

Imaginaries of historical dynamics and the legitimation of power

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Imaginaries of historical dynamics and the legitimization of power

The role of temporality in Xi Jinping's thought

Thomas Huygens

This paper examines the conceptual uses of imaginary temporality by Xi Jinping's thought to legitimise the CCP's actions and positions. The methodology applies Castoriadis' theory of the social imaginary for CDA through RAF triangulation of an official propaganda manual. The results reveal a view of History as a central shapeless and external concept, integrating a coherent heteronomous model that ensures CCP supremacy over society, justifying the maintenance of state capitalism, and reducing the proletariat to executors of a predefined historical mission.

Keywords: *Political Imaginary, Xi Jinping's Thought, CCP, Propaganda, Discourse Analysis, Cornelius Castoriadis, Historical Narratives*

Introduction

Since its establishment in 1949, following the Soviet model, the Chinese communist regime has adopted an ideology specific to each party leader, exemplified by the so-called "Mao Zedong Thought", the "Deng Xiaoping Theory", Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" concept, Hu Jintao's "Scientific Development" concept, and nowadays the "Xi Jinping Thought". However, the importance of this ideology in the political model varied over time. Since he came to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has strengthened the ideology's role in Chinese governance and the regime's quest for legitimacy (Holbig, 2009; Brown, 2012; Sorace, 2017; Lin, 2017; Guo, 2019; Cheung & Tsang, 2024; Rudd, 2025). This has been achieved primarily through an increased centralisation of power and the strategic use of historical narratives to legitimise the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s political actions. However, as Zhao Dingxin (2001, 219) argues, for the case of Tian'anmen protests, there are often many differences in understanding the role of ideology in state legitimacy among social groups.

Taking into account Schoon's dyad of legitimization (2022), which emphasizes the role of expectations, assent and conformity within the relationship between an object and its audience, this paper seeks to analyse the ideological structuring of Xi Jinping's thought through the lens of imaginary temporality (Castoriadis, 1975, 311–318), based on a propaganda manual published collaboratively by two publishing houses under the guidance of the Chinese Central Propaganda Department.

This paper will not focus on how this ideological structuring is apprehended, reappropriated or accepted by the different social groups, but rather focus on the content produced and addressed to the CCP members and some strata of the population. This could contribute to revealing what the propaganda apparatus considers legitimate and its expectations regarding the norms and finalities to be “instituted” within Chinese society and the Chinese Communist Party.

While there exists a considerable body of literature on the CCP’s current ideology, and its links with legitimisation processes, much of it tends to focus either on strategic, theoretical and geopolitical interpretations of Xi Jinping’s thought (Kingsley, 2014; Lin, 2017; Lams, 2018; Cheung & Tsang, 2024; Rudd, 2025), or on the socio-political functions of “ideology” and propaganda in the Chinese political arena (Zheng, 2010; Cao, 2014; Cabestan, 2014; Miranda, 2016; Lams, 2018; Pieke, 2009, 2020; Xu & Zhao, 2023; Cheung & Tsang, 2024).

Despite this body of work on Xi Jinping’s ideology, few studies have examined the internal articulation of concepts within the phenomenon of the instrumentalisation of temporality and the institution of the CCP’s official ideology to legitimise the actions of the Chinese regime.

Following the initial investigations conducted by Lams (2018), the current research seeks to fill these gaps, contributing to the existing knowledge by providing a clearer understanding of the logical articulation between different concepts and clarifying this dimension of official ideology, which has not been fully explored to date. Finally, our approach draws upon the conceptual contributions of the field of studies on the social imaginary, particularly the work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1975; 1986; 1996; 1997), by mobilising the “RAF” triangulation framework (Representation, Affects, Finalities) applied through both qualitative and quantitative approaches, using TXM and LIWC-22 software.

Case study, data and Methodology

This study aims to answer the following research question: How does Xi Jinping’s thought conceptualise its imaginary temporality in the process of legitimising the CCP’s political actions?

Our analysis will focus on the manual “Study outline of Xi Jinping’s thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era” published in June 2019. According to an article published on the 9th of June 2019 in the state-owned newspaper Xinhua:

“(the book) gives a comprehensive and systematic exposition of Xi Jinping Thought (...), helping the general cadres and masses to understand better the Thought’s basic spirit, content and requirements, and to use it more consciously in arming their minds, guiding their

practice and promoting their work. The Outline is rich in content, neatly structured, faithful to the original text” (Xinhua, 09/06/2019)

This article comes on the heels of an internal circular issued by the CCP Central Committee (CCPCC) and relayed by the various CCP authorities, urging party organisations to mobilise their members to study the established precepts and the “original writings” in Chinese Mandarin.

For this study, the software TXM and LIWC-22 are used. While TXM allows frequency, co-occurrence, and concordance analysis, LIWC-22 processes text by recognising words and word groups from a set of predefined linguistic, psychological, and social categories. In this study, the Chinese dictionary (v1.5) was applied.

To compile the corpus for TXM/LIWC-22, the document was extracted from its public publication by the University of Science and Technology of China (USTC), cross-checked with the print edition to ensure consistency: <https://hzdt.ustc.edu.cn/2020/0903/c22391a448070/page.htm> (consulted on 08/04/2025). Then, the corpus was segmented using Jieba, tagged into segments following the verse-structured partitions of the book, and imported.

In the study of Chinese Mandarin, text segmentation for lexicometric analysis effectively isolates the various ideas exemplified by single or compound sinograms. Using a funnel method from the discourse’s main characteristics to the frequency, co-occurrences, concordances and full-text analysis, we begin by grasping the central axes of the corpus, the related ideas linked to our central theme, before examining the text to heighten our vigilance when reading the whole corpus. Finally, for the psychometric analysis, we will focus on the following software categories: time, focuspast, focuspresent, and focusfuture, thus counting the propensity of words or groups of words pre-categorised as related to time, the past, present and future.

For the results’ discussion, the RAF triangulation will be framed in Fig. 1. As part of this critical discourse analysis of an instituted imaginary, this study will use the analytical grid described by Reisigl (2018) to guide the critical study of representations, presented in Fig. 2. We will therefore pay attention to the nominations and predications linked to temporal, phenomenal, and historical representation within the text, the perspectivization of these representations, and the intratextual logics and connections that comprise the argument, using the operator schemas established by Castoriadis (1975) (Fig. 3). We will then discuss the results by reflecting on the social-historical context of the period surrounding the institution of this imaginary.

	Specific disciplines	Analysis method and interpretation grid	Tools
Representations	Lexicometry	Frequency analysis Cooccurrence Analysis of discourse strategy: naming, predication, argumentation (using Castoriadian operator schemes)	TXM
Affects	Psychometry	Analysis of the prevalence of categorised words	LIWC-22
Finalities	Content Analysis	Concordance analysis Text reading Comparison with Literature Documentary exploration	TXM Corpus

Fig. 1: RAF triangulation method through TXM and LIWC-22

Question for addressing discourse characteristics	Discourse strategy	Objectives
How are people, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions named or linguistically evoked in discourse?	Naming	Discursive construction of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions
What characteristics are attributed to the people, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions evoked in the discourse?	Predication	Discursive characterisation of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions
What arguments are used in the discourse?	Argumentation	To study the validity of the enunciation of certain "truths" or "normative righteousness"
From what perspective are these appointments, characterisations and arguments expressed?	Perspectivisation	Positioning the speaker's point of view

Fig. 2: Reisigl (2018) analytical grid for Discursive Strategies in Discourse-Historical Analysis

Operator scheme	Function	Set theory coding example
Separation/discretion scheme	Makes explicit the disunity of determination. <i>Example: The element A is strictly different from the element B.</i>	$A \neq B$
Reunion scheme	Makes explicit the union of determination. <i>Example: The element A is strictly equal to the element B.</i>	$A = B$
Decomposition scheme	Expresses the fact that discrete elements can be found in a set. In particular, this scheme enables the principle of designation, allowing for the attribution of common properties and predicates. <i>Example: The element A belongs to the C set.</i>	$A \in C$
Iteration scheme	Introduces a hierarchy of sets, in other words, creates "sets of sets". <i>Example: The C set belongs to the D set.</i>	$C \subseteq D$
Coappearance scheme	Corresponds to the linking or relating of a representation to other meaningful representations. <i>Example: The representation R belongs to S_n significations.</i>	$R \subseteq S_n$
Scheme of value (worth as...)	Expresses a relation of "worthing" as insofar as it is positioned or instituted as a bearing significance within the social-historic dimension. <i>Example: The representation R worth as this essence E.</i>	$R \rightarrow E$
Scheme of value (worth to...)	Expresses a relation of "worthing" for insofar as a mean toward an end within determinate context of action. <i>Example: The representation R worth to this use U.</i>	$R \rightarrow U$

Fig. 3: Operator schemes of the "Representing-Saying dimension" (Leg-ein), interpreted through a "sets-identity" logic (Castoriadis, 1975, pp. 327–377)

Results

The institution and role of the heteronomous history in the CCP's legitimisation

Our analysis shows that the historical conception is central to Xi Jinping's ideology, where each actor and element has a precise role in the evolution of time. History is long, gradual, made up of stages and cardinal points. What we will discuss here is summarised in Fig. 4, Fig. 5 and Fig. 6. The text-tag is quoted in brackets and can be retraced in Fig. 7 and the psychometrics outcomes in Fig. 8.

The central reasoning (Fig. 4) is based on the principle that "the People create History" (5; 35; 190), having the role of "judge" or "supreme arbiter" who "chose" the Communist Party (30; 39; 59), the latter's presence in power representing, from this point of view, the "will of the people". Simultaneously with this "popular choice", a kind of state of affairs resulting from the historical dynamic, the CCP was given a "historical mission" by History: that of achieving the national "renaissance", which by definition would be the "people's aspiration" (10; 43).

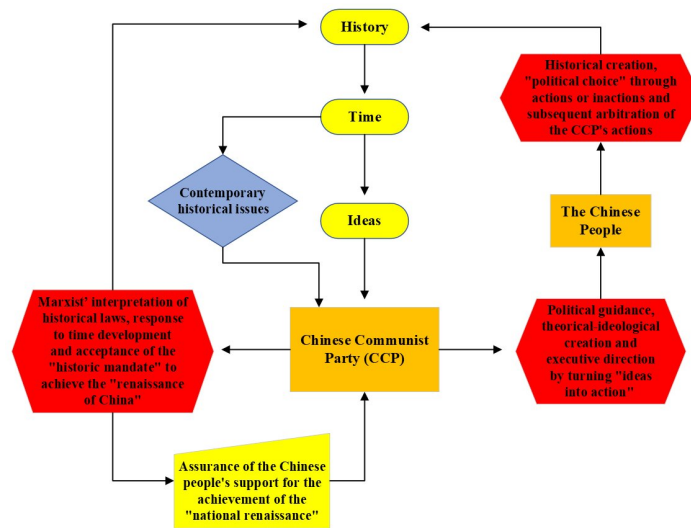


Fig. 4: Diagram of the process of historical creation and interpretation in Xi Jinping's thought

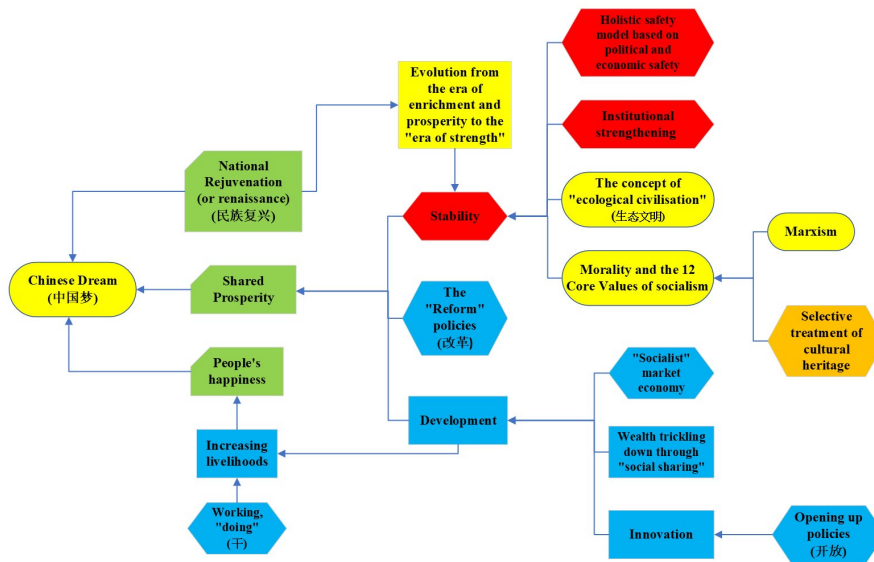


Fig. 5: Synthetic diagram of the "Chinese Dream" and the relationship between its components

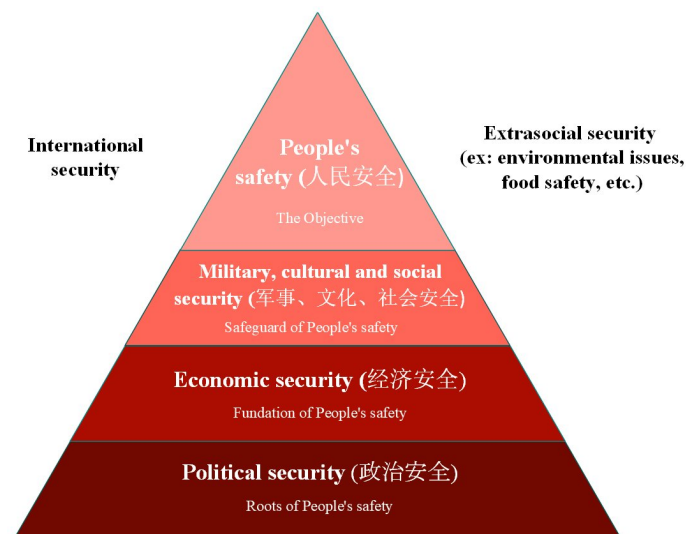


Fig. 6: Security hierarchy within Xi Jinping's thought

*text	Original Version	Translation
2	« 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想，正是在中华民族迎来从站起来、富起来到强起来的伟大飞跃中创立并不断丰富发展的 »	<i>"Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era was created and constantly enriched and developed as the Chinese nation made the great leap from standing up, becoming rich to becoming strong"</i>
5	« 这一思想(...)彰显了人民是历史的创造者(...)的唯物史观 »	<i>"This idea (...) highlights the fact that the people are the creators of history (...) of materialist history"</i>
8	« 一个国家、一个民族要振兴，就必须在历史前进的逻辑中前进、在时代发展的潮流中发展 »	<i>"If a country or a nation is to be revitalised, it must advance in the logic of historical progress and develop in the trend of the times"</i>
10	« 实现中华民族伟大复兴，是中国共产党的历史使命 »	<i>"To achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the historic mission of the Communist Party of China"</i>
30	« 历史和人民选择马克思主义是完全正确的 (...)它并没有结束真理，而是开辟了通向真理的道路 »	<i>"History and the people are absolutely right in choosing Marxism (...) It (Marxism) does not end truth, but opens the way to it"</i>
32	« 时代是思想之母，实践是理论之源(...)新时代孕育新思想，新思想指导新实践 »	<i>"Time is the mother of thought, practice is the source of theory (...) A new era breeds new ideas, and new ideas guide new practice"</i>
35	« 人民是历史的创造者，人民是真正的英雄。(...)只有坚持历史唯物主义这一基本原理，才能把握历史前进的基本规律；只有按历史规律办事，才能无往而不胜 »	<i>"The people are the creators of history and the people are the true heroes. (...) Only by adhering to the basic principle of historical materialism can we grasp the basic laws of historical progress; only by acting in accordance with the laws of history can we be invincible"</i>
37	« 习近平总书记指出：“时代是出卷人，我们是答卷人，人民是阅卷人。”(...)人民是我们党的工作的最高裁决者和最终评判者 »	<i>"General Secretary Xi Jinping said: 'Time asks the questions, we are the ones who answer them, and the people are the corrector. (...) The people are the supreme adjudicator and final judge of our Party's work'"</i>
43	« 谁能够承担起实现中华民族伟大复兴的历史使命，谁就能赢得中国人民的衷心拥护 »	<i>"Whoever is able to undertake the historic mission of achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will win the heartfelt support of the Chinese people"</i>
44	« 实现中华民族伟大复兴，必须合乎时代潮流 »	<i>"To achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, it is necessary to keep pace with the trend of the times"</i>
46	« 实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦，就是要实现国家富强、民族振兴、人民幸福 ».	<i>"To realise the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is to realise the wealth and strength of the country, the national revitalisation and the happiness of the people".</i>
47	« 中国梦就是要让每个人获得发展自我和奉献社会的机会，共同享有人生出彩的机会，共同享有梦想成真的机会，共同享有同祖国和时代一起成长与进步的机会。 »	<i>"The Chinese dream is to give everyone the opportunity to develop themselves and contribute to society, to share the opportunity to excel in life, make their dreams come true, and to grow up and progress together with the motherland and the Times."</i>
59	« 历史和人民选择中国共产党领导中华民族伟大复兴的事业是正确的 »	<i>"History and the people are right in choosing the CPC to lead the cause of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"</i>
79	« 当今世界，(...)经济全球化的历史大势不可逆转。融入世界经济是历史大方向 »	<i>"In today's world, (...) The historical trend of economic globalisation is irreversible. Integration into the world economy is the general direction of history"</i>
80	« 想人为切断各国经济的资金流、技术流、产品流、产业流、人员流，(...)，是不可能的，也是不符合历史潮流的 »	<i>"The idea of artificially cutting off the flow of capital, technology, products, industries and people in the economies of various countries, (...) It is impossible to cut off the flow of capital, technology, products, industries and people from the economies of all countries, and it is not in line with the trend of history"</i>
118	« 中华优秀传统文化是中华民族的根本和魂(...)并将其作为治国理政的重要思想文化资源(...) 可以为人们认识和改造世界提供有益启迪，可以为治国理政提供有益启示，也可以为道德建设提供有益启发 »	<i>"Chinese excellent traditional culture is the root and soul of the Chinese nation (...) and as an important ideological and cultural resource for the governance of the country (...) It can provide useful enlightenment for people to understand and transform the world, for the governance of the country, and for the construction of morality"</i>
142	« 维护国家安全是全国各族人民根本利益所在 »	<i>"Maintaining national security is the fundamental interest of the people of all ethnic groups in the country."</i>
144	« 坚持总体国家安全观，必须坚持国家利益至上，以人民安全为宗旨，以政治安全为根本，以经济安全为基础，以军事、文化、社会安全为保障 (...)坚持总体国家安全观，必须坚持国家利益至上 »； « 国家利益至上是国家安全的准则 »	<i>"Adherence to the overall concept of national security must uphold the supremacy of the national interest, with the security of the people as its purpose, political security as its foundation, economic security as its basis, and military, cultural and social security as its safeguards. (...) The supremacy of the national interest is the criterion of national security"</i>
154	« 必须在国家总体战略中兼顾发展和安全，科学统筹经济建设和国防建设，在更广范围、更高层次、更深程度上推进军民融合 »	<i>"It is necessary to strike a balance between development and security in the overall national strategy, scientifically integrate economic construction and national defence construction, and promote civil-military integration on a wider scale, at a higher and deeper level."</i>
156	« 国家强大、民族复兴、两岸统一的历史大势，更是任何人任何势力都无法阻挡的！ »	<i>"The country is strong, the nation is reborn, and the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are in harmony. The historical momentum of a strong country, national rejuvenation, and cross-strait unification is moreover unstoppable by any person or any force!"</i>
163	« 人类生活在同一个地球村里，生活在历史和现实交汇的同一个时空里 »	<i>"Human beings live in the same global village, in the same space and time where history and reality meet"</i>
165	« 一个国家要发展繁荣，必须把握和顺应世界发展大势，反之必然会被历史抛弃 »	<i>"For a country to develop and prosper, it must grasp and respond to the general trend of world development; otherwise, it will certainly be abandoned by history."</i>
190	« 马克思主义哲学深刻揭示了客观世界特别是人类社会一般规律，在当代时代依然有着强大生命力 (...)掌握人民是历史创造者的观点，坚持以人民为中心 »	<i>"Marxist philosophy profoundly reveals the general laws of the objective world, especially the development of human society, and still has a strong vitality in this day and age (...) Grasp the viewpoint that the people are the creators of history, and adhere to the people-centred approach"</i>
194	« 要从历史和现实相贯通、(...)聚焦我国发展和我们党执政面临的重大理论和实践问题，进行深入思考和全面把握。 »	<i>"We should focus on the major theoretical and practical issues facing China's development and the Party's governance from a broad perspective that integrates history and reality, (...) and conduct in-depth thinking and comprehensive grasp."</i>

Fig. 7: Results of concordance analysis labelled by text-tag number in the original version and in the English version

Psychometric Categories	LIWC-22 Code	Index - Original version (simplified Chinese)
Drives	drives	16,68
Affiliation	affiliation	2,68
Achievement	achieve	7,82
Power	Power	6,85
Cognition	Cognition	
Cognitive processes	cogproc	13,97
Insight	insight	3,73
Causation	cause	2,76
Discrepancy	discrep	2,52
Tentative	tentat	1,06
Certainty	certain	3,41
Differentiation	differ	1,47
Affect	affect	7,73
Emotion	emotion	
Positive emotion	posemo	4,68
Negative emotion	negemo	2,18
Anxiety	anx	0,28
Anger	anger	0,45
Sadness	sad	0,14
Swear words	swear	0,07
Social processes	Social	
Social behaviour	social	7,55
Family	family	0,02
Friends	friend	0,17
Female references	female	0,04
Male references	male	0,01
Lifestyle	lifestyle	
Leisure	leisure	0,26
Home	home	0,08
Work	work	10,2
Money	money	1,04
Religion	relig	0,27
Physical	body	0,15
Health	health	0,63
Bio	bio	0,89
Sexual	sexual	0,07
Food	ingest/food	0,08
Death	death	0,07
Motives	/	
Reward	reward	1,86
Risk	risk	1,58
Perception	percept	1,22
Motion	motion	3,99
Space	space	9,37
Visual	see	0,5
Auditory	hear	0,28
Feeling	feel	0,29
Time orientation	/	
Time	time	5,48
Past focus	focuspast	0,17
Present focus	focuspresent	0,89
Future focus	focusfuture	0,61
Conversational	Conversation	
Netspeak	netspeak	0,15
Assent	assent	1,41
Nonfluencies	nonflu	0,24
Fillers	filler	0,9

Fig. 8: Table of results for the psychometric analysis with LIWC-22 and the segmented simplified Chinese corpus

Furthermore, the CCP interprets “historical laws and logic” with the help of Marxism (30; 190), which is seen as a method for understanding the laws of historical development and objective reality. Throughout the textbook, the universe seems to be formed in the encounter between “historical movement” and “objective reality”, in the image of space and time (163; 190; 194). In this context, Time is also described as the “mother of ideas”, which are then put into practice to build the “right theory” (32). From this point onwards, the CCP instituted the “ideas in conscious action of the masses”.

Moreover, by its historical role, the CCP thus takes the lead from the People as a “guide”, placing the masses in a situation of historical struggle, and thus in the position of creator (43). Finally, time is seen as “the one that produces the test” to which the CCP will have to respond and whose relevance to the people’s responses at the time will be judged only in retrospect (37).

The discrimination of the past

At the same time, the document is very explicit about China’s past and traditional culture. Traditional culture is understood as “the root and soul of the nation”, simultaneously providing ideological and cultural resources for the governance of the country, the “moral construction”, the “transformation of the world” and the construction of the identity of Chinese society.

In other words, it enables us to take root amid the world’s cultural turmoil, while progressing in line with the times. The textbook assumes a “discriminatory” treatment of the philosophical and cultural heritage, according to criteria of “recognition or abandonment” (118), again in accordance with the demands of the time.

The Chinese Dream: the economic and geopolitical implications of the “sense of history”

The “sense of history” takes on a prophetic and deterministic logic in the ideological credo. This fatalistic character of the CCP’s presence in power, of “national strength”, of progressive globalisation and the creation of a world history is justified by Destiny. This explains the emergence of the term “Community of Common Destiny”. According to the textbook, Fate and Time remain on China’s side, as it respects and even accompanies the “course of History”, thus

granting it its “invincibility” and ensuring its future reunification with Taiwan (35; 156). Meanwhile, any nation or social group that opposes the “movement of time” will find itself abandoned by History (8; 44; 79; 80; 165).

This historical movement is converging towards a single goal: the Chinese Dream (Fig. 5). This Dream is the relentless pursuit of progress in the areas of revitalisation and national rejuvenation, prosperity (wealth and strength) and People’s happiness (46).

This “national dream” would allow everyone to fulfil themselves, to contribute to society and to “grow up” in tune with the times (47). Achieving the “great rebirth of the Chinese nation” is viewed as an evolution in the era of time, which is also considered the era of strength in the CCP’s historical narrative (2). In line with this idea of continuous progress in the creation of a strong, prosperous and modern country, Chinese modernisation is based on three pillars: development, reform and stability.

However, in this modernisation project towards national renaissance, stability is central to ensure development and the maintenance of the CCP in power. This means giving pride of place to security, while maintaining a balance with the imperatives of development (154). This security is understood within a “holistic” and strategically planned vision of economic development and national survival (142; 144; 148), through a pyramidal hierarchy (Fig. 6).

Discussion

Our discussion occurs in three stages. Firstly, we will explore how history plays a conceptual role in legitimising the actions of the CCP under a highly heteronomous model. Secondly, we consider how this configuration serves the state capitalism system and functions as a strategic tool to address China’s contemporary issues.

Heteronomous history: its conceptual legitimising role and universalisation

Considering our findings, we argue that the system of legitimisation described based on the operator schemes of the “social representing-saying” is a highly heteronomous model with a logic that is part of the “closure of the meaning” (Castoriadis, 1990, p. 146; 1997, p. 22). This “mode of thought” anchors itself in an intrasocial group, which it considers the primary cause of the Ideal. Consequently, it presents a heteronomy that crudely simulates the principle of autonomy. It compels people to recognise and submit to their condition and their own creations through a new form of alienation, the interpretation of which remains foreign to them.

In this way, this ideology also makes it possible to relieve the CCP of responsibility for the failure of an objective, by delegating responsibility to the “executors of the historical task”, thus revealing a central rhetorical contradiction: that of the result of the choice of an executing and supposedly responsible people; and that of the historical fatalism of a detached, overhanging history which, by its determinism, thereby calls into question the idea of popular free will.

In other words, the narrative in the textbook offers the illusion of popular choice, using arguments that reinforce both the de facto legitimacy of the regime in place and a teleological dimension whose ins and outs remain outside the people. In this way, the CCP’s ideology uses “History”, the master of all things, shapeless, abstract and yet very much present, to enclose its universe, excluding all opposition, encompassing the whole of society, and gradually universalising itself to the whole of humanity under a single “imaginary temporality”, through a “Common Destiny for Humanity”.

While we have succeeded in clarifying the conceptual relationships, we would nevertheless like to point out that the use of the “sense of history” as such to justify political ac-

tion by a CCP leader is far from new. Although the use of the term is weak in Maoist writings, it began to take hold from the end of 1979 with Deng Xiaoping’s speech “The democratic parties and the ACFIC are political forces serving socialism”, referring to the “inevitable” attachment of Taiwan to the People’s Republic of China (Deng, 1979). This is a discursive construction that remains within the discursive field of the document analysed with a view to “national reunification”.

Regarding the traditional position of Chinese communist theory concerning History, the structuring presented in the textbook takes up certain notions from the Marxist historiographical tradition in China. For example, the importance of knowing the “stage” at which the country and its development are situated has its origins in research into the “historical causes” that led to the failure of the first united front between the Kuomintang and the CCP at the Shanghai Massacre in 1927, to draw up the “appropriate revolutionary strategy”. The same goes for the early questioning of the Eurocentric Marxist economic schema, favouring a vision in which Chinese particular history, although marked by foreign incursions, at least participates in universal history (Dirlik, 1987). This led to a Sinicization of the concept of the unilinear development of modes of production in the light of “national history”, introducing the idea of a “multilinearity” of this process, so that we now find ourselves in the situation of a particular Chinese history, bringing all other national histories into the general concert of an organised but fragmented universal history.

The “sense of History” mobilised in the service of State Capitalism

We also argue that Xi Jinping’s thought addresses the dislocation of social meanings that arose with the introduction of capitalism during the Reform and Opening period. This led to an identification crisis (Castoriadis, 1996; Meissner, 2006), resulting in social fragmentation, which Xi Jinping’s ideology aims to fulfil.

The Reform transformed “People’s Communes’ work units” into family farms and flexible enterprises, focusing on profit at the expense of worker conditions (Benson, 2012; Fairbank & Goldman, 2019). This competition among urban workers and contractual relationships in rural areas eroded the original meaning of work and diminished the value systems fostered during Maoism. Following privatisation waves in 1991 and 1997, rising unemployment and redundancies ensued, leading to weakened social infrastructure (Fairbank & Goldman, 2019) and loss of community ties (Yang, 2023).

Moreover, the Reform amplified capitalist imaginaries such as market self-regulation and the minimisation of state power during the early era, while reinforcing desires for consumption as a central model for the CCP’s legitimacy. At the end, the expansion of the desire for “mastery” and the unlimited increase in consumption has come to be seen as a simple “end in itself”, gradually becoming a

“general identification model” on which the CCP’s legitimacy is partly based. Lastly, to preserve this economic system, the “sense of history” may serve as an indirect driver for mass security expansion (Huang & Tsai, 2022) (Fig. 5).

Considering this rapid transformation of the social body and the collective imaginary, literature has clearly demonstrated the many strategies aimed at filling the void left by the destruction of the gains of the Maoist revolution and restructuring the CCP’s political legitimisation. At different times, the regime strengthened nationalism at the heart of the population (Zhao, 2004, p. 219; Chuyu & Ma, 2018), played on economic legitimacy (Brødsgaard & Rutten, 2017, p. 170) through the gradual spread of consumerism and affluence, and reactivated certain Confucian, Legalistic or ethnic and cultural sensibilities (Bell, 2010, pp. 3–18; Lin, 2017; Liu & Chang, 2024) as a political tool to maintain power.

Regarding social fragmentation, we confirm the literature’s position that the CCP’s ideology aims to unify the various social currents and sensibilities within the party and society (Lams, 2018; Fairbank & Goldman, 2019). However, our results show that the holistic character of “Time” as the original principle of Ideas plays the role of a unifying concept in this process in the contemporary era.

“History” as a long-term strategic tool in the light of contemporary issues

In the final analysis, we postulate that the current ideological reconfiguration is even more crucial in a context of economic difficulties, slowing growth (Brødsgaard & Rutten, 2017, p. 154; Duran & Ersin, 2020), progressive globalisation, increased global instability, and a trade war with the United States launched in March 2018 (Duran & Ersin, 2020).

Indeed, the old tools of legitimisation run the risk of becoming obsolete or even jeopardising the regime’s interests in the future. This is why it is becoming necessary for the regime to reorient its ideology through a more global, holistic, intangible, and controllable logic. Because, in the current context, narrative construction and ideological reinterpretation in the service of the “issues of the day” represents a lesser risk compared to the course of the global economy, the indebtedness of regional public entities and the shadow of the crises of internal overcapacity that have been threatening the country for several years (Brødsgaard & Rutten, 2017, p. 158; Lei, 2023, p. 85; Ren & Zhang, 2024).

In addition, such a model of legitimisation represents greater strategic room for manoeuvre, both in terms of the CCP’s “historically acceptable” actions and the orientation of its international positions.

In other words, Xi Jinping’s ideology strengthens the acceptance of change in the content of action or ideas, while reinforcing the ideological backbone, placing it in continuity with previous periods, and maintaining national objec-

tives and the CCP’s predominance over Chinese society. In this way, rapid political change can be achieved while avoiding inconsistency and contradiction with past actions.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the conceptual structuring of History, its role in legitimising the CCP’s political actions and decisions, and the representation of its dynamics in Xi Jinping’s ideology as presented and instituted in 2019 through a propaganda manual. We have highlighted the links between this representation of the world and socio-political phenomena such as the universalisation of the “course of history”, the “crisis of social imaginary significations” following the introduction of capitalism in 1979, and the strategic potentiality of this very temporality representation.

We discovered that the imaginary projection of History as an external entity, existing objectively and guiding the Party’s action, essentially reinforces heteronomy by projecting it beyond the reach of individuals, as an entity both overhanging and immanent to every individual.

This projection risks exacerbating the identification crisis at the individual level, as the individual sees themselves dispossessed of control over their destiny, alienated from their work and forced into the eternal senseless growth of productive forces. However, the regime has instituted the necessity of this increase in productive forces, without the slightest evolution in the relations of production, which sharply contrasts with traditional Marxist theory on this point. The regime justifies this absence of evolution in the relations of production internal to the productive process by the fact that China remains under the “dictatorship of the proletariat” through the supremacy of the CCP and prefers to divert attention from the relations of production towards the development inequalities.

Ultimately, we argue that Xi Jinping’s doctrine in our case study suffers from shortcomings similar to those we could point to in Marxism-Leninism: the claim to hold a “universal knowledge of history” which subordinates political practice and entrusts a small group of people with the power to instruct the unconscious masses. In other words, a deterministic and objective vision of history that eliminates human agency and replaces it with the natural laws of development, reducing the Chinese proletariat to the role of “executor of a predetermined historical operation”.

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