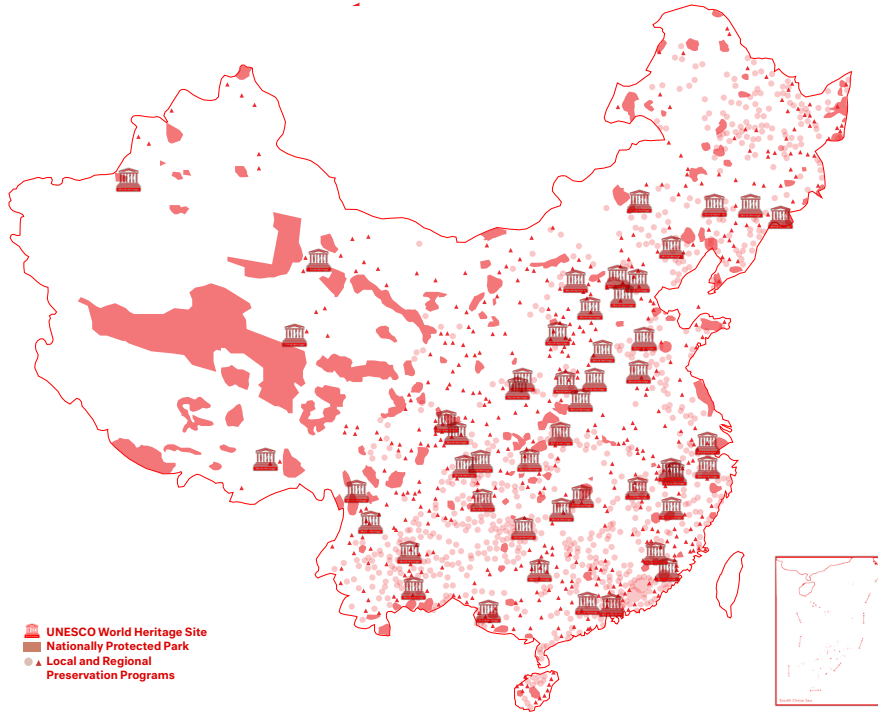


**2000-2010**

资料来源 SOURCE: US CENSUS, 2016

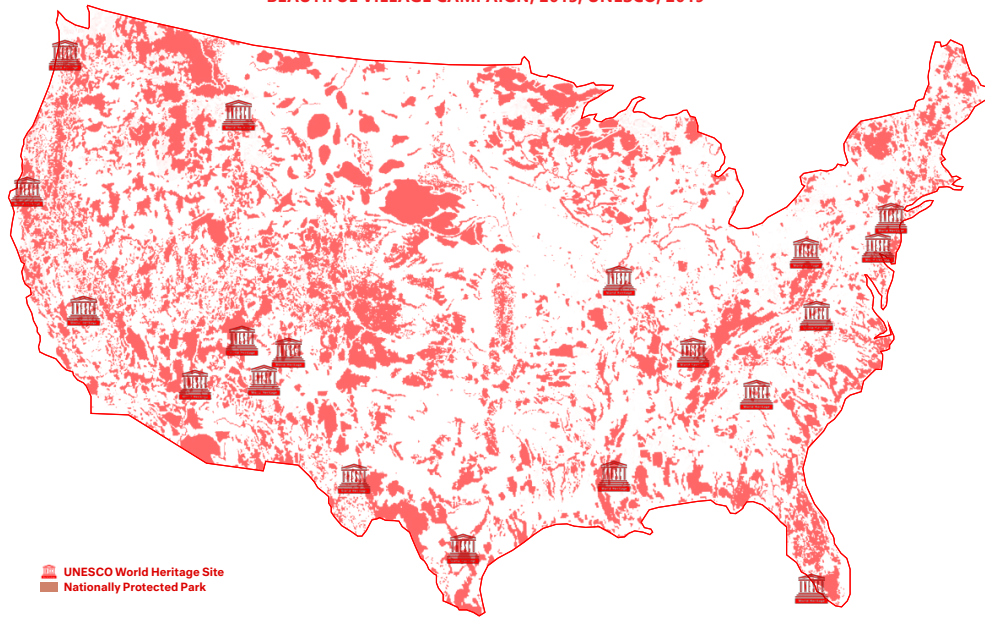
2019  
ATLAS  
by CAFA / AMO / MANN

These maps visualize the development of the Chinese countryside from the 1970s onwards. Rapid growth of different layers of infrastructure are juxtaposed with development in the US in the last fifty years.



2019

资料来源 SOURCE: ANALYSIS OF THE NETWORK OF PROTECTED AREAS IN CHINA BASED ON A GEOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE: , 2015; BEAUTIFUL VILLAGE CAMPAIGN, 2015; UNESCO, 2019



2019

资料来源 SOURCE: THE NATURE CONSERVANCY, 2019; UNESCO, 2019



## ” When I lift my head from the books and glance at Western coverage of China, the vertigo is dramatic. “

overall optimism about shared endeavors and a common future. By September 2021, though, the contours of the Xi from 2015 are recognizable but hardened. « One country’s success does not have to come at the expense of another’s failure », he says. « Differences and problems amongst countries are hardly avoidable, and they need to be handled through dialogue and cooperation on the basis of equality and mutual respect. » We statesmen « need to pursue dialogue and inclusiveness rather than confrontations and exclusion. » Later he stresses how adherence to multilateralism through the UN is the central pillar of global governance: « There is only one international system in the world — the international system with the UN at its core. »<sup>9</sup> Characteristically, he will refrain from outright public scolding, but the stance is more strident than ever before.

○

When I lift my head from the books and glance at Western coverage of China — hawkish European politicians focus on « the China threat », warmongering Republicans in the US call for a « decoupling », EU Commission President von der Leyen answers « decoupling » with a call to « de-risk » the relationship with China — the vertigo is dramatic. My first post-Covid trip back to China was in April 2023. I saw students and colleagues in person again; others I’d only ever met on a screen. I tried to gauge their sentiment. One student put it most plainly: « It seems many other countries don’t like China anymore. » On the one hand many of them feel the same way: appalled and discouraged about their future after the lock-downs, and following that, an unconvincing economic outlook. Many

are looking for new opportunities elsewhere, or even reconsidering their career as architects. But there is also a deep misunderstanding about what it is « they » — China? the Chinese? — did wrong or why they are not accepted. They don’t understand the aggression and the perpetual suspicion. Another Chinese friend — a Dean at a different art school in China — is more outspoken and calls the US position purely neo-colonial. (Europe is taken less seriously.)

Read anyone’s speeches for several months and they’ll probably start growing on you in some way. Xi Jinping’s massive corpus projects power and certainty — about the past and the future — and yet the more you read into it, the more you sense the cracks, which can then be experienced as poignant. A speech he gave in the fall of 2021, at the opening ceremony of a new training program for younger party officials, is one my favorites.<sup>10</sup> It feels down-to-earth; and an irritation comes through, at party members who’ve sought only material wealth. He implores the young comrades to be in touch with the people at the grassroots: « Listen to what people say, find out the real situation, study problems thoroughly and identify genuine difficulties. » He cajoles them to follow Mao in practicing self-discipline, in fact-finding, in being honest and analytical in their work; to beware superficiality; « It’s completely unacceptable to set out with ‘no intentions of seeking trust from facts, but only a desire to curry favor by claptrap.’ » In fact he’s quoting from Mao Zedong’s « Reform Our Study » speech, from 1941.

Something more personal comes to the surface in this speech, if mostly between the lines. Xi’s father was a senior CCP party member who experienced the woes of Mao’s regime. He was purged in the Cultural Revolution, prosecuted and jailed for several years in the late sixties and early seventies. His main *crime* (although Xi doesn’t use the word) had been telling truths to the party at a moment when it was particularly

9 « Increase Confidence and Overcome Difficulties to Build a Better World. » 21 September 2021

10 « Be the Spine of Our Party », 1 September 2021

risky to do so: he reported « the real situation », Xi says, of students being forced into « making false confessions » during the Cultural Revolution. Xi recalls what his father, who died in 2002, used to tell him: « Our Party emphasizes commitment to the Party. In my opinion, seeking truth from facts is the most important commitment. » He doesn't mention how that left his father ousted and jailed until 1975 and himself sent to the remote and impoverished countryside of Shaanxi. He scolds « types of officials » who « vacillate like a weather cock, some conceal problems ... some indulge in showy display and do nothing practical. » They are not « true adherents of philosophical materialism, but are victims of self-centered thinking. » Xi rallies the young cadres to « [h]ave the courage to uphold the truth, be an independent thinker, and work in a pragmatic manner. This will benefit the Party and the people, and you will achieve personal growth. »

Xi's teenage years in rural exile, we're often told, left a deep impression and a sentimental connection to the humble life, which he frequently draws on — earnestly or cynically — both in speeches and in interviews not included in these volumes. He never mentions how his own attempts to become a party member were rejected ten times, nor the thirty years of painstaking political work it took within the CCP to reach his own position. But his speech to the officials of tomorrow deploys one unusually personal example from his experience working in Fujian province, where he was governor from 1999 to 2002, to illustrate what good politics looks like. It's not often that Xi shares specific insights from his own career. It concerns a forestry policy he developed through « extensive research », which dramatically improved the life of the villagers while also preventing excessive illegal logging: « sensible policy » and « effective methods » that initially went against the grain of the central authorities. His mentioning of this to the young generation leaves me with an impression of a Xi who is growing tired of the complexities that must exist in the very secret top party life. The frustrations of a bureaucrat whose words are

often misinterpreted, while most solutions are so simple to him, so rational.

The last speech of *The Governance of China*, dated 10 May 2022, is titled « Give of Your Best in National Rejuvenation ». It marks a relatively minor centenary, of the founding of China's Communist youth league, and is a bit run-of-the mill, instilling among the young a courage to reform, to keep up with the times, to keep the 101-year-old party forever young.

On my second return to China since the COVID-19 epidemic, I meet the new president of the art academy. Rumor has it that his appointment reflects a deeper involvement of the state in the school's functioning. When he hears that I've finished reading Xi's collected writings, he nods with surprise — maybe gratitude? — and then quizzes me on the fourteen elements of « Xi Jinping thought » — the most condensed version of his main political tenets, listed in a long and important 2021 speech, which I luckily remember to a sufficient degree. His smile widens. He thanks me for putting in the effort.

