

China's Leaders from Mao to Now, with David Shambaugh

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James Gethyn Evans:

Welcome to the Harvard on China Podcast. My name is James Gethyn Evans here at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. Today, I'm joined by Professor David Shambaugh, the Gaston Sigur Professor of Asian Studies and Political Science and International Affairs, and director of the Elliott School of International Affairs China Policy Program at George Washington University. Professor Shambaugh is a field defining scholar, a former editor of China Quarterly, former director of The Asia Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a non-resident fellow at Brookings Institute and formally serving in the US Department of State and National Security Council to name a few. Professor Shambaugh is widely regarded as one of the foremost experts on the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. He's the author of more than 30 books, including his latest book, China's Leaders from Mao to Now, published with Polity Press.

James Gethyn Evans:

So Professor Shambaugh, thank you for being with us here today on the Harvard on China Podcast.

David Shambaugh:

My pleasure, James. Good to see you.

James Gethyn Evans:

So your book, before we start, is dedicated to the late Professor Roderick MacFarquhar, who is the former director of the Fairbank Center and known to many in the China studies field. Why did you decide to dedicate this book to him and what kind of influence did he have on your scholarship?

David Shambaugh:

Well, Rod has had a long standing influence on my scholarship and myself, I would say since we first met in, I think 1978 or 1979, when Rod was researching the first volume of his trilogy on the Cultural Revolution. At that time he was a visiting scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center here in Washington. And that's when we first met and had a couple of lunches and I subsequently went to the University of Michigan for my own PhD studies. And I remember he came out to Ann Arbor a couple of times at the invitation of Michael Oxenberg, who was my principal advisor and mentor there, together with Allen Whiting and Ken Lieberthal. So I interacted with Rod as a graduate student. But really, I must say my interactions with him were after he moved to Harvard from London. I went in the opposite direction.

David Shambaugh:

Interestingly enough, a little bit later, then he came to Cambridge, I went to London and began my almost decade long stint at SOAS, School of Oriental and African Studies where I started off as a junior lecturer and then became a senior lecturer and then what they call a reader in Chinese politics in the University of London. But during that same period, I was appointed at a very rather young age. I think I was a senior lecturer at the time as the editor of the China Quarterly, which was then, and is still, and always has been published by SOAS.

David Shambaugh:

Now, Rod of course, was the founder of the China Quarterly, 1960. And all editors, at least of the China Quarterly have a paternal approach to their journal. And certainly if you're the founding father of the journal as Rod was, he had a paternal approach. I think I was at that time, maybe the fourth editor, David Wilson, John Giddings, Brian hook, and then myself. So Rod was very kind and very... He reached out to me when I moved to London. First of all, he gave me advice on key personalities in British academia and in British government, even suggested neighborhoods I should look forward to live in and buy a flat. I recall he suggested Hampstead, but that was a little bit beyond my financial reach, so I wound up in West Hampstead.

David Shambaugh:

I was an American new to the UK and to British academe, which has of course its own peculiarities. And so he was very helpful privately telling me about things to look out for. But then when I was appointed as editor of the China Quarterly he made a particular effort, first of all, to have me to Cambridge there in Massachusetts and introduce me to the community of China scholars at Harvard. It was always traditional by the way, for the editor of the China Quarterly to make an inaugural trip to North America, to meet the American sinological community.

David Shambaugh:

Well, as an American, I didn't really need to meet them. Some people, I was familiar with a number of them, but not all. So I made my editorial trip across the pond, as the British would say, starting though in Cambridge. And Rod convened a lovely dinner in the faculty club and an afternoon long seminar with different faculty members and graduate students. So I don't want to indulge in too many memories, but the point is he was very mentoring during my five years as editor, including the 35th anniversary of the journal when we convened all the former editors who were all alive at the time in London and had a public symposium and published a special issue with reminiscences of the journal and reminiscences of China during each of our editorships.

David Shambaugh:

So that was a great moment and we have a great photograph actually with a cake that looks like the cover of the China Quarterly and all of our hands are on the knife cutting the cake, but Rod's of course is in the center. He was never my teacher directly, but he certainly was indirectly, and he was very mentoring, as I say. I would also just mention the fact that he held extremely high standards of scholarship and empiricism and I've always tried to hold the same sorts of standards. And he just had an encyclopedic mind, unbelievable. He would lecture, of course, with no notes in front of him, his rice paddies course, and his Cultural Revolution course at Harvard are famous, legion for speaking and not just charismatically, but without a single note in front of him.

David Shambaugh:

Well, he carried all that information around in his head. And I remember he took me to task once or twice for some statement I'd written or made. There was one case in 1956 or 1955 or something when I said Luo Ruiqing, who was then minister of public security had admitted so many people had been killed in the Contra Revolutionary Campaign and he corrected me because the digit was slightly wrong. It was six rather than five. But it's that kind of meticulousness and empiricism that I think all scholars really should be held to. So that was instructive to me.

David Shambaugh:

Rod was also fascinated by the internecine strife of Chinese politics and leaders. He was really interested in the backstabbing, the maneuvering, the undercutting, the various tactics that they would use vis-a-vis each other and the sheer capriciousness really, and brutality of the system. I have to say, as fascinated by that dimension as he was, I'm more... we can get into this in the conversation, I've been interested in leaders my entire academic career, but I've also been very much more interested in institutions and the policy process and bureaucracies. So anyway, I really look up to Rod and I'm so sad that he passed away, and I was at the memorial service there in Cambridge. It was a very, very moving event. And obviously the turnout just was testimony to how much everybody revered him and will continue to revere him. So I thought it was only appropriate writing a book about Chinese leaders that I dedicated to his memory.

James Gethyn Evans:

Yeah. And I love that you mentioned Rod as a mentor. So he wasn't formally your teacher, but in a mentor position. And I think many people who met Rod will share a similar sentiment about, he took everyone under his wing and was incredibly encouraging. So we certainly miss him at the Fairbank Center. And so you mentioned the book which is about the five most prominent leaders of the People's Republic of China since its founding in 1949. Why did you decide to write this book? And I should note during lockdown of the past few years as COVID-19 has ravaged North America, for some of us, we sat in sweat pants the whole of lockdown and here you are writing and publishing a book. What was that experience like?

David Shambaugh:

Well, I have to say that this topic and this book has been brewing in my brain for literally my entire career, going back to the late 1970s when I first started studying Chinese politics, I have always had an interest in leadership. I'm one of these Zhongyang level scholars. I very much care what goes on inside the ring roads in Beijing, and I care much less, or I'm less interested, I should say, in what goes on in the country in China. So that was true in the late 1970s, when I was an undergraduate at George Washington University studying under Harold Hinton, who was another one of these elites centric, China scholars, one of Rod's contemporaries. In fact, somebody Rod held in high esteem. And Washington, certainly during that time, the height of the Cold War was very obsessed with leadership politics and all communist systems, including the Chinese system.

David Shambaugh:

So my introduction to the study of Chinese politics started in the Zhongnanhai. That was as an undergraduate and that continued during my graduate school as well. Although as we can get into this too. As I say, when I got to the University of Michigan, I really began to look much more consciously and seriously at institutions rather than just individuals. My professor and mentor there, Michael Oxenberg took me out to lunch the very first day on campus. He said David, if you're going to understand China, you have to understand bureaucracy. And he sent me off in a series of directed reading courses and a couple of organizational theory classes and other things to understand Chinese bureaucracy. So we can come back to that subject, but you ask about what motivated this book and I've literally been studying it and teaching it for over four decades. So you can't just sit down during a pandemic and manufacture a 430 page book.

David Shambaugh:

So I had just finished my previous book *Where Great Powers Meet: America and China in Southeast Asia* came out in just January of this year, six or seven months ago. That took about three years to reach fruition. Oxford University Press is far slower in production than Polity Press. Polity got this book out in six months from delivery of manuscript to publication. And I can commend Polity to all your listeners. It's a great press. This is the second book I've done with them. They're a small-ish niche press based in

Cambridge, England, not Cambridge, Massachusetts, but they're fabulous. And they have a great team to work with.

David Shambaugh:

So the editor there published my previous book China's Future had been after me to write another one. And so when the pandemic broke and I had finished my Southeast Asia book, I thought, this is the time to sit down and write this China leaders book. And as I say, you can't write a book about 70 years of leaders off the top of your head. So I like to think of it that I had 40 years of research and teaching. And I dug out a lot of my teaching notes and lot of the materials I had and when the pandemic erupted, I thought, okay, what can I write during this time? And sat down and retreated to my family cottage in Northern Michigan for four months of it and wrote this book. It took nine months of writing from start to finish. As I say, because I'd done the research, I've been teaching it and I had the materials, I had to go back and check. I'd forgotten a number of things, and I wish that Rod had been alive to ask him what about this party plenum or that factional struggle or this purge, or that event.

David Shambaugh:

I had to go back and unearth data that I'd forgotten about or didn't even know about. But most of it, it was in my brain. It was just a matter of sitting down and collating it and writing it.

James Gethyn Evans:

Yeah. I think one of the things I enjoyed most about the book was taking incredibly complex topics and making them very accessible. So for somebody who doesn't know much about the Chinese political system, this book is a really great introduction to that topic. For someone who doesn't know much about Chinese leaders, it really helps lay out what's at stake for each of them. You talk about these five prominent leaders. And I say prominent because not all of them held the same position formally within the Chinese Communist Party. And one of the ways that you explain it in a very accessible way is to give each of them labels. So you label Mao as a populist tyrant, Deng as a pragmatic Leninist, Jiang Zemin as a bureaucratic politician, Hu as a technocratic apparatchik, and Xi Jinping as a modern emperor. When you were coming up with these categorizations, what was the process behind their labels?

David Shambaugh:

Right. Well, first of all, I wanted to write a book, as you say, that was accessible to the public and to students. I like to think that this might be a useful volume in the classroom because it's not just about the individual leaders but about their times as well. So this is a history, it's a political history to be sure, it's also an economic history, certain extent I think you could say it's even as social, military and foreign relations history. So I write about all those different domains in the context of each leader, and I wanted to make it readable and accessible. I mean, one has to say to Rod's writings were just dense. I mean, the amount of detail was just overwhelming and that's what distinguished it. The footnotes were longer than the text or as long as the text in many of his books.

David Shambaugh:

And they were really written for other scholars, I have to say, and they're the gold standard. We all really read the trilogy and the Cultural Revolution and the book he did with Michael Schoenhals on the Cultural Revolution and his others all the way back to his Hundred Flowers volume, and that's just a scholarly gold standard. But I didn't want to get into that level of primary source research and footnoting. I wanted to write a more accessible volume but with the empirical data. So the footnotes are a mixture of secondary and primary materials. So I just had to say that. But you ask about the labels I give these five leaders; Mao, Deng, Jiang, Hu, and Xi. So you've already given the labels to listeners.

David Shambaugh:

Mao, I call a populist tyrant because of what we associate today, and especially after Donald Trump with the term populism. And in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the globe, we've just been through a period, hopefully past tense of populist authoritarianism. But populism or another term that scholars use for voluntourism, it is an appeal to the mass public, the downtrodden and the dispossessed and the disaffected elements of a society in particular. That's who Mao appealed to in China, the rural peasantry of course most notably, but other elements of society in the urban proletariat as well.

David Shambaugh:

Mao was a deeply anti-elitist politician who repeatedly appealed straight to the masses and would try and mobilize them, I should say, through his campaigns, the yundong. One yundong after another characterized Mao's era. He would mobilize the masses against the state. He didn't use the state against the masses so much, certainly not after 1956, but he used the masses against the state repeatedly. He had an innate faith in them in their voluntourist agency, you might say. He distrusted institutions, he distrusted elites, and this led to his views about revisionism. He wanted to transform Chinese society, normatively, culturally, behaviorally, and the institutions would get corrupted in that process, he believed. So he leapfrogged the institutions, the bureaucracies and appeals repeatedly straight to the masses. So that's why I call him a populist.

David Shambaugh:

He was also very much a revolutionary in, I would argue the Trotskyite variety. He saw perpetual revolution and the export of it. You James are in fact writing your own PhD dissertation about the export of Maoist revolutions abroad during the sixties and the seventies. So that was also populous. To be a revolutionary, you have to be a populist. And then I would note, why do I call him a tyrant? So I call him a populous tyrant. Well, he was a tyrant of global historical proportions. He's up there in the league of Hitler and Stalin, if not more so. Many more Chinese died under his rule than did under Hitler's rule or Stalin's rule or Pol Pot in Cambodia, tens of millions, somewhere between 40 and 50 million Chinese died as a result of his policies directly or indirectly. I don't know about tens of millions, but countless millions, others were persecuted by him and took their own lives and were stigmatized. He was a despot and a tyrant extraordinary.

David Shambaugh:

So these two elements are in fact, somewhat contradictory. You appeal to the people, but you're despotic really towards the elites, interestingly enough. I mean, the Great Leap Forward, which took most of those 50 million lives, if you believe Frank Dikötter's research, 40 million perished in that campaign. So those were contradictory elements of his rule. But I think his lasting legacy has to be said is mixed, but overwhelmingly negative, certainly after 1956. So that's that's why I call him a populous tyrant.

David Shambaugh:

Moving more quickly, maybe through the others. Deng Xiaoping I call a pragmatic Leninist. I think those are self-evident terms. We all associate pragmatism with Deng Xiaoping and his famous statement, it doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice, it's a good cat. He wanted to get things done and he didn't want ideology or other things really standing in his way. So we all know about the eighties and the reforms. He was a highly pragmatic leader, but he was also very much a Leninist. And he believed in ruling through institutions, quite unlike Mao, who just wanted to either circumvent or attack and destroy institutions, which is what the Cultural Revolution was all about. Deng had come up in his career working through the Leninist operat as the general secretary of the party in the mid 1950s, and then

certainly in the period '62 to '65 when Mao "retired to the second line" and Deng and Liu Shaoqi and Chen Yun had to put Humpty Dumpty back together again after the catastrophe of the Great Leap.

David Shambaugh:

So anyway Deng had to do that again when he took over after Mao's death. Mao died in 1976, he took over in '78 and he did all kinds of things, but he had to rebuild quite literally the institutional apparatus of the party and the state and the military for that matter. So that's why I call him a Leninist. He was a real organization man in the truest Leninist sense, and he rebuilt it and then he ruled through it, but he didn't want the organizations to become captured by factions or impede the reforms that he was implementing. He understood that bureaucracies and institutions have a natural way in any system to block initiatives. So that was a trick for him to try and finesse. So that's why I call him a pragmatic Leninist.

David Shambaugh:

Jiang is a man I call it bureaucratic politician. Well, this is interesting because he was catapulted to the top of the system in 1989 June, right after the massacre of June 4th. He had been the party secretary in Shanghai just prior to that and before that the mayor in Shanghai. But when he was brought to the top by Deng with the acquiescence of Chen Yun and Song Ping and Wang Zhen and other senior elderly gerontocrats who were in control at the time, they could all agree on Jiang Zemin might be a good figure. Whether they thought of him as a long lasting leader or a transitional leader, who knows. But it turns out he ruled for 13 years. I think many foreigners analysts when he was promoted, the first reaction was who is this guy?

James Gethyn Evans:

Who comes next?

David Shambaugh:

Yeah. And then the next reaction was, well, he's not going to last long. This is Hua Guofeng 2.0, and he'll last a couple of years and they'll shove him aside and somebody else will emerge. Well, it turns out Jiang Zemin lasted 13 years in power and he wasn't ready to go when they finally did forcibly retire him, I would argue, beyond the retirement age. So question is, how did he last for 13 years in power? That's no mean trick in that system. Deng Xiaoping didn't rule for 13 years. So I argue, the reason I call him a bureaucratic politician is because he drew on his own background as a bureaucrat, and he turned that to his political advantage. So what do I mean by that?

David Shambaugh:

So Chinese politics, it may be a one party dictatorship but it still has different constituencies throughout the country, geographic, factional, institutional, patronage networks, bureaucratic and others. I argue in the book that Jiang adopted a bureaucratic approach, namely that he'd worked his entire career in the industrial bureaucracies. This is not a man in fact, who worked his way up through the party system. Yes, he was a party member, but until the late eighties, he didn't hold a party position. I think it was when he was assigned party secretary of the ministry of electronics was his first actual party position. Prior to that, he was entirely on the state side. So this is the only Chinese leader of the five I look at whose career came up through the government, not really through the party. In terms of work, again, he was party member and then he after the late eighties held one or two party positions, but the point is he understood bureaucracy, he understood this table of organization of the state council. He understood how to mobilize bureaucratic support, within bureaucracies and across them.

David Shambaugh:

And the best way in any bureaucracy to mobilize support is to basically support what they ask for and then give them the resources to accomplish it. It's very interesting. In the chapter I wrote about Jiang Zemin, in the first two years really of his rule, he very systematically went through every bureaucracy in the state council and the military and the party, every units, that is to say every bumen, every department within the systems. And listened to them, gave speeches to them, and then I argue, adopted their aspirations, their missions, their programs, and did what any smart politician, any system will do, shower them with money, give them resources to accomplish their mission. So it's a Tip O'Neill approach you might say, or I don't know. It's not just unique to China, quite to the contrary, pork barrel politics with Chinese characteristics, you might call it.

David Shambaugh:

Jiang Zemin excelled at that. And that I argue is what really cemented his position. He was very weak when he came to the top, he had no ties to other leaders, he had no ties to the military, he had no real geographic power base except the Shanghai region. But this strategy of his was very astute strategically and tactically and I argue is what propelled him for 13 years in power now.

David Shambaugh:

Now, Hu Jintao as you mentioned, I describe him as a technocratic apparatchik. Well, he's a technocrat due to his training and engineering at Tsinghua University. Indeed Jiang Zemin was a technocrat as well, also engineering at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. So this whole intermediate period after Deng is characterized by technocratic rule. A lot of other scholars have written about that. So Hu was trained in the hydroelectric field and was in fact after graduation, after one year of teaching at Tsinghua, the first year of the Cultural Revolution, by the way, which is one of the gaps in the book. I'm sure there are many gaps in the book that is a little unclear what happened to him during the Cultural Revolution. I haven't been able to really ascertain what happened to Hu Jintao in '66, '67. That's one of the times I wish Rod was around to ask. I'm sure he would have had the answer.

David Shambaugh:

But anyway, he gets sent off after that year to far away Gansu province where he works for a few years in the hydroelectric industry out there before meeting the then party secretary Song Ping. And Song Ping becomes his lifelong or career long and major patron. It's Song Ping who first brings him to the attention of Deng Xiaoping, for example. And Deng Xiaoping is the one who anoints Hu Jintao as Jiang Zemin successor, when Deng Xiaoping is still alive and Jiang Zemin is just in the first few years of his rule. So Jiang Zemin rules his entire 13 years constrained by the fact that he knows who his successor is going to be, Hu Jintao. And I argue in the book that Hu Jintao did not use those 13 years very effectively at all in building his own power base. He could have. But when he got to the top, he didn't really have a power base either outside the party system, which is why I call him an apparatchik. So technocratic in training, apparatchik in career path. He spent his entire career in the party xitong. It's called party system, different in propaganda, organization work.

David Shambaugh:

At the party school, he was a student there. And so he understood the party system and he's just an organizations man, or a quintessential cadre. A cadres cadre you might say. He didn't really stand out, but that may have been one of his assets in fact, but he certainly had lacked in personality, I think it's fair to say. He's widely dismissed as just being a really bland figure. The cliché at the time was who's Hu? Where is this guy's personality? The adjectives that are frequently used to describe Hu Jintao are wooden, stiff, never smiles, and that's all true. Although I have a photograph of me meeting him and he's actually smiling. I have it here on my shelf.

David Shambaugh:

But no, this is not a charismatic leader, Hu Jintao. He was just a apparatchik, and he's dismissed for having been ineffective. Fact, when he stepped down after 10 years, he and Wen Jiabao, who was the premier during that period were both criticized for having presided over so-called 10 lost years. That's the phrase that Chinese used, not just foreigner. I think that's unfair, frankly, that description 10 lost years. The two of them launched a number of reformed policies and social policy, party reform foreign policy during their first term, the first five years, but they failed to implement it. The second five years were a failure. These initiatives just fizzled out.

David Shambaugh:

So Hu Jintao, one thing he did not understand was bureaucracy. He could have taken tutorial from Jiang Zemin about how to get policies implemented and to use bureaucracies into co-op bureaucracies. So it's an oddity. This is a guy who worked his entire career in a bureaucracy, but it was the party bureaucracy. So when it came to the policies, he and Wen Jiabao returning to institute, that required government bureaucracies to do so. And he didn't really understand that. So as well-intended as these reforms were, and there was a distinct attempt to shift emphasis away from the coastal bias and growth at all costs economic policies with Jiang Zemin to a more socially conscious agenda of social equality, social justice, improving basic living standards, alleviating poverty, environmental protection anti-corruption and a whole number of things that were lumped under the title, the scientific mode of development. That was Hu Jintao's lasting contribution, the scientific mode of development.

David Shambaugh:

Anyway, they fizzled out. They were well-intended. There was a corrective, you might say, to the Jiang Zemin period, but they didn't really get implemented. And as a result, social inequality continued to widen during the Hu period and corruption became even more endemic and systemic. That's why I guess people are really critical of him when he left office. But I think as time passes, his period may look better in retrospect. His tenure was noteworthy for stability, predictability, and incremental improvements in many areas, including foreign policy and across the Taiwan Strait, I would note. There were no relations across the Taiwan Strait before Hu Jintao came to power. And he and Ma Ying-jeou put them in place.

David Shambaugh:

He reoriented Chinese foreign policy from a northern foreign policy to a global south foreign policy, a much more omnidirectional foreign policy, away from the United States and even away from Russia. Jiang Zemin was fixated on relations with Moscow and Washington. Well, Hu Jintao reembraced, rediscovered the global south and multilateralism. So there were some significant changes, I think, in Hu Jintao's foreign policy. Anyway, with the passage of time, I don't know if historians will look better upon Hu Jintao's period than when he left office.

David Shambaugh:

Lastly, sorry, James, you asked a complicated question; why do I describe these leaders as I do? Well, I describe our friend Xi Jinping as a modern emperor. He rules China during modern times, but in ways reminiscent of China's historical emperors, all powerful, regal, fairly aloof, respected, indeed feared, sycophantically revered personality cult, extreme, in singular control of all the organs of state and military power, a believer in China's greatness, but promoter of its imperial past and tolerable of insubordination and descent, a proponent of ethical behavior, which all emperors were supposed to be, Wangdao. And the setter of ideological doctrine and interpreter of the past.

David Shambaugh:

So these are traditional roles that imperial emperors had to perform, and he's very much in that mold, I see, but in the 21st century. He's also trying to turn China's economy and technology into world-class standards. And China is global power. The way he rules is the reason I call him an emperor, the manner in which he rules, it just happens to be in modern times. So we can go into each of these five, including Xi Jinping further if you're interested, but those are the reasons I describe each of them as I do.

James Gethyn Evans:

Yeah. Well, thank you for a fabulous answer to a complicated question. I think one of the key points that really comes out in the book is how much each of these individuals' backgrounds really does influence a lot of their ideas, their policy positions. You talk about how different leaders go through this process at slightly different times in their lives. For some it's their twenties, some it's their thirties and forties. What are the main themes that you're seeing in terms of how background influences leadership? We have not that much to go on with some of the leaders in terms of their background, but it does seem to have a very strong influence on Chinese leaders in a way that influences policy quite directly.

David Shambaugh:

Yeah. Well, studies of leaders in the world generally all try to explore and ascertain the connection between their youth in particular, their so-called childhood and pre-adult socialization and the way they rule. This is intrinsic to biographical research and political science research on leadership, is you try and figure out what happened to somebody before they reached the top and how does that influence how they behave once they got to the top? So in the case of Chinese leaders, we have a problem, namely information or lack of it and data. The Chinese system is secretive on many levels, but when it comes to personal background, family issues, schooling, what happened to somebody when, there's just not much to go on. And then of course they try and build false, hate you graphic narrative around their leaders. So there's a data problem.

David Shambaugh:

And then secondly, there is this attempt when you study a leader to try and make those linkages. As I say, between the period before they became a leader, and then subsequently. Now, these five I look at, frankly I didn't find a lot of linkages between the way they ruled after getting to the top. And what happened to them before they got to the top. In a couple of cases, yes, certainly Mao. Let's start with Mao. The whole first chapter is a discourse on leadership studies and the way to think about leadership in the Chinese context normatively. And I talk in that chapter a little bit about the backgrounds of these individuals.

David Shambaugh:

So Mao, yes, we all know he had a terrible relationship with his father. It's been argued for a long time, beginning with the biographies by Lucian Pye, another former fixture in Cambridge and at the Fairbank Center and at MIT. Terribly, terribly insightful sinologist, that Mao's relationship with his father drove his revolutionary passions. Richard Solomon wrote a huge book based on all this. So yes, no, I think that's true. Mao's anti-authoritarianism, his anti-elitism born very much out of his experiences at home with his father, but also once he went off to high school and then subsequently. The other element of Mao is he hated intellectuals, but he inspired to being one himself. He just attacked them relentlessly throughout his career once he became the leader, but he fancy being an intellectual and reading and himself. So you can see that early on in his teenage years and you see it all the way through his period in the Zhongnanhai, where he's reading the Shiji and all kinds of ancient Chinese texts. So there are some linkages in Mao's case.

David Shambaugh:

Deng Xiaoping, no. I didn't find any connection between Deng's pre-leadership experiences growing up and in France and in Moscow, and even in the fifties and what kind of leader he became after 1978. I suppose the only indicator of that is how he ruled in the '62 to '65 period and the post Great Leap recovery. That's the prototype for the reforms of the eighties. What Chen Yun and he, and Liu Shaoqi and others put together in '62 through '65 was a complete template blueprint for what then they revisited and reimplemented in the post '78 period. It's before the Cultural Revolution intervened. They went to back to the file drawer, opened it up, pulled out the file, blew off the dust and said where were we before 14 years ago in the Cultural Revolution. So yes, there's a linkage there, but otherwise I don't see any linkages between Deng's personal past and his policies.

David Shambaugh:

Jiang Zemin, a little bit of linkage. Jiang Zemin is the only one I would say is a real intellectual in terms of his schooling. And he approached policy in a very intellectual disciplined empirical kind of way, I would argue. And there may be a linkage there between his training and Yangzhou in Shanghai and the kind of leader he became.

David Shambaugh:

Hu Jintao, is there connection between his youth? To the extent that we know about it, he was raised by an aunt. His father died when he was 14, I think. Sorry, his mother died when he was 14. His father was always away as a tea merchant traveling through the lower Yangtze valley region. And so there was no nuclear family. In fact, very interestingly, of all of these five leaders, the only one who had approximation of a nuclear family experience at home was Jiang Zemin. Every one of them came from a broken home, you might say. Parents died. Parents were in Xi Jinping's case, imprisoned or the kids individual left. I think Mao left home at 15, Deng Xiaoping left home at 16, Xi Jinping also at 16. If you're looking for connections between families and homes and teenage years and the kind of leaders these people become, you don't find them.

David Shambaugh:

Xi Jinping. So he was sent off to the countryside when he was 16 or 17 to Shaoxing. He spent seven years or something out there. Grew a deep appreciation for the difficulties of rural life. And you still see some elements of that in his leadership style, at the least of which is his Poverty Alleviation Initiative and now his common prosperity initiative. He was down to the countryside youth program that Mao initiated in the Cultural Revolution. Well, Xi Jinping's case, it worked. That's exactly why Mao sent these urban youth down to the countryside. And Xi Jinping, I think does have a significant understanding of that. Of course that continued when he was a subprovincial official subsequently. But anyway, long story short, I don't find a lot of connection in any of these five individuals between their pre-leadership years and then how they behaved once they're in power.

James Gethyn Evans:

Yeah. There's some interesting work going on at the moment about succession and leaders. So in particular, I'm thinking of Joseph Torigian's work at American University on this exact topic. I want to ask you some questions about the constraints faced by leaders, especially these five in particular. And you mentioned a few of them as we've been talking about the leaders. One is constraint of the party or the state, another is the institutions that the individual is often battling against, and the third is the system that they are always inheriting. Even though Mao Zedong is founding the PRC, he's still inheriting the system that's come from the Republican-Era and the Late Qing and so on. Let's start with the party or state question. Briefly, a lot of people think of China as a party state that is collapsing between... there's no distinction between the Communist Party of China and the state or the government. What is your understanding of the actual distinction that exists between the two?

David Shambaugh:

Well, it's changed over time. It's a very good question, James. It's changed over time. In Marx's theory or at least Chinese Marx's theory, it's the party that's supposed to basically set the line, they call the luxian or the general direction, the fangzhen for the nation and for the party, of course. And it's left to the government to implement the line and the direction and make it into policy, the zhengce. So the Chinese distinguish between those three things direction, line, and policy. And it's the latter policy, that falls to the government. So government is an administrative and a regulatory institution, in my view, if you look at the state council and their counterparts at the provincial level. So that's one distinction is a division of labor between the two.

David Shambaugh:

And secondly, I would note that in the late eighties, there was an attempt to separate the two; party and government under Zhao Ziyang. When Zhao Ziyang first was premier, he initiated this. And then when he became the general secretary of the party, he continued it. Policy was known as dang zheng fenkai, to separate the party and government. And that was consistent with Deng Xiaoping's own beliefs, that the party was two interventionist into the economy and into elements of social life and behavior and even intellectual life and thought. So Deng gave the green light and said this is what's retarded... amongst the other things that has retarded China's development during the Maoist period was an excessively interventionist party that controlled everything. Well, that's the way totalitarian political party systems function. That's why they're called totalitarian. And Deng tried to transition to an authoritarian system and relatively withdraw... the keyword word there is relatively, withdraw the party from the economy and society and let the state administer and let actual enterprises administer, let managers and enterprise make the decisions about how much to produce and how to produce it and how to sell it.

David Shambaugh:

So that was a unique period, the late 70s, Zhao Ziyang's separation of partying government policy. And similar, he also initiated an ADA right towards the very end of his time, his separation of party and military policy, dang zheng fenkai. And that's something that Gorbachev had been doing in the Soviet Union that seemed to inspire Zhao. And the belief was the People's Liberation Army is what we call a dǎng zhèng, a party army. It's loyal to the party. It's not loyal to the nation. It doesn't serve the state council, it doesn't serve the state. Yes, it serves the nation, but at the parties behest. That's a very different model from the Turkish Ottoman or the Western model.

David Shambaugh:

So Zhao was of the view in the late eighties that the military too needed to be professionalized. That meant in his view, depoliticized along the western model. Well, after June 4th, not only did party army separation come to a screeching halt, but so did party government separation. So that was the end of that policy explicitly. And so I would say since '89, up until the Xi period, there was a uneasy, uncertainty really about the role of the government. How much leeway should the government have separate from the party? And basically, the party continued to give the government administrative distance in order to administer their functional domains in whatever field it was and didn't really interfere.

David Shambaugh:

Well, under Xi Jinping that has completely reversed. The party is now back in charge of everything. And if you look at, in particular, at the administrative institutional reforms at the National People's Congress in 2018, you see the party now reinserted into every sphere of economic social activity and the military to be sure as well. So we have come full circle. China's flirted with separation of party and government, de jure and de facto. But under Xi Jinping, oh no, this is all about the party. The party controls all east, west,

north, south, I think he says in his speech, the party controls all. So that's a good question, but the government in the current time does not have a lot of agency and autonomy.

James Gethyn Evans:

Yeah. And that seems to be very much a trend that's accelerating even as we speak towards the institutions that would otherwise have constrained an individual really and co-opted to carry out the individuals will in the case of Xi Jinping. In terms of systems that they've inherited as well, I think there's increasingly work on how policies that we associate with say the Xi Jinping era were started under Hu or even Jiang and are inherited from earlier periods of China's contemporary past. To what extent does an inherited mandate and inherited system constrain the leader's choices in terms of what they want to do in their vision for China?

David Shambaugh:

It's a very good question. I argue in the book and I think that institutions don't change and norms don't really change in perhaps any system, but certainly in the Chinese systems. And again, in the first chapter of the book, I lay out the normative framework in which all Chinese leaders have to operate. I won't take the time now to go through all that. But I argue that those are constraints, the types of Lenin's institution. The way the Chinese Communist Party state is organized... First of all, it's not Chinese, it's Soviet. I teach all my students on day one of class this week, for example, we just started our semester. You want to understand Chinese communist politics, you have to understand the Soviet Union. And I still believe that to this day, this is a cloned Soviet system in China. And I think scholars or students of China, if you don't understand that, and you look at it as a kind of sui generis Chinese system, you're really missing a lot.

David Shambaugh:

So there's a whole institutional architecture, organizational chart of the party and the government and the military, all of which frankly is taken from the Soviet Union and has been tinkered with a little bit over the years by China. But this is still in essence, in my view, a profoundly institutionally Soviet system. So that constrains leaders, they have to operate within the institutions of the system. And normatively institutions produce norms too. And there's a long discussion of that in the first chapter. So generally speaking, I think all these leaders after Mao, Mao didn't accept the institutions. He didn't accept a lot of the norms after 1956. And that's what characterized his last 20 years in power.

David Shambaugh:

In the case of Xi Jinping, what I was going to say is that I think I would slightly disagree with your point about continuity amongst leaders in that system. It takes a lot to change a system like that. It's like trying to move an ocean liner a fraction of a degree in the ocean, in any system. Deng Xiaoping did. During the 1980s he moved the ocean liner, and he changed normatively the way the party related to society, to the economy, the norms and the institutions of the party institutionalization. And here I have to say I disagree with my friend and colleague Joseph Fewsmith's recent book, which argues that there was never any institutionalization. Well, Joe, if you, and in fact, you do argue in your first chapter, that one way to define institutions is normatively. Well, if one does look at normative behavior in Chinese communist politics post Mao, I would argue that there's been a lot of institutionalization, if you define it normatively. But where I think Joe and I would agree has to do with Xi Jinping.

David Shambaugh:

Xi Jinping has rolled back, reversed, undermined, abandoned, pick your adjective, a number of these norms that began with Deng but continued through Jiang and Hu, everything from the retirement and succession norms. He's thrown those out to the way the party relates to the state, to the so-called inner

party democracy, which they still pay lip service to. I just read some recent document that CCP put out this week on their political system and they still give lip service to dang nei minzhu, inner party democracy. Well, that was taken quite seriously during the Hu Jintao period, and xieshang minzhu, consultative democracy. Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, if you read the book, I argue both of them were very progressive. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. And the one thing that they shared in common, the most progressive element of all, was a man, called Zeng Qinghong.

David Shambaugh:

Zeng Qinghong I give five stars to. I think I am different than my colleagues, other Chinese politics scholars, who don't see Jiang as the great political reformer that I do, but I see him as having instituted profound stealthy reforms. He couldn't call them political reforms. In fact, I was talking to a former member of the central party apparatus not so long ago and was told that post '89, they couldn't use the word zhengzhi gaige, party reform or political reform. They had to use dangjian, party building. But under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, there are a whole number of reforms, consultative democracy, interparty democracy, actual voting, multiple candidates for party level positions, intellectual ideological changes.

David Shambaugh:

If you look at the substance of the Jiang and the Hu periods when Zeng Qinghong was in charge, which ended in 2008, when he had to retire, that was a very progressive period. The Fourth Plenum of the 13th Central Committee, read the communicate from that Plenum and then the speech given by Zeng Qinghong the next day about the lessons to be learned from the Soviet collapse for China. Very progressive. Sorry. Xi Jinping has rolled all that back, completely undermined the Deng, Jiang and Hu political institutionalization and has made it into the kind of one party, sorry, not just one party, a one person party and singular leader dictatorship, and a number of other things. So he's really de-institutionalized the system. There Joe Fewsmith and I think are probably on the same page. So I guess that's what I would say about that question.

James Gethyn Evans:

So what does Xi Jinping de-institutionalization mean for the future of China's leaders? If everything is now about Xi the institutionalization is gone, it's all about him as a person, he's got rid of term limits, we're likely to see him around for a while. What does this look like for the next person post Xi, or even for the latter half of Xi's reign?

David Shambaugh:

Well, I don't think it's good for the Chinese political system. Deng, is probably rolling over in his grave. And I don't know how Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin and Zeng Qinghong feel about it and I suspect they're not too very happy. And there are a number of individuals inside the party who are not happy with the way that Xi has ruled and the kind of reversion to the pre Deng era. In fact, Rod did write about this and he and I spoke about it. The similarities between the Maoist era and the Xi Jinping era. Now, obviously there are differences too, major ones, but there are considerable similarities in the way that the two men are ruling. So I would argue that that is not good for the qua system and as a country.

David Shambaugh:

In the short run, there's no doubt Xi Jinping has strengthened the party. He came to power at a time when there was a lot of atrophy in the party, to use a phrase that's used in academia to study authoritarian regimes. Atrophy is a process of piecemeal incremental deterioration. These regimes don't implode overnight the Soviet Union didn't implode overnight. The GDR didn't implode overnight. The atrophy

over time and then there's a trigger that finally brings these systems down. That's a very important point to remember. And when Xi Jinping came to power, he looked around and they had finished doing their post-mortem assessment of the Soviet collapse, and sure enough, Chinese Communist Party had a number of elements that were similar. So Xi Jinping has really, it's remarkable in eight years, he's set about to correct those elements of atrophy, I would say, beginning with the corruption, but a lot of other things too.

David Shambaugh:

So that's, you might say, the good news from their perspective. They've restrengthened, restabilized the party and given it new life. Like plants, you have to water the plant if it's going to grow. Parties don't just continue without new water. And so in Xi Jinping's case, he's done a lot of watering and he has strengthened the party in the short term. But to your question, I think he's actually weakened it in the long term, and that is not only dangerous for the party, but for the country, because now we don't have these institutionalized procedures in place. My guess is though, James, if Xi were to have a black swan event or a health event, or leave power tomorrow for some reason, the system would snap back to the Dengist, Jiangist, Huist types of institutionalized norms and procedures that we've known for the last 30 years prior to the Xi Jinping period. Kind of like it snapped back under Deng once Mao died, after 20 years of de-institutionalization under Mao. Sure enough.

David Shambaugh:

So these procedures and these institutions are there, the political culture is there. I think now the expectations on the part of the populace are there. So if Xi Jinping were to leave power sooner rather than later, my guess is that we'd see a reversion to the kinds of more progressive modes of rule that we saw presently. But the longer he stays in power, the more he's stressing the system, is my view. I think it doesn't mean it's going to collapse tomorrow, but he's stressing it. And the repression is another subject, but it's indicative of insecurity, not security. So we can talk about that if you like. But I think in the short term, we can say yes, under Xi Jinping, the party is in stronger position, but I think he's endangering it in the medium and long term.

James Gethyn Evans:

I have a final question about the book's place in public debates about China. So as you mentioned at the beginning, the book is very much aimed at a public non-scholarly audience. And it's not to say that scholarly audiences are significantly different from public audiences, but there are ways to craft a book to suit one over the other. Arguably public information on China is more important now than it has been almost ever. China is constantly in public debates, in political discussions. It's used as a boogeyman a lot, especially in the United States. What do you hope someone who is new to China will take away from your book if this is their first introduction to the country?

David Shambaugh:

Oh, goodness. Well, I guess I would hope that they read more than just my book about the country. It's a big, complicated place. And you can do no worse than reading the writings of Roderick MacFarquhar, Ezra Vogel, Elizabeth Perry, Bill Kirby, and other great Harvard sinologists over time, Iain Johnston, Martin King White, who used to be my professor and colleague. I have to say that Harvard doesn't have a monopoly on good sinology, it's spread across the country and across the world. And so the point I'm simply trying to make is that one book is not going to answer all questions. But I did try and write a book that covers 70 years of time in addition to five main leaders. And by the way, inside of each of these chapters, I discuss many, many other leaders; Liu Shaoqi, Peng Dehuai, Hua Guofeng, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and many, many others.

David Shambaugh:

As I said at the beginning of our conversation, I'd hope that this is an overview with considerable depth, but not too much depth. This was a constant challenge for me in writing the book was how much detail and how much depth to give. I didn't want to write a MacFarquhar kind of book, to be honest with you with a gazillion footnotes and all kinds of really excruciating detail which is admirable operable about Rod's scholarship, as I said earlier. But it doesn't lend itself to public readership very well. It's great for sinologists, political scientists, historians, but public readership eyes glaze over at that level of detail. So that was a real challenge in writing this book. I don't know if I've met that mark. I'm sure I'm going to be criticized for lacking in detail in certain places by my colleagues. What about this? What about that? They may certainly take issue with my own interpretations. Mind you, the whole book is my own interpretation of these five leaders. There's no Bible on them.

David Shambaugh:

So that was a struggle. But for the public and for students, for whom this book was really written, I must say, not necessarily for sinologists, although I do hope that sinologists learn from it, not so much in the empirics which are not necessarily new, but the framing and the explanation, the way I approach the topic. I hope readers take away a sense of the capriciousness, the brutality and the repressiveness of the Chinese political system over time. Those are continuities, you're looking for continuities over seven decades, capricious, brutal, repressive. It's just a question of less or more so in each of those three archetypal categories. But it's a regime and a system that has visited enormous hardship, I put it mildly, enormous repression of human rights on its own population.

David Shambaugh:

But then lastly, the continuity, I guess, across the five leaders in the seven decades, indeed stretching all the way back to Late Qing dynasty is the so-called Search of Wealth and Power with the great Harvard sinologist Benjamin Schwartz, first wrote about in his biography of Yan Fu, which I think all students should begin China studies by rereading. So this has been more than century long quest mission to what they now call China's great rejuvenation to attain wealth and power, to rejuvenate, to regain China's, not just wealth and power in the world, but dignity and respect as well. And we're seeing that recently in not so flattering ways with so-called wolf warrior public diplomacy. China's demanding respect and is becoming... Now that it's got wealth and it's got power, it thinks it can now start dictating and lecturing and hectoring and conditioning others.

David Shambaugh:

What I see actually is very interesting subject for a different discussion, but what China's trying to do in foreign affairs today, and including to the United States, is to condition it. It's using the same tactics that the party has used towards different groups internally in China over the last seven decades; preemptive methods and tactics, self censorship really. That's the whole point to censorship. You want people to self-censor preemptive behavior. Anyway, this is a subject for different discussion. But the point is that there's continuity over these five leaders and I would say even longer back, nationalist period as well. Although obviously the nationalists never fully... except for '27 to '37, never really had a chance to get that regime and Republic on its feet, but this is a long standing continuity.

David Shambaugh:

And then lastly, I suppose, in terms of takeaways, leaders matter; they have agency, they have personality in all systems, so it does matter who's at the top. But they are constrained by institutions and by norms and by culture. So Hu Jintao is different than Xi Jinping. Xi Jinping different than Deng Xiaoping. Deng Xiaoping is different than Mao Zedong. Mao Zedong is different from Jiang Zemin. But each of them did put their own stamp on their society. So I think we have to understand that they actually did have an

impact. And with the passage of time, some of them may look better or worse. I think Hu Jintao may actually start looking better.

David Shambaugh:

In the book, Jiang Zemin actually quite high marks. I think his 13 years in power accomplished a lot. Deng Xiaoping, of course I give high marks. Mao Zedong, I give extremely low marks to. But if you ask Chinese today, what about Chairman Mao, they give him very high marks. They continue to think of him as the father of the republic, the father of the revolution, all kinds of things. They just seem to either not know or ignore all the hell that he unleashed on the society, and Roderick MacFarquhar documented so well. So leaders matter, but institutions matter more. I'll leave it at that.

James Gethyn Evans:

I think that's an excellent takeaway to give listeners of our podcast. Well, Professor David Shambaugh, thank you so much for being with us here today on the Harvard on China Podcast.

David Shambaugh:

Great pleasure. Thank you very much for your good questions.

James Gethyn Evans:

Thank you for listening to the Harvard on China Podcast at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. You can listen to more interviews like this one or recordings from our public events on SoundCloud, iTunes, Spotify, or other podcast providers. Our thanks to Connor Giersch for providing research assistance for this episode and to our podcast editor, Mike Pascarella.