Layering Ideologies from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping: Tracing Ideological Changes of the Communist Party of China Using Text Analysis

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Layering Ideologies from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping: Tracing Ideological Changes of the Communist Party of China Using Text Analysis

SHAN Wei, GU Yongxin and CHEN Juan

This article argues that ideological changes of the Communist Party of China follow a layering model, whereby a new discourse developed by each top leader adds a fresh layer to the existing ideological system. Computerised text analysis of college materials for ideology courses from 1978 to 2018 lends support to this model, quantifying the changes over time in the prevalence of each layer in the Party's ideology. Marxism, Maoism and Dengism have remained as the foundational and dominant components of the ideological system, even during the ascent of Xi Jinping Thought and nationalistic narratives.

The ideological legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has received growing attention in the scholarship on Chinese politics. A long-held belief was that the CPC’s Marxism-based ideology was losing its importance and credibility, whereas governance performance, especially related to economic growth, has become the foundation of the Party’s legitimacy. In recent years, increasingly more scholars have found that the CPC’s ideology has been resilient and flexible in its adaptation to sociopolitical changes, and that it has had a significant impact on citizens’ political...
orientations. Studying the evolution of the CPC’s ideology remains important to understanding Chinese politics across different dimensions.

Among existing studies on the changing ideology of the Party, one branch of research is concerned chiefly with identifying which specific elements of the ideology were replaced by newer ones, while another branch focuses on the functional change of ideology, e.g. from a belief system to a tool for power struggles or language norms. Both branches of research attempt to provide an answer to the question of “what” has been changed, whereas this article aims to examine ideology from a “how” perspective to reveal the ways ideology has been adjusted to changes in politics and society.

The authors argue that the changing ideology of the CPC follows a layering model, whereby each generation of leaders presents its own ideological discourse without dismantling or rejecting its predecessors’ ideological contributions. An ideological innovation is added on top of the existing discourse system as a fresh layer and, in the process, it modifies parts of the underlying layers of the old system. For example, when market economy became the Party’s primary policy direction, the Party did not abandon Marxism–Leninism, but rather it made minor amendments in order to eliminate possible contradictions with the socialist market economy.

Three factors led to the emergence of the layering model. One is that abandoning Marxism–Leninism and Maoism would destroy both the CPC’s core communist identity and the legitimacy imparted by the Maoist revolution. Second is the need to maintain popular support, which requires that the Party’s ideology adapt to changing realities. The Party should constantly innovate its ideology to fit the shifting situation on the ground. Third, it is every Chinese leader’s imperative to signal to the Party’s rank and file the consolidation of his power by creating a new ideological discourse. Nevertheless, leaders are also cautious not to disregard the contributions of their predecessors in order to bridge factional divisions and guarantee broad support among the ruling elite. The first factor requires ideological stability, while the latter two necessitate timely adjustments. These factors, working in tandem, lead the CPC to preserve the thoughts and theories of previous leaders, allowing those of new leaders to be added over those of past leaders.

Using a semi-supervised machine learning approach, the authors conducted a textual analysis of college-level ideology course materials from 1978 to 2018, tracing changes in the prevalence of specific topics in the entire corpus of texts across the years. The authors’ findings confirm that changes in CPC ideology take place in a layering manner. Each top leader, when in power, would attempt to promote the prevalence of exposure of his own theory or thought to the highest level. At the same

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time, the ideas of his predecessors would be reduced but would not completely disappear. Moreover, historical knowledge continues to be an important part of ideology and has become a major vehicle of nationalism. Discussions on history have shifted from the Party’s achievements in the class-based revolution to national humiliation and rejuvenation, hence resulting in the rise of nationalism-related discourse. On the other hand, discussions on the economy and globalisation have been on the decline, whereas those on politics, law and the environment are on the rise.

Contrary to suggestions in the literature that Marxism-Leninism has been marginalised in CPC ideology, this study finds that Marxism-Leninism is still a substantial component—despite exhibiting a downtrend since the late 1990s—of the CPC’s discourse system. In the last four decades, three topics, namely Marxism-Leninism, Dengism and Maoism in descending order of prevalence, remain dominant. After Xi Jinping came to power, his discourse has moved up the ideological system rapidly as captured in the authors’ data set up to 2018, and has probably attained the level of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping after 2018. Jiang Zemin’s and Hu Jintao’s ideas have a much lower degree of prevalence. Jiang and Hu mainly fine-tuned Deng’s theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics, instead of creating their own paradigms that could rival Deng’s.

This article aims to contribute to the literature on ideological change of the CPC by proposing a new theoretical model. By introducing a new data source and new methods to test the model, the authors’ study may be one of the first to examine systematically and quantitatively the Party’s ideological adjustment across four decades. Furthermore, existing literature on party ideological change in general revolves around revealing the changing elements in Western political parties’ manifestos and their causes. The authors’ study takes a further step by uncovering a strategy that has induced ideological change and provides additional perspectives in the context of an authoritarian regime. This article also helps policy analysts and experts to understand what is currently happening in China. Xi is widely perceived as a game changer in the political arena. This research concerns the extent to which this perception is valid, what has been changed and how further changes might unfold in the future.

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THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Most current research on the ideological evolution of the CPC has focused on changes in its content. Such examples include studies on how the Marxist-Leninist economics dogma was reformed and replaced by the socialist market economy, and studies on how the planned economy and public ownership system gave way to a market economy and private enterprises. Other research examines the evolution of the top leaders’ discourse through Maoism, Dengism, the Three Represents and the Scientific Outlook on Development to Xi Jinping Thought. After the 1990s, there have also been many analyses revealing that nationalism has increasingly become an important component of Party ideology, portraying the Party as the lodestar leading the Chinese nation towards national rejuvenation.

Another stream of literature reveals that the function of CPC ideology has changed over the last four decades. In the past, its main function was to provide a communist belief system and persuade citizens to believe and accept that system. In addition, ideology is also a tool for competition or assertion of power in factional struggles among the elite, and establishing ideological orthodoxy is crucial for the consolidation of the power of top party leaders. Today, the latter is arguably an even more prominent function. When Party members set up study sessions on, for instance, Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” or Hu Jintao’s Scientific Outlook on Development, such sessions imply Party members’ recognition of and compliance with Jiang’s or Hu’s personal authority. From the leaders’ point of view, “ideological campaigns function as radars that allow senior leaders to discern the loyalty of faction members”.

In terms of the general public, ideology serves as a convincing device to gain popular support. According to Holbig, the Party’s ideology sets the rules of a language game. Performing (or not performing) according to such rules is a measure of an

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individual’s political loyalty. Other studies reveal that ideology has turned into a discursive system that is entrenched in daily life, shaping and influencing citizens’ ways of thinking. So long as they think and communicate using the language of the system, citizens will unconsciously be influenced by the ideology. Huang however believes that the imposition of ideology does not necessarily change people’s attitudes, but rather it signals that the Party is capable of asserting social control. In other words, ideology helps the authorities to secure obedience from citizens through deterrence rather than indoctrination.

Regardless of their views on what the CPC’s ideology achieves or attempts to achieve, previous studies appear to have neglected a central piece of the puzzle, i.e. how ideology is adjusted and evolves. Ideas and views may be abruptly abandoned or rejected by later generations of elites, but could also be changed in a gradual, piecemeal and accumulative manner. There are even various strategies to making gradual changes. Inspired by the “institutional layering” concept in literature on institutional change, the authors propose an ideological layering approach. Layering refers to the addition of a new element to an existing ideological system, with potential adjustments to the orientations of the original ideological system. Layering does not seek to dismantle the old ideology as a whole, but simply to make amendments, revisions or additions. Each addition or modification may lead to a small change to the existing ideological system, but these modifications could accumulate to effectuate a large, substantial change over time. Layering is therefore one method to maintain a semblance of continuity while adapting to changing circumstances.

A new PRC leader, upon assuming power, needs to make policy adjustments according to his preferences as well as to the domestic and international environment. In addition, the leader also needs to impose a personal ideological contribution to signal the consolidation of his power. As a result, there are two types of change to the Party’s ideology. The first type involves the relatively straightforward modification and adaptation of the existing ideology to suit a new general policy line. Examples of this type include switching from the concept of a socialist commodity economy to that of a socialist market economy; abandoning Lenin’s theory that “imperialism is the decay and death of capitalism” in light of the shifting international political economy; and emphasising nationalism to align with the new goal of national

11 Holbig, “Ideology after the End of Ideology. China and the Quest for Autocratic Legitimation”.
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rejuvenation. The second type involves establishing a personal discursive system for leaders, and laying out the principal policy goals and issues accordingly. Examples of the second type are the “Three Represents”, the Scientific Outlook on Development and Xi Jinping Thought for the New Era. These ideological innovations are attached to the existing ideological system.

Why do the CPC leaders adopt the layering strategy? The authors believe the reason is related to the composition of the Party’s ideology. Scholars have found that there are two components to the ideology of the ruling or once-ruling communist parties, such as the CPC and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The first is the core ideology, which includes the parties’ world view, philosophy and its vision of the future society. Marxism-Leninism, communism, historical materialism, etc., all belong to the core ideology. The second component is the practical application which translates the core ideas of the ideology into action.15

The CPC’s core ideology is therefore generally constant, while the practical aspect is continually changing. The former represents the Party’s most fundamental identity and legitimacy. As Schurmann points out, “without pure ideology, the ideas of practical ideology have no legitimation”.16 The CPC must retain its identity as a communist party. In other words, no matter how its ideological content has been adjusted, the CPC cannot afford to discard the core ideology that defines it, specifically Marxism and Leninism.

While the core ideology necessarily consists of theoretical abstractions, the practical aspect of the ideology cannot be too far removed from reality. The CPC ideology should therefore be constantly adjusted. However, the CPC leaders have been very cautious not to dismantle a predecessor’s discourse, having learned the lessons of the Soviet Communist Party. According to Schurmann, “creative development of Marxism-Leninism” for the Chinese means “development of new thought on the basis of unchanging theoretical doctrine”; for the Russians, however, the doctrine itself must be changed.17 At the 20th Congress of the Soviet Party, Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s ideology. The CPC concluded that the denouncement had in fact damaged the legitimacy of the Soviet regime.18 Although the CPC recognised the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution as Mao Zedong’s “extensive, long-lasting, and

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16 Schurmann, Ideology and Organization in Communist China, p. 23.
17 Ibid., p. 34.
serious mistake”, the Party led by Deng Xiaoping decided not to discard the ideology of Mao. Mao was not only one of the founders of the Party, he also guided it towards success in the revolution and establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Even though Deng’s subsequent market reform abandoned many of Mao’s social transformation projects and utopian ideals, the Party strongly believed that it could not afford to abandon the Maoist ideology altogether. Deng’s successors have inherited this tradition and continued to seek ideological continuity from one generation of leaders to the next. This results in the change in the CPC’s ideology taking the form of a layering pattern.

Figure 1. Illustration of the Ideological Layering Model

As illustrated by Figure 1, Marxism-Leninism is the original ideological foundation of the CPC, and the subsequent layers added to it are Maoism, Dengism and other top leaders’ ideological discourses. By adding layer upon layer of new contents, gradual changes have been made in main policy directions, such as economic and development strategies, as well as various major aspects of ideology, such as history and “construction of socialism”. The dashed lines between the layers represent that the content of existing layers can be modified by the successive leaders’ new ideologies that had aimed to create better consistency for the entire ideological system.

DATA AND METHODS

The empirical analysis in this article is based on the syllabi and textbooks adopted by universities in ideological and political courses from 1978 to 2018. There are several channels through which the CPC promotes its ideology among the population. One is via the release of official documents by the Party-state agencies, such as political reports, decisions and communiqués of the National Party Congresses and the Central

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19 Marxist Project Textbook (Makesi zhuyi gongcheng jiaocai), Zhongguo jin xiandai shigang (Outline of Modern Chinese History) (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe [Higher Education Press], 2018).
Committee plenums, as well as announcements issued by the Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee. The second channel is via the publication of the top leaders’ writings and speeches that summarise their achievements in the ideological field. The third channel is through articles released by the Party’s mouthpiece media, including the People’s Daily, Qiushi magazine, and Guangming Daily. The fourth transmission channel is via the ideological and political curriculum in schools from primary school to postgraduate level.

The first two channels plus the People’s Daily from the third channel convey current policy goals, directives and development plans, i.e. the application aspects of the ideology. By contrast, Qiushi magazine, Guangming Daily and the political curriculum in schools communicate more the “theoretical” aspects, namely Marxist doctrine, the Chinese and the Party’s history, and the ideas of top leaders. Existing research on CPC ideological change is based largely on official documents and leaders’ speeches, therefore capturing mostly changes in policy goals and programmes while neglecting the foundational and doctrinal aspects of ideology. With such an approach, it is unsurprising that many of these studies have found Marxism to be marginalised in the CPC’s ideology.

The ideological and political curriculum, especially at the college level, provides the most comprehensive and in-depth content regarding the Party’s ideological foundation. The CPC has increasingly attached importance to ideological education. These courses aim to inculcate in generations of Chinese youth the Party’s ideological dogma and to nurture successors to the socialist cause. Each time the Party makes a change to its ideology, the change is quickly updated and reflected in the content of the ideological and political courses. Therefore, an analysis of the content of these courses tracks the evolution of the Party’s ideology.

Since 1978, the ideological and political curriculum at the college level has undergone four major revisions. The revisions are known as the 78 Plan, 85 Plan, 98 Plan and 05 Plan, named after the year in which they were introduced. In each plan, the curriculum consists of four backbone courses. The first is Marxism which introduces Marxist dialectics, philosophy and history, and political economy. The second course is on socialist construction, which teaches the CPC’s policies, guidelines, experience and achievements in constructing Chinese socialism, and also includes the ideological contributions of top leaders. The third is the history course that presents the Party’s views on modern Chinese history and its own achievements during the Chinese Revolution. The fourth course on morality and law introduces communist ideals, patriotism and basic legal knowledge.

The course titles and content in each plan were modified from their preceding plan. For example, in the 78 Plan, the “Construction of Socialism” was included in

the course on Marxist political economy, while in the 98 Plan, the “History and the Construction of Socialism” was included in the courses on Maoism and Dengism. Figure 2 summarises the evolution of the curriculum in these four plans.

Figure 2. Evolution of College-level Ideological and Political Education Curricula

Additions were also made at various times. The course on “History of the International Communist Movement” was introduced in the 78 Plan, and that on “World Politics and International Relations” was introduced for liberal arts students in the 85 and 98 Plans. Following the launch of the 85 Plan, “Situation and Policy”, a course on the Party’s perspective on both domestic and international current affairs, was included in the Morals and Law curriculum.

The Ministry of Education of China issued unified syllabus guidelines for the first three plans, but each university had the discretion to choose or compile its own textbooks. In some universities, instructors simply customised their own lecture notes instead of using a textbook. However, from the 05 Plan onwards, universities countrywide are required to use standard textbooks compiled by the Ministry of Education.21

The text data used in this study originate from three courses in the 05 Plan and their earlier versions in the previous plans, namely the Principles of Marxism, Maoism and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, and Modern Chinese History. As these three courses cover the major aspects of the Party’s ideology, the authors omit the remaining courses in their analysis. As discussed earlier, the ideology of the CPC consists of two main components, i.e. Marxism and the CPC’s policy goals and directives, which are covered largely by the Principles of Marxism, and Maoism and

21 Chen Zhan’an, “Gaoxiao sixiang zhengzhi lilunke ‘05 fangan’ shishi shinian lai de huigu yu zhanwang” (Review and Prospects of the “05 Plan” of Ideological and Political Theory Courses in Higher Education in the Past 10 Years), Sixiang lilun jiaoyu (Thought and Theory Education) 9 (2015): 4–9.
Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. History plays a crucial role in the ideology of the CPC, which inherited the Soviet traditions. By assuming the authority to make judgements on history, CPC leaders establish their supreme status in the Party. In recent decades, history also serves as a vessel to accommodate nationalist discourses.

For the first three, i.e. the 78, 85 and 98 Plans, the authors used the syllabi issued by the Ministry of Education. Specifically, for the 78 Plan, the authors used syllabi issued in 1983 and 1984; for the 85 Plan, syllabi from 1988 and 1991 were used; for the 98 Plan, syllabi from 1998 were utilised. For the 05 Plan, however, the authors used the standard textbooks issued by the Ministry of Education. Considering that significant changes in ideology took place after Xi Jinping came to power, the authors included two versions in the 05 Plan, one from 2010 when Hu Jintao was still in office and the second version from 2018 during Xi Jinping’s second term (see Appendix I for a detailed list of syllabi and textbooks used).

The authors analysed the course materials using topic modelling—a type of algorithm that automatically identifies hidden patterns within a large corpus of texts by examining how words co-occur. Sets of co-occurring words will help to identify latent themes or topics. As topic modelling becomes one of the most commonly used tools for text analysis in the social sciences, researchers have also begun to find fully automated topic models to be unsatisfactory in generating topics of their specific interests. Furthermore, these auto-generated topics often do not provide any specific meaning, and still require researchers to read samples of the generated topics and make subjective decisions or interpretations. This could lead to post hoc theorising that undermines scientific objectivity.

To avoid such problems, the authors adopted the newly developed keyword assisted topic model (KeyATM), which allows researchers to predefine a series of keywords for topics of interest before running the model. This leads to more theoretically relevant topics. Following the strategy of Chan, Kim and Leung, the authors utilised

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25 Eshima, Imai and Sasaki, “Keyword Assisted Topic Models”.

26 Chan, Kim and Leung, “COVID-19 and Asian Americans”.

their text data to first fit a structural topic model (STM)\textsuperscript{27} to generate two metrics, exclusivity and semantic coherence scores, which serve as objective criteria for choosing the number of topics (K). Considering the trade-off between these two metrics as well as interpretability, the authors determined the optimal K to be 60 and ran the KeyATM model for 60 topics.

The authors identified 12 theoretically important topics and customised a list of keywords for each topic (see Appendix II), even though some of the keywords did not emerge from the STM model. In addition, there are also themes that emerged as independent topics in the STM, but they lacked clarity and interpretability. For such cases, predefined keywords were used to enhance the topics’ interpretability.

The authors chose the keywords for each topic based on two principles. First, all keywords should be the highest probable words of relevant topics generated by the STM (K=60). Second, they should be distinguishable and occur at a reasonably high frequency.\textsuperscript{28} Distinguishable keywords are those that are highly relevant to a specific topic but not to others. For example, keywords like “China Dream” and “New Era” are highly identifiable as associated with the topic on Xi Jinping Thought, and not related to other themes.

Theoretically, the authors are interested to find out how various topics in the Party’s ideology have changed over the past four decades. They used the dynamic version of the KeyATM model to analyse changes in prevalence of each topic across time. Topic prevalence, measured as a ratio between 0 and 1, refers to the proportion that each topic contributes to the text data set at each time frame. Here, the time variable includes the 78 Plan, 85 Plan, 98 Plan, the 05 Plan A referring to the 2010 version of textbooks, and 05 Plan B referring to the 2018 version.

**FINDINGS**

The authors first investigate the layering pattern from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping in the shifts in leaders’ ideological contributions, as well as in Marxism in the past four decades. The authors subsequently discuss how five main aspects of the ideological system, namely history and nationalism, reform, economic development, opening up and struggle, have been amended by the successive generations of Chinese leaders. These aspects are chosen for two reasons. First, they are major components of the Party’s ideology that have undergone significant changes over the past four decades. Second, some of these aspects have become prominent policy issues today as China watchers in the Xi era are concerned about the reversal of economic reform and opening up, as well as the revival of the Maoist narrative of “struggle”.

\textsuperscript{27} The structural topic model (STM) is an algorithm developed to estimate topic models with document-level covariates, such as document labels, authors and time of publication, etc.; see Margaret E. Roberts, Brandon M. Stewart and Dustin Tingley, “stm: An R Package for Structural Topic Models”, *Journal of Statistical Software* 91 (2019): 1–40.

\textsuperscript{28} Eshima, Imai and Sasaki, “Keyword Assisted Topic Models”.
Discourses of the Five Leaders

Based on the layering model, the authors argue that each successive leader will not reject his predecessors’ discourses entirely, but will instead build his own discourse on top of his predecessors’. To validate the argument, the authors first determine whether there is a rise or fall in the relative dominance of each top leader’s discourse in the CPC’s ideology. Figure 3 shows the change in dominance of each of the five generations of CPC leaders, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, in the overall ideological system; the x-axis indicates the five educational plans and the y-axis represents topic prevalence on a scale of 0 to 1. As is evident in Figure 3, each post-Mao leader’s prevalence score is at its highest when they are in power and begins to decline during their successors’ period without disappearing completely.

Figure 3. Prevalence of CPC Top Leaders’ Discourses

![Figure 3. Prevalence of CPC Top Leaders’ Discourses](image_url)

Even though his reforms were a major break from Mao’s ideas, Deng Xiaoping did not abolish the status of Maoism in the Party’s ideology. Nonetheless, a pruning of Mao’s thought took place. Mao’s advocacy of class struggle was removed, while his views on how the CPC seized power and developed socialism in the early years of the PRC were retained. Since then, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have continued the strategy of layering their own ideas on top of those of their predecessors.

Figure 3 highlights a key pattern—Mao and Deng have occupied a prominent place in the ideological system in the past 40 years. Their prevalence attained the highest values in the 98 Plan, hitting 0.10 for Maoism and 0.12 for Dengism. Although
both Maoism and Dengism have gradually declined afterwards, they have remained above 0.03. By contrast, the topics “Three Represents” (Jiang Zemin) and Scientific Outlook on Development (Hu Jintao) managed to score only between 0.01 and 0.04. Xi Jinping Thought started to be included in the textbooks in the 05 Plan B, rising rapidly to 0.04 in 2018. After 2018, significantly more content on Xi Thought has been added to the ideology textbooks,\(^{29}\) and the prevalence of Xi Thought is likely to rise to the same level or to surpass that of Maoism and Dengism in the CPC’s ideological system.

In November 2021, the Central Committee of the CPC adopted its third Historical Resolution,\(^{30}\) a document that summarised the achievements of the Party’s century-long history, especially during the course of nearly 10 years of Xi’s rule, and declared that a “new era” of socialism has dawned in China under Xi’s leadership. The Resolution divides the history of the CPC into four periods. The first two periods, attributed to Mao, consist of the Chinese revolution and the early stage of the country’s socialist construction. Deng, Jiang and Hu are classified under the same period, the advance of market reform. Xi has been touted as the leader of the fourth period, i.e. the “new era” of socialism. Analysts reckon that this Historical Resolution was designed to elevate Xi’s status to the level of Mao and Deng in order to secure his political future, while Jiang’s and Hu’s status fell to a level below that of Xi.\(^{31}\)

Figure 3 demonstrates that Jiang and Hu left a relatively small “footprint” on the ideological system in comparison to Mao and Deng even when the former pair were in office. The “Three Represents” and the Scientific Outlook on Development were intended to fine-tune Deng’s socialism with Chinese characteristics. Among the high-probability words generated by the authors’ topic model, only a few, such as “advanced culture” and “harmonious society”, can be attributed to Jiang or Hu. Both leaders adopted terms mostly created by Deng, such as “economic construction as the centre”, “reform and opening up”, “emancipation of the mind”, to express their own ideas. Xi stands out in that he has a greater ambition for a more visionary and dominant ideological presence. The Third Historical Resolution may have been less a deliberate

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attempt to belittle Jiang and Hu but rather an effort to construct his own dominant thought in the Party’s ideology.

**Marxism**

Since the 1980s, there has been one school of reasoning among China scholars that the CPC has discounted the importance of Marxism and adopted a more pragmatic ideology, or that the CPC has utilised nationalism to shore up its legitimacy. This might be true in the sense that Marxism has ceased to be used to provide guidelines in economic policies during the market reform. However, Marxism may have retained its foundational role in the CPC’s ideological system. The authors’ topic model generated 20 topics related to Marxism. By summing their prevalence scores, the authors grouped them into three composite topics, namely “Marxist Philosophy”, “Marxist Political Economy” and “Marxist Historical Materialism”. Figure 4 displays the prevalence scores of these three topics.

**Figure 4. Prevalence of Marxist Topics**

![Graph showing the prevalence of Marxist topics](image)

Figure 4 demonstrates that Marxism has by no means become obsolete. The three topics of Marxism had some of the highest prevalence scores (0.08–0.16) throughout the entire 40-year period in the authors’ analysis, demonstrating that Marxism has always occupied an important place in the ideological system of the CPC. However, in general, all three composite topics show a declining trend, indicating that the share of Marxism in the ideological system is indeed shrinking, although with
fluctuations—an increase in prevalence during the Jiang and the Xi eras and decreases during other eras.

A noteworthy observation from both Figures 3 and 4 is that in the 98 Plan, which corresponds to Jiang Zemin’s final term, Marxism, Maoism and Dengism all achieved their highest-ever prevalence scores. Evidently, the Jiang administration undertook efforts to re-establish the orthodox status of Marxism and Maoism in the Party’s ideology, which had declined in importance between the 78 Plan and the 85 Plan periods.

The 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a credibility crisis of the CPC ideology due to the repercussions caused by the Cultural Revolution and subsequently the collapse of the Soviet bloc. The Party leaders believed there was a link between this crisis and the 1989 Tiananmen movement. In Deng’s words, the “biggest mistake” that the Party had made was its neglect of ideological education.32 Starting in the early 1990s in the Jiang era, the Party rebuilt the ideological education system from primary school to university level. The patriotic education campaign targeted youth to instil nationalism and loyalty towards the CPC in the name of patriotism. The Party’s efforts in other aspects of ideological construction, including formalising Deng’s reform agenda into Dengism, as well as re-canonising Marxism and highlighting the status of Maoism, shored up the campaign.33

The authors’ analysis unveils in this regard the duality of the Jiang Zemin era. On the one hand, Jiang upheld and deepened market reform, culminating in China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. On the other hand, the Jiang administration also committed tremendous efforts to reinstate the orthodox status of Marxism and Maoism in the ideological education system. New courses at college level were entirely devoted to teaching Maoism and Dengism. Furthermore, Marxism was not only one of the core courses, its content was also reflected in the entire ideological curriculum.34

History and Nationalism

For every new leader, not only was a new layer of discourse added, so were amendments added to parts of the existing ideological system. History, as an important part of the CPC’s ideology, is often the target of revision. The CPC has always attached paramount importance to the official historical narrative based on historical materialism.35 The

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33 Han Zhenfeng and Li Chenyang, “Xin Zhongguo chengli 70 nian lai gaoxiao sizhengke kecheng jianshe de fazhan licheng ji jingyan qishi” (The Development of History and Experience Insights of Curriculum Construction of Civic Science Courses in Colleges and Universities in the Past 70 Years Since the Founding of New China), *Beijing jiaotong daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* (Journal of Beijing Jiaotong University [Social Science Edition]) 18, no. 4 (2019): 42.
34 Ibid.
nation’s past glory and humiliation are also great sources for nationalist narratives. In the authors’ findings, 15 out of 60 topics pertain to history. These topics can be grouped into three composite topics, two of which are nationalism-related, i.e. humiliation and national rejuvenation. Figure 5 shows that the topic with highest prevalence is China’s hundred years of humiliation that involves mainly the invasion by the Western powers in the second half of the 19th century and the war against the Japanese invasion in the 20th century. The second topic focuses on national rejuvenation, i.e. the Party’s long-term goal to reinstate China as a prosperous great power. The third topic is the achievements of the CPC during the revolution, including the establishment of revolutionary base areas in the countryside, and the mobilisation of all sectors in the country to establish a united front, resist the Japanese army and ultimately found the PRC.

**Figure 5. Prevalence of History Topics**

While the three line graphs depicting history topics in Figure 5 show an uptrend in topic prevalence, the nationalism-related topic of humiliation demonstrated a much greater increase after the 98 Plan period. During the 05 Plan A and B periods, the topic hovered at around 0.09 and 0.10, higher than Dengism and Maoism (see Figure 36). The patriotic education campaign in the 1990s was included mainly in the modern history course for primary and secondary schools. At the time, universities had yet to incorporate patriotic education into the curriculum, only covering briefly the campaign under Maoism and Dengism. As a result, the authors’ analysis may not have fully captured the changes.
3), but still generally lower than Marxism-related topics (see Figure 4). Another nationalism-related topic, that of rejuvenation, while rising moderately in general, saw a significant increase to 0.06 in the 05 Plan B (see Figure 5)—i.e. at the same topic prevalence level as Dengism but higher than Maoism and Xi Thought. The CPC-led revolution, on the other hand, showed an insignificant increase in the 05 Plan B. These findings lend support to the literature that argues that nationalism has become increasingly important in CPC ideology. Nonetheless, in the authors’ data set, nationalism topics were not as prevalent as Marxism but more prevalent than Maoism and Xi Thought in the 05 Plan B period.

A close reading of the texts reveals that the revolutionary narrative emphasised the confrontation between the CPC and the Kuomintang, and depicted the resistance against imperialist powers as a class struggle between the Chinese proletariat and foreign capitalists and their agents in China. This has increasingly given way to the nationalist narrative, which emphasised that the entire Chinese nation was the victim of foreign powers, and that the leadership of the CPC saved the nation from demise and directed it towards rejuvenation. In this latter narrative, the Kuomintang is also given credit for its contribution during the anti-Japanese war to emphasise the resilience, greatness and unity of the Chinese nation, thus diminishing the emphasis on divisive class struggle.

Reform

Reform has been one of China’s principal policy goals since the Deng Xiaoping era, focusing mainly on the economic system, which has led to China’s shift from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. Reform also includes the restructuring of the government and the judicial system to adapt to the demands of the market economy.

Reform has become a source of political legitimacy. Successive generations of leaders have all declared their support for the general policy of promoting reform. Figure 6 depicts a distinct rise in reform topics from the 78 Plan to the 85 Plan period, after which a slight decline follows. The decline could be attributed to two factors. First, reform is an umbrella concept and most aspects have eventually been captured by other more specific topics. For example, topics on the socialist economy, the development of the private economy, politics as well as law have broached the theme of reform. Second, it could be the lower level of enthusiasm for reform among the newer generation of leaders compared to Deng.

Economic Development

Deng emphasised that economic development should be the focus of CPC policy for 100 years. This is reflected in the textbooks devoted to the Party’s views on economic policies. Some of the main debates were the extent to which the private economy should be accommodated and to what extent the socialist central planning style should be replaced by a market economy. The authors organised the topics related to economic development into two main themes. The first theme of “socialist economy” includes the establishment of a socialist industrial system, a socialist way of distribution and the dominant role of state-owned enterprises. The second major theme is “private economy” that includes the individual economy, private enterprises, foreign enterprises and the role of the market.

Figure 7 portrays the trend of “socialist economy” and “private economy” topics over time. As is evident, the topic prevalence of “socialist economy” has been declining over the years, albeit at a moderate rate in the 05 Plan A and B periods. Discussions on the private economy saw a slight increase from the 78 Plan to the 98 Plan periods.

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38 For example, the Marxist Project Textbook (Makesi zhuyi gongcheng jiaocai), Zhongguo jin xiandai shigang (Outline of Modern Chinese History), ch. 10.
during the Deng and Jiang eras, followed by a steeper decline in the 05 Plan period. In general, content related to economic issues has reduced over time.

Figure 7. Prevalence of Economics- and Politics-related Topics

One of the explanations for this decline may be the changing priorities of top leaders. The authors have combined themes related to political, legal and environmental issues into one composite topic, including those that discuss the People’s Congress system, the constitution, laws, the “one country, two systems”, socialist rule of law and environmental protection. This composite topic has seen a significant upswing since the 98 Plan (see Figure 7) when the prevalence of economic issues started to decline.

Opening Up

In the authors’ analysis, two of the topics pertain to China’s view of the international society and China’s relations with other countries. The first topic, “globalisation”, concerns China’s intention to be actively engaged with the international economic system and includes such themes as globalisation per se, the international division of labour, international trade and multinational corporations. The other topic, “international cooperation”, includes international engagement, peace and development, mutual trust and respect between nations, and opposition to hegemony.

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Figure 8 shows that the topic of globalisation peaked in the 85 Plan period and has since been declining. Topic prevalence for international cooperation sustained the rise for a longer period, declining only after the 98 Plan and falling during the Xi Jinping era. This echoes the rise of “wolf warrior diplomacy”, which projects China’s assertiveness in diplomatic stances. The authors consider “globalisation” and “international cooperation” as indicators of the Party’s commitment to opening up, and conclude that the importance of engaging with the outside world in the ideological system has declined since the 1990s.

**Embracing Struggle**

Xi has repeatedly in recent years revisited Mao’s concept of struggle and requested all Party members to embrace struggles. The targets of struggle are broadly described as various obstacles that hinder the construction of Chinese socialism in the international arena, domestically and from within the Party. Deng, Jiang and Hu

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had also discussed this issue. However, they did not starkly use the word “struggle” with its Marxist associations, but rather terms like “opposition”, “resistance”, “prevention” or “guarding against”.

In the authors’ corpus of texts, “struggle” relates mainly to contestations against religions, Taiwan independence, separatist forces in Tibet and Xinjiang, corruption and factions within the Party, and foreign hostile forces. Topic prevalence for struggle peaked in the 85 Plan (see Figure 9). This can be explained by the text data for the 85 Plan that covers the ideological and political course materials between 1988 and 1991, i.e. the period of the Tiananmen movement. The period witnessed the CPC encounter one of the biggest challenges to its regime since its founding, and therefore it took up the issue of struggle for greater discussion in the ideological and political courses. The topic of struggle hit its lowest point in the 98 Plan, when the CPC had weathered the post-1989 sanctions by Western countries, and was actively promoting market-oriented reforms and greater openness. A rebound in the topic prevalence happened after the 05 Plan A period. Given that there have been many references to struggle in Xi’s speeches over the recent years, the topic of “struggle” is expected to become highly prevalent in future ideology textbooks.

DISCUSSION

This study has shown how the CPC’s ideology has been changing as a new layer of content is added to the old system. Textual analysis of Chinese university course materials on ideological and political topics shows that there are three core topics of high prevalence in the CPC’s ideological system, namely Marxism-Leninism, Dengism, and Maoism, in descending order of prevalence. The post-Deng leaders showed no intention of dismantling the three ideological components. Despite the general decline in prevalence of the three topics after reaching their peaks in the late 1990s, they still dominate the CPC ideological system. In the more recent ideological education plans, Jiang’s and Hu’s ideas account for only a small proportion of the overall course content, while Xi Thought increasingly constitutes a major proportion. Nationalistic narratives have been on the rise, but are still not as prevalent as Marxism.

Most China watchers believe that Xi Jinping is, in many ways, reversing Deng’s reforms that were moving towards a more open society. However, the authors’ analysis highlights that the reality is more complex. For example, the downturn in the themes for opening up and participation in globalisation, and the development of the private economy had already begun before the Xi era. Xi has simply continued and accelerated this trend. Conversely, it is widely believed that China displayed a greater inclination to engage with the outside world during Jiang Zemin’s time, and Jiang had also given Deng’s reform agenda top priority in the ideological system. However, the Jiang era also witnessed a period when Marxism-Leninism and Maoism were reasserted and achieved their highest prevalence in the ideological system.

In other words, while Xi Jinping appears to be a game changer to many, the authors’ analysis finds that he has, to a certain extent, been following the path already laid out by his predecessors. For instance, Deng introduced the “two hands” approach—one hand on reform and opening up, and the other hand on the four cardinal principles of adherence to Marxism-Leninism, Maoism and the socialist path. The “two hands” approach may have established a framework for post-Deng leaders to make their own ideological adjustments. The Party’s notable pro-market and pro-openness stance during the Jiang era as well as the emphasis on control and “dual circulation” during Xi’s time are both long-term oscillations between the “two hands” rather than fundamental shifts. In this sense, the ongoing market-oriented reforms and engagement in the global economy for over 40 years have never deviated from the ideological core of Marxism-Leninism and Maoism.

In the near future, Xi Jinping Thought will further dominate the CPC’s ideological system. In 2021, the Chinese government issued guidelines for incorporating Xi Jinping Thought into various curricula, stipulating that schools from primary to postgraduate level have to systematically educate students in Xi Thought. Furthermore, this

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requirement is not only implemented for political and ideological classes, but must also be integrated into all other curricula, including philosophy, economics, law, science, engineering, medicine and other courses. At the 20th Party Congress held in October 2022, Xi secured a third term and handpicked his team for the Politburo from his supporters. Therefore, there is a high likelihood that the prevalence of his thought will continue to surge in the Party’s ideology.

The authors suggest equipping the layering model with greater explanatory power in future research. The present study is largely descriptive and focuses on tracking how changes occur in the CPC’s ideological system. A shortcoming that the authors have identified is that the study is not able to correlate the prevalence of certain components (be they a theme, idea, thought or theory) with social and political variables and to explain when the prevalence of a particular component would rise or decline. Other future work could investigate if the proposed layering model fits other contexts, such as communist or former-communist countries like the former Soviet Union or Vietnam. The authors’ preliminary understanding of these countries is that their communist parties’ ideologies also comprised Marxism-Leninism in combination with the contributions of their top leaders. However, the attitudes of these countries towards the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and their predecessors’ ideological contributions may differ from those of the PRC. As discussed earlier, the Soviets were more inclined than the Chinese to execute major revisions to existing ideologies. A comparative study of the strategies of ideological change in different communist regimes and an investigation of the underlying factors affecting their choices of strategies would help scholars better understand how the communist systems operate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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47 Schurmann, Ideology and Organization in Communist China, p. 34.
## APPENDIX I List of Syllabi and Textbooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Course Title (Chinese)</th>
<th>Course Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>78 Plan</strong></td>
<td>辨证唯物主义和历史唯物主义教学大纲 (1983年) (Bianzheng weiwu zhuyi he lishi weiwu zhuyi jiaoxue dagang [1983 nian])</td>
<td>Dialectical and Historical Materialism (Marxist Philosophy) 1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>05 Plan A</strong></td>
<td>马克思主义基本原理 (2010年) (Makesi zhuyi jiben yuanli [2010 nian])</td>
<td>Basic Principles of Marxism 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>中国近现代史纲要 (2010年) (Zhongguo jin xiandai shi gang yao [2010 nian])</td>
<td>Modern Chinese History 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>毛泽东思想和中国特色社会主义理论 (2010年) (Mao Zedong sixiang he Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi lilun [2010 nian])</td>
<td>Maoism and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>05 Plan B</strong></td>
<td>马克思主义基本原理 (2018年) (Makesi zhuyi jiben yuanli [2018 nian])</td>
<td>Basic Principles of Marxism 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>中国近现代史纲要 (2018年) (Zhongguo jin xiandai shi gang yao [2018 nian])</td>
<td>Modern Chinese History 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Maoism and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics 2018</td>
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### APPENDIX II Keywords in Predefined Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Keywords</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Globalisation</td>
<td>“贸易” (maoyi, trade), “分工” (fengong, division of labour), “全球化” (quanqiuhua, globalisation), “国际” (guoji, international)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Cooperation</td>
<td>“国际” (guoji, international), “和平” (heping, peace), “外交” (waijiao, diplomacy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>“改革” (gaige, reform), “经济体制” (jingji tizhi, economic systems), “深化” (shenhua, deepen), “体制” (tizhi, systems)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Economy</td>
<td>“个体经济” (geti jingji, individual economy), “非公有制” (feigongyouzhi, private ownership), “跨国公司” (kuaguo gongsi, multinational corporations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejuvenation</td>
<td>“中华民族” (Zhonghua minzu, Chinese nation), “复兴” (fuxing, rejuvenation), “伟大” (weida, great), “各族人民” (gezu renmin, people of different ethnicities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Revolution</td>
<td>“文化大革命” (Wenhua dageming, the Cultural Revolution), “错误” (cuowu, mistake), “四人帮” (Sirenbang, the Gang of Four)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maoism</td>
<td>“毛泽东思想” (Mao Zedong sixiang, Mao Zedong Thought/Maoism), “新民主主义革命” (xin minzhuzhuyi geming, new democratic revolution), “社会主义改造” (shehui zhuyi gaizao, socialist transformation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Represents</td>
<td>“三个代表” (sige daibiao, Three Represents), “先进生产力” (xianjin shengchanli, advanced productivity), “先进文化” (xianjin wenhua, advanced culture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific Outlook on Development</td>
<td>“科学发展观” (kexue fazhan guan, Scientific Outlook on Development), “和谐社会” (hexie shehui, harmonious society)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>