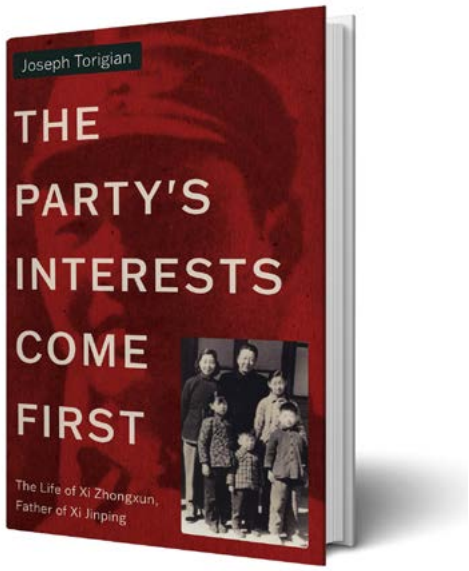
intelligence in public media

The Party's Interests Come First
The Life of Xi Zhongxun, Father of Xi Jinping

Reviewed by Dr. Emily Matson



Author:	Joseph Torigian
Published By:	Stanford University Press, 2025
Print Pages	704 pages; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index
Reviewer:	The reviewer is an adjunct professor of modern Chinese history at Georgetown University.

The ways in which we craft historical narratives are often influenced by contemporary concerns, and how we understand the life of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) revolutionary Xi Zhongxun is no exception. In his comprehensive account of Xi's life, political scientist Joseph Torigian cautions readers from the outset that this "is itself a story about the politically explosive nature of competing versions of the past." (5) During Xi's own life, party history was already highly politicized. As Xi Zhongxun's son, Xi Jinping, has become indisputably the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao Zedong, both Xi Jinping's "detractors" and "boosters" have also sought to "weaponize" Xi Zhongxun's life and legacy for their own sociopolitical motives. (6)

Any potential biography of Xi Zhongxun, then, must be approached with great care and painstaking attention to historical detail, and Torigian does just that. Drawing on extensive primary and secondary sources in Chinese and Russian, Torigian's *The Party's Interests Come First* is an impressively nuanced portrait of a deeply complex individual whose devotion to the party, as the title indicates, remained unshaken. Torigian makes clear that "Although this book has both caves and a pipe, it is not intended to be a Freudian analysis of Xi Jinping." (7) However, knowledge about the father's life and legacy can still inform our perspective on what practical and ideological motivations drive the son today. It is also worth noting that this is not a book for newcomers to Chinese history but rather assumes readers will at least some prior knowledge of 20th century China.

Torigian's magnum opus begins with Xi Zhongxun's early life in Shaanxi Province and ends with his death

on May 24, 2002. However, this biography is not strictly chronological but often spends several chapters discussing different aspects of the same time period. For instance, Chapter 10 is on Xi's work in foreign affairs in the 1950s, particularly with the Soviet Union during the fraught lead-up to China's 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement and the Sino-Soviet Split that followed. Chapter 11 then details Xi's contributions to ethnic and religious policy in the 1950s, notably in Xinjiang and Tibet, and Chapter 12 zooms in on Xi's family life in Beijing during this period (His son Jinping was born in 1953). Separating chapters thematically proved to be an effective way of ensuring proper emphasis on the variety of themes that informed Xi's life.

Although this work is ostensibly about Xi, it is also about the triumphs and tragedies of 20th century Chinese history and the intense intraparty factionalism and policy disputes that characterized every step. In 1935, for instance, Xi and his mentor, Liu Zhidan, were among the victims of an inner-party purge in northern Shaanxi.[a] Although CCP history as well as Xi himself later claimed that it was only the arrival of Mao Zedong and the Long Marchers that "saved" Xi, Torigian claims the historical reality was "a little more complicated: Xi's death was not imminent, Mao's own role is overstated, and it took years for Xi to achieve complete rehabilitation." (41)

In narrating Xi's life, Torigian also contributes new angles to our understanding of major tragedies in Communist China such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–62). Still sensitive to the potential implications of the purge of fellow Northwestern cadre Gao Gang on his own career, Xi was careful to follow the Party line in light of both the 1957–58 Rectification Campaign and the August 1958 Beidaihe meeting that signaled the beginning of the Great Leap Forward. In the summer of 1958, for instance, Xi "roundly condemned anyone who cared more about themselves than about the party" and also claimed that a "Communist consciousness" was more important than knowledge, thus showcasing his anti-intellectual tendencies as well. (193–94) However, Torigian shows that although Xi continued to be publicly supportive of Great Leap policies, he was skeptical behind the scenes. There was often tension between Xi's individual conscience and what he perceived as his duty to the CCP collective. For instance, when Xi visited Gansu Province in 1958, he was greatly concerned by the construction of the Yintao Dam near Lanzhou in a region that did not even have electricity or much industrial capacity. In public, however, he praised the project, saying that "Gansu has let us see the future of Communism." After the project failed and exacerbated the mass starvation in Gansu, local officials "complained that Xi knew about the endeavor, and even visited it, but did not discover any problems at the time." (196) In light of the persecutory nature of the subsequent Lushan Conference, however, Torigian argues that "criticizing the Leap would have been difficult for Xi, if not unthinkable" at that time. (201)

Although historians of modern China usually see Wu Han's 1965 play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* as the "opening salvo" of the Cultural Revolution, Torigian argues that the purge of Xi after the 1962 publication of a biographical novel of his mentor, Liu Zhidan, was an earlier foreshadowing of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. He agrees with Chinese historian Han Gang that "the criticisms of *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* were an "extension" of the *Liu Zhidan* case." (218) Xi had been supportive of novel's author, the wife of Liu Zhidan's younger brother. However, he had warned her that "writing such a large novel is not a game" and that the work could potentially cause problems given the fraught history of intraparty conflict in the Northwest. (209) Later, Yan Hongyan and other political enemies of the then-deceased Gao Gang would claim that *Liu Zhidan* was actually an attempt to promote Gao. After Yan contacted the notorious Kang Sheng, Kang "accused Xi of trying to use the novel to reverse the verdict on Gao Gang." (211) However, Torigian argues that Deng Xiaoping also deserves a large portion of the blame for what happened to Xi. Li Jiantong was pressured into claiming that "most of the material she used [in the book] had been drawn from Xi's life." (2121)

At this point, Xi was doomed to fall, and Torigian subsequently details the extraordinary trials and

a. Liu had been imprisoned before Mao's arrival and was then freed, but he would be killed in battle not long after in 1936.

tribulations he underwent. First, Xi had to conduct "a yearslong process of writing constant self-criticisms about his past." (219) In 1965, he was moved to a factory in Luoyang, Henan Province. Although Xi was initially "enthralled" with the Cultural Revolution (221), he would end up suffering greatly at the hands of the Red Guards. Xi was kidnapped by a faction of Red Guards in Xi'an on January 7, 1967, and subject to painful struggle sessions in which he lost hearing in his right ear and was forced into holding the "jet-plane" position for two hours. (223) Xi also received incredibly poor treatment in "Number 73," a prison in the Shaanxi Military Region. In the summer of 1967 alone, Xi was subject to over 10 large struggle sessions and 10 smaller ones. (226) Torigian shows that during the Cultural Revolution, Zhou Enlai did not step in to save his former comrade. Indeed, throughout *The Party's Interest Comes First,* Torigian shows a more draconian side of Zhou (and Deng Xiaoping, for that matter) than the public is accustomed to observing.

After the Cultural Revolution and Xi's rehabilitation, Xi was sent to Guangzhou to become the second secretary of the party committee in Guangdong Province. Xi proved committed in his attempts to restorie intraparty democracy. However, Xi was by no means eternally patient—he had a poor temper and was often "very long-winded," but no one dared interrupt him at meetings. (258) Additionally, although Xi was open to converting unbelievers to the CCP through persuasion and dialogue, the Cultural Revolution had convinced him of the "need for stability and unity" and to avoid chaos at all costs, but when necessary "he did not shrink from more repressive methods." (267) While Xi was in Guangzhou, he also had an undeniable impact on the "Reform and Opening Up" movement. He observed the migration of many Chinese from Guangzhou to Hong Kong and Macau, and decided one potential method to solving this crisis was to make Guangzhou into a special economic zone, open to the outside world. Xi was supported in his proposal by the then-chairman of the CCP Hua Guofeng, and Torigian emphasizes that although Deng approved as well, "Deng's role should not be overstated." (278)

Xi's more flexible ethnic and religious policies are another highlight of the book. Torigian charts the relationships between Xi and ethnic minority leaders, notably the Panchen Lama, the Dalai Lama, and the ethnic Mongolian party leader Ulanhu, spanning multiple decades of shifting ethnic policies. After 1945 when Xi became head of the Northwest Bureau, Torigian shows that while Xi could resort to force, he was also sensitive to "the usefulness of other methods of control: gradual co-optation of local leaders and effective propaganda" in dealing with the ethnic groups under his jurisdiction. (109) One particularly poignant incident was Xi's visit to the Panchen Lama on December 14, 1951 at Kumbum Monastery. When Xi visited Genghis Khan's tomb nearby, he bowed three times, explaining that "the Mongol was a 'national hero, extraordinary, and great.'" The next day, Xi showed extreme deference to the Panchen Lama, referring to him as *foye*, meaning "Buddha." Both these incidents were shocking to other party cadres present, but Xi shrugged them off as being consistent with the party's ethnic policy. (120-21) After the purges of the late 1950s and the disastrous Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, Xi once again played a big part in pursuing more moderate relations between the Party and ethnic minority groups in the 1980s. Although he did "betray culturally essentialist views" in certain rhetoric, Torigian shows that most significantly, Xi argued in 1986 that "the party should never again use campaign-style purges to attack people who hold different opinions." (400)

Torigian details Xi's later years largely through the lens of the Tiananmen Square protests and subsequent massacre on June 4, 1989. Although Xi once again understood the power of persuasion, "his other solutions, the study of party history and the spirit of sacrifice, were rooted in the past." (503) We do not know for sure whether Xi acted and, if so, how, during the spring of 1989; other party elders with "reformist" credentials, such as Lu Dingyi, did not end up supporting the protestors. Ultimately, Xi backed the party, but Torigian argues that "[his] behavior is less a case of cowardice than a demonstration of political judgment." (505) Xi was certainly in a vulnerable political position after the purge of Hu Yaobang several years earlier. However, Torigian does ultimately pass judgment on Xi's inaction, arguing that "Xi did miss an opportunity to go down in history, like Zhao Ziyang,

as a man of principle who refused to go along with the decision for martial law." (505)

Ultimately, I believe Xi's commitment to the ideals of the CCP above all else did actually make him a man of great principle, although he was also a man with flaws. "In this book," as Torigian warns us at the very outset, "the traditional 'heroes' of Chinese history come out a bit worse, and the 'villains' a bit better." (20) One of Xi's most laudable character traits throughout his life is that despite the injustices committed against him, he never wavered in his loyalty and commitment to the CCP and the revolution: "although the party betrayed Xi Zhongxun, Xi Zhongxun never betrayed the party." (20) Why would Xi continue to have faith in a party that had lost faith in him? Torigian does not comment too extensively on this other than to argue that this was ultimately a very meaningful life to Xi, "a life that afforded him the excitement of participating in the grand adventure of revolution in an organization that he believed was a manifestation of the iron laws of history," (20) and a life that deeply influenced the overall trajectory of Xi Jinping.

Torigian ends his account of Xi Zhongxun's life by focusing on the importance of the father's legacy for the son's leadership. Xi Jinping, Torigian argues, "has not fully resolved the problems at the heart of the Leninist system, and he might have created new ones that remain poorly understood." (542) The Leninist system is indeed full of tensions and contradictions, which are inevitable according to the theory of Marxist dialectics. However, I paused after reading the final sentence of *The Party's Interests Come First.* In conclusion, Torigian argues that "left out of this narrative [of Xi Jinping's version of party history] is a full account of the terrible costliness in human suffering that has come along with the revolutionary project—a Faustian bargain seen so clearly in the life of the man Xi Zhongxun."

There has certainly been abundant human suffering in the Chinese revolutionary project. However, this is only one side of the coin—we must also consider the tremendous "wins" for the average Chinese citizen over the past 76 years—for example, overall gains in longevity, and education—both in the 1950s and in the years following the Cultural Revolution, during which millions of Chinese were lifted out of poverty. I would also hesitate to call Xi Zhongxun's life a "Faustian bargain" with the party. In the 16th century German legend of Dr. Faust, the doctor gives up his soul to the devil in exchange for 24 years of limitless power and pleasure. CCP policies can and should undoubtedly be critiqued for their excesses. However, Xi's principled, religious-like faith in party ideals should not be dismissed. Of course, power corrupts, and the communist ideal is in essence an unattainable utopia. However, there are also clear historical and ideological reasons why Chinese intellectuals and peasants alike were so attracted to Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. In part, Marxism promised to make sense of a chaotic, messy history and bring dignity and livelihood to China's suffering masses (whether it did is, of course, up for debate). Xi did not sell his soul for material comfort, knowledge, or prestige—in *The Party's Interests Come First*, Torigian arguably shows the exact opposite. For the sake of his "soul" (or the material equivalent in the atheistic communist ideology), Xi was willing to sacrifice everything, including his personal desires.■