Meaning Behind the 2018 PRC Constitution Amendments – Application of Political Discourse Analysis to the “New Era” Narratives of Xi Jinping

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Abstract

Although opinions vary as to the degree of assertiveness of China’s leadership under the Xi Jinping rule in comparison to Hu Jintao, the fact that China under Xi has set out on a new, more persuasive discursive path regarding its historical role and position global futures has been confirmed both by analysts inside and outside of the PRC – particularly after the 2018 PRC Constitution Amendment, which introduced “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a New Era”, among other additions.

This paper serves the purpose of explaining the meaning of the official discursive strategies behind the “New Era” (新时代) concept as presented by Xi Jinping during his Report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China by examining the grand narratives that surround it, ultimately contributing to the research of the logic behind Xi Jinping’s agenda vis-a-vis China’s desired position. A total of three overarching New Era narratives have been established: the mission narrative, the international influence narrative, and the party governance narrative. The paper argues that the main task of all three narratives is to provide arguments in support of Xi Jinping’s ideological innovation. Methodologically, the paper draws on the Political Discourse Analysis theory.

Keywords: China, Constitution, Xi Jinping, New Era, political discourse analysis.
Introduction

March 11, 2018 Amendments to the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China instantly became a topic of the global political discussion. They were seen as a demonstration of power centralisation, including the strengthening of the role of the Communist Party and the removal of the presidential term limits. However, it was the Amendment that introduced “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a New Era” into the Preamble that made Xi Jinping “the first Chinese leader ever to have his theories enshrined in the constitution during his own lifetime”. [1]

The political notion encompassed in the concept of the New Era immediately made a noticeable impact both domestically and internationally: “China has a new official political doctrine. It’s called Xi Jinping Thought, and it is everywhere. Schools, newspapers, television, the internet, billboards and banners all trumpet the ideas of Mr. Xi, the country’s president and Communist Party leader.” [2]

This paper serves this purpose by examining the grand narratives that surround and project the New Era (新时代) concept used by Xi Jinping during his Report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” [3] on October 18, 2017. The Report itself as well as the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China were central to the inclusion of the concept in the Constitution of the PRC, as the resolution on the proposed amendment to the Constitution was adopted during this National Congress.

New Era is mentioned a total of 37 times throughout the report, and appears in all major chapters relating to all topics discussed. A discourse analysis of the Report has been conducted to determine and break down major narratives related to the concept. To determine whether the established traits are unique to Xi Jinping, a comparison with the Hu Jintao Report at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 25, 2007 has been conducted.

Political Discourse Analysis has been used as the underlying theoretical framework. Methodologically, qualitative methods such as document analysis, narrative analysis, comparative analysis have been used. The linguistic analytical toolkit has been deployed to determine metaphors, rhythmic elements, and poeticisms that Xi Jinping used to persuade his public. The research methodology also builds upon previous author’s research into the ideology of Xi Jinping and its discursive characteristics [4].

A total of three overarching New Era narratives have been established: the mission narrative, the international influence narrative, and the party governance narrative. The existence and influence of these narratives serve to substantiate the claim made by previous researchers [5] that the policies of Xi Jinping have been driven by a transformative agenda both domestically and internationally. The analysis also lends further proof to
the assessment that strengthening the rule and image of the Communist Party of China has been one of the central tasks undertaken by Xi Jinping in this context.

The paper argues that the main task of all three narratives is to provide arguments in support of Xi Jinping’s ideological innovation. To borrow the wording of the Report, for Xi Jinping, the New Era narratives serve both the authority component – the power to shape China domestically and internationally, as well as the motivational component – the ability to inspire his audiences.

**Applicability of the political discourse analysis theory**

According to Teun A. van Dijk, the founder of the Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) school, in order to analyse materials within PDA, three distinct requirements must be met. First of all, “we must determine which discourse is political and which is not” [6] – in other words, PDA can be applied to a text for which the attribution to the political sphere cannot be contested – it is delivered in a political context, it speaks of political matters, and the presenter of the text is a politician or a political stakeholder. In the case of Xi Jinping Report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, all three political discourse characteristics match, making the material suitable for the application of PDA.

Secondly, as PDA stems and is heavily influenced by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) most prominently developed by Norman Fairclough, the critical aspect of the endeavour cannot be ignored, as PDA “deals especially with the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination through political discourse” [6]. This paper demonstrates the reproduction of the political power by the Communist Party of China via discourse. Albeit the critical element is not at the centre of inquiry; however, the presented conclusions provide grounds and arguments for further critical research of domination through political discourse.

Third, from a disciplinary perspective, PDA analysis must fall within the confines of political science research, as it “should not merely be a contribution to discourse studies, but also to political science and the social sciences more generally” [6]. The current paper is a transdisciplinary research combining political science and discourse studies.

It should be noted that in the recent years, most notably with the publication of “The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Discourse Analysis” [7] the field produced an advance in theoretical toolkits applied in Chinese political discourse studies by creating linkages between PDA, CDA and other adjacent theoretical approaches, including Critical Cultural Discourse Analysis [8]. The current publication aims to serve as a contribution to this growing field and to the interest towards theorising Chinese political discourse.
Background of Xi Jinping’s political transformative positioning

Xi Jinping first came to power in October 2012 as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and became the Chairman (official translation into English – “President”) of the People’s Republic in March, 2013. In 2014, he began introducing anti-corruption reforms that were perceived as a bold play for power consolidation, putting him apart from his predecessor Hu Jintao: “Xi has advanced himself as a transformative leader, adopting an agenda that proposes to reform, if not revolutionise, political and economic relations not only within China but also with the rest of the world” [5].

The rationale for such a transformation was twofold, as the Party was aware of its decreasing importance and authority in the eyes of the PRC population domestically, and internationally needed to project a strong and unified image of a mighty-as-ever Communist Party as the backbone of the Chinese political system and, ultimately, Chinese economic growth to fight the supposition that as China’s prosperity rises the Party with its outdated ideals might become obsolete. The Chinese political establishment equated the fall of the Communist Party stock in the eyes of the population with loss of control and ultimately a threat to sovereignty. These considerations – both domestic and international – lead to the emergence of the strong Xi Jinping leadership style, signalling a difference with the previous period, and the consolidation of power in his hands. The 19th Party Congress was central in this regard.

As Dylan M. H. Loh writes,

“Mao Zedong aside, Xi’s power grab is unprecedented; the full effects of it have yet to be understood. It is also apparent that foreign policy and diplomatic success appear central to Xi’s power consolidation efforts. The 19th Party Congress, for instance, under-scored the necessity for China’s foreign policy to be more proactive, essentially dropping Deng’s mantra of biding one’s time.” [9]

Perhaps there was no greater illustration to the paramount role of the Xi Jinping personality in the Communist Party messaging than the proposal for the National People's Congress (NPC) of the PRC for the amendments to the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, namely, to include Xi Jinping thought and the mention of the “New Era” alongside Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought. After the NPC passed the amendments in 2018, the fragment of the Preamble to the Constitution now reads:

“We, the Chinese people of all ethnic groups, will continue, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the guidance of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Theory of Three Represents, the Scientific Outlook on Development and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, to uphold the people’s democratic dictatorship, stay on the socialist road, carry out reform and opening up, steadily improve the socialist institutions, develop the socialist market economy and socialist democracy, improve socialist rule of law,
apply the new development philosophy, and work hard in a spirit of self-reliance to modernise step by step the country’s industry, agriculture, national defence, and science and technology and promote coordinated material, political, cultural-ethical, social and ecological advancement, in order to build China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful, and realise the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” [10]

However, as argued above, Xi Jinping’s strongman image was not a goal within itself, it was serving a purpose, namely – to resuscitate the weight of the Party:

“Despite the fact that a cult of personality around Xi had by 2015 gone into high gear, Xi has at least rhetorically subsumed his power grab under the overarching theme of boosting the CCP’s authority.” [11]

Still, in order to boost the Party’s authority, a simple power display would not be enough. Xi Jinping also needed to provide inspiration and a positive story. As demonstrated in the analysis below, the three narratives of Xi surrounding the New Era concept contain both of these characteristics.

New Era narratives in Xi Jinping report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China – Analysis


The task of “mission” is to create an alibi for the “new” by demonstrating that no matter how profound the changes, they are in line with the “original mission”, which in turn coincides with “the historic mission of national rejuvenation”. The task of the “international influence” is to demonstrate domestically that China is now becoming confident and would not be misunderstood, seen as a disruptor, or simply disliked. The “Party governance” narrative evokes a strong personal image of the speaker and signals that there is a new and reinvented approach to Party management, a wider and more self-confident one than that of the Hu Jintao period.

The New Era mission narrative

Hu Jintao mentions “mission” in his 17th Report, mostly applying it in the context of Armed forces, but also speaking of the Great rejuvenation.
The main disparity between the text of Hu and Xi is that in Xi Jinping’s Report “mission” is tied to his innovation, or the “new”, whereas in Hu Jintao’s text no such personal trait exhibits itself:

“Ever since its founding, the CPC has bravely dedicated itself to the historical mission of leading the Chinese people in striving for a happy life and for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Chinese Communists have been fighting one generation after another to fulfil this mission, and countless revolutionaries have sacrificed their lives in the course. Party members in contemporary China must continue on this mission.” [3]

Like Hu, centrality of the mission narrative in Xi Jinping’s message transpires as early as the theme of the 19th Congress:

“Remain true to our original aspiration and keep our mission firmly in mind, hold high the banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, and work tirelessly to realise the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.” [3]

In this statement, already a significant trait of Xi’s New Era mission narrative reveals itself: in his interpretation, every aspect of theoretical and policy innovation that Xi Jinping brings forward is actually firmly serving the original founding mission. The legitimacy behind change is the claim that any change only circles back to the original intention and aspiration of the first Chinese communists.

With such reasoning, any disruption can be explained as purification:

“Never forget why you started, and you can accomplish your mission. The original aspiration and the mission of Chinese Communists is to seek happiness for the Chinese people and rejuvenation for the Chinese nation. This original aspiration, this mission, is what inspires Chinese Communists to advance.” [3]

What is the mission? On the one hand, the description of the mission that Xi Jinping applies ties it to “national rejuvenation” – the same concept used by Hu Jintao in this context, and the same concept that Xi himself had entwined with his “China dream” of 2012. On the other hand, unlike “national rejuvenation”, Xi’s “mission” is a fluid one, it possesses a greater deal of ambiguity and leaves room for the future to be the judge: “Our mission is a call to action; our mission steers the course to the future.” [3] The mission narrative justifies Xi Jinping’s turn for the “new”, which is a leading discursive trait throughout the 19th Report.
The task of “mission” is to create an alibi for the “new” by demonstrating that no matter how profound the changes, they are in line with the “original mission”, which in turn coincides with “the historic mission of national rejuvenation”. Xi Jinping promises to launch a “staying true to our founding mission” campaign which would “enable all Party members [...] to arm themselves with the Party’s new theories.” [3] The mission narrative is about communicating that staying true to the original mission equals embracing new theories, i.e. Xi’s theories – and that, ultimately, no matter how unorthodox, they contain no heresy from the point of view of the Sinicized Marxist doctrine.

At the same time, the use of “mission” also goes beyond China to accommodate the New Era international influence narrative (analysed below):

“The Communist Party of China strives for both the wellbeing of the Chinese people and human progress. To make new and greater contributions for mankind is our Party’s abiding mission.” [3]

The New Era international influence narrative

As Hu Jintao reported on the accomplishments of the last five years in 2007 in the chapter named simply “The work of the past five years” (“过去五年的工作”), he used “continuing”, “widening”, “growing” and other similar verbs that signal a permanent process that falls within the line of a certain procedure.

The language deployed by Xi Jinping in the respective chapter of his report appears much more assertive and victorious right from the word choice in heading, as the name of the chapter reads “The work of the past five years and historic transformation” (“过去五年的工作和历史性变革”, official translation “The Past Five Years: Our Work and Historic Change”).

In the vein of the mentioned “historic change”, there is little to point towards a reaffirmation of the previous strategies. The text speaks of “transformation”, “reform”, “change” – discourse elements that signal a qualitatively different period – serving Xi’s ideological premise of socialism with Chinese characteristics entering the New Era.

A major aspect of the “new”, according to Xi Jinping, is the fact that China now “stands tall and firm in the East”, in other words, has gained visibility and assertiveness during his rule. It can perhaps be claimed that this assertion has attracted the most attention internationally, as it was perceived as an indoor into a nationalist agenda. Naturally, some topics could be traced back to Hu Jintao and beyond, and yet there was a discursive shift, poignantly summarised by Michael Swaine: “Although many of these themes were evident at the 18th Party Congress, and in some cases even earlier, they have never been stated as emphatically nor linked so decisively to China having turned a corner toward greatness.” [13]
The subchapter on the diplomatic advancement is quite evidently in line with such a confident stance. Unlike his predecessor a decade ago, who devoted one sentence to speak on China’s diplomatic exchanges in dull terms of “strengthening contacts and cooperation” with other countries, Xi Jinping capitalises on his “major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” and reports on how such a position has already borne fruit:

“China champions the development of a community with a shared future for mankind, and has encouraged the evolution of the global governance system. With this we have seen a further rise in China’s international influence, ability to inspire, and power to shape; and China has made great new contributions to global peace and development.” [3]

Xi Jinping repeats this aspect of the “new circumstances” – China under his rule being respected and reckoned with internationally – time and time again throughout the report, be it in terms of ecology (“Taking a driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change, China has become an important participant, contributor, and torchbearer in the global endeavour for ecological civilisation.” [3] (倡导应对气候变化国际合作, 成为全球生态文明建设的重要参与者、贡献者、引领者。[12])) or China’s military might (with a view to realizing the Chinese Dream and the dream of building a powerful military, we have developed a strategy for the military under new circumstances. [3] (着眼于实现中国梦强军梦, 制定新形势下军事战略方针, 全力推进国防和军队现代化。[12])).

The underlaying issue for Xi Jinping, however, is not just about demonstrating domestically that China has become proactive and strong on the global stage since his coming to power. It is more about the necessity to demonstrate domestically that China in the pursuit of such a position and “stronger cultural confidence” [3] would not be misunderstood, seen as a disruptor, or simply disliked. To tackle this issue, Xi Jinping employs wordings where “champion”, “influence” and “power” go hand in hand with “inspiration” and “contribution to global development” (see above). In this vein, the use of such words as “appeal”, “charm” and “soft power” ring strong throughout the report. Xi Jinping promises that during the period of 2020 to 2035 “China’s cultural soft power has grown much stronger; Chinese culture has greater appeal,” leading to China becoming a “global leader in international influence” [3] by 2050.

Hence, the New Era international influence narrative of Xi Jinping contains a triangle of promise of an increase in influence, reporting on the successful delivery on the promise, and providing reassurance that the risks of such an increase have been mitigated.

The New Era party governance narrative

When Hu Jintao spoke on the achievements in Party building in 2007, he was careful to avoid any hints of disruption. He reported in unemotional sentences that the education of Party members had been successful, the democracy within the Party was on the rise, and combating corruption had achieved significant progress.

The subchapter devoted to party building of Xi’s report looks very different from that of Hu. If the name of Hu’s subchapter a decade earlier contained the words “steady advance” [扎实推进], then Xi speaks of “remarkable outcomes” [成效卓著] and innovative solutions that he had introduced five years prior, and how they have yielded outstanding results.

First of all, similarly to the international influence narrative, Xi Jinping stresses the “new” to an extent that a disruption with the previous leadership is evident:

“The achievements of the past five years have touched every area and broken new ground; the changes in China over the past five years have been profound and fundamental. For five years, our Party has demonstrated tremendous political courage and a powerful sense of mission as it has developed new ideas, new thinking, and new strategies, adopted a raft of major principles and policies, launched a host of major initiatives, and pushed ahead with many major tasks. We have solved many tough problems that were long on the agenda but never resolved, and accomplished many things that were wanted but never got done. With this, we have prompted historic shifts in the cause of the Party and the country. These historic changes will have a powerful and far-reaching effect on the development of this cause.” [3]

Secondly, Xi Jinping widens the Party ideology to include his “Chinese dream” and “fine traditional Chinese culture”:

“We have strengthened Party leadership over ideological work and explored new ground in advancing Party related theories. The importance of Marxism as a guiding ideology is better appreciated. Socialism with Chinese characteristics and the Chinese Dream have been embraced by our people. Core socialist values and fine traditional Chinese culture are alive in the people’s hearts.” [3]

Third, Xi Jinping introduces colourful and unorthodox ways of expression, including metaphors, rhythmic elements, and poeticisms on the subjects related to the governing of the Party, including, but not limited to the topic of Party discipline.

Metaphors include: “examining ourselves in the mirror, tidying our attire, taking a bath, and treating our ailments” (坚持照镜子、正衣冠、洗洗澡、治治病的要求); “take out tigers,” “swat flies,” “hunt down foxes” ( “打虎”、“拍蝇”、“猎狐”); rhythmic elements include: 不敢腐的目标初步实现, 不能腐的笼子越扎越牢, 不想腐的堤坝正在构筑。

Both here and elsewhere throughout the Report, the role of such expressive language is twofold. First, it is aimed at creating a strong personal image of the speaker and demonstrating that he is passionate about the topic. Second, it serves the purpose of better communication, ensuring that the main point is understood on the spot.

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The application of such rhetoric instruments possibly has been devised in response to the criticisms of the inexpressive/impersonal and unclear language of Hu Jintao. This approach has proven to be successful, as the metaphors deployed by Xi Jinping were instantly picked up by both the domestic and international media alike and continue to dominate the headlines on China’s battle against corruption.

It should also be noted that in Critical Discourse Analysis studies, which PDA draws from, metaphor in a political text is viewed as “serving to highlight certain aspects of reality and to hide others. As such, the speaker may get to manipulate the worldview that they intend to present via verbal means and the hearer will pick up the communicated worldview in subtle ways.” [14].

Conclusions

After the 2018 Amendments to the Constitution of the PRC were adapted to include the “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”, the centrality and stability of the concept became increasingly clear. This meant that the discursive messaging and the purpose of the “New Era” narrative called for deeper interpretation and research.

The paper concludes that the main task of all three New Era narratives that transpire through Xi Jinping’s 19th Report – the mission narrative, the international influence narrative, and the party governance narrative – is to provide arguments in support of Xi Jinping’s ideological innovation.

The New Era mission narrative serves to solidify the link of the “new” with the tradition of the Chinese Communist Party to avoid accusations of deviation from the Party line, laying foundation for further ideological innovation.

The New Era international influence narrative serves to tackle the feeling of inferiority and contains a triangle of promise of an increase in influence, reporting on the successful delivery on the promise, and providing reassurance that the risks of such an increase have been mitigated as the rise of China is globally accepted, demonstrating outside support to and success of further ideological innovation.

The existence and influence of these narratives serve as an argument towards the claim that the policies of Xi Jinping have been driven by a transformative agenda both domestically and internationally. The analysis also lends proof to the assessment that strengthening the role of the Communist Party has been one of the central tasks, central activities in this context, because a new and reinforced Party would then be geared to provide a solidifying social narrative for the inhabitants of China, and project power and unity internationally.

The New Era party governance narrative changes the way Party governance is discussed, making the leading principles of Party more “user friendly” through colourful metaphors and colloquialisms, demonstrating that the “new” approach allows to admit past mistakes and grants more leeway to how the challenges inside the Party are being
tackled, and widening the scope of the Party core values by including non-controversial aspects of traditional Chinese culture, referred to as “fine traditional Chinese culture” (中华优秀传统文化), and a more relaxed outlook on wealth distribution.

**References**