

Review – The Prince

Written by Alice Politi

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ALICE POLITI, APR 13 2023

The Prince: Searching for Xi Jinping By The Economist, hosted by Sue-Lin Wong Podcast, 2022

Xi Jinping has been in power for more than a decade; arousing curiosity for his diplomatic assertiveness and his ability to strengthen his grip on power throughout his terms, but he still appears an enigmatic figure. *The Economist's* podcast “The Prince”, hosted by Sue-Lin Wong, explores the story and character of Xi, making sense of his complex background and exploring the significance of his leadership for the People’s Republic of China and the rest of the world. In the first episode, the host discusses the rationale behind making this podcast. The early episodes of the series proceed chronologically, exploring Xi’s past and his rise to power. The podcast then sheds light on the tightening of internet restrictions under Xi, the oppression of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang, China’s more assertive diplomatic approach and the problems of Xi’s strategy in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Through interviews with experts, reporters, censors and a persecuted member of the Uyghur minority, Wong untangles what she describes as a “Machiavellian story of power”. In a bonus episode, she reveals that the name of the podcast is inspired by the manual written by Machiavelli, as well as by Xi’s upbringing, which led him to “see himself as a true inheritor of the Communist revolution” (Bonus Episode: “Behind the Propaganda”).

The initial episodes of “The Prince” delve into Xi’s traumatising upbringing and delineate the impact of his background on forging the leader he is today and his position in the Party. Xi’s childhood was marked by his father – a high-ranking official of the Communist Party of China (CPC) – being purged during Mao’s leadership, heavily impacting on the life of other family members. When he was thirteen, Xi himself was sent to work in rural areas during the Cultural Revolution, together with numerous other urban youths, the so-called ‘educated youth’ (知青; zhīshī qīngnián). Xi was also detained, and, when escaping detention, he was reported to the authorities by his own mother, who wanted to avoid accusations of protecting him. As a result of such painful and traumatic events inflicted by the Party, one might expect that Xi would develop a sense of refusal towards the authority of the CPC. Instead, he did not see a problem in the Party’s authority itself, but rather in the Party’s loss of control and lack of discipline.

Xi’s climb to power and his leadership have been characterised by his willingness to be the one reasserting the Party in a moment of crisis, and keeping the ‘chaos’ under control through specific policies, such as his signature anti-corruption struggle. Xi was not awarded predestined power, but worked his way toward earning and consolidating it, through what Sue-Lin Wong has defined as a “Machiavellian story of power: how it’s won, how it’s wielded and how far you can fall when it’s taken away” (Episode 1: “Redder than red”). In the following episodes, Wong successfully walks the audience through the key political events that marked and contributed to Xi’s world view, such as the collapse of the USSR, and his complex, challenging rise to power. “The Prince” thoroughly portrays and examines the link between the domestic and global political scenario that Xi witnessed, his rise through the government ranks and the development of his character as a leader. The series provides the necessary elements to read through Xi’s approach, and encapsulates the complexity of his position within the Party. His rigid stance as a leader is put into the context of the political unrest he witnessed both as a child and during his rise to become the leader he is today.

Xi’s strict objective to maintain control and to sedate potential unrest or dissent also results in repression, as testified by the notorious oppression of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang. In one of the most interesting episodes of the series

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(Episode 6: “Seeds of a pomegranate”), Wong captures this aspect of Xi’s leadership by giving voice to the experience of a persecuted Uyghur teacher who was accused of espionage for the CIA. This potent and outstanding testimony provides the audience with invaluable insights to understand the extent of the brutal oppression that the Uyghur people experience under Xi’s rule.

“The Prince”, like the eponymous manuscript by Machiavelli, focuses on the relationship between one leader and power. Of course, the way in which Xi has been able to rise and accrue power is surprising and in a way unusual, especially considering his more assertive approach. This draws quite a stark contrast with his two predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao – the latter having been described by some scholars as a “silent” leader. Looking back at his time in power so far, it is certainly possible to say that his leadership breaks with the past, as reflected by his anti-corruption struggle, which has been significantly more radical and extensive than precedent purges. At the XX Party Congress in November 2022, he secured an unprecedented third term, strengthening his grip on power and, according to Wong, he has not reached the peak yet. The way he has exercised power throughout his terms indicates what future he envisions for China. Committed to achieve “China’s Dream” (中国梦; Zhōngguó Mèng), that he referred to as the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴; Zhōnghuámínzú Wěidà Fùxīng), he has strengthened those ideologies and practices aimed at maintaining the country’s system of one-party rule sustainable. He has also affirmed a more powerful role for China on the global stage through a more assertive diplomatic stance – as explored by Wong in the series’ Episode 7: “Wolf Warriors” – and through his foreign policy strategy, with projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

‘The Prince’ succeeds in providing a thorough analysis of the figure of Xi Jinping and his relationship with power, which is of great importance to understand where China is currently heading. However, whilst the podcast tends at times to portray Xi as solely holding the power to determine China’s future, we should not lose sight of the role and power held by the CPC and of the complexity deriving from this. The CPC is not a monolithic entity, but it is in fact fragmented and considerably more diverse than it used to be. Whilst Xi made it his mission to make the Party more efficient, and he enforces policies to ensure that the one-party rule remains in place and durable in China, we should not forget the role that the Party plays in ultimately architecting those policies and deciding the direction of the future of China. This is testified by the fact that several policies pursued under the leadership of Xi Jinping were actually already envisioned before his first term.

Overall, “The Prince” is an excellent tool to understand the enigmatic figure of Xi Jinping, and Sue-Lin Wong succeeds in guiding the audience through the complexity of his character. It does so by analysing the link between his distressing background, the political environment he grew up in and how this has affected the development of the leader Xi is today, his position in the Party, the future he envisions for China and the consequences that this entails for the rest of the world. However, it is also important not to lose sight of the role played by the Party in determining the future of China, in defining those policies that Xi pursues and the very mission that Xi serves.

About the author:

Alice Politi is a PhD Candidate at the Lau China Institute at King’s College London. Her doctoral research focuses on EU-China relations, with a particular focus on China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Alice has experience cooperating with think-tanks, governments, and research institutes on issues of national and international security, with a focus on China. Her publications have also been featured on Oxford Bibliographies, the Journal of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs, the Italian Institute of International Affairs (IAI) and the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), and her work has been cited in several outlets, with appearances on Al Jazeera and other broadcasters.