

By Invitation

# Xi and the lessons from China's past

Why did Xi drop term limits for the presidency? Look to his keen sense of history and the upheavals that rocked China at critical junctures.



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For *The Straits Times*

The announcement that President Xi Jinping will not be limited to two terms and could be China's leader for life has raised many concerns worldwide and led to numerous analyses of its significance.

The most common refrain is that this might have benefits in the short term but would make the longer-term prospects of stable development more uncertain.

What this debate misses is that it is President Xi's deep interest in connected histories that guides the thinking behind the decision to modify Deng Xiaoping's two-term policy.

When Mr Xi came to power as head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, he reminded its members of the surprising failures of the Soviet Communist Party and asked his colleagues to reflect carefully on what the CCP must do if it is to survive.

He followed soon after with a call to end the tendency to disconnect Deng's period of reforms from the decades of Mao Zedong's disastrous rule and, before that, from China's travails of the 20th century.

He went on to speak of the China Dream, with its call for national rejuvenation and reform, and linked that with earlier periods of Chinese history and the resilience of China's ancient civilisation.

These exhortations did not figure in the headlines for long because they were totally overshadowed by the unrelenting campaign against corruption that enabled him to remove one by one some of the most senior members of the CCP who had profited from the weak and decentralised system that emerged under his predecessor Hu Jintao.

There was also much attention given in the international press to the enormous task of economic restructuring that the regime faced as China's export-oriented economy grew exponentially, especially when Mr Xi seemed unable to offer convincing answers to critics both within and without.

#### STRONG LEADERSHIP

However, it is important to stress that underlying the intense struggle he is leading to control and

save the party is the insistence on balancing the push for progress with lessons from the past.

And getting his colleagues to develop a keener sense of continuity with the many layers of China's long past has been a running theme behind the new policies that he has been projecting.

A strikingly effective example is his choice of the One Belt One Road Initiative to remind the world not only of China's new economic power and the urgent need of poorer countries for infrastructural development, but also of the extended historical connections that had sustained Chinese wealth and power for millennia.

Another example is to play down the megalomaniac policies that followed when Mao seized personal power in the 1960s while highlighting the idealism and cohesiveness within the CCP, during the early period of his leadership that enabled the revolution to succeed in reuniting China. This includes Mao's creative efforts to reinterpret international socialism to fit in with China's distinctive needs even though it is clear to everyone today that his wild ambitions had led him to grave error.

By calling for reassessment, Mr Xi is asking that lessons be

learnt. And these reviews go further back to the beginnings of revolution, after the fall of the Qing dynasty and the imperial system.

For example, the role of Sun Yat-sen when he proclaimed that the Nationalist Party needed a strong leader with supreme power; and when he concluded that the Chinese people should be led by an elite group capable of guiding them to modern transformations; and not least when he turned to Soviet advisers to build a revolutionary army loyal to his party and one that could ensure that the state will always be a dangguo (党国) party state.

The lesson was not that nationalism or, for that matter, any ideology, had failed but because Sun died soon afterwards without a strong successor to carry out his plans and the party was divided into vicious rival groups that could not unite even when faced with Japanese invasion.

The military leader Chiang Kai-shek simply did not have the political skill and vision to inspire or control his party colleagues.

There is common agreement that, in 1937-1945, the country endured its most dangerous years since the Mongol conquest of the 13th century and the Manchu

conquest of the 17th. And that reminder connects the 20th-century upheavals to the two millennia of rises and falls of the dynastic system. This produces a sense of continuity that drives home the point that it was strong leaders that made China's revivals possible. It follows then that a highly centralised system ensures wealth and power and is essential whenever the country rises after a great fall.

#### SUSTAINED LEADERSHIP

Mr Xi also sees connections in China's recent political development with world history, the nationalism that created the Republic, the socialism in one country that inspired Soviet communism, the progress through embracing capitalist methods that Deng brought to China. Altogether, they helped the Chinese recover those parts of their heritage that they hope will make their revolution better than any other.

Mr Xi's success in gathering so much power to the party centre in his brief five-year period as leader is astonishing. He must be aware that such quick gains can plant the seeds of equally swift losses. He has made it clear that his ideas of further progress cannot be realised

in a short period and has called for longer spans of planning that aim for goals to be achieved in 10, 20 or even 30 years from now.

Like it or not, these goals have to be sustained while the world outside is changing fast, not only in political terms but also technologically, sociologically and psychologically.

Having outlined his vision for the future with his China Dream, Mr Xi cannot pretend that all will now follow smoothly. Nor can his colleagues be certain that they can find among themselves the same sense of direction and purpose.

It is therefore doubtful that he found it difficult to persuade them to accept modifications to the fixed term provision that is ultimately artificial and alien to Chinese tradition.

All he has to do is to reaffirm that only a strong party can save China and such a party needs sustained leadership.

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