Chinese politics

The people’s pope

Two books explore the meaning ofXi Jinping

CEO, China: The Rise of Xi Jinping. By

Kerry Brown. I.B. Tauris; 262 pages; $28

and £20

Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping.

By Willy Wo-Lap Lam. Routledge; 323

pages; $52.95 and £34.99

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HERE are few political questions to

which the answer will have greater

bearingon the livesofsuch a large number

ofpeople in the comingyearsasthis: what

sort of leader is Xi Jinping? Since Mr Xi

emerged in 2010 as heir-apparent to the

general-secretaryship ofthe Chinese Com-

munistParty, and tookon the job two years

later, the question hasexercised the minds

of analysts even more than is normal

when someone new takes over in China.

As recently as the mid-2000s, Mr Xi was

still little-known. His glamorous folk-sing-

ing wife was far more famous. The some-

whatliberal leanings(bythe party’shighly

illiberal standards) of Mr Xi’s late father, a

party grandee, provided one of the few

available clues. It has proved highly mis-

leading. MrXi haspresided overthe tough-

estcrackdown on dissentin years.

One way of understanding China’s

leader is suggested by the title of a new

book: “CEO, China”. Yetasthe author, Ker-

ryBrown, a veteran British China-watcher,

makes clear, MrXi is farmore than merely

the chief executive of a colossal economy.

He compares Mr Xi’s role to that of the

pope: “The general secretary, armed with

doctrinal infallibility, like the pope, is a

rule-giver, spiritual nurturer and voice of

doctrinal purity and correctness,” he

writes. Pope Francis, he notes, isbattling to

instil a renewed sense of mission into a

Catholic church “that has lost touch with

its spiritual roots, tarnished its legitimacy

and become consumed by material pow-

er”. This, he says, is “eerily similar” to Mr

Xi’sstruggle to revamp hisparty.

It is somewhat easier, however, to un-

derstand how the pope wants to reform

the church than itisto make outhow MrXi

intends to change the party, and his coun-

try. He says that market forces should play

a decisive role, but does that mean he

wants to topple state-owned enterprises

from the commandingheightsofthe econ-

omy? His wish to purge the party of the

egregiouscorruption thathaspermeated it

ateverylevel seemsevident: hiscampaign

against graft has been the most sustained

and wide-ranging of any waged by a

Chinese leader since the party seized

power in 1949. But does he want to intro-

duce checks and balances that would

make it harder for corruption to take root?

He stresses the importance of rule of law,

butdoeshe mean thatcourtsshould oper-

ate independently from the party, even in

casesthatinvolve challengesto the party’s

rule? Many observers have lost hope that

the answers to any of these questions

mightbe affirmative.

Willy Wo-Lap Lam, another experi-

enced China-watcherbased in HongKong,

appears to have little doubt. His richly de-

tailed book, “Chinese Politics in the Era of

Xi Jinping”, describesMrXi asmore “a dis-

ciple of Mao” than of Deng Xiaoping, the

leader who began opening China to the

outside world in the late 1970s. Mr Lam

says Mr Xi has no interest in political or

ideological liberalisation, having “learned

the lessons” of the vicissitudes experi-

enced by party liberals such as his father,

who was imprisoned by Mao. Mr Xi has

“totally ruled out” any option other than

orthodoxsocialism, he writes.

But so great is the secrecy surrounding

the highest echelons of power in China

that it is impossible to know for sure. Mr

Lam’s book came out in 2015 and covers

lessthan two yearsofMrXi’srule. Notably

itdoesnotextend asfarasa meeting ofthe

party’s Central Committee in October

2014, which emphasised the importance

of the rule of law and the state constitu-

tion—an unusual focusofinterestatsuch a

gathering, and an intriguing one given the

Chinese leader’sseemingdisdain forboth.

Mr Xi may in the end turn out to be

more ofa reformerthan hisfrequenthard-

line rhetoric, his hammering of civil soci-

ety and his tiptoeing round all-powerful

state firmsmaysuggest. Adwindlingband

of optimists pin their hopes on a crucial

party congress late next year, at which Mr

Xi will preside over sweeping leadership

changes and set out the party’s goals for

the remainingfive yearsofhisrule (assum-

inghe accepts the norm ofa ten-year limit

on the general-secretaryship). Having

placed more of his allies in key positions,

MrXi maybegin to do whathe hassaid he

wants to do: let market forces hold sway

and put“powerin a cage” ofimpartial law.

In his crisp and provocative account,

Mr Brown suggests that analysts may be

wrongto setmuch store byMrXi’sindivid-

ual will. “The partyisthe powerin China,”

he writes. MrXi is“onlypowerful through

it, operating within the limits it sets. On

this basis, he is no Mao.” The party be-

lieves in the creation ofa “strong, rich, sta-

ble” and respected country, says Mr

Brown. The emotional powerofthisgoal is

what confers power upon Mr Xi (who de-

scribes it as the “Chinese dream”); unlike

Mao, he cannotenforce discipline through

terror or repression, the author argues. Mr

Xi, he says, isa “servant” ofthe party’sam-

bition to restore China to the greatness it

once enjoyed. Itcould “easilygo badly” for

him ifsufficientnumbersofhiscolleagues

were to decide thathe istakingthe country

in the wrongdirection.

If Mr Brown is right, this may explain

why Mr Xi, for all his seeming strength,

appears to vacillate. Making China a

respected global power will require the

development ofa more attractive political

system. But Mr Xi is transfixed by a fear of

unrest, and so clamps down ruthlessly on

dissent. He acknowledges that making

China rich and strong will require tough

economic reforms. But these may trigger

strikesand protestsasstate firmsare closed

orslimmed down, so he errsrepeatedly on

the side of caution. Failure to reform may

eventually cause even greater instability,

many analysts believe. But ifMr Xi agrees

with them, he appears to thinkthat on his

watch, at least, repression will ensure that

the party is obeyed. Given that the main

mission entrusted to him by the party is

an impossible one—keeping a one-party

dictatorship in place for ever—he has few

good options.