

# *To Steer China's Future, Xi Is Rewriting Its Past*

A new official summation of Communist Party history is likely to exalt Xi Jinping as a peer of Mao and Deng, fortifying his claim to a new phase in power.



China's leader, Xi Jinping, giving a speech last month in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Credit...Roman Pilipey/EPA, via Shutterstock



By [Chris Buckley](#)

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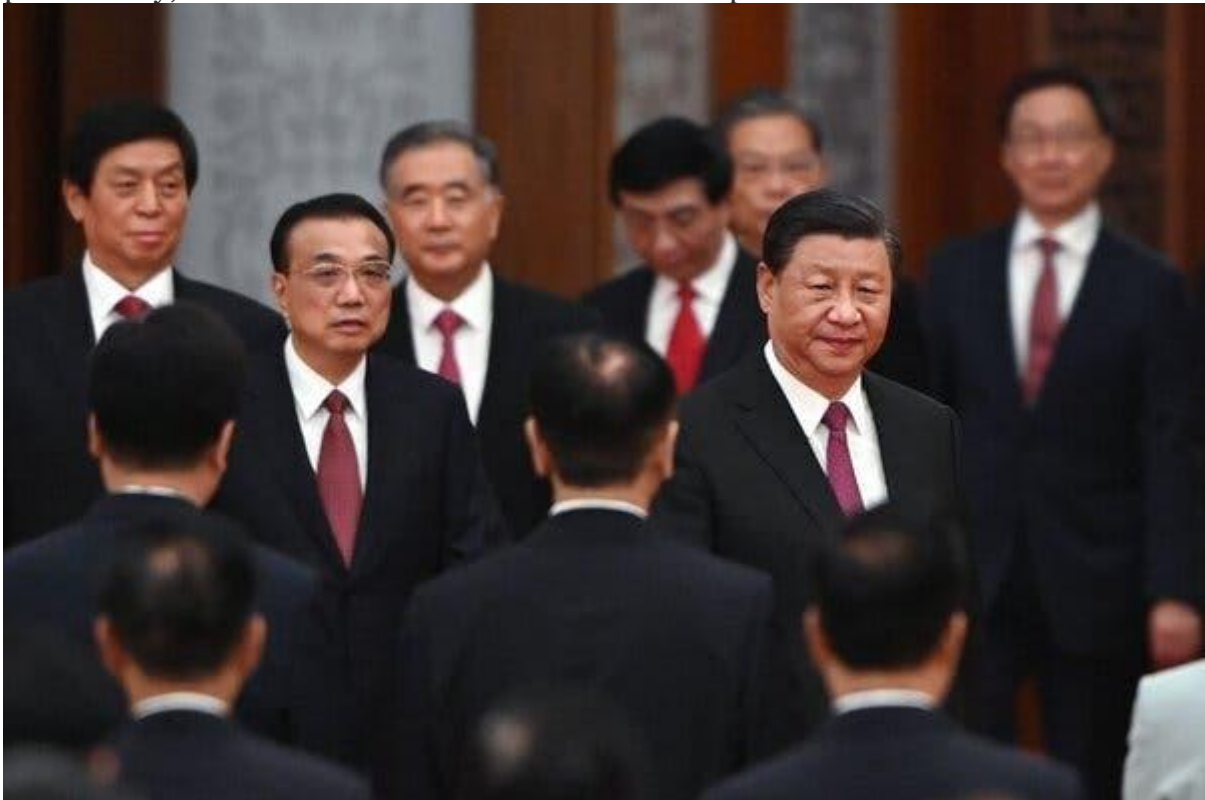
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The [glowing image](#) of China's top leader, Xi Jinping, greets visitors to museum exhibitions celebrating the country's decades of growth. Communist Party biographers have [worshipfully chronicled](#) his rise, though he has given no hint of retiring. The party's newest official history devotes over a quarter of its 531 pages to his nine years in power.

No Chinese leader in recent times has been more fixated than Mr. Xi on history and his place in it, and as he approaches a crucial juncture in his rule, that preoccupation with the past is now central to his political agenda. A high-level [meeting](#) opening in Beijing on Monday will issue a "resolution" [officially reassessing the party's 100-year history](#) that is likely to cement his status as an epoch-making leader alongside Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.

While ostensibly about historical issues, the Central Committee's resolution — practically holy writ for officials — will shape China's politics and society for decades to come. The touchstone document on the party's past, only the third of its kind, is sure to become the focus of an intense indoctrination campaign. It will dictate how the authorities teach China's modern history in textbooks, films, television shows and classrooms. It will embolden censors and police officers [applying sharpened laws](#) against any who mock, or even question, the communist cause and its "martyrs." Even in China, where the party's power is all but absolute, it will remind officials and citizens that Mr. Xi is defining their times, and demanding their loyalty.

"This is about creating a new timescape for China around the Communist Party and Xi in which he is riding the wave of the past towards the future," said [Geremie R. Barmé](#), a historian of China based in New Zealand. "It is not really a resolution about past history, but a resolution about future leadership."



No Chinese leader in recent times has been more fixated than Mr. Xi, right, on history and his place in it. Credit...Greg Baker/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

By exalting [Mr. Xi](#), the decision will fortify his authority before a party congress late next year, at which he is very likely to win another five-year term as leader. The orchestrated acclaim around the history document, which could be published days after the Central Committee meeting ends on Thursday, will help deter any questioning of Mr. Xi's record.

Mr. Xi, 68, is China's most powerful leader in decades, and he has won widespread public support for attacking corruption, reducing poverty and projecting Chinese strength to the world. Still, party insiders seeking to blunt Mr. Xi's dominance before the congress could take aim at the early mishandling of the Covid pandemic or damaging tensions with the United States.

Especially after the resolution, such criticisms may amount to heresy. In the buildup to this week's meeting, articles in People's Daily, the party's main newspaper, [have praised Mr. Xi](#) as the "core" leader defeating the pandemic and other crises.

Commentaries have exalted him as the unyielding leader needed for such perilous times, when China's ascent could be threatened by domestic economic risks or hostility from the United States and other Western powers.

"Xi Jinping is undoubtedly the core figure mastering the tide of history," read an [article from Xinhua](#), the official news agency, about the forthcoming resolution.

The resolution is likely to offer a sweeping account of modern China that will help to justify Mr. Xi's policies by giving them the gravitas of historical destiny.

Image



A mural in Lhasa depicting Mr. Xi and his predecessors, including Mao Zedong, top, and Deng Xiaoping, top right. Credit...Mark Schiefelbein/Associated Press

Mao led the country to stand up against oppression, Deng brought prosperity, and now Mr. Xi is propelling the nation into a new era of national strength, says the stage-by-stage description of modern China's rise that is laid out in party documents and is likely to be enshrined in the resolution.

In the coming years, Mr. Xi's priorities are focused on reducing wealth inequalities through a program of "[common prosperity](#)," lessening China's reliance on imported technology, and continuing to modernize its military to prepare for potential conflict.

Mr. Xi's conception of history offers "an ideological framework which justifies greater and greater levels of party intervention in politics, the economy and foreign policy," said Kevin Rudd, a former Australian prime minister who speaks Chinese and has had long meetings with Mr. Xi.

For Mr. Xi, defending the Chinese Communist Party's revolutionary heritage also appears to be a personal quest. He has repeatedly voiced fears that as China becomes increasingly distant from its revolutionary roots, officials and citizens are at growing risk of losing faith in the party.

"To destroy a country, you must first eradicate its history," [Mr. Xi has said](#), quoting a Confucian scholar from the 19th century.

Mr. Xi's father, Xi Zhongxun, served as a senior official under Mao and Deng, and the [family suffered years of persecution](#) after Mao turned against the elder Mr. Xi. Instead of becoming disillusioned with the revolution like quite a few contemporaries, the younger Mr. Xi remained loyal to the party and has argued that defending its "red" heritage is essential for its survival.

Image



Programs to reduce poverty in rural China have helped to win Mr. Xi widespread public support. Credit...Gilles Sabrié for The New York Times

“He has this visceral notion that as the son of a revolutionary, Xi Zhongxun, that he cannot allow the revolution simply to drift away,” said Mr. Rudd, now president of the [Asia Society](#).

Mr. Xi has also often [cited the Soviet Union](#) as a warning for China, arguing that it collapsed in part because its leaders failed to eradicate “historical nihilism” — critical accounts of purges, political persecution and missteps that corroded faith in the communist cause.

The new resolution will reflect that defensive pride in the party. While the titles of the two previous history resolutions said they were about “problems” or “issues,” Mr. Xi’s will be about the party’s “major achievements and historical experiences,” according to a preparatory meeting [last month](#).

The resolution will present the party’s 100-year history as a story of heroic sacrifice and success, a drumroll of preliminary articles in party media indicates. Traumatic times like famine and purges will fall further into a soft-focus background — acknowledged but not elaborated.

Mr. Xi “sees history as a tool to use against the biggest threats to Chinese Communist Party rule,” said [Joseph Torigian](#), an assistant professor at American University who has studied Mr. Xi and his father. “He’s also someone who sees that competing narratives of history are dangerous.”

Image



Liangjiahe, a Chinese village where Mr. Xi worked for years, has become a site for political pilgrimages. Credit...Bryan Denton for The New York Times

Plenty of Chinese people embrace the party's proud version of its past and credit it with improving their lives. In 2019, there were [1.4 billion visits](#) to revolutionary "red" tour museums and memorials, and Mr. Xi [makes a point](#) of going to such places during his travels. A village where Mr. Xi labored for seven years has become a site for [organized political pilgrimages](#).

"Instruction in revolutionary traditions must start with toddlers," Mr. Xi said in 2016, according to a [recently released compendium](#) of his comments on the theme. "Infuse red genes into the bloodstream and immerse our hearts in them."

In creating a history resolution, Mr. Xi is emulating his two most powerful and officially revered predecessors. Mao oversaw a resolution in 1945 that stamped his authority on the party. Deng oversaw [one in 1981](#) that acknowledged the destruction of Mao's later decades while defending his revered status as the founder of the People's Republic. And both resolutions put a cap on political strife and uncertainty. "They were creating a common framework, a common vision, of past and future among the party elite," said Daniel Leese, a historian at the University of Freiburg in Germany who studies modern China. "If you don't unify the thinking of people in the circles of power about the past, it's very difficult to be on the same page about the future."

Image



A performance in Beijing in June marking the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party's founding. Credit...Noel Celis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Throughout this year, Chinese officials have already been undergoing an indoctrination program in Mr. Xi's views about history. And the main texts in the

campaign appear to be a preview of the forthcoming decision, especially the new [531-page “brief” history](#) of the party.

That history celebrates at length Mr. Xi’s successes in reducing corruption, cutting poverty and advancing China’s technological capabilities. His response to the Covid pandemic, which began in China in late 2019, showed “acute insight and resolute decision-making,” it says.

The new resolution is likely to praise both Mao and Deng while indicating that only Mr. Xi has the answers for China’s new era of rising power, said [Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik](#), a retired professor at the University of Vienna who studies the party’s use of history.

“He is like a sponge that can take all the positive things from the past — what he thinks is positive about Mao and Deng — and he can bring them all together,” she said of the party’s depiction of Mr. Xi. In that telling, she said, “he is China’s own end of history. He has reached a level that cannot be surpassed.”