



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

China Studies Centre

Understanding China Brief



Post 20th CCP Congress Roundtable

This Understanding China Brief results from a [roundtable](#) discussion organised by the China Studies Centre on 31 October 2022 to decode the outcomes of the 2022 20th Congress of the CCP

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The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China met in Beijing starting 16 October. The last five years since the 19th Congress have seen fairly important changes in the political environment, including the deterioration of relations with the USA, the challenges of dealing with the pandemic, and an economic slowdown. The Congress has adopted the various reports presented and announced the new CCP leadership line-up. On Monday 31st October the China Studies Centre hosted an online Roundtable discussion of the main outcomes of the Congress.

About the speakers (listed in their speaking order):

David Goodman (Chair)

David S G Goodman is Director of the China Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, where he is also Professor of Chinese Politics. He has worked in universities in Australia, China and the UK since 1971.

Richard MaGregor

Richard MaGregor is Senior Fellow for East Asia at the Lowy Institute. His areas of expertise including China's political system and the workings and structure of the communist party; China's foreign relations, with an emphasis on ties with Japan, the two Koreas, and Southeast Asia; Australia's relations with Asia.

Minglu Chen

Minglu Chen is a senior lecturer in the Department of Government and International Relations and a member of the China Studies Centre at the University of Sydney. Her research concentrates on social and political changes in China, especially the interaction between entrepreneurs and the state and women's political participation. She has published her research in *The China Quarterly*, *The China Journal* and *Journal of Contemporary China*. She is the author of *Tiger Girls: Women and Enterprises in the People's Republic of China* (Routledge 2011).

Yingjie Guo

Yingjie Guo is Professor of Chinese Studies and deputy director of China Studies Centre. He received his BA and MA from Shanghai International Studies University, China and PhD from the University of Tasmania, Australia. Before joining the University of Sydney in 2014, he had taught at Shanghai International Studies University, the University of Tasmania, the University of New England, and the University of Technology, Sydney. His research focuses on cultural nationalism, cultural identities, and discourses of class in contemporary China.

Ben Hillman

Ben Hillman is a political scientist, public policy researcher, and advisor, and is the Director of the Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW). Ben is a specialist in politics, public policy, and public administration in China. More broadly his research examines policies and mechanisms for promoting political inclusion and safeguarding minority rights. Ben is the author or editor of six books on China, including *Patronage and Power* (Stanford University Press, 2014), *Conflict and Protest in Tibet and Xinjiang* (Columbia University Press, 2016), and *Political and Social Control in China* (ANU Press 2023).

Marina Zhang

Marina Yue ZHANG is an associate professor at Australia China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney. She holds a bachelor's degree in biological sciences from Peking University, and a PhD from Australian National University. Her current research looks into innovation & technology and draws managerial and policy implications for Australia-China relations.

Richard MaGregor | The major themes of Xi Jinping's ten years in power

I'll put the major themes like these: gone from collective leadership to one man rule, term limits to leader for life, meritocracy to loyalty, the private sector to the state sector, from wealth to common prosperity, from globalization to technological independence, and from US-China coexistence to US-China confrontation. I guess the question facing us about the twentieth Party Congress is: Will this Congress have any impact on the trajectory of those trends? My short answer to that is no. One way of calibrating both the power of Xi and the internal policy debate is to look at appointments and the manner of appointments. Personnel choices are watched closely not just outside of China, but inside China as well in an opaque system. Because they're one of the few transparent expressions of internal power balances in a closed system. So what does Xi's choices tell us? I argue that the appointments do speak to Xi's dominance over the party. Xi's rivals were forced out of the Politburo Bureau. Standing Committee and the Politburo Bureau are largely with Loyalists taking their place. I think there are no fewer than three of Xi's personal aids from previous positions in Beijing and the provinces are promoted into the top leadership. Overall, Xi has dispensed with the old factional system, such as he crushed any expectations he would nurture a successor; he has largely ignored the informal age caps on top positions within the Politburo Bureau, and I think he's also cemented China's current direction in foreign policy. Xi pronounced that the country must prepare for the storm. Generally speaking, I think Xi has been skilled in exploiting the enormous powers that his office has to do what a Communist party does best: mobilize the state, the workforce, capital, technology in a singular effort to get his way both at home and abroad, it's a system of mobilization. I think that Xi is really locking in absolute control at home to ensure that he can project maximum strength to what abroad, and gain whatever leverage he can in any showdown with the United States, whenever it comes or whatever form it takes. I plan to finish with a quick two points: 1, I want to compliment Xi on one level for example, throwing out the age limits. It makes no sense to have an artificial retirement date; 2, a lot of commentaries have focused on two people who have been elevated: Li Qiang and Cai Qi. Now both of those people have been portrayed as basic cronies. Up to a point, that's true, but we have to be clear that they are not greenhorns. They are extremely experienced officials who have very big jobs in the system. Li Qiang, for example, bought Tesla into Shanghai while he was party secretary there. So we don't want to overemphasize loyalty over meritocracy to suggest that the people who have been elevated aren't skilled operators within the system.

Minglu Chen | The lack of women in the very top of the Chinese Communist party leadership

I never thought it would be certain that the Politburo would have a female member this time, as this has not been an institutionalized rule in Chinese politics. The so-called institutionalization of the CCP's rule that so many people have based their expectations on, is really nothing more than an observation of the CCP's practice over a short period of twenty years.

In fact, women's involvement in politics has always been a rarity in this political system. To start with, there has never been a gender quota system that applies to the very top level. And the party has ever really explicitly expressed a concern about lack of women in its power core. What we saw in the last twenty years could just have been an exception. While there is a gender quota system applying to the prefecture and the provincial levels, and there has not been any real oversight over the implementation of this system.

The political sphere has always been seen as a place that is not for women. Over the Chinese Communist Party's history, we have seen that women's involvement in politics is often just considered either as a mistake, for example, Jiang Qing who was accused of being responsible for all the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, or an extension of their feminine roles at home, such as Deng Yingchao, who was often referred to as either 'Big Sister Deng' or 'Deng Mama'.

Wu Yi was the first female member in the Politburo in the post-reform era. The media discourse of her involvement in politics has been paradoxical. On the one hand, she was expected to comply with the masculine stereotypes and expectations in politics, which could be seen in her being referred to as the 'iron lady' or the 'tom boy'. But on the other hand, as one of the most powerful Chinese female politicians, she had received the most attention on her personal life and her individual style. Her single life, her hair style and her fashion style was often topics of discussion on media. Wu Yi, as many women in politics, was still expected to perform their femininity. This shows the patriarchal norms of 'men outside (in politics) and women inside (at home)' is still a barrier for women to enter politics.

Moreover, the party's commits to advancing women's interests is not checked by interparty competition or by the need to appeal to the voters. Also, the discourse of 'women holding up half the sky' has really only focused on women's rights to work, not really women's rights to participate in politics. When this goal conflicts with other objectives, such as economic development, women's rights would be put aside. Lastly, research shows that Chinese political leaders are selected based on the criteria for age, education, membership in the CCP, work experiences. And women are disadvantaged in all these aspects.

Yingjie Guo | The Theme of the Twentieth Party Congress

At each CCP congress, the theme is actually stated, but there's a lot of unpacking to do. The theme of the congress centers on the goal of the party in the next five years and all the way to 2049 is a long-term view, and it's a huge advantage for a party like the CCP, who is able to do that. There are definitely advantages in there, although disadvantages exist as well. The point is to stick to the goal in the coming years all the way to 2049, this is, to strive in unity and build a modern socialist country in all respects, but at the same time there are a number of phrases packed into that theme.

The phrases tell us about the methodology or the means by which that the goal is to be achieved. These include exactly the same as what it was stated at the former two congresses, that is, to hold the great banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. The banner is probably the very first thing to remember when we talk about the party, and the party's work. The next one is probably more meaningful and it's certainly different from the theme of the 19th Party Congress, that is, to fully implement the Xi Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. So, in other words, this is one of the Two Upholds – to establish Xi Jinping Thought as a guiding ideology.

Another is carrying forward the great founding spirit of the party, which has been repeated over the last five years, or probably in the ten years as well. That is, the founding mission of the

party is to bring happiness to the people and to realise China's national rejuvenation. Another phrase is staying confident and building strength. Breaking new ground or theoretical innovation is a major part of the report. There is a whole section about theoretical innovation. Sinicized Marxism: Marxism combined with China's realities and combined with traditional Chinese culture. There's a very long section just on that.

Another phrase is 'forge ahead with enterprise and fortitude'. I'll just focus on fortitude because it's related to a number of keywords in the report. Fortitude is related to struggle, and it has been widely reported that struggle is a key term at this conference because it's repeated so many times. The other related ones are challenges, difficulties, and problems. I did a rough count of these words: problems were mentioned 67 times, challenges 11 times, and risks 16 times. Given that, it makes sense for the party to stay united to achieve the goal of modern socialist country.

But what does unity actually mean? It means two things. It has President Xi at the center, radiating out to the party and to the nation. So, President Xi talks about the party's unity first, and that concentric circle keeps radiating out, and we have national unity. His report began with unity and ended with unity. A lot of things can be justified with this. For example, the personnel reshuffling can be justified in terms of unity.

Ben Hillman | Ideology: Chinese-style Modernisation

I think it's worth paying attention to the latest *tifa* or formulation: Chinese-style modernisation. To a casual observer, this term might seem plain enough, but I think this is a term we'll hear a lot in the coming years as public intellectuals. Before we unpack this concept of Chinese-style modernisation, a quick comment on the standing Committee was made. So we've heard from other panelists on the composition of the male dominated Politburo Bureau, it's a male-dominated standing committee. Richard also noted that all of the standing committee members are experienced officials, but this one exception in there: Wang Huning. Wang is one of the only two standing committee members who's been retained from the previous Standing Committee. The other is Zhao Leji, who runs Xi's anti-corruption campaign as the Secretary of CCDI. Mr Wang has moved from the sixth to fourth position which can only be interpreted as a promotion or reward. Wang has been known as a political whisper. He was first called up from Fudan University and have been instrumental in developing the theory of Jiang Zemin's Three Represents, continued to serve Hu, and later Xi. Wang was elevated to the Politburo Bureau, and then Xi brought him into the Standing Committee. Wang is believed to have come up with the slogan of the China Dream, which was the key slogan of Xi's first term, and also to be a leading advocate for the idea of promoting Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. Wang is a really interesting character, not just because of his ideological inventiveness, but also because he's been a leading proponent of the idea of American Decline. In fact, he was one of the earliest. Wang's promotion signals that ideological work remains a priority for Xi, and Xi still needs Wang's intellectual powers to continue the practice of adapting party ideology to changing realities, and to justify the party's actions in its efforts to maintain its monopoly on political power.

The term Chinese-style Modernization is much like the China Dream and Socialism with Chinese characteristics. It's an empty vessel that party theorists can manipulate. If the China dream was a vision for China's great rejuvenation I think we'll see more discussion of Chinese-style modernisation as the strategy. It's a vision of governance that has politics in command, a model in which the CCP uses its domination of the state, to tame capital, and put it to work for the people. The concept also links Marxism to Chinese culture and civilisation in ways that I think we'll hear a lot more about in the coming years. Xi in his report highlighted the need to promote the modernisation of Marxism in China. And he's also said, following from Yingjie's point earlier,

that only by taking root in the rich, historical, and cultural soil of the country and nation will the truth of Marxism be able to flourish. From all the discussions about ideology and how ideological Xi and the party under Xi has become, we are reminded that the party controls the application of Marxism in China, and the definition of it. The party will ultimately be the arbiter of what aspects of Marxism are relevant and applicable to their political aims.

Marina Zhang | Interpretation from the Angle of Science and Technology

Following Professor Guo's point, and I like to mention that science and technology was mentioned 44 times in Xi's work report, compared to 17 times 5 years ago, which reflects the concerns and worries that the party is having for China's development over the next five years to achieve the so-called Chinese-style of modernisation. The reason why innovation, science and technology is so important to China's next stage of development is because this is the only solution to solve China's domestic and international challenges: innovation will break away its dependence on the investment-driven growth, the imports of critical technologies, and the low-cost driven growth, so innovation will provide, as Xi said, the primary driving force for China's next stage of development. When I look at China's development from official documents, I can conclude that this is a dynamic, balanced philosophy. All those concepts, definitions are clearly defined, but they leaves a lot of room for interpretation, so the indication can be really weak, and the meanings can be really ambiguous. To make sense of China's official messages, it is important to feel the storms and waves under the calm surface. If you read the report carefully, there is a shift of emphasis, from entrepreneurship-driven innovation to state-driven innovation. That can be really dangerous, because innovation does require autonomy and freedom, and it needs to tolerate failure, all of which are hard to achieve through state-driven mode. Certain policy may make ordinary citizens feel satisfied, but makes a small group of people extremely uncomfortable, including the leading entrepreneurs, who are the driving force of all changes. Moreover, given China's strict implementation of Zero-Covid policy, it's difficult for the Chinese economy to take off again if the route is not right. The government should resume a pragmatic policy approach, otherwise, China would face severe challenges.

The video record of this Roundtable may be found [here](#).

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