Introduction

The desire for the "core" leader has been deeply embedded in the ruling philosophy of the CCP, a crucial factor for the party leadership to ensure effective discipline and control over party members, containment of corruption, a push for political and social programs, a guarantee of unity and stability, and promotion of economic prosperity. As the role of the "core" leader and his interactions with other ruling elite are particularly important in understanding Chinese politics, this book attempts to focus on the role of the party chief; how he could become the "core" of the leadership; what mechanism exists in regulating the interaction between the "core" leader and the rest of party elite; what checks and balances, if any, exist between them; what the dynamics or driving forces of the changes from collective leadership to strongman politics and vice versa are; and what the potential implications are for us to understand the current leadership politics and its possible development in the future.

The "core" leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been influenced by the communist all-powerful and charismatic leader and the traditional Chinese ruler combined with Confucian sage king (*shengwang* 圣王) and Legalist enlightened ruler (*mingjun* 明君). Besides his authority in defining or interpreting ideology and functioning as ultimate arbiter of culture including the media, literature, and the arts, educational affairs, programs in science and technology, policies toward the intellectuals, and public health and sports, he has the indisputable power to order the system and plays a pivotal ritual role in modeling society. As the supreme arbiter of what is true or false and having an image of infallibility, he must be effective in either leading successful revolutions or pushing reforms in changing China. However, there is a structural conflict between the all-powerful leader and the bureaucracy of the communist party. While the all-powerful leader enjoys almost complete domination over party bureaucracy, he is limited by the organizational mechanism of the "circular flow of power" institutionalized in *nomenclatural* appointments and biographies. This stubborn autonomy, derived from

a bureaucratic-interest dynamic of its own against the control by the nominally all-powerful leader, tempts the leader to repeat "purge and mass mobilization" in a cyclical manner.[1] Realizing the constraints imposed on leadership by bureaucratic organizations, the "core" leader is able to effectively curb resistance and create the "leading groups" or "committees" to bypass the Politburo and its Standing Committee in order for him to direct the enormous machinery of the CCP rule. Furthermore, the "core" leader is perceived by the ruling elite and the populace as the traditional Chinese sage king with the "Mandate of Heaven" who is supposed to be all-powerful, benevolent, caring, concerned, and all-knowing while symbolizing the unity, power, and security of the state. Like a Legalist enlightened leader, the "core" leader relies on his authority to achieve a structural and a substantive domination of others through his control over the ruling elite and the bureaucracy, and by using political "technique" skillfully to undermine the influence of his political rivals and consolidate power.

OUTLINE OF THE STUDY AND CRITICAL ISSUES

Elite politics in China has been deeply rooted in Chinese communist ideology and practice and the traditional Chinese culture and history, especially imperial legacy, which have shaped the behavior of the party's high-ranking leaders. Traditional political ideas highly regarded the vital role of the emperor or the paramount leader as the "Son of Heaven," the one who bore the mantle in succeeding Heaven's decree to govern the country. Chinese tradition, from its fusion of moral and political systems to the social emphases on family hierarchy in all levels of Chinese life, remains a constant factor in determining how contemporary China has been shaped culturally, philosophically, sociologically, intellectually, and economically and has exerted profound influence on today's Chinese politics as well as the CCP's high-ranking leaders.

A formal party-state apparatus based on a hierarchical and centralized party is in theory run by a disciplined and ideology-equipped vanguard. Compared with traditional authoritarian regimes in which there was a limited governmental power into society and its programs, the party-state of the PRC relies on communist ideology, although it has been modified significantly and constantly over time, as the legitimate source of the CCP's rule. The combined function of the party and the state, with the denial of any moral and spiritual authority independent of official ideological doctrine, reinforces the domination and control over Chinese society. In the post-Mao era, the party-state has been significantly transformed by removing the CCP from economic control over organizations, creating democratic elections in grassroots, and allowing managers and leaders of private enterprises into the party ranks.

[1] John F. Padgett, "The Politics of Communist Economic Reform: Soviet Union and China," in *The Emergence of Organization and Markets*, John Padgett and Walter Powell (eds.), p. 277.

China's pursuit of modernization and openness to the world has brought about some significant changes: its economy and society have become more complex, with greater functional specialization and social differentiation creating a richer diversity of interests.

The system and structure in Chinese elite politics constrain the Chinese communist leadership politics: gerontocracy and mentor politics, political meritocracy, intra-party factionalism, and the enduring tendency toward the "core" leadership. The selections of the party officials are based on the compromises of a group of powerful, influential, and richly experienced senior and incumbent high-ranking leaders rather than equal input and elections. However, the transformations of the leadership positions based on negotiation, bargaining, compromise, and consensus of the powerful factions and the influential retired and incumbent leaders do not guarantee the transfers of power in accordance to positions as it does in Western democracy but rather the "opportunities" awarded to the new generation leaders to "work" for establishing his legitimacy and gaining "real" power. Hence, a prominent feature and consistent tradition of the qualification for the "core" in the CCP leadership is that the "core" is not appointed but rather earned.

The idea of the "core" leader is influenced not only by traditional political thought in which the emperor must be on the central stage of the state and in a crucial and decisive role with indisputable power in elite politics, but also by the communist ideas and practice in which the party's monopoly on the exercise of political power and the political paramountcy of its top leaders are the central features of communist regimes. The "core" of party leadership is not only a political leader whose power cannot be shared but also a symbol of national unity, solidarity, prosperity, and harmony. For a party chief, the criteria required to become the "core" include accomplishments in work performance, prestige and charisma in the party leadership, rich experience in civilian and military careers, a profound *guanxi* network among the party elite, and skillful political "technique" (in Legalist sense) to rally support from the party elite, defeat open and potential political rivals, and pursue domination in the party leadership. Due to the lack of the institutionalized rules that grant real authority to and check the power of a party general secretary, real power relies greatly on personal ties, factional alignments, and individual skills. Power is acquired and maintained based on Machiavellian strategies by a combination of force, prudence, and Legalist methods that control the bureaucracy and officialdom and protect the leader against any political measure including espionage and denunciation.

A general pattern of CCP elite politics that is also structurally constrained is the cyclical changes from collective leadership to strongman politics and vice versa. Given the strong personal nature of CCP elite politics and the weak institutionalization of the party and the state's organizations and political structures, political practice – and the primary mechanism for collaboration at the top level, the cycle from collective leadership to strongman politics and

vice versa – and elite politics tends to lean, albeit slowly, toward two extremes. The two extremes are caused by either an incoherent collective leadership or an arbitrary strongman. The incoherent leadership led by a weak general secretary would be dominated by intra-party factions and vested interest groups and would be powerless in commanding a disobedient PLA and cracking down on the rampant corruption committed by the party and government officials. If strongman politics develops toward one-man arbitrary rule that undermines inner-party democracy and causes disunity within the party, it would eventually ruin the party – as with an extreme case of the Cultural Revolution in which the party apparatus was thoroughly disrupted and the CCP faced imminent collapse. The two extremes would eventually trigger the crisis of the party's survival and become the cause for the cyclical changes from collective leadership to strongman politics and vice versa.

Despite the growing pluralism of Chinese society and increased transparency of the government decision-making process in the post-Mao era, the limitations of institutionalization have become evident for the process of leadership succession. There has been no institutionalization in regulating the competition for power and there has been no clear rule in choosing a "core-in-waiting." Political institutionalization in China had further showed some weaknesses after decades of collective leadership prior to the rise of Xi Jinping. Although the collective and depersonalized leadership style based on growing institutionalization had contributed to China's economic success, the CCP faced tremendous challenges when the party chose its fifth-generation leaders: a growing crisis of faith in communist ideology, the party's failure in disciplining its members and containing corruption, a prolonged slowdown of China's economy, the widening gulf between rich and poor, the increasing unrest, and moral degradation of society.

As the hiking crises would ultimately undermine the legitimacy of the CCP, the rise of a strong leader becomes the only option (if the CCP rejected democracy and disallowed the opposition parties to compete for office) on which the system relies to ensure the survival of the party. The party leadership is forced to choose a strong leader who is able of strengthening the authority of the party, reestablishing the faith of the people in the CCP, reinforcing the discipline, imposing severe punishment against corruption, controlling the army, and pushing the needed political and economic reform. Hence, the sudden rise of Xi Jinping was a joint effort of the incumbent and retired party elite and the princelings to respond to the weak and incapable post-Deng leadership with the weak, ill-informed party chiefs and the fragmented decision-making organs, such as the Politburo Standing Committee and the Politburo. When the survival of the regime becomes the priority at the time when the CCP is headed by a weak leader, there is always a strong sentiment among the party leadership to rebuild the authority and power of the party chief to strengthen the discipline, unity, and party organizations.

The desire for the "core" of leadership has been deeply embedded in the ruling philosophy of the CCP, a crucial factor for the party leadership to ensure effective discipline and control over party members, containment of corruption, a push for political and social programs, a guarantee of unity and stability, and promotion of economic prosperity. Because of the weak institutionalization of the Chinese political system and a still strong tendency toward personal rule, the system favors a strong and powerful paramount leader who is able to reinforce party discipline, make assertive decisions, accelerate China's political and economic reforms, control the military, and enhance the cohesion of the party leadership. Mao and Deng earned the titles of "core" leaders due to their excellent political skills, legendary political and military careers, charisma, and profound *guanxi* networks within the party elite, their unique personal stature based on revolutionary records and political vision, and their enormous, almost unchallengeable, personal power. However, the post-Deng leaders are unable, at least adequately, to demonstrate the key character traits as the "core" leaders like their predecessors and have to face many more challenges in establishing themselves as the "core" of the party leadership in an environment where China becomes more open, transparent, politically pluralistic, and vulnerable to outside influence.

Although the system desires a paramount leader with strong institutional and personalistic authority that facilitates his role as the "core," not all party general secretaries appointed could become the "core." Thus, the system likely has to tolerate a period of time without the "core" when the party is headed by a party chief with limited ability and weak influence. The general approach in the party leadership when the party deals with a weak party chief is to establish a set of norms and promote the limited institutionalization to govern relations among the party elite. Thus, the collective leadership is *de facto* a temporary mechanism for the CCP leadership to compete for the status as the "core" when the appointed party chief has not developed himself into the paramount leader yet or a paramount leader is currently not available.

There is a self-adjustable mechanism between the party chief and his associates in terms of power distributions and political influence. This self-adjustable and self-regulating mechanism mainly comes from the changing perceptions of the political actors and the changing degrees of the party elite's confidence in the "core" leader, a dynamic of the elite politics that motivates the ruling elite to take political action. When the party is led by a visionary, capable, and talented party chief who is able to create an image as a sage ruler with virtues, wisdom, justice, courage, and equanimity, and is skillful at using deceit, cunning, manipulation, and self-serving tactics to achieve political ends, his associates will likely comply with his command and support his leadership. However, if the party is ruled by a party chief who makes big mistakes and causes the crisis of the party's survival due to his arbitrary rule, such as he only uses his trusted followers in the key party organizations and is surrounded by flatterers and he refuses to listen criticism and suppresses dissenting voices, his

associates would organize to undermine his power and share the responsibilities with him if he is not replaced.

If the party chief is politically weak and less capable of forcing the party elite to comply with his institutional authority and establishing his personalistic power, he would have to share his power with other members of the party leadership and his power would be gradually encroached upon by his associates or intra-factions. The associates of the party chief would pursue more power and take more responsibilities from the party chief if the decisions made by the party chief are proved unwise, especially if they cause severe damages for the party. As a result, a weak party chief would automatically open a window for other party leaders to compete for more political power and influence and thus fall into the pool for the "core" of the leadership in the future.

The self-adjustable and self-adaptable mechanism works according to a system with or without the "core" leader, which implies a benign competition within the party elite. This also implies not only that selection of the "core" leader is deeply influenced by the principle of meritocracy but also emphasises a pragmatic approach that measures the Mandate of Heaven through its outcome. The criteria for winning the competition require not only one's competence but also the ability to gain a consensual support of the major factions in the party leadership and the powerful and influential senior veteran leaders. The legitimacy and real power of the party chief, and the condition to become the "core" of party leadership, depend on not only his impressive experiences in party and army organizations but also on continual competence in carrying out the party's programs, strengthening the solidarity and cohesion of the party leadership, skillfully containing the intra-party strife and conflict, effectively controlling the military, and successfully winning public support.

THEORY, METHODOLOGY, AND DYNAMICS OF CHINESE ELITE POLITICS

In Chinese politics, the very concepts of "power" and "authority" do not apply in the same way that they do in the West. In Chinese political thought dominated by Confucianism, power refers to moral virtue (*de* 德); authority has nothing to do with chains of command but rather the ability to provide stability, unity, prosperity, and protection to the ruled with the result justified according to the extent that it does so. Instead of relying on political institutions and the mechanism of checks and balances against the abuse of power, Confucianism put its emphasis on a group of committed scholar-officials led by a sage ruler with the Mandate of Heaven who not only has the indisputable power to control the system while playing a pivotal ritual role in modeling society but also is the ultimate arbiter of culture including the media, literature and the arts, educational affairs, programs in science and technology, policies

toward the intellectuals, and public health and sports.[2] Confucius urged the scholar-officials wholeheartedly to assist, support, and even admonish the sage ruler (if the sage ruler makes the unwise decisions) in order for him to follow the Way or *dao* and achieve a benevolent government through his role as a moral example, a model defined by Confucius as "all stars twinkle around the moon" (众星捧月).

Confucius viewed the sage ruler as the Son of Heaven who acted on behalf of Heaven to maintain order in society while serving as a moral creature whose right conduct harmonized with the unseen forces of nature. The vital role of sage ruler in achieving a benevolent government was also highly regarded by both Mencius and Xunzi, two of three founders of classical Confucianism. While Mencius emphasized the importance of the virtuosity and talents of the sage ruler in influencing the ruling elite and the population, Xunzi advocated the indisputable power of the sage ruler in creating ideology, establishing rituals, and giving orders to society because only a sage ruler "knows Heaven" and "adapts the law of Heaven and makes use of it."[3] The sage ruler's role as the Son of Heaven has always been vital, and the "core" of the political leadership received the Mandate of Heaven to maintain order and peace throughout the "universe under Heaven" while also being obligated to offer appropriate, timely sacrifices to the various deities and accurately reading and reacting to heavenly portents to ensure the well-being of the people. Additionally, Confucianism urges the scholar-officials to unify around the sage ruler and support his rule through their participation in pursuing a benevolent government.

Compared with Confucianism, Legalism has favored a ruler-centered autocratic polity and views government as an apparatus to serve the interests of the ruler.[4] Legalism has agreed with Confucianism that the system must have the "core" of political leadership who could influence and transform the people and help them follow the Way, and who could provide a stable and enduring government that ensures and maintains national prosperity. While Confucianism has set up ritual structure and moral values, such as filial piety, loyalty, righteousness, sincerity, rectification of names, and so forth, to ensure that the ruling elite under the "core" of leadership follows the Way, Legalism has asserted that the regime's central pursuit is to ensure, maintain, and enhance the ruler's absolute power and authority and an ideal enlightened ruler must be a skillful manipulator and successful politician who could use personal authority, "technique," and laws effectively to control the bureaucracy and statecraft. Confucian values and Legalist traditions have remained powerful influences on contemporary Chinese political leaders and the ruling elite mainly through not only official promotions (e.g., education systems, civil service

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[2] Xuezhi Guo, *The Ideal Chinese Political Leader: A Historical and Cultural Perspective*, p. 32.

[3] *Xunzi*, "Tian lun," in *Xunzi jijie* [Collections of explanations on Xunzi], Wang Xianqian (ed.), p. 317.

[4] Guo, *The Ideal Chinese Political Leader*, p. 141.

examinations, and official ideology) but also folk culture and historical literature. Chinese political culture, as Lowell Barrington points out, "continues to reflect the values of Confucianism as well as the often complementary values stressed by the Communist government."[5]

The idea of the "core" of political leadership has been deeply embedded in both Confucianism and Legalism and has played a central role in Chinese political theories and thought based on the legalization of Confucianism during the practice of imperial dynasties and the contemporary nationalist and communist regimes since Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BC) pushed the doctrine of Confucianism into a position of orthodox ideology in the Han Dynasty. The triumph of Confucianism as the official ideology was certainly at the price of tolerating some Legalist practices in political rule. More importantly, the "core" of leadership has dominated CCP elite politics throughout CCP history except during the period of leadership successions where the party leadership faced crises or had the difficulty finding the appropriate candidates for the "core" of party leadership.

The basic ideas and approaches of Chinese political thought that have evolved slowly over centuries continually carry forward powerful legacies not only in influencing the ruling philosophy and practice but also in shaping the bureaucratic structures of the regime. The cultural logic of political legitimacy in China's ruling elite rests on the normative idea that the top leader as the "core" of the leadership has the same relationships to the ruling elite that an emperor did to his ministers. Considering the weak institutionalization and lack of concrete rules defining the ruler's authority, the power of the ruler has depended predominantly not only on the personal ability to achieve the nation's stability and prosperity and to establish his prestige and moral influence but also on his political skills or "technique" to control officialdom and manipulate the power dynamics among the ruling elite. Competition for political power in the ruling elite is justifiable if the top leader's qualifications and personal ability, promotion of prosperity, and effectiveness at controlling the bureaucracy are called into question. This normative idea ultimately derives from a pervasive, yet largely unarticulated, conceptual understanding of political legitimacy that is transferable based on the principle of meritocracy. Although moral matrices are present in all political systems, and they change across both time and space, the moral obligations of the Chinese ruling elite in supporting a capable ruler and checking and dethroning a disqualified ruler form a culturally rooted template against which people come to understand political legitimacy, institutions, ideas, policies, and procedures. The Confucian emphasis on the inseparability of morality on the one hand and politics on the other shapes how the parameters of the political universe of the ruling elite are established, how the elite define key political concepts, and how they comprehend and act on alternative notions of political causality.

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[5] Lowell Barrington, *Comparative Politics: Structures and Choices*, 2nd edition, p. 86.

In a democratic system, the political elite and government officials are assumed to be rational, calculating, and self-interested but constrained by legal rules in which accountability is generally implemented through checks and balances, rule of law, establishing democratic institutions, and independent media. Government officials who believe that elitism is integrated with the moral structure of society in the Chinese political system, however, are selected under the principle of meritocracy and required to be moral models for people who engage in public service as their moral duty. Chinese political theories are concerned more with the role of the government in guaranteeing unity, stability, economic prosperity, and national pride, and the ruling elite's obligations in ruling by moral example and benevolence, rather than the promotion of democracy, individual and property rights, rule of law, and checks and balances.

For a long time, it was more convenient to look at China in terms of the standard assumptions about Communist regimes – perhaps as a variation of the Soviet communist regime – than an in-depth analysis of the profound influence of Chinese political ideas, thoughts, intellectual tradition, and culture as well as the historical evolution of imperial China. The challenge of understanding China, as Lieberthal points out, "is heightened by the fact that its experience does not fit neatly into many of the conceptual models of Western social science."[6] Chinese history, according to Tang Tsou, "is so complex that it provides many hard tests for theories, models and general propositions based on Western cases."[7] Western scholars analyzing contemporary Chinese studies have wondered about the unique complementary nature of formal and informal politics in the Chinese political system. Many of them have been puzzled by how China had changed over the period of dramatic transformation from Mao's era into the "reform and opening up" period, a fascinating but illusive era. Similarly, many China experts are wondering why the CCP has suddenly turned toward Mao-style leadership with Xi's recentralization of power after decades of collective leadership that was somewhat institutionalized. A comprehensive understanding of the CCP elite politics must take full account of these underlying historical, institutional, and cultural forces as well as their dynamics and implications.[8]

China's learning from and adoption of Western ideas, including radical intellectual movements such as westernization and the adoption of Marxism and Leninism, were mainly triggered by its humiliation by the West, which started with the Opium War in the 1860s. However, the ideological foundation for all learning and adoption of Western ideas and thoughts has been based on

[6] Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform*, 2nd edition, p. xvii.
[7] Tang Tsou, "Chinese Politics at the Top: Factionalism or Informal Politics? Balance-of-Power Politics or a Game to Win All?" in *The Nature of Chinese Politics: From Mao to Jiang*, Jonathan Unger (ed.), p. 159.
[8] Lieberthal, *Governing China*, p. xviii.

the principle of "upholding Chinese essence while introducing and applying Western means." While China sinicized communism when it adopted it, China's westernization has been a selective westernization in which technology is vigorously adopted, but democracy is kept firmly at arm's length.[9] Chinese reformers have firmly persevered in Chinese culture when pursuing economic reform that has been defined as "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Xi Jinping's supposed pragmatism and penchant for economic reform without political liberalization has elicited comparisons to Deng Xiaoping, a founding father of China's economic modernization.[10] There has been a general consensus among scholars that both the theory and practice of the CCP has been influenced not only by communism but also by traditional Chinese political thought and its enduring cultural tradition. The imperial tradition, as Lieberthal points out, "nurtured the idea of basing the state system on ideological commitment, strong personal leadership at the apex, and impressive nationwide governing bureaucracies."[11] While there has been a rich scholarly research on the influence of communist ideology on the CCP since the PRC was established in 1949, the investigation on the influence of traditional political thought on contemporary Chinese politics – its political philosophy, operating principle, and concept of legitimacy – remains limited. More importantly, it makes particular sense here to further our understanding of traditional political thought as communist ideology has been gradually given up in China. Since Deng Xiaoping launched economic reform in 1978, traditional culture, especially Confucianism, has been experiencing a steady revival in politics and society. After Xi Jinping took over the CCP leadership, Confucianism and some Legalist political ideas have been publicly referred to as intellectual, ethical, and cultural sources for China's ruling philosophy and Xi has been working hard to select the useful traditional political ideas to apply them within the CCP's ruling tenet considering that China and the world have changed over the past century to the point that traditional Confucianism no longer speaks effectively to the new social and political environment.

Research on the "core" of Chinese political leadership is an important breakpoint for understanding Chinese politics. There is an embedded mechanism related to the relationships between the party chief and the rest of the ruling elite and their respective roles that dictate the power dynamic within elite politics. The power and authority of the party chief rely on not only his institutional positions awarded by the powerful and influential incumbent and retired party leaders but also his individual abilities in leading the elite and the bureaucracy. He may be the most dominating political strongman with

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[9] David Askew, "Sport and Politics: The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games," in *The European Union and China: Interests and Dilemmas*, Georg Wessala et al. (eds.), p. 110.
[10] Kristian McGuire, "Xi Is Leading China Away from Democracy," in *Newsweek*, March 6, 2015, www.newsweek.com/xi-leading-china-away-democracy-312011 (accessed on August 4, 2017).
[11] Lieberthal, *Governing China*, p. 4.