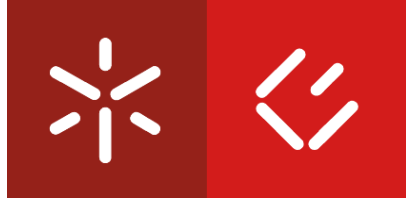


From self-sufficient China to the Belt and Road: The  
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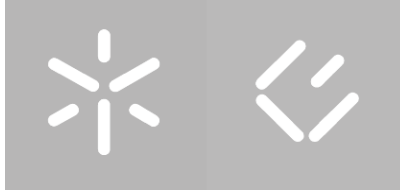


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Escola de Economia e Gestão

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Escola de Economia e Gestão

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## **The Belt and Road Initiative's Narrative in Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream**

Dissertação de Mestrado  
em Ciência Política

Trabalho efetuado sob a orientação do  
**Professor Doutor Paulo Afonso Brardo Duarte**  
**Professor Doutor José António Passos Palmeira**

outubro de 2024

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With all my gratefulness,

Nuno Costa

### **Statement of Integrity**

I, hereby, declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism or any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration.

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## Resumo:

Desde que Xi Jinping foi eleito Presidente da República Popular da China (RPC) em 2013, vários estudos têm procurado analisar a singularidade da sua liderança, visão e narrativas com vista a consolidar o poder, como o *Sonho Chinês* e a *Faixa e Rota Chinesa*. No entanto, a literatura existente não tem levado a cabo uma comparação simultânea e exaustiva entre as narrativas dos três líderes chineses mais carismáticos, a saber Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping e Xi Jinping. Com base neste *gap*, e reconhecendo a mais-valia do tema, a presente dissertação visa responder à seguinte questão de investigação: “De que forma a narrativa de Xi Jinping se aproxima e/ou distancia das narrativas de Mao e Deng com vista a consolidar o poder?”. Como tal, a delimitação temporal da nossa investigação compreende o período com início em 1954 e término em 2023. O período em questão abarca o momento em que Mao é eleito Presidente da RPC, a era Deng Xiaoping (1978 - 1990) e, por último, os primeiros 10 anos da Faixa e Rota Chinesa (FRC) (2013-2024), vista como a narrativa por excelência de Xi Jinping. De facto, consideramos que uma década de existência da FRC, estreitamente associada ao *Sonho Chinês*, se afigura fundamental para traçar as principais semelhanças e diferenças entre as lideranças de Xi, Mao e Deng. Para o efeito, utilizamos uma metodologia qualitativa com recurso a fontes primárias e secundárias, apoiada pelos contributos da chamada *Role Theory*, cujas variáveis - *role conception*, *role expectations*, *role adaptation* e *role performance* - nos permite uma melhor comparação entre as diferentes visões e narrativas (*role conceptions*) dos vários líderes face à sua *role performance*, tendo em conta as expetivas (*role expectations*) da população chinesa em determinada conjuntura histórica. Em jeito de conclusão, constatamos que cada líder se esforçou em adaptar o seu papel (*role adaptation*) para melhor acomodar as necessidades estruturais, expetativas domésticas e, acima de tudo, preservar o poder. No caso de Xi, a sua liderança tem sido mais adaptável do que a de Mao, embora menos orientada para as reformas do que a de Deng.

**Palavras-chave:** Faixa e Rota Chinesa, Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong, Narrativas, Xi Jinping

## **Abstract:**

Since Xi Jinping was elected President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2013, several studies have sought to analyse the uniqueness of his leadership, vision and narratives aimed at consolidating power, such as the *Chinese Dream* and the *Chinese Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI). However, the existing literature has not carried out a simultaneous and exhaustive comparison between the narratives of the three most charismatic Chinese leaders, namely Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping. Based on this gap, and recognising the added value of the topic, this dissertation aims to answer the following research question: ‘How does Xi Jinping's narrative approach and/or distance itself from the narratives of Mao and Deng in order to consolidate power?’. As such, the time frame of our research covers the period beginning in 1954 and ending in 2023. The period in question encompasses the time when Mao was elected President of the PRC, the Deng Xiaoping era (1978-1990) and, finally, the first 10 years of the Chinese *Belt and Road* (2013-2024), seen as Xi Jinping's narrative par excellence. In fact, we believe that a decade of the BRI's existence, closely associated with the *Chinese Dream*, is fundamental to tracing the main similarities and differences between the leaderships of Xi, Mao and Deng. To this end, we used a qualitative methodology comprising both primary and secondary sources, and supported by the contributions of the so-called *Role Theory*, whose variables - role conception, role expectations, *role adaptation* and *role performance* - allow us to better compare the different views and narratives (*role conceptions*) of the various leaders in relation to their *role performance*, taking into account the expectations (*role expectations*) of the Chinese population at a given historical juncture. In conclusion, we found that each leader endeavoured to adapt his role (*role adaptation*) to better accommodate structural needs, domestic expectations and, above all, to preserve power. In Xi's case, his leadership has been more adaptable than Mao's, although less reform-orientated than Deng's.

**Keywords:** Belt and Road Initiative, Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong, Narratives, Xi Jinping

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## **Abbreviations**

BRI - Belt and Road Initiative

CAC - Cyberspace Administration of China

CCP - Chinese Communist Party

CCTV - China Central Television

CGTN - China Global Television Network

CISS - China Institute of International Studies

DSR - Digital Silk Road

EU - European Union

IMF - International Monetary Fund

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

GRF - Great Firewall

MIC25 - Made in China 2025

MSR - Maritime Silk Road

NBS - National Bureau of Statistics

PLA - People's Liberation Army

PRC - People's Republic of China

SARs - Special Administrative Regions

SCS - Social Credit System

SEZ - Special Economic Zone

SNS - Social Network System

TVEs - Township and village enterprises

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Justification, relevance, and delimitations

The twenty-first century *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI; 一带一路, *yīdài yīlù*), announced by Xi Jinping in 2013, assumes a fulcrum role for the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the matter of International Relations, particularly in terms of geopolitics, connectivity, and infrastructures. In this sense, it serves as an apparatus within Chinese relations with third-party states, international organisations and neighbouring countries to affirm the Chinese presence and dominance as a fundamental political area in the region. However, to fully understand and grasp BRI's true dimension, it must not be seen only as a foreign policy. In fact, domestically, the BRI encompasses relevant areas regarding the conception of new narratives and policies, mainly politically and culturally, within Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

In large measure, the BRI's high social and economic elevation is provided by Xi Jinping and the CCP's heavily used narratives and phenomena influenced by historical and cultural events in Ancient China and in the recent history of China. Therefore, it is easy to understand why the recurrent use of social and cultural concepts such as the Chinese Dream is being contemplated (中国梦, *zhōngguó mèng*) in speeches referring to this multidimensional Chinese project. As a matter of fact, the BRI is itself inspired by the ancient route of the *Silk Road* (114 BCE – 1450s CE). Thus, He (2019) considers the BRI as a unique opportunity for Xi Jinping to “concentrate, expand, and legitimise his power” (p.183) in a crescent nostalgic, nationalist, and assertive China. The project is synonymous with the Chinese President's name and the nationalist vision he brings to the Chinese environment, which has already changed the way politics are conducted in China.

Based on this, domestic policies, such as the *Social Credit System* (社会信用, *shèhuì xìnyòng*; SCS)<sup>1</sup>, and the use of cultural terms, i.e. *Chinese Dream*, and *Tianxia* (天下, *tiānxià*)<sup>2</sup>, provide the establishment and longevity for the project that is being

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<sup>1</sup> The *Social Credit System* (SCS) was officially launched in 2024 through the “The Plan for the Construction of the Social Credit System (2014 – 2020)”. In addition, the SCS was created as a mechanism of feedback to the Chinese society in accordance with their behaviour in compliance with the law, therefore covering several public sectors (Creemers 2018; Schaefer 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Everything Under Heaven or *Tianxia* is an Ancient Chinese term from the Zhou Dynasty (周朝, *zhōucháo*, 1027 a.C. – 256 a.C.) based on religious idea of the existence of a universal and sacred existence that allows men to distinguish the Chinese from the Barbarians. Moreover, according to Confucianism, *Tianxia* is a

conceived by Xi Jinping and the CCP (Jiang 2021). As Mao Zedong used the *Cultural Revolution* (1966 – 1976) and Deng Xiaoping *One Country, Two Systems* as political narratives to sustain their respective political power, Xi Jinping used the BRI as a narrative to legitimise and consolidate his power in China. It is an idealised and calculated initiative with unique characteristics, rightful justifications and identity characteristics of the CCP and Chinese culture.

In any case, the magnitude and importance of the BRI has been, in recent years, a subject of research and interest by academics, who have addressed, among other factors, the geopolitical challenges that the Initiative is likely to face in the international order. However, there are no studies linking the BRI with narratives of power or consolidation of power, much less triangulating Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping, the current President. Few presidents in China's leadership history have the charisma to constitute their own party jurisprudence. Furthermore, with these political figures' resolution, they alone mark the country's history – their doctrine is the Party's doctrine. Therefore, it is crucial to compare them.

Although little has been written to understand the subject, it will be vital to understand the changes that Xi Jinping has made within the framework of Chinese politics as a crucial part of the *Chinese Dream* and the BRI. We believe that the research question “*In what ways does Xi Jinping's narrative approach and/or distances from Mao and Deng's previous narratives to consolidate power?*” is what best reflects the essence of the current study. In addition, this dissertation benefits from drawing on a comparison with the two aforementioned Chinese leaders who marked Contemporary China. On top of that, the emergence of the personality cult around the current Chinese President and the functioning behind the Chinese political system will also be investigated.

As for the time frame of analysis, this dissertation will focus on three distinct periods: the *Cultural Revolution* (1949 – 1976), the Deng Xiaoping era (1978 – 1990); and the current governance of Xi Jinping (2013 – 2024). The announcement of the BRI in September 2013 marked the foundation of what has been described as China's ambitious plan for international and domestic strategies. Since then, various cultural policies and nationalistic discourses have been accompanying the development of the BRI

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criterion, and not a segregation, as the barbarians cohabit with the Chinese (Wang, 2017).

and Chinese daily life. In turn, between 2019 and 2020, China experienced the COVID-19 pandemic intensely. Therefore, the management by Chinese political institutions is an asset in analysing policies during this period in the context of the BRI.

## **1.2. Literature Review**

Currently, the *Chinese Dream* does not have any unique characteristics, although it shares nostalgic emotions towards events of Ancient Chinese glory, which demonstrate Chinese dominance and invincibility, thus distancing itself from humiliating and reprehensible moments in its more *recent* history (Carrai 2020). Nevertheless, according to the same author, the *Chinese Dream* is an asset for China's future, as it creates links between historical achievements and the natural progress of China at the national and international level, according to Xi Jinping's ideas. The project does not appear to be a mere incentive or political propaganda. However, according to Lam (2016) and Hayes (2020), the *Chinese Dream* has also inherited the rejuvenation and transformation that will lead the Chinese society into a prosperous, moderate, harmonious, and civilised collective. Thus, it is designed to bring Chinese citizens back to the forefront of development, led by the leadership of Xi Jinping and guided by the CCP. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that both the BRI and the generality of the Chinese political system are very much steered by historical and cultural aspects of Ancient China.

In the international sphere, the concept of *Tianxia* is used by the Chinese authorities as their Chinese soft power policy. Xi Jinping envisions an international community in which there is full acceptance of Chinese civilisational superiority in the face of unattainable power, that is dominated in comparison with other cultures and civilisations (Cheung 2023). At the same time, according to Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira (2021), traces of *Tianxia* can also be found domestically in the SCS. Furthermore, Creemers (2018) emphasise that the SCS was designed as a mechanism of feedback to the endeavour of Chinese society, encompassing the various public sectors. In this sense, the system is not just about enforcing the law, it is also based on the morality of the Chinese citizens' actions and their economic, social and political behaviour. However, academics such as Xiaoding (2017) argue that the way liberal academics interpret the meaning of the law is contrary to that practised by the CCP. In his article, the author states that for Western academics the law is positive and has objective standards. Even so, the CCP interprets the law as a reflection of the will of the People and of the Party itself,

which leads to the conclusion that “compliance with the law is actually the application of the ideological will of the party” (Xiaodong 2017, p. 3).

Nonetheless, it is certain that in a country of China’s size, where diverse ethnicities and cultures are intertwined, there is, sometimes, a need for a strong authority to unite them. In this specific sense, Xi Jinping’s era, which began in 2013, has been guided by new Chinese structures and bureaucracies, seeking methods of operation, while stemming from a nostalgic dream. Correspondingly, Xi Jinping is the first Chinese leader, since Mao Zedong, that tried to centralise the political machine in a single figure, a contrary posture to that adopted by Deng Xiaoping during his leadership (Shirk 2018).

Faced with this situation, the BRI became the practical and justified tool devised by Xi for the rehabilitation and legitimisation of both himself and the party. As He (2019) notes, the project is a unique opportunity for Xi Jinping to “concentrate, expand, and legitimise his power” (183). As part of this project, the BRI is promoting anti-corruption policies characterised by the persecution of high and low-ranking officials and bureaucrats in both the government and the CCP. However, it is important to mention that authors such as Wedeman (2017) describe that efforts to combat corruption have been met with scepticism, as they can be seen as political prosecution against Xi Jinping’s opposition inside the political and military rankings. However, in Xi’s words, these policies are not a power struggle like a House of Cards, but a program against corruption in the Chinese system (Politico 2015). According to the Chinese leader, it is “a matter of life and death” (Martina 2015). In fact, according to the Secretary General of the CCP, rather than the imprisonment of corrupt officials, these laws are an attempt to reinstall basic discipline within the government and CCP’s hierarchy (Wedeman 2017; Kautz 2020).

Briefly, the international perception of the use of certain mechanisms as a personal tool of the Chinese executive is nothing new, as it also happened when Xi Jinping’s Thought was adopted into the party’s ideology. In this regard, it suggests the development of a personality around the Chinese President (Lynch 2020; Yuan 2022). Furthermore, the control of Chinese social media, such as Weibo (微博, *wēibó*) and WeChat (微信, *wēixìn*), also contributes to the construction and control of narratives created around President Xi’s charisma, which can also be used to monitor publications or comments

against Xi Jinping and the CCP. In comparison, while Mao Zedong used the *Cultural Revolution* to further project his image and place in Chinese history, Xi Jinping is using the BRI for the same purpose. Thus, to a certain extent, the current General Secretary of the CCP tries to equate himself with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping in the pantheon of memorable CCP leaders. However, rather than being treated as an entity above, like Mao, Xi is perceived as an ordinary being (He 2019). With the BRI, according to authors such as Hall and Krolkowski (2022), China is long distancing itself from Deng's hide-and-bide approach, and it is showing itself to the world. In addition, for the BRI to be successful, like Mao Zedong, Xi is committed to propaganda policies.

Nonetheless, just as there are authors as Economy (2021) and Treisman (2021) who accuse the Chinese President of contributing to a cult of personality, there are also those, as Fewsmith (2016) and Flew and Yin (2017) who question this idea. Academics like Lu and Soboleva and Flew and Yin (2017) argue that there is no premeditated cult of personality in China. Although the authors recognise that Chinese propaganda follows certain practices, they argue that some of the current political decisions do not resemble traditional methods of political propaganda. Furthermore, they state that the cult of Xi Jinping today depends on a specific context that must be analysed. In light of this thinking, in CCP's history, the leader is in "Service to the People", in which the friendship between the leader and the population is evident. Thereby, it is expected that one must be an exceptional leader, a "good father, a good son, and a good husband", who scrupulously practises the virtues of Confucianism (Flew and Yin 2017, 14). That said, Flew and Yin (2017) also considered that the new century and the new society that come with the age of technology and the strong presence of social networks in everyday life, demands a closer relationship between citizens and their leaders. In any case, these gestures are perceived as tradition among Chinese presidents, rather than political propaganda.

To conclude, it's not enough to frame the BRI as an extension of China's economic and financial policies; it is also essential to understand it from a social point of view and its interference in both Xi and the CCP's image and reputation.

### 1.3. Theoretical framework and methodology

As a means to answer the research question outlined above, this dissertation will be based on a qualitative approach, insofar as it seeks to interpret the dynamics, behaviours, and procedures inherent in political actors. In this sense, it is a comparative analysis that aims to comprehend (*verstehen*) rather than describe, as opposed to a quantitative methodology that is characterised by the exact sciences. In addition, we emphasise official speeches made available by Chinese politicians and news agencies (i.e. Xinhua, and China Central Television (CCTV)), as primary sources for this dissertation. As secondary sources, book chapters will be used as well as monographs, and scientific articles written by reputable authors on the subject in study. To conclude a comparative analysis will be made of the presidencies of what are arguably the most charismatic and relevant leaders in the PRC's contemporary history, namely Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping.

As far as the conceptual lens is concerned, the Role Theory seems to be the most appropriate one for analysing the proposed study. In effect, this theory determines that a certain agent develops a certain perception of himself and his role and of others (*role conception*), who, in turn, also have their perception and expectations (*role expectations*) of that said agent. In this sense, role conception and role expectations can (and often do) lead to *role adjustments*, as the agent may wish to adjust his role to meet the expectations of other agents. Thus, making such adjustments, is what Role Theory calls *role performance* (Turner 2002; Harnish 2010).

The Role Theory provides a better understanding of the interdependence between the different roles and their respective actors. In addition, it should be kept in mind that in authoritarian states, political and military organisations can use multiple mechanisms to maintain and/or adapt the political regime (Turner 2002, Harnish 2010). Based on this explanation, the use of Role Theory seems adequate for this study, as we will explain below. In fact, in the period before the establishment of the PRC, in 1949, China needed a refreshing and united image for an ashamed and discouraged society and also a leader who would project the country onto a different path from the one that had characterised the Century of Humiliation period. Therefore, during Mao's era the Chinese regime used propaganda, such as posters or Mao's so-called Little Red Book, to establish a social behaviour that could be extended to all Chinese, regardless of their differences (Evans

2020; Chen 2022). In turn, the Chinese people's expectations regarding Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution also seemed to corroborate the paternalism he had inaugurated, based on a centralised and firm stance for the reconstruction of the country.

Since 2013, following the Xi Jinping's election as China's President and the announcement of the BRI, the Chinese political dynamics have been restructured, moving closer to the more centralising role that had been characteristic of Mao's regime (Miller 2020; Economy 2022). Today, through the so-called *Chinese Dream* and the BRI, Xi Jinping's role conception aims to subject China to a process of rejuvenation, accompanied by greater economic, political, and even cultural influence inside and outside the country (Zhao 2022; Yu 2024). Unlike Deng, and more like Mao, Xi has established his thinking at the centre of Chinese politics, economy, armed forces, and society. In practice, the 'Chairman of Everything' has sought to rewrite China's history at home. His vision is likely to fit in what Barry Buzan (2010) calls a revisionist reformist approach. In other words, China keeps just the institutions that do not pose difficulties to Chinese aspirations worldwide and builds new institutions, for example the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), when it believes that its interests are no longer effectively fulfilled within the old Bretton Woods system (Duarte and et. al 2024). Xi's China is less low profile than Deng Xiaoping's, and significantly more pragmatic in the pursuit of its domestic and international objectives. So, the new stance displayed by Xi corroborates Buzan's (2010) postulate.

To conclude, Xi Jinping's China is an autocratic, assertive, nostalgic, nationalist country that must reinvent its role to better achieve its goals. In fact, if Mao had used the *Cultural Revolution* or if Deng Xiaoping had idealised the creation of *One Country Two Systems* (一国两制; *yīguó liǎngzhì*), Xi Jinping, in turn, has relied on the BRI as a privileged instrument to better meet domestic and international role expectations. That said, and although these narratives served each leader, it is not unreasonable to undertake a comparative study of the three greatest leaders and their respective ways of consolidating power. The leaderships of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping reflect three distinct eras. Firstly, Mao led the founding revolution of the PRC through mechanisms of repression, then, Deng engineered the rapid economic growth and its integration into the world economy, and, finally, Xi continues to oversee China's growth as a global power, emphasising national development and the country's international

status (Lu 2014; Inwald 2023). In short, it is necessary to understand each leader's individual decisions and respective historical contexts. Given Beijing's increasingly significant international role, analysing how China has been governed is essential to understanding the country's current trajectory.

#### **1.4. Structure**

To achieve the objectives mentioned above, this dissertation is structured as it follows. After a brief contextualisation of the topic, Chapter 2 concentrates on the eras of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping in order to: i) assess how each political actor presented, developed, and adapted his narrative, and ii) draw a comparison between the *role conception*, *role adaptation* and *role performance* of each Chinese leader in light of the domestic *role expectations*.

Chapter 3 examines the most important traits that mark the Xi Jinping era will be examined, in order to understand what bureaucratic and political changes have been made to consolidate his power. In addition, we will shed light on the main cultural and historical characteristics that influence Xi's rule, as they are essential to have a better analysing of the topic in study.

Furthermore, once the "state of the art" has been characterised, Chapter 4 is dedicated to the specific study of the Chinese *Belt and Road Initiative*. Namely, the balance of the last 10 years of the BRI will be undertaken, what has changed in the Initiative, and its stakeholders in the face of the problems it has crushed abroad, as well as within China's borders, i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, in the conclusions we will answer the research questions by presenting the most important findings and ending pointing out future research avenues.

.

## 2. Embodying the Chinese narrative

With the chapter that begins here we will assess the main features that characterises the narratives of the two most important Chinese leaders Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Additionally, we will also compare both leaders' *role conceptions*, *role performances* and *role adjustments* to comprehend where they merge and where they diverge.

### 2.1. Mao's narrative

After World War II (1939 – 1945) and the establishment of the PRC, in 1949, the longstanding communist desire to eradicate a feudal system heavily guided by foreign influences was put into practice (Dreyer 1993). Since then, the advancements made in the political game, coupled with the unique relationship between citizens and their leaders, led to the foundation of a united front. Consequently, Mao Zedong, the founding father of the PRC, was adored and beloved by millions of Chinese citizens for his contributions during the liberation conflicts.

Whilst joining the party during the Long March in 1934, Mao propagated his ideas in front of communist revolutionaries. In Mao's *role conception*, the Chinese revolution was inevitable and much needed for any societal progress and development to occur. Indeed, in his speeches, the communist leader made it clear that revolutions were crucial for the total control of political power, especially in a society characterised by a feudal system, as it was distinctive of the Chinese Imperial Rule (Mao 1937, 1939). Furthermore, the communist leader also believed that the Chinese people's resilience, capabilities, and cohesion would triumph, as witnessed in the past (Kissinger 2011). Plus, as a son of peasants, in rural China, Mao felt firsthand the injustices and prejudices, which allowed him to form a connection to the struggles of the common people. As a result, he forged a narrative that positioned himself as a leader capable of transforming China and championing the cause of the oppressed.

Mao's speeches earned him the trust and confidence of the Chinese people. The population expected the chairman of the CCP to be a modest and charismatic figure, which was perceived differently from the Imperial rulers (Morton and Lewis 2004). Such components also allowed the Chinese leader to understand and adjust his *role conception* when needed since both the Great Leap Forward (1958 – 1962) and the Cultural

Revolution (1966 – 1976) proved to be a disaster in the following years. Nevertheless, due to his *role adaptation*, his image remained almost untouched by the CCP, as it will be analysed further ahead (*ibid*).

In 1958, Mao planned to rapidly industrialise China by making the huge population of peasants work nonstop in collectivisation, live organised in run-government communes, and manufacture crude steel in an initiative called the Great Leap Forward (Morton, and Lewis 2004; Inwald 2023). Even though Mao gave the countrymen the impression that the plan was successful, it was far from being triumphant. Notable stemming issues such as organisational shortcomings and a lack of knowledge of agricultural and economic policies made the Chinese progress face several limitations (Brown, et. al 2018). In fact, rather than enjoying the economic growth observed in its neighbouring countries, China was faced with severe and enduring crises, including social and economic consequences (Palese 2009). The quality of life was heavily affected by a continual reduction in minimum wages, an ever-growing discontent among CCP officials, and the demoralisation of the population. Consequently, these repercussions culminated in widespread famine, with millions of people starving to death (*ibid*). By the time the *Great Leap Forward* ended in 1962, between 15 to 30 million people had died in the famine, and Mao retired as chief of state, while remaining chairman of the Party (Our world in Data 2013; World Peace Foundation 2017).

Mao's distance from the policy-making process did not last long as he concluded that Liu Shaoqi, the man who had succeeded as chairman of the PRC, and other conservatives were trying to thwart his policies. Since Mao was afraid that a “de-Stalinization”<sup>3</sup> could emerge in China, he made role adjustments to his position as a leader, thereby allowing him to recalibrate both his *roles conceptions* and *roles expectations*.

Remarkably, in 1966, at the age of 73, Mao surprised the nation by swimming in the Yangtze River, in Wuhan. He, according to the Peking Review (1966), allegedly swam for 65 minutes, covering about 15 kilometres. In doing so, Mao Zedong showed his good health and resilience to endure the country's leadership. However, as Poon

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<sup>3</sup> De-Stalinization (*destalinizatsiia*) is a process created by Nikita Khrushchev to dismantle and demythologize the political system and personality cult created by his predecessor, Josef Stalin, the former leader of the Soviet Union (Hunt 2015).

(2019) argues in her article, Mao's swimming episode was used to construct propagandist representations of himself. As such, it embodied the political narrative and the personal message that Mao would always emerge victorious over any challenge regardless of winds and waves. The latter is a metaphor for capitalists and counterrevolutionaries (ibid).

Afterward, the Chinese leader began to recognise in his speeches that political conquest alone was inadequate to inspire and consolidate the power of the masses (Dreyer 1993, Palese 2009). Mao observed that a synergy between politics and culture was essential for achieving social development and motivating the population to join his glorious cause. The Party directed its attention to merging politics, culture, and education by carefully choosing crafted posters, speeches, and texts from Mao's doctrine as examples to be studied, shared, and employed (Morton and Lewis 2004; Inwald 2023). By the end of 1966, the movement had become more violent, and the *Red Guards* burst into homes to destroy old books, paintings, and art that represented *The Four Olds*<sup>4</sup>. In other words, it fueled a widespread campaign of persecution and punishment of scholars and intellectuals accused of criticising Mao's Thought, not even sparing prominent figures such as Liu Shaoqi (Morton and Lewis 2004; MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2012). Instead of fostering egalitarianism, the *Cultural Revolution* replaced many long-standing leaders with new and inexperienced individuals. As a result, not only were authority relations severely weakened in some areas, but they also caused an ambiance of distrust within society (Vogel 2011; Dreyer 1993).

Overall, this strategic communication was crucial in replacing Chinese people's negative *role expectations* vis-à-vis Mao's *role conception* (Inwald 2023). However, by adjusting his *role conception*, Mao allowed a new transformation that proved to be much more negative than the *Great Leap Forward*. When the Chinese leader felt his role was being oppressed, he incorporated a rule-by-fear approach within his role performance, by censoring the media and opposing comrades for any negative comments or actions against his image or ideology. Furthermore, Mao signalled his ambition to hold a remarkable position in China's history and the Communist Pantheon alongside Stalin and other

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<sup>4</sup> *The Four Olds* (四旧, Sìjiù) was a concept adopted during the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) by the *Red Guard* about ideas and policies that were against the Chinese communist ideology. *The Four Olds* were: *Old Ideas* (旧思想; Jiù Sīxiǎng); *Old Culture* (旧文化, Jiù Wénhuà); *Old Customs* (旧风俗, Jiù Fēngsú); and *Old Habits* (旧习惯, Jiù Xíguàn) (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2012).

intellectuals, despite the consequences of the *Cultural Revolution*. In doing so, Morton and Lewis argue that many of the leaders who had been victims of the Cultural Revolution's persecution could not condemn the Chairman posthumously, as "they risked questioning the "Party authority in a way that could jeopardise their hold on power" (2004, 228). Yet, as the upcoming subchapter will highlight, Deng Xiaoping, the successor of Mao Zedong, pragmatically took matters into his own hands the same way he went to rule China. While recognising the Chinese leader's misconduct during the *Great Leap Forward* and the *Cultural Revolution*, Deng decided to preserve some of Mao's narratives in assembling masses and created policies that recovered the Chinese economy from his predecessor's negative wrongdoings (ibid).

## **2.2. Deng's narrative**

As described by Vogel (2011), the economic and social turmoil stemmed from the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, anticipated a decade marked by political upheaval, and social and economic reforms in China. In this regard, Deng Xiaoping's role conception envisioned a path toward stability and economic viability, with no space for the resurgence of absolute power reminiscent of the Maoist era. He noted that it was crucial to implement policies, and the establishment of rules and regulations, that allowed the rapid development of the country's industry (Jiaqi and Gaogao 1996; Chang 1996; Chow 2018). Hence, in December 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> CCP Central Committee "ushered (a new chapter) of reform and opening up and socialist modernization (in China)" to improve living conditions and innovation in the Chinese economy (The State Council Information Office 2021, para. 143). Moreover, during the Third Plenary, many reforms were accepted in ideology, among the *Four Modernizations*, (四个现代化, *sì gè xiàndàihuà*) in agriculture, industry, technology, defence, and *Reform and Open Door Policy* (改革开放, *Gǎigé kāifàng*) (Marsh and Kau 1993). This led to a period of reform and openness to the implementation of market-oriented policies, and the adherence of China to foreign markets, and international organisations, that is International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank (Marsh and Kau 1993; Chang 1996; Xu 2011; Hofman 2018).

Initially, these economic reforms developed gradually from the decentralising fiscal and administrative powers and accelerated the process of private ownership in rural

areas. For the countryside this meant the abolishment of people's communes in 1982, and the development of township and village enterprises (乡镇企业, *xiāngzhèn qǐyè*; TVEs). In this sense, peasant families were allowed to use the land for personal use. From that moment on, families profited from their production and could spend their money on investments, which dynamised the Chinese economy. Additionally, in 1988, Deng proposed Special Economic Zones (经济特区, *jīngjì tèqū*; SEZ) to attract overseas manufacturers, bringing controlled foreign industry and capital to coastal areas.

These areas offered preferential tax treatment to attract foreign capital and were gradually expanded to other areas of China, including locations along the Pearl River in Guangzhou (Morton and Lewis 2004; Chow 2018). Over the years, these economic reforms contributed to poverty reduction from coastal areas to western and central regions, improving the living standards for millions of Chinese citizens. According to the data made available by the Development Research Center of the State Council Information Office of the PRC and the World Bank (2022), between 1978 and 2020, China's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) grew 8.2 percent per year on average while the poverty rate decreased by 2.3 percent per year. Besides, between 1978 and 1990, the headcount of people living in rural poverty in China decreased from 770 million to 658 million.

As the Chinese economy and industry developed alongside the proliferation of multinational corporations on Chinese soil, disparities among provinces emerged. Regardless of the success of such economic reforms, the Chinese rural areas remained significantly undeveloped, in comparison with the coastal zones (Morton and Lewis 2004; Chow 2018). Furthermore, as it was no longer required to be part of "work units"<sup>5</sup> in the agricultural field, the younger generations migrated to the urban centres. For most groups, the migration to a metropolis meant the flourishing of more job opportunities, and access to trade markers, which inevitably allowed them access to better services such as healthcare and education (Dittmer 1993; Morton and Lewis 2004; Chow 2018). In Deng Xiaoping's *role conception* these socioeconomic changes were perceived as a natural transformation process of the working class into the 'leading class', and the extinction of

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<sup>5</sup> Work unit (单位, *dān wèi*) is the name given to the place of employment in the PRC. Before Deng's economic reforms, this used to refer to the multi-tiered hierarchy linking individuals with the central CCP infrastructures (Morton and Lewis 2004).

the bourgeoisie. In his vision, there was no point in mentioning social classes, as the poorest were now members of a bigger group (Deng 1984b). As Chang (1996) assesses in her paper, Deng saw China “as being larger than the People’s Republic (...), all Chinese had a sense of pride (...) and wanted to see (China) become strong and prosperous” (385). Overall, by implementing these gradual reforms, the CCP built a reputation among the Chinese communities for delivering prominent, and to some extent, successful economic reforms, while maintaining a sense of social stability.

It is important to state that both Deng’s *role conception* and *role expectations* were largely influenced by economic prosperity, social stability, and the preservation of the CCP’s stand on power. As such, Deng’s *role performance* encompassed proposing political reforms within the party to improve governance efficiency, combat corruption, and promote the acceptance of the CCP leadership. His *role adjustments* emphasised the importance of collective decision and institutionalised mechanisms to prevent power struggles, i.e. term limits and retirement age for top leaders.

Notwithstanding, in the process of opening the country, Deng’s *role conception* was extended to the field of International Relations. As said before, Deng recognised the role and importance of China’s integration into the international community and the global market. Intrinsically, this fostered diplomatic relations, controlled foreign investment, and China’s handset in international economic cooperation (Marsh and Kau 1993; Chow 2018). In Deng’s formula *One Country, Two Systems*<sup>6</sup>, one can understand Deng’s *role performance* of maintaining the stability and development in the SARs of Hong Kong and Macau while connecting these areas to mainland China.

The adaptation of Deng’s *role conception* was based on the people’s *role expectations* of a prosperous and modern China. In this sense, much of Deng Xiaoping’s *role performance* countered Marx-Lenin-Mao Thought, although the Chinese leader did not completely reject these political ideas. The paramount leader of the PRC recognised the importance of Mao’s legacy in building a strong Chinese state but criticised his option

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<sup>6</sup> *One Country, Two Systems* is a policy framework that describes the governance of the Special Administrative Regions (SARs) of Hong Kong. Created and developed by Deng Xiaoping during the negotiations of the handover of these European colonies to China, the formula *One Country, Two Systems* means that while China maintains sovereignty over the SARs, they nonetheless enjoy a high degree of autonomy, in vast areas such as the judicial system (The State Council 2014b).

for ideological narratives over economic development (Chang 1996; Morton and Lewis 2004; Garnaut 2012); Wang and Vangeli 2016). As explained by Wang and Vangeli (2016), in an attempt to mitigate the risks of arbitrary decision-making and unchecked power, Deng attempted to institutionalise a pragmatic succession. The emphasis on institutional stability was more important than one's rule. In fact, one of his role conception's main priorities was to prevent the perpetuation of the power of top leaders. Indeed, Deng personally contributed to it by stepping down from his position after two terms (Morton and Lewis 2004; Hofman 2018).

Deng's *role performance* in economic development successfully fostered the country's economy. However, these reforms showed how the legal and judiciary systems were incapable of making corrupt officials accountable. As new social and economic gains swept China, serious corruption scandals and opposition emerged in new urban areas, thus threatening the political status quo in the country (Marsh and Kau 1993; Morton and Lewis 2004; Xu 2011). Furthermore, the late 1980s and the early 1990s were a period of ambiguity in several sectors that left China in a limbo of conflict and peace (Liu 1992). Not only were the welfare programs insufficient for the millions of laid-off workers, but also the livelihood of urban and rural residents was threatened by two-digit inflation and grain production extremes (Morton and Lewis 2004).

In 1986, large demonstrations emerged from provincial cities and spread to Shanghai and Beijing, asking for greater democracy. The opposition blamed Hu Yaobang, a top official and close ally of Deng Xiaoping, for mishandling the demonstrations, leading later to his resignation as the Party's secretary general. Three years later, in May 1989, during Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to Beijing, the last leader of the USSR, debates about China's culture and politics burst into public discussion. In Beijing, students asked for democratic government and constitutional freedoms. Gradually, workers and local citizens joined the students and flooded Tiananmen Square (Liu 1992; Mason and Clements 2002). In response to these demonstrations, during the 7<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress in 1989, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress released a resolution condemning the riots and imposed martial law in certain areas of Beijing to maintain social stability (Standing Committee of the Seventh National People's Congress 1989). By mid-1989 the military was called to peacefully clear the protests and to only use force as a last resort. Nonetheless, brutal, and bloody encounters erupted in major

cities. Thousands fought back against troop forces in brutal confrontations as Deng saw it as the only way to put an end to the protests, thus avoiding a civil war and disparities within the country. Overall, after the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 and the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, the Chinese state tightened its control and enforced economic liberalisation (Liu 1992; Morton and Lewis 2004).

Deng's *role conception* and *role performance* were also heavily influenced by both the *Great Leap Forward* and the *Cultural Revolution*, which led to a *role adjustment* of his position. Deng's *role performance* approached the leadership with a deep awareness of what could be done and the limitations of his rule, as people's *role expectations* hoped to maintain social stability after Mao's rule. According to Deng's *role conception*, China needed economic prosperity through pragmatic and comprehensive decisions. After all, his commitment to modernisation brought rapid industrialisation and highly improved the quality of life for millions of Chinese citizens (National Bureau of Statistics of China n.d.). As for comparisons with the Mao era, and as will be highlighted in the following subchapter, the Deng Xiaoping era represents a significant turning point for the country's modernisation. In practice, Mao's *role performance* was characterised by indiscriminate means to achieve his personal goals, which often meant a significant human cost and disregard for basic human rights. Whereas Deng's *role performance* pursued a more pragmatic approach centred on the country's development, Mao employed radical and revolutionary ideological campaigns. In line with this, Deng Xiaoping's *role conception* of emphasis on flexibility as the means to achieve economic prosperity allowed him to do constant role adjustments, in a clear contrast with Mao's inflexibility in pursuing radical and revolutionary campaigns.

### **2.3. A comparison between Mao and Deng's role conception and role performance**

After exploring the narratives forged by Mao's revolutionary ideology and Deng's pragmatism, we will now attempt to go deeper into the divergences of the Chinese leaders and their influence on the Chinese political stage. Despite the tumultuous periods that followed the Chinese Revolution, each leader's *role conception* and *role performance* were characterised by their distinctive ideologies and policies. As the Father of Contemporary China, Mao envisioned himself as the captain of a sinking ship in and out of a storm of revolutions and class struggles, with the guidance of the CCP (Mao 1944, 1945a, 1945b 1957). In contrast, Deng, as the architect of the Chinese economic reforms,

projected and developed China's economy with pragmatism. In this subchapter, their self-perceived responsibilities and the position of topics such as ideology and historical narrative in these political actors will be unravelled.

To help simplify what will be discussed throughout this subchapter, we elaborated two tables showing the main differences between Mao and Deng's *role conception* and *role performance*. In table 1, the major differences between Mao's and Deng's *role conceptions* will be elucidated. As Mao and Deng differed in their approach to materialising their *role conception*, we will highlight two principles that are considered important in their leadership: authority and ideology. In addition, the comparison of these leaders' economic policies is crucial to the understanding of their *role performance*. These policies impacted the country's progression from an agrarian society (Mao era) to a global economic powerhouse (Deng era). Concurrently, all these policies also impacted China's diplomacy posture and the country's response to international challenges. This means that analysing the alignment of all these elements facilitates further discussions on Xi Jinping's consolidation of power as is the main topic of this dissertation.

On the other hand, table 2 helps visualise the *role performance* of these political actors taking into account both their role conceptions and Chinese people's expectations. This table illustrates how Mao and Deng conducted their policies under the Chinese Communist institutions and their relations with the international community, especially during the Deng Xiaoping era. Finally, their *role performances* will be highlighted, mainly how Mao built the foundations for Contemporary China, and how Deng helped construct socialism with Chinese characteristics.

**Table 1. Mao Zedong's *role conception* versus Deng Xiaoping's *role conception***

| <b><i>Role Conception</i></b>         | <b>Mao Zedong<br/>(1949 – 1976)</b>   | <b>Deng Xiaoping<br/>(1978 – 1990)</b>     |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <b>Authority</b>                      | Strong centralised figure             | Collective leadership                      |
| <b>Party Ideology</b>                 | Maoism                                | Socialism with Chinese characteristics     |
| <b>Role of State</b>                  | An instrument for achieving socialism | Strong state and market                    |
| <b>Alignment on Political Reforms</b> | In favour<br>(Mass Movements)         | In favour<br>(Legal and political reforms) |
| <b>Internationalism</b>               | Anti - Imperialism                    | Pragmatic                                  |
| <b>Historical Narrative</b>           | Founding leader                       | Architect of economic reforms              |

Source: Elaborated by the candidate

**Table 2: Mao Zedong's *role performance* versus Deng Xiaoping's *role performance***

| <b><i>Role Performance</i></b>               | <b>Mao Zedong<br/>(1949 – 1976)</b> | <b>Deng Xiaoping<br/>(1978 – 1990)</b> |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| <b>Leadership</b>                            | Dogmatic                            | Pragmatic                              |
| <b>Governance</b>                            | Centralised                         | Inclusive                              |
| <b>Economic Policies</b>                     | Collectivism                        | Mark-oriented reforms                  |
| <b>Political and<br/>Information Control</b> | Strict control                      | More flexible                          |
| <b>Contact with<br/>International Actors</b> | Less participation                  | More participation                     |
| <b>Road to Socialism</b>                     | Revolutionary                       | Pragmatic                              |

Source: Elaborated by the candidate

To this extent, it becomes evident that a comparative analysis of Mao and Deng's approaches to the Chinese road to a socialist society exhibits different methods to achieve their corresponding goals. One aspect to analyse in these leaders' *role performances* is their focus on ideology in the political realm, such as their willingness to adjust their roles. While Mao's unflexible *role performance* was deeply rooted in his commitment to perpetual revolutionary ideals, Deng's *role performance* aimed at modernising China through market-oriented policies and at improving living standards.

Looking back to Mao Zedong's influence in China's political realm, it becomes evident that the Chinese leader embodied revolutionary ideas to guide the Chinese society (Mao 1937). As time went by, Mao's *role conception* as a revolutionary leader shaped his approach to governance and policymaking. In practice, this meant a centralised and

authoritarian Chinese state, which resulted in the persecution of political opponents and the consolidation of power, often at the expense of basic human rights (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2012, Ezra 2012). As Ruoshui (2007) clarified, Mao endorsed the idea of unity between two opposing elements (communists vs capitalists in the Chinese scenario) to forward the development of society into socialist standards. For Mao (1937), a society grows strong and consolidated through the endless process of ceasing differences and contradictions.

However, as he came to power, Deng Xiaoping persisted in *role adjustments* to seek positive economic affairs and avoid past errors. In addition, much of the initial Deng's *role performance* aligned with the domestic *role expectation* of a leader who could expand the Chinese image domestically and abroad, and secure social order (Deng 1984a; Chang 1996). Furthermore, Deng's *role performance* constantly adjusted to policies that compensated for economic efficiency and social stability. In contrast, Mao's unchanged *role performance* stood from his studies of Marxism-Leninism, mainly class struggle. Mao strongly believed that "revolutions and revolutionary wars are inevitable in class society, and without them, it is impossible to accomplish any leap in social development" (1937, 344). This led to Mao's *role performance* being mainly characterised by unbending role adjustments focused on a commitment to achieve socialist principles, mainly through class struggles and mass movements.

Contrary to Mao's *role conception* which always embodied mass mobilisation and collectivisation, Deng's *role conception* created the principle to formalise his approaches to challenges left by his predecessor – *Socialism with Chinese characteristics*. In Deng's vision, the party's emphasis should be on pragmatic and adaptable governance, alongside political control, rather than ideological purity (Deng 1978). This *role adjustment* demanded a restructure of Deng's role as a leader, but also CCP's role as the party ruler, even though ideological fervour severely damaged CCP's image among the Chinese population. In fact, the formula *Socialism with Chinese characteristics* permitted Deng to make role adjustments, as Deng was flexible enough to respond effectively to complexities domestically and abroad. Rather than seeking the party's legitimacy through revolutions and mass movements as Mao endorsed, Deng's governance of the CCP was in alignment with the expansion of Chinese influence abroad. Furthermore, he also

worked towards the improvement of living standards<sup>7</sup> (Marsh and Kau 1993; Wong 2007).

Another characteristic that differentiates Mao Zedong's *role performance* from Deng Xiaoping's is their respective understanding of foreign affairs. Under Mao, China's foreign policy advocated for "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, noninterference in each other's international affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence" (Council on Foreign Relations n.d. para. 9). Gradually, during the 1960s, China also tried to expand its international influence through the support of revolutionary and independence movements in Africa and Southeast Asia (Mao 1964). This contrasted with Deng's *role performance*, whereas to have Chinese development, Deng sought a controlled opening of China to foreign expertise and investment. Along these lines, the international community's role expectations of China shifted from those of a revolutionary country to a more open and diplomatic nation. This change reflected the rise of China as a major economic power, which also saw an increase in Chinese influence on world affairs (Chow 2018).

All in all, despite their differing *role performances* and *role conceptions*, it is important to note that both leaders managed to maintain the CCP as the central force of the country. As decades have gone by, since these historic leaderships, the CCP remains committed to controlling the contributions and shortcomings of these leaders. In the present era, as we will analyse in the upcoming chapter, Xi Jinping's *role conception* of the *Chinese Dream*, a community with a common destiny, and the BRI have been heavily influenced by these leaders (Carrai 2020; Hayes 2020).

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<sup>7</sup> *Relatively comfortable life or Xiaokang society* (小康社会; *Xiǎokāng Shèhuì*) is a Confucianst term associated with a society where everyone lives in peace and harmony with each other. During Deng Xiaoping's term, the concept was adopted as a development target to improve the standard of living (Wong 2007).

### 3. Xi Jinping's Era

The era of Xi Jinping has brought a period of assertive leadership, efforts to strengthen the CCP control, and the expansion of China's dominance in international affairs. As such, in this chapter we analyse what the first decade of Xi Jinping era signified in terms of political narratives, power consolidation and personality cult.

#### 3.1. The 'self' towards the new conjuncture

When Xi Jinping appeared in front of the National Congress of the CCP in November 2013, Beijing faced serious challenges created by the collective leadership left by Deng Xiaoping. In this regard, Xi Jinping's predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao's *role performance* failed to control the increased levels of corruption, even though in their conception they pledged to fight against it (Barrass and Inkster 2018; Li 2022). For instance, as Lee (2017) and Li (2022) underline, a growing factionalism within the Party - that later led to severe difficulties in policy-making and major corruption cases - left the Chinese economy and society dissatisfied. In addition, there were also serious tensions between the Chinese authorities and the ethnic minority groups in rural provinces, which undermined the CCP's rule. Thus, domestically, Chinese society felt disappointed with the central government and its role expectations anticipated for a new leadership capable of improving economic development, living standards, and transparency (Wang and Zeng 2016). Alongside it, China's high-ranking officials also loudly voiced for deepening coordination between ministries and regional governments to improve governance and administrative performance. Consequently, at a time of crisis for CCP legitimacy, this influenced Xi Jinping's *role performance* to act rapidly (Lee 2017).

In the following months of his election, Xi Jinping's *role performance* proved to be more intense, assertive, and resilient than Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. In this sense, the Chairman of Everything enforced top-down leadership and became the chair of major executive commissions, including the National Security and Foreign Affairs (Barrass and Inkster 2018; Grünberg and Drinhausen 2019). In this sense, Xi strengthened his power, including over the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Supreme Court, and the Supreme People's Procuratorate, while sidelining major cabinets, i.e. the State Council and China's Premier (People's Daily 2013). Additionally, Xi focused on CCP values, including socialist values and the party work style (Wang and Zeng 2016; Li 2022; Choi 2023).

Furthermore, during the earlier stages of the anti-corruption campaigns, Xi asked for efforts to strengthen national anti-corruption and warned that “no one can enjoy absolute power outside of the law” (Xi 2013a, para. 14). To this extent, the anti-corruption served political purposes, as well as for Xi’s personal political gain. Moreover, these earlier movements signified a departure from the collective leadership and an adjustment of Xi’s role to what he considered necessary to maintain effective power and authority. Indeed, at the celebration assembly of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Central Party School, Xi stated that it was important to adjust the party members’ capabilities to safeguard reforms, developments, and stability in China (Xi 2013b). In order to avoid the fate of the USSR, Xi elevated all of his roles, in all aspects of the socioeconomic and political life of China (Blanchette and Medeiros 2022). As such, Xi Jinping’s *role adjustment* was forged with the attempt to gain support domestically and reshape the powers given to the presidency of China. In this sense, Xi Jinping could have easily faced repercussions or setbacks. However, Xi’s *role performance* in the anti-corruption campaign was received with trust among the Chinese citizens.

By the end of his first term, Xi Jinping had already solidified and centralised his power in the CCP. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of CCP, in 2019, the Secretary-General stated that the country’s national governance had many advantages, mainly the party’s centralised and unified leadership, which allowed political stability, and ensured the path for socialism. Based on this, it can be concluded that Xi’s *role conception* of leadership is directly influenced by Mao Zedong’s *role conception* of authoritative leadership, while he distances himself from Deng Xiaoping’s *role conception* of collective leadership. Nevertheless, according to Lam (2016), in Xi Jinping’s conception, he “regards himself as the equal of Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong” (410). In comparison, Xi, for example, became the first Chinese official leader, since Mao, to have his personal contribution, The Xi Jinping Thought, engraved in the Party’s constitution, while in office – an honour that was not given to Jiang Zemin or Hu Jinao (Shrik 2018; Tsang and Cheung 2022).

In view of this, Xi’s conception of democracy is borrowed from Mao’s principle of mass line incorporated into the party’s policies, so that the people can have a sense of familial bond with the CCP (Ibid). Interestingly, the CCP immersed the population in anti-corruption campaigns by creating mechanisms to denounce cases of corruption in any sector of work. Nonetheless, that does not mean that Xi is just adjusting his role exclusively from what he has learnt from Mao. For instance, during the first 100 days of

his leadership, like Deng Xiaoping, Xi toured poverty-hit rural areas, where he had conversations with rural citizens and showcased his ruling principles and concepts (China Daily 2013). From this point of view, the overall political propaganda portrayed in the traditional media is intended to leave the society with the impression on how the role of a leader should be perceived (Esarey 2021).

Another Xi Jinping's *role conceptions* involves the CCP legitimacy. In his *role conception*, the CCP plays a crucial function in its attempt to unite and guide the people. In this light, the party aims to fulfil social *role expectations* by implementing structural reforms. Since day one, Xi's *role conception* has been fully confident in the superiority of the CCP, and that it will thrive from day to day (Grünberg and Drinhausen 2019; Tsang and Cheung 2022). From this perspective, during the 19th Century Committee of CCP, the Secretary General stated that "the party has led the people to create a miracle of rapid economic development, and long-term social stability that is rare in the world" (2019, para. 3). To be more specific, in Xi's *role conception* of centrality, a strong, centralised, and modernised party is crucial to the governability of a country with the dimensions and diversity of China (Blanchette and Medeiros 2022).

However, to sustain the CCP's legitimacy, the party must also be led by a strong actor. In this regard, Stang and Cheung (2022) note that "Xi's loyalty to himself shores up the Leninist principle of democratic centralism, which requires complete obedience from a lower-level party organisation to an upper-level party organisation, and from the whole party to the Party Central" (228). To sum up, to Xi the loyalty of the party is loyalty to himself. Based on this, Xi's *role performance* is to institutionalise the party's leadership into a 'self-supervising system'. Subsequently, this has led to his last standing anti-corruption campaign and investments on the SCS and in the *Great Firewall* (防火长城, *Fánghuǒ Chángchéng*; GFR)<sup>8</sup> (Grünberg and Drinhausen 2019; Stang and Cheung 2022).

According to the previously stated, one can conclude that both Xi and Mao's *role performance* are comparable in their approaches to governance and CCP's supervision and control. Indeed, whereas Mao's *role performance* is heavily characterised by his

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<sup>8</sup> The *Great Firewall* is a nation scale firewall enforced by the Chinese government to regulate the Internet domestically (Ensafi et al. 2015).

centralised and authoritarian role, coupled with mass mobilisations and revolutionary movements, Xi's *role performance* is more strategically minded. Building upon this, Xi's *role performance* in consolidating power within the CCP involves addressing the people's *role expectations* through anti-corruption campaigns and ideological indoctrination, rather than the mobilisation of the masses. Although Xi's personality cult is not as strong as it was in Mao's era, as for instance there is no equivalent of a *Red Guard*, or the *Little Red Book*, in Xi's personality cult, the current Secretary General has been adopting more assertive components.

As the time changes and technology develops, Xi Jinping carefully uses the internet to reinforce a positive image about his leadership and himself. For Mao, the Little Red Book served to indoctrinate, and the *Red Guard* to punish. With Xi, there is a pop culture instrumentalised that seeks to portray the leader as a great leader, and policies in the face of the powerful figure. In fact, eulogy songs and poems are commonly used to portray a paternalistic figure and to express affection or familiarity with Xi Jinping's image. However, such songs and poems are also used to promote Xi's policies, such as the *Chinese Dream*. As can be seen in Table 3 from a song entitled *The Father Xi loves Mother Peng*, the lyrics also mention the anti-campaign policy against the corrupt leaders in the highest ranks (*tigers*) of the CCP (Yin and Flew 2018; Stensile and Galtung 2023).

**Table 3. The Father Xi loves Mother Peng**

| 习大大爱着彭麻麻                                                                                                                                                                     | The Father Xi loves Mother Peng                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 中国出了个习大大，<br>多大的老虎也敢，<br>多大的老虎也敢打，<br>天不怕嘿地不怕，<br><br>(...)<br>做梦都想见到他！<br>男人要学习大大，<br><br>(...)<br>人要学彭麻麻，<br>像他们一样去爱吧，<br>有爱的人才赢天下，<br>有种爱叫习大大爱着彭麻麻，<br><br>在一起时他总微笑幸福看着她。 | China has Xi Dada (Father)<br>He even dares to fight big tigers,<br>He even dares to fight big tigers,<br>He is neither afraid of the sky nor the earth,<br><br>(...)<br>I want to meet him in my dreams!<br>Men need to learn from Xi Dada,<br><br>(...)<br>People should learn from Pang Mama (Xi's wife),<br>Love like them,<br>Only those with love win the world,<br>There's a type of love called Xi Dada loves Peng Mama,<br>When they are together, he (Xi) always looks at her and smiles happily. |

Translated by the candidate. Original lyrics written by Song Zhigang (2014).

Closely related to the above, under Xi Jinping's *role conception* and *role performance*, the concept of cyber sovereignty is also being popularised and modernised to regulate and control online contents (Masaaki 2022). According to the China Internet Information Center (2024), China had nearly 1.1 billion internet users as of June 2024. Of that universe, 68.8% go online to trade in on e-commerce, while 95,5% are short video consumers across Chinese platforms, such as the use Douyin app (抖音 *dǒuyīn*; or Tiktok outside China). However, digital access is tempered with extensive domestic laws, and regulations that significantly restrict online debates and expression. In this sense, international social media such as X (former Twitter), Facebook, YouTube have all been

blocked under the Great Firewall of China (GRF), and replaced by their corresponding Chinese counterparts WeChat, Weibo, and Youku (优酷, *Yōukù*).

While Chinese citizens can access online information and communication, the power imbalance between the state and individuals means that digital freedom is illusory. According to Masaaki (2022), Xi is aware that “the free circulation of domestic and foreign cyberspace will easily invite foreign powers to intervene in China’s domestic cyberspace” (17-18). More importantly, the CCP has removed anonymity from the Internet, understanding both economic and political importance of development of China’s cyberspace (Cabestan 2020). In this context, the Chinese government implemented, in 2017, a new cybersecurity law, demanding every social media platform to republish and link new articles previously approved by the state. Rather than being a space of free thinking and open conversations, Xi’s *role performance* has turned the internet into a political weapon to input patriotic symbols and control public opinion (Zhao 2022). Consequently, Xi’s online *role performance* aims at controlling how information is perceived to accompany his technological censorship efforts (Tsang and Cheung 2022; Zhao 2022). If the government proves able to control the narrative, then it can shape the lens through which people filter information and determine how much information will be spread. In other words, the cybernetic supervision not only helps Xi Jinping change the Chinese people’s *role expectations*, but also assists him in producing *role adjustments* (Jiang 2020; Quan 2022).

As aforementioned, Xi modernised the personality cult in China in his favour, and through online channels, such as Hunan TV, or Chinese versions of Western night quiz TV shows are aired to change the people’s perception of Xi’s role performance (Stensile and Galtung 2023). While it is true that Chinese citizens may be experiencing certain freedoms they have not enjoyed before, they also face significant levels of oppression (Cabestan 2020). With the rise of Xi Jinping’s cult of personality, the outsized sensitivity in censorship around his policies and power reflects both a fragility in his grip of power as well as a consolidation of his authority (Jiang 2020; Quan 2022). In connection with the foregoing, the CCP also requires its members to download the *Little Red App* (小红书, *xiǎohóngshū*) and *Xuexi Qiangguo* applications, whilst encouraging them to be active users<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Both applications are used for the study of principles and concepts approved and recommended by the

Besides the development of the *Great Firewall* domestically, the Chinese government is also running projects for the SCS. Even though the SCS was first introduced as a financial credit to assist state banks to evaluate the creditworthiness of individuals and enterprises who applied for loans, the SCS functions have gradually shifted. In 2014, the SCS was to “play the mechanisms of incentivizing trustworthiness and punishing untrustworthiness” (The State Council 2014a). In 2019, the plan spread to cover online information and speech. As such, individuals can be punished for not visiting their parents or be labeled as dangerous “for social stability should they participate in an underground church or a workers’ rights non-governmental organization” (Cabestan 2020; 11). Such ratings can result in a ban on travel in public transportation or the access to social housing or public jobs (ibidem).

Overall, in Xi’s *role conception*, the SCS is aimed at monitoring and regulating the behaviour of individuals, and organisations, while promoting social stability and adherence to CCP’s ideological and behavioural standards. In this line of thought, besides the economic priority of China’s digitalization, by potentially identifying and addressing the social anomalies more effectively, the government can promote trustworthiness between the people and the government, develop economic innovation, and control the political narrative (Jiang 2020; Quan 2022). To put it simply, through the SCS, the CCP attempts to respond to Chinese people’s *role expectations* more easily, thereby adjusting both the CCP and Xi Jinping’s role.

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CCP, including The Xi Jinping Thought. Furthermore, in those applications the Chinese citizens can video chat, hold conversations with each other and learn about CCP’s history, or even Xi Jinping’s biography (Cabestan 2020).

**Table 4. Elements of personality cult between Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping**

| <b>Instruments</b>                       | <b>Mao Zedong<br/>(1949 – 1976)</b>                                                                                                                       | <b>Xi Jinping<br/>(2013 – 2024)</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mobilised Groups</b>                  | Red Guard                                                                                                                                                 | Communist Youth League                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Party Ideology and Loyalty</b>        | The Little Red Book was massively distributed and treated as a sacred text;<br><br>Marxism-Leninism-Maoism essential for China's progress.                | Speeches and quotes promoted through state media and incorporated into the official ideology of the party;<br><br>Loyalty promoted through the Chinese Dream and national rejuvenation policies.                                    |
| <b>Political and Information Control</b> | Dissenting voices persecuted mainly during the Cultural Revolution;<br><br>Information controlled and used to promote Mao's personal cult.                | Control over information;<br><br>Censoring opposition;<br><br>Promoting a positive image of leadership;<br><br>Surveillance technologies to motorise citizens.                                                                      |
| <b>Media</b>                             | Mao's image promoted through state-controlled media, posters and literature;<br><br>Mao as the founding father of the nation, a saviour and great leader. | Xi's personality is portrayed in the media through songs, poems, tv shows and online publications;<br><br>In social media, the party shares positive narratives about Xi's leadership and his contributions to China's development. |

Source: Elaborated by the candidate

In comparison with Mao, Deng took advantage of a period where the people were saturated with the previous leadership, with the Great Leap Forward fiasco and the personality cult of an oppressive leader, to better fulfil the *role expectations* of the population. In fact, the Chinese population opted for a path of liberalisation and private initiative - an anti-Mao view. Furthermore, Deng was in favour of these *role expectations*, as he made the means to be more flexible in order to better meet the *role expectations* of those who were suffering from the fatigue of an absolutism that did not open China up to the world, neither contributed to China's self sufficiency. In this sense, Deng realised that Mao's *role conception* and *role performance* were not driving China to the position that Mao had hoped for, and that it was necessary to make the instruments more flexible in order to meet the *role expectations* of the population. Deng took the pressure off the communes and collectivisation and did the exact opposite. Overall, in history, every

nation has cycles and counter-cycles in its correct time. In China's case, as Mao's cycle brought instability, Deng surged as a denial of Mao's leadership. Today, Xi Jinping is Deng Xiaoping's own antithesis.

Overall, similarly to Deng, Xi's *role performance* can be described as ambitious and visionary. As it happened at the beginning of his first term with the anti-corruption campaign, during the Hong Kong protests between 2019 and 2020, and most recently with the COVID-19 pandemic, Xi proved to be a leader that likes to take risks. Notably during the public demonstrations in Hong Kong, Xi Jinping pushed a new national security law<sup>10</sup>. Likewise, during the pandemic, the general secretary of the CCP faced criticism for his inflexible *role performance* on the COVID-19 policy. Overall, Xi's *role performance* propensity for high-risk tolerance is comparable with Mao, and highly differentiated from Deng's approach to social stability, except for the handling of Tiananmen's protests. In fact, whereas Mao and Xi Jinping's *role performance* prioritised the one-man rule power, including a strong nationalist sentiment and solidifying the party's legitimacy, Deng focused on bringing social stability to the country and avoiding a new Mao (Stenslie and Galtung 2023). Besides, as we will be analysing in the upcoming lines, the nostalgia for China's glorious past is heavily present in Xi Jinping's *role conception* of China's future.

### 3.2. Remnants of the past to tomorrow's dream

The *Chinese Dream* aims to achieve prosperity, collective effort, socialism with Chinese characteristics, and national glory (Lu 2015; Bislev 2015). In addition, the Chinese Dream encompasses the aspirations of personal success and improved living standards, while involving broader national objectives such as economic prosperity, military dominance, and cultural revival (Lu 2015; Mazuelos 2022). That is to say that by connecting national goals to personal dreams, Xi's *role conception* tries to evoke hope and optimism about

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<sup>10</sup> The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (中华人民共和国香港特别行政区维护国家安全法, *Zhōnghuá rénmin gònghéguó xiānggǎng tèbié xíngzhèngqū wéihù guójiā ānquán fǎ*) is a law concerning the national security of Hong Kong. The law was approved in June 2020 by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress to safeguard national security, development and security in the SARs of Hong Kong. The national security law acts in accordance with the One Country Two Systems formula and respects the legitimate rights and freedoms enjoyed in accordance with the law (The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2020).

the future of Chinese society.

As Table 5 shows, the *Chinese Dream*'s influences can be tracked from the period of Confucius, and the Ancient Silk Road to the "Century of Humiliation". Historically, the basis of the *Chinese Dream* comes from a period where China considered itself the centre of the world, forcing the title of *Tianxia*<sup>11</sup> upon itself, a concept that the Chinese authorities still use (Lu 2015; Mazuelos 2022). However, with the foreign occupation of China, a sense of personal humiliation was felt inside the domestic and international policies, which brought a political desire to lead the country to a national rejuvenation – a core concept for the *Chinese Dream* (ibid). In the words of Xi Jinping (2022), the renewal of the Chinese nation (中华民族伟大复兴; *Zhōnghuá mínzú wěidà fùxīng*) a shared honour and a shared mission. In addition, according to Chen (2023), the rhetoric created by the national rejuvenation alongside textbooks intends to show the Chinese civilisation as homogenous and unique. In addition, this nationalistic approach also discourages questions about why the *Chinese Dream* exists and what it truly means. Essentially, it makes policies feel persuasive to people's role expectations on the country's future and governance (ibid).

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<sup>11</sup> If needed to review the concept of *Tianxia*, revisit page 2.

**Table 5. Influences of the Chinese Dream across China’s historical past.**

| <b>Era</b>                                     | <b>Chinese Dream</b>                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Ancient China<br/>(551 b.C. – 459 b.C.)</b> | Societal harmony, moral integrity, and ethical principles.                                                          |
| <b>Imperial China<br/>(211 b.C. – 1911)</b>    | Inspiration for a strong, unified, and prosperous nation.                                                           |
| <b>Mao Zedong<br/>(1949 – 1976)</b>            | Socialist Revolution and Collective Equality: classless society, rapid industrialisation, and collective ownership. |
| <b>Deng Xiaoping<br/>(1978 - 1992)</b>         | Moderately prosperous society: Reform, innovation and rejuvenation.                                                 |

Source: Elaborated by the candidate.

The national rejuvenation concept also emphasises the strengthening of the CCP leadership and governance (Li 2015; Bhattacharya 2019). In this context, the use of nostalgia is leveraged to make the CCP the central force capable of guiding the nation towards progress. Like Mao Zedong, Xi Jinping also uses the “Century of Humiliation”, or “China’s Civil War”, to show a linear trajectory towards achieving a better future for the Chinese nation (Womack 2017; Goldstein 2020; Esaray 2021), as can be seen in Table 6. While Mao’s *role conception* invoked the role of the CCP in the Chinese Civil War as the ground basis for the Chinese socialist revolution, Xi’s understanding of historical periods reinforces the remnants of the past to foster unity and work to materialise China’s Dream. According to Xi Jinping, “the past 110 years have shown us that to realise national rejuvenation, the Chinese people must have a strong force to lead us forward, and that force is the Communist Party of China” (2021, para. 11). In other words, by recalling victorious episodes of China’s past, Xi Jinping’s *role conception* is trying to justify and strengthen the CCP authority in a way that legitimises it vis à vis the population’s *role expectations*.

**Table 6. Use of nostalgia, humiliation and pragmatism in Mao, Deng and Xi's narratives**

| Elements           | Mao Zedong<br>(1949 - 1976)                                                        | Deng Xiaoping<br>(1978 - 1990)                                     | Xi Jinping<br>(2013 - 2024)                                                         |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Nostalgia</b>   | China's revolutionary past.<br><br>Glory of the CCP's rise against foreign powers. | Focus on the country's future, instead of China's tumultuous past. | Old Silk Road;<br><br>Century of Humiliation;<br><br>Reforms and Opening Up Period. |
| <b>Humiliation</b> | Century of Humiliation;<br>China's Civil War.                                      | Reform;<br><br>Rejuvenation.                                       | Century of Humiliation.                                                             |
| <b>Pragmatism</b>  | Revolutionary ideas and ideological purity.                                        | Socialism with Chinese characteristics.                            | Combination of Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic policies with Mao's ideological fervour.   |

Source: Elaborated by the candidate.

The *Chinese Dream* also represents a contemporary revival of historical aspirations, contextualised within modern China's economic development and global ascension. In these circumstances, Xi Jinping's *role performance* has also drawn inspiration from Deng Xiaoping's leadership. In Xi Jinping's words, "not a single ethnic group should be left behind in China's efforts to fully build a modern socialist country" (In Xinhua 2021, para. 5). For this purpose, both leaders sought fair distribution of wealth, poverty alleviation, and a strong middle class capable of contributing to China's economy. The BRI, for example, is a crucial component of the *Chinese Dream* as it aims to establish a network of trade and infrastructure projects across China to foster connectivity, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange between provinces (Li and Wang 2015). Second, both leaders' approaches to governance include policies aimed at China's stability, which are perceived as mandatory for China's continued progress.

Finally, just like Deng Xiaoping's *role performance*, Xi Jinping also emphasises practical solutions over ideological purity and prioritises stability and gradual progress in China's political and socioeconomic systems.

Altogether, under the *Chinese Dream*, Xi's economic *role performance* is characterised by his commitment to innovation and structural reforms to guarantee national sovereignty over the economy and defence security, and reduce China's reliance on foreign technologies (South China Morning Post 2023). In addition, initiatives including *Made in China 2025* (中国制造2025, *Zhōngguózhìzào èrlíngèrwǔ*; MIC25;)<sup>12</sup>, illustrate Xi's idea of levelling up China's industrial base through technological innovation and digital transformation. Besides, Xi Jinping's economic *role performance* has prioritised efficient bureaucracy and cultivated a favourable business environment to encourage private sector growth and strengthen China's economy.

Abroad, Xi's *role conception* for the *Chinese Dream* envisions a world adjusting its borders according to the terms of the old *Tianxia*. This means a world without borders in accordance with *Pax Sinica* – a society connected through multiple digital arteries of communication while diluting the physical borders. Drawing on the internet, Xi's *role conception* aims to create a new world order, via e-commerce, and the diffusion of ideals in line with Chinese soft power – an old *déjà vu*, where the borders are fundamental. Additionally, the expansion of China's borders (as the ongoing artificial islands' construction in South China Sea show) did not happen neither in Deng's nor in Mao's China. While Deng was more pragmatic and Mao more ideological, Xi's *role conception* tried to reunite all of these leaders' components to establish a modern China globally.

Nonetheless, the *Chinese Dream* also faces significant challenges and has raised constant criticism both domestically and abroad. In fact, despite improved health standards, and the country's unique economic growth, Xi's China faces one of its biggest social challenges. With many families still having only one child<sup>13</sup> and with a fast ageing society, China assisted its dependence ratio increase and strained the social security

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<sup>12</sup> *Made in China 2025* is an economic strategy launched in 2015 to transform China into a high-tech industry leader by improving the quality and efficiency of its manufacturing sector (The State Council 2015, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Between 1980 and 2016, the Chinese government implemented the "One-Child Policy" (一孩政策, *yīhái zhèngcè*) which prohibited some Chinese families from having more than one child. The policy aimed to reduce the country's population increasing rates.

system (Tan 2019; Whyte 2020) as visible in Table 7. Accordingly, China has a shrinking workforce hampering its economic growth and prosperity, central to the Chinese Dream. While it is true that Xi Jinping's *role adjustments* have attempted to mitigate the issues through financial incentives and the relaxation of the *One-Child Policy*, the outcomes of his role performance are waiting for long-term results (Tan 2019).

**Table 7. China's demographic levels across decades<sup>14</sup>**

| Information               | 1982   | 1990  | 2000   | 2010   | 2020   |
|---------------------------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|
| Population size           | 101654 | 11433 | 126743 | 134091 | 141260 |
| Age 0 - 14                | 34146  | 31659 | 29012  | 22259  | 25277  |
| Age 15 - 64 <sup>15</sup> | 62517  | 76306 | 88910  | 99938  | 96871  |
| Age 65 or Over            | 4491   | 6368  | 8821   | 11894  | 19064  |

Source: Elaborated by the candidate, based on China's Statistical Yearbook 2022.

Plus, social instability is another critical issue that indicates a growing discontent among Chinese citizens against the *Chinese Dream*. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, China's healthcare system exposed several weaknesses, which made the government apply heavy measures to prevent the spread of the disease<sup>16</sup>, including censorship and harassment of whistleblowers. Consequently, these policies raised concerns about civil liberties and human rights that had not been seen since the Tiananmen Square incident, in 1989 (The New York Times 2022; BBC 2023). In this framework, new social movements, such as the *White Paper Movement* (白纸抗议; *bái zhǐ kàngyì*)<sup>17</sup>, emerged

<sup>14</sup> These numbers do not include data from the SAR of Hong Kong, the SAR of Macau, and Taiwan. The scale used is 10,000 people.

<sup>15</sup> According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS; 国家统计局, *guójiā tǒngjìjú*), the working age in China is between 16 and 60 years old.

<sup>16</sup> The *Zero Covid Strategy* (动态清零; *dòngtài qīng líng*) was a public health policy applied during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020-2022) in the PRC. Under this policy, the Chinese government focused on early detection of the virus through regular Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests, mainly in big urban areas. A positive test could go from from a building level to a much wider lockdown, as it happened in the cities of Shanghai, Chengdu, and Shenzhen (Reuters 2022).

<sup>17</sup> The *White Paper Movement* was a series of protests that took streets across multiple cities in China

and organised public demonstrations across multiple cities in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing (Guzman 2022; Wang 2022; Wong 2022). As a response vis à vis the people's *role expectations*, the government reacted with major detentions and harsher online censorship. However, by the end of 2022, the government conceded to the public discontent and relaxed some of the *Zero COVID-19 strategy* policies (Bradsher, Che, and Chien 2022). This corresponded, indeed, to a *role adjustment* regarding what seemed to be an inflexible position that contributed, nonetheless, to raise social discontent in an unprecedented way since 1989.

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against the CCP's strict COVID-19 pandemic control. What began with a vigil mourning the victims of an apartment fire in Xinjiang, rapidly spread to other regions of China, with many using white papers or sheets to mock the government's decisions (The Guardian 2022).

## Partial Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have concluded that Xi's leadership has been characterised by his unique *role performance*, his constant *role adjustments* to contemporary challenges, and the shape of the nation towards building socialism with Chinese characteristics. Since the beginning of his rule, in 2013, the Chinese President's *role performance* has been defined by his engagement in strategic initiatives, particularly in centralising authority and controlling key sectors of Chinese politics and military. Consequently, these moves have assured Xi that his visions and policies have been met with great receptiveness by Chinese people, with the exception of the *Zero Covid strategy*. The latter required a reactive *role adjustment* in order to avoid social disruption. However, today, Xi's *role performance* towards consolidating a unique power has disrupted the stable equilibrium left by Deng Xiaoping and his successors. Xi has made his role unpredictable while the norms among China's political elite have been synonyms of insecurity.

Through the *Chinese Dream*, Xi's *role conception* shows a will to recover a civilisational character that was present in ancient China. Even though his predecessors did not materialise the concept of *Tianxia*, Xi's *role conception* goes along with the line of also recovering the glory of ancient China. Mao wanted a self-sufficient China, Deng a developed China and Xi desires a glorious country playing a leading role in the international arena. To achieve its purpose, Xi has instructed Chinese media to disseminate the China model and propagate the 'Right Chinese history' abroad.

The legacies of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping have also massively influenced Xi's *role performance* and *role conception*. From Xi's anti-corruption campaign to *Made in China 2025* Initiative and the *Chinese Dream*, Xi's *role performance* has put clear efforts to uphold Mao's ideological purity and Deng's clean and efficient governance system. However, since the beginning of the new century, there has been a sociopolitical mistrust between both the state and the Chinese society. After the public demonstrations between 2019 and 2023, in Hong Kong and mainland China, it became clear that People's *role expectations* vis à vis the CCP and Xi Jinping have been shattered.

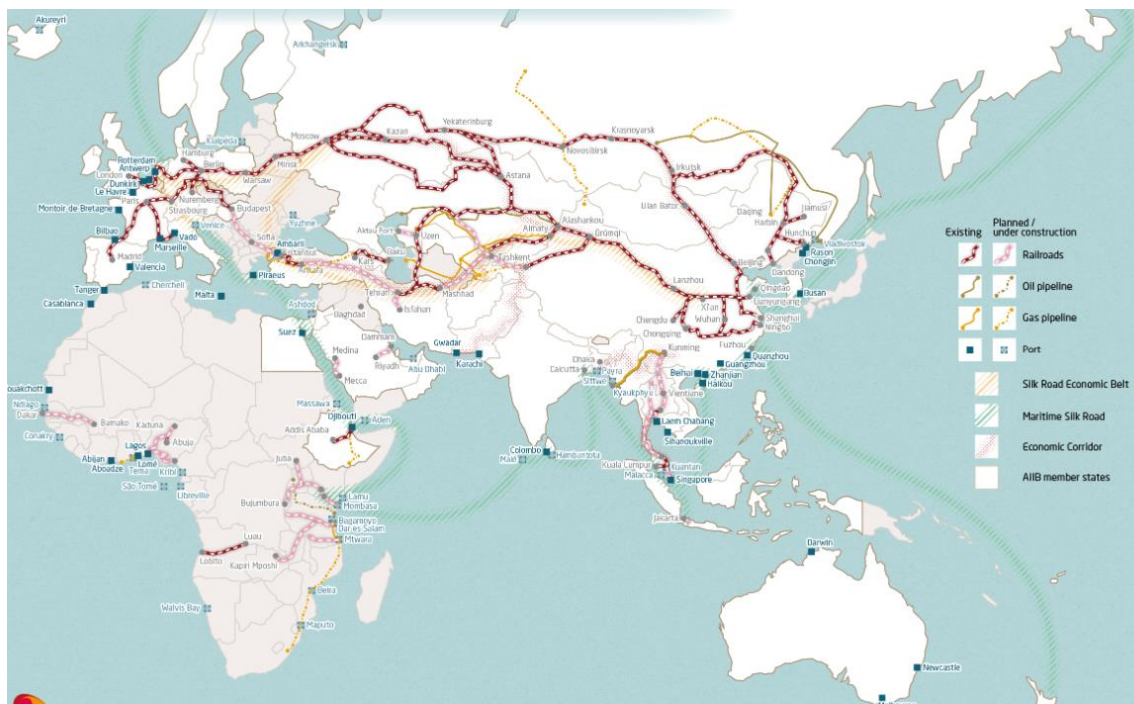
## 4. The Belt and Road Initiative as a holistic instrument

The objective of this chapter is to elucidate the meaning of the BRI in the hands of Xi Jinping to address the research question. In doing so, we will also stress the balance of the first 10 years of the BRI. Even though a decade is a small period of time in human history and the BRI is considered a long-term project for China, we believe that is essential to dissect the success and challenges the initiative has faced.

### 4.1. The Converge of Land, Sea and Digital Roads

Introduced by Xi Jinping in 2013, the BRI marks a turning point in China's contemporary politics, reflecting Xi's *role conception* of China as a central player in world affairs, capable of driving global economic growth and technological innovation (Council on the Foreign Relations 2023). Through a vast network of politics, the "Belt" seeks to enhance connectivity across provinces and continents, driving cultural and political integration and fostering national identity. At the same time, the "Road" focuses on coastal and maritime connectivity stressing worldwide routes (Ghiassy and Zhou 2017; Russel and Berger 2019).

Figure 1. The Belt and Road Initiative's Land and Sea Corridors.



Source: MERICS (2018)

According to Xi's *role conception*, the BRI is a comprehensive strategy that aims to reduce the economic disparities between China's coastal and inland provinces, foster a balanced and integrated nation, secure energy supplies and improve the quality of life of Chinese citizens (The National Bureau of Asian Research 2019). Domestically, the BRI land dimension encompasses significant investments in infrastructure, such as industrial parks and a train connection between the Yangtze River Economic Belt<sup>18</sup> to the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Metropolitan Area (Daily China 2023). Besides the infrastructure development and high-tech boost, the BRI also allows the central government to better control the regional and local governments' actions (Zhao 2022). Through the BRI, the government can align local projects with national necessities, ensuring that regional initiatives support economic objectives and global integration. Consequently, this means that the central government has established regulatory entities and implemented rigorous criteria evaluation for these local officers, aiming to achieve high standards for the BRI's projects (ibid). The materialisation of the Initiative not only mitigates the risks of counterproductive investments, but also promotes the efficient use of resources and the centralisation of power in the hands of Xi Jinping.

Abroad, the BRI is about "jointly meeting various challenges and risks confronting mankind and delivering win-win outcomes and common development" (Xi 2019, para. 6). This win-win draws on Confucianism and Taoist thoughts of "peace and cooperation", in which peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit leads to development (The State Council 2017a; Xi 2021b). Additionally, it serves to appease the Sinophobia felt worldwide and the spread of the *Chinese Dream*. In this sense, Xi Jinping's *role conception* tries to demonstrate to the world that China should not be feared. In doing so, he aims to encourage the perception of a friendly China focused on a shared development towards the common good. In Chinese literature, it is said that "the Chinese Dream is interlinked with the world's people's dream for better lives" (Wang 2016, 19).

Overall, Xi Jinping's *role conception* of the BRI's land component can also be described as an extension of Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic *reform and opening up* approach, aiming to further develop China's rural provinces. Domestically, his speeches

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<sup>18</sup> The Yangtze River Economic Belt is a socioeconomical initiative aimed at fostering economic and regional growth and environmental sustainability along the Yangtze River. In addition, The Yangtze River Economic Belt is home to over 600 million people, which represents 40 percent of the country's population and GDP (CGTN 2021; NBS 2024).

around the BRI underscore the significance of achieving the *Chinese Dream*, while promoting the idea of a historic and pragmatic opportunity for economic and geopolitical advancement. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, for example, Xi Jinping highlighted BRI's 10-year conquests based on practical cooperation and pragmatic measures and the joint contribution between its members (Xinhua 2023). Overall, Xi Jinping's *role performance* regarding the BRI has been characterised by his strong leadership, resembling Mao's *role performance* of power hegemony.

Under Xi's rule, the government has made significant investments in highways, railways and pipelines across China's western regions (China Daily 2023). Similarly, the sea component of the BRI seems to fit China's strategy to promote global connectivity and economic influence worldwide (Economy 2021; Lampton et. al 2020; Lin 2023). Since 2011, the Chinese government has stated the importance of maritime routes for the guarantee of the safeguarding of China's commercial trade and reputation (The State Council 2011). In fact, in October 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed the 21<sup>st</sup> century Maritime Silk Road (21世纪海上丝绸之路, *èrshíyī shìjì hǎishàng sīchóu zhīlù*; MSR) focused on creating and modernising ports and infrastructures to secure *Chinese rights and interests* in maritime routesconfuci, such as South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, and Europe.

According to Chinese literature, through the MSR, the Secretary General of the CCP hopes to strengthen diplomatic ties and establish Chinese leadership in global governance (Wang 2016; Zheng et al. 2018; Wang 2023). As part of the MSR, the central government of China hopes to use marine resources as a powerful guarantee of mitigating the mitigating the Malacca dilemma<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, the MSR is also perceived as an extension of the win-win rhetoric, which accompanies the BRI, aimed at building a community with a common destiny (CRI 2015).

Nonetheless, as it occurs with the Silk Road Economic Belt, the 21<sup>st</sup> century MSR is a modern manifestation of the Ancient Maritime Silk Road (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC – 15<sup>th</sup> century AC) aimed at enhancing global trade and political stability in the already highlighted regions (Zheng 2018). Overall, the MSR also reflects Xi's *role conception* of

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<sup>19</sup> The Malacca dilemma refers to China's lack of alternatives and vulnerability to the Strait of Malacca, in the case of a naval blockade. (Myers 2023).

China in the vanguard of development and international cooperation. In this sense, the Chinese President is trying to expand the country's influence, secure vital trade routes, and ensure energy security.

In 2017, The Digital Silk Road (数字丝绸之路, *shùzì sīchóu zhīlù*; DSR) emerged as the third component of the BRI (People's Daily 2022). Largely, the DSR has employed several technical parts, such as AI, and 5G to facilitate reliable and effective sharing of information and collect databases (Daily China 2021; Liu 2023). Moreover, it allows Xi Jinping's *role performance* to shape China's cyberspace as a complementary element of the SCS, as the government classifies online data as a fundamental strategic resource for China's national security and interests (Liu 2023). Initially, Xi Jinping's *role conception* for the DSR aimed to transform China into "a cyber great power". However, as the government has increased its monitorisation of citizen's behaviour, and access restrictions to foreign social media, the DSR has assumed a key position in cyber security and cyber sovereignty (Lin 2023; Arsentyeva 2024).

Globally, according to Chinese academia, the DSR incorporates the win-win rhetoric created for the BRI (Arsentyeva 2024). This means that when China provides infrastructure and fast technological developments to participating members of the BRI, the economic, cultural and political ties between actors are enriched. Additionally, it also allows China to reduce the online and offline borders between countries, improve digital connectivity between participating countries and promote China's global vision, especially in the Global South (Arsentyeva 2024; Triolo 2024). In Xi Jinping's *role conception*, the DSR aims to build a bridge of worldwide cultural interaction to learn from each other and enhance mutual understanding.

Even though most of the Chinese companies operating in the DSR are from the private sector, both private and public enterprises are being introduced in emerging and developing economies (Li 2023). This may happen through digital platforms (e-commerce and financial technologies), digital services (smart cities and data centres) and digital infrastructure (fibre optics and 5G networks) (Lu 2023). Ultimately, this may lead to the idea that the DSR will expand and be extrinsic to BRI's success or failure. In fact, according to Triolo (2024), there are no substantial means to tell if the Chinese authorities are addressed or observed by Chinese government officials besides from business and

economic points of view. In this sense, most private companies may use political advances to speed their market abroad. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, while BRI's projects were suspended, DSR gains increased, and many participating countries used Chinese technology to fight the pandemic-related issues (Malena 2021; Lu 2023). This also means that Chinese companies, such as Huawei, Alibaba, or Tencent are much more worried about expanding their global market share than connecting themselves to the BRI or the DSR (Malena 2021; Triolo 2024).

Obviously, this gains some criticism from Western literature that accuse the Chinese government of interfering in the world order that came at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most criticism comes from accusations of cyber colonialism, the eruption of a “digital iron curtain”, or spying on foreign countries (Arsentyeva 2024; Malena 2021). Such authors argue that such occurrence happens due to political agreements between countries that state that BRI and DSR's infrastructure must be provided by Chinese firms, as well as its equipment (Malena 2022). Which means that supposedly China, in exchange for cheaper advanced technologies, is being allowed to collect and store data from its economic partners. However, there also authors as Creemers (2020) and Schaefer (2024) that do not agree with these allegations. Both Creemers (2020) and Schaefer (2024) argue on their studies that Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) strategy is rather focus on securing data for both political and cultural stability and economic development than building digital curtains. In fact, during the first World Internet Conference in 2014, in Wuzhen, Xi Jinping defended a country's rightful development and governance of the Internet, restrained from violating other's countries Internet's sovereignty (Council on Foreign Relations 2015). Thus, refuting earlier accusations of cyber colonialism.

#### **4.2. A 10-year balance**

In 2023, the BRI celebrated a decade since President Xi Jinping announced it. Even though we recognise that 10 years is a short time to evaluate the long-run project that Xi has projected for the upcoming centuries, the academic community as Wang (2023) and Khanal and Zhang (2023) have already assessed some of BRI's parameters. As such, we aim at exploring how the BRI has changed China domestically and in the global affairs.

In October 2023, during the Opening Ceremony of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Xi highlighted the initial efforts put by China and the BRI

members to bring to life the drafts proposed 10 years before. In his long speech, Xi stated that “important guiding principles (...) have been laid down, which include planning together, building together and benefiting together” (in Xinhua 2023, para. 5 - 6). In other words, much of what was told lies in Xi’s *role conception* of what he wishes for the BRI – a rebirth of China’s greatness inside and outside its physical borders. Additionally, Xi also remembered the original meaning behind BRI’s foundation and announced what the future looked like for its participants: a multidimensional connectivity by rail, port and air; a more open China to the world, focused on the digital economy, e-commerce cooperation and digital commerce; support to people-to-people exchanges, and the development of institutions, from economy to cultural and bureaucratic fields (Asian Times 2023; Xinhua 2023). However, while Xi Jinping promised a bright future for China and its partners, he also emphasised his role conception regarding *Tianxia* by reminding his partners about China’s place in global affairs.

Domestically, after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, China faced weak economic growth, aggravated by long-standing structural issues, such as the real estate market bubble, the demographic decline, the indebtedness of local governments and high unemployment rates among the youth (World Bank 2023; NBS 2024). Politically, besides public demonstrations against the government’s manoeuvres during the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing has also faced troubled times with the purges of some of its highest officials, including the former Foreign Minister Qin Gang in 2023 (Politico 2023)

Overall, when it comes to globalisation, the BRI faces challenges. In fact, most of BRI’s image has been damaged in the West. This can be attributed to several motives. First, the current political movement towards anti-globalisation creates a sense of distrust between China and the West in terms of transparency and governance. Additionally, such moments have led many European countries to witness a rise in protectionist sentiments, leading to skepticism towards global interconnectedness and preference, for domestic interests (Naughton 2020; Rodrik 2020; Huang 2021). Consequently, this causes disturbances to Xi’s role conception of a global cooperation towards a common destiny.

Second, the war in Ukraine showed that China’s indirect collaboration with Russia seemed to frustrate the Western’s role expectations to have Beijing condemning Moscow’s invasion. This came after “gentlemen’s agreement” between Putin and Xi,

where allegedly Putin would respect the Olympic Truce in exchange for Xi's refusal to join the West outrage against the "special military operation" (The New York Times 2022). However, in the Western's reading, the BRI's "win-win" strategy signified cooperation and the security of peace. So, from the moment that China does not condemn the aggressor and even helps Russia deceive the Western economic sanctions, China is leaving BRI's essence, and surgically taking advantage of the war to gain access to cheaper oil, thus mitigating the Malacca dilemma. As a consequence, Xi's role *conception* of China as a win-win partner in Global Governance and its accompanying *role performance* of siding with Russia as the aggressor has frustrated Western role expectations vis-à-vis China. Moreover, it is no coincidence that the final declaration of the July 2024 Washington Summit of NATO, referred to China as a "decisive enabler" of Russia's war in Ukraine (Associated Press 2024; NATO 2024).

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to negatively affect the international community's role expectations vis-à-vis China's handling of the health crisis. Although China tried to provide a faster response compared to previous health crises, the initial hiding of the virus outbreak together with the delays in medical equipment deliveries to several countries, have undermined international role expectations of China. Aware of this, China has attempted to appease the discontent through its impressive mask diplomacy materialised in multimillion-dollar donations made by Chinese billionaires. Nonetheless, these endeavours were perceived with ambiguity by the international community since they were not necessarily private nor altruistic, but rather seen as calculated and orchestrated by the CCP (The Diplomat 2020).

To conclude, 10 years after being launched, what stays of BRI's first decade of consideration is the negative impact of China stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia – Ukraine conflict. According to Chellaney (2017), the BRI has produced for the much-debated "Debt Trap Diplomacy" that leaves many developing countries in the hands of Beijing. However, it is important to note that even though the term has been used since Chellaney (2017) to highlight China's money lent to developing countries, academics such as and Cheong (2022) argue that China should not be blamed for debt troubles faced by those borrowing countries.

## Partial Conclusion

As this chapter attempted to stress, Xi's *role conception* and *role performance* have been reflected in the *Belt and Road Initiative*. In this case, Xi's *role conception* of the *Belt and Road Initiative* reflects his dream of reviving the ancient trade routes to foster global economic cooperation, while softening China's image abroad and setting China's influence through multiple sectors in global affairs. However, even though there have been important logistics and infrastructures implemented so far, such as the connection between huge urban areas in China, and the cooperation between China and developing countries, the Initiative has failed in many ways.

In addition, recent global events have negatively impacted the *Belt and Road Initiative* and consequently China's image abroad. Firstly, China's earlier handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by its late public acknowledgment of the crises and economic slowdowns has received negative comments on China's leadership and social model from abroad. Regarding China's handling of the pandemic, the Western criticism has accused China of opacity and vagueness in the earlier stages of the pandemic, which allowed the virus to spread globally easier and unnoticed. As well, China's indirect support to Russia during the war in Ukraine has also drawn criticism and heightened tensions between the West, and China, as many criticise China for not committing to its win-win approach, and peaceful cooperation and development. Instead, according to Western critics, China has taken advantage of the conflict to ensure China's influence in global affairs and purchase cheaper oil for its industries.

To conclude, in response to the negative image projected by these recent events, Xi Jinping has tried to adapt the *Belt and Road Initiative's* role by modifying its approach to international concerns and ensuring that the Initiative responds to long-term sustainability and contemporary challenges, and promoting the *Digital Belt Road*. Moreover, the President of China has also tried to promote more transparency and inclusive project management, such as investment in key industries in developing countries, to encourage a change of role expectations vis à vis China's image abroad.

## 5. Conclusion

Drawing on the conceptual lenses of the *Role Theory*, this dissertation has attempted to answer the previously stated research question: *in what ways does Xi Jinping's narrative approach and/or distance from Mao and Deng's previous narratives to consolidate power?* In this sense, we have arrived at some important conclusions.

As a first major finding, we observe that the three Chinese leaderships assessed by us, namely those of Mao, Deng and Xi - have all attempted to legitimise their rule based on the strength of their narratives. As such, they have sought to establish a specific role conception with their own views regarding the governance of China. In doing so, they sometimes needed to adapt their role conceptions to better match the expectations of their domestic audiences. This was the case, for instance, of Mao's *Great Leap Forward* which proved to be a disaster, thus boosting the emergence of a new role conception (The *Cultural Revolution*) in order to regain the Chinese people's support. As for Deng Xiaoping, since Mao's two *role conceptions* had not produced the desired outcomes, the new role conception would privilege the anti-Mao narrative, which materialised in preventing another ruler for life. At the same time, to cope with China's own domestic needs as well as the shifting international environment, Deng's formula of the *One Country Two Systems* (一国两制; *yīguó liǎngzhì*) allowed both the end of Mao's self-sufficient China whilst gradually opening the country to the rest of the world. This new role conception and role performance actually aimed at killing two birds with one stone, by both legitimising power inside China, while also modernising it through a Chinese model of development that seemed to gather increasing international support.

This is connected to our second finding, according to which Xi Jinping's leadership has been characterised by a dynamic approach to *role performance*, marked by continuing adjustments to address contemporary challenges and steer the nation towards the *Chinese Dream*. Since taking office in 2013, Xi has crafted a *role conception* focused on strategic initiatives, particularly the centralisation of authority and the consolidation of control over key sectors of Chinese politics and the military. In this sense, the legacies of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping have also massively influenced Xi's *role conception* and *role performance*. From Xi's anti-corruption campaign to *Made in China 2025*, the *Chinese Dream* and the *Belt and Road Initiative*, Xi's *role*

*performance* has put clear efforts to uphold Mao's ideological purity and Deng's pragmatic and efficient governance system. Although Xi Jinping has not surrounded himself with a *Red Guard*, or a *Little Red Book*, the Chinese President has developed his own tools of personal cult and persecution - *Study Xi*, *Study the Great Nation*, national documentaries about his life, as well as the *Social Credit System* and *the Great Firewall*. This has allowed Xi Jinping to maintain tight control over Chinese society and Chinese behaviour. Additionally, Xi's narrative centres on restoring China's global status and consolidating party power, using modern tools and nationalism to adapt to both domestic and external challenges. Not only are these tools used to ensure loyalty and conformity, but also to align it with the nation and the party's objectives. In that sense, his ability to maintain control while navigating global pressures showcases a more adaptable leadership than Mao, although less reform-oriented than Deng. Mao wanted a self-sufficient China and Deng a developed China. Now, Xi desires a glorious country with a leading role within the international community.

On our final major conclusion, we found that Xi Jinping's leadership reflects a constant interplay between two main role conceptions, drawing on the *Chinese Dream* and the *Belt and Road Initiative*. Xi Jinping has used the *Chinese Dream* to input national rejuvenation ideals, emphasising economic prosperity, military strength, and the return of China to its historical prominence. Domestically, his version of the *Chinese Dream* fosters a sense of collective pride and unity, while reinforcing the authority of the Communist Party under his rule, thus allowing the populace to feel connected to the party's and nationwide goals. In a way, this has created a narrative of himself as a transformative figure tasked to transform China into a modern powerhouse. To put it in comparison, the same as happened when Mao positioned himself as the Founding Father of PRC, and Deng Xiaoping as the Architect of Modern China. In terms of role performance, the *Belt and Road Initiative*, has become the materialisation of the *Chinese Dream* abroad, as showcases Xi Jinping's intentions to portray an image of China as a benevolent power. Inside China, the *Belt and Road Initiative* allows Xi Jinping's leadership to reinforce a sense of collective identity, suggesting the idea of a shared work towards a common destiny, where every Chinese can contribute to implementing the *Chinese Dream*.

Finally, as future revenues of research we believe that it would be relevant to

conduct more domestic investigations on whether the *Belt and Road Initiative* has been actually contributing to bring more social stability to China, and in the process strengthening Xi's power. Although the existing literature usually looks at the Initiative as a tool to reduce domestic imbalances, future studies should better emphasise how the economic boost in China's most remote regions is *de facto* helping maintain social stability and preventing dissents against Xi's leadership. Finally, although the *Digital Silk Road* is a narrative for technological innovation, economic development and to foster China's independence on foreign technologies, the Chinese government has also given the opportunity to further gather, monitor, and control data both from inside and outside China. As written in this dissertation, the *Digital Silk Road* allows the Chinese government to shape the political narrative inside China, thus solidifying both the CCP's and Xi Jinping's leadership. Therefore it could be interesting if future studies on the *Social Credit System* continue to investigate the implications for state control and Xi Jinping's consolidation of power.

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