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Getting to know the real Xi Jinping could mean preventing a conflict

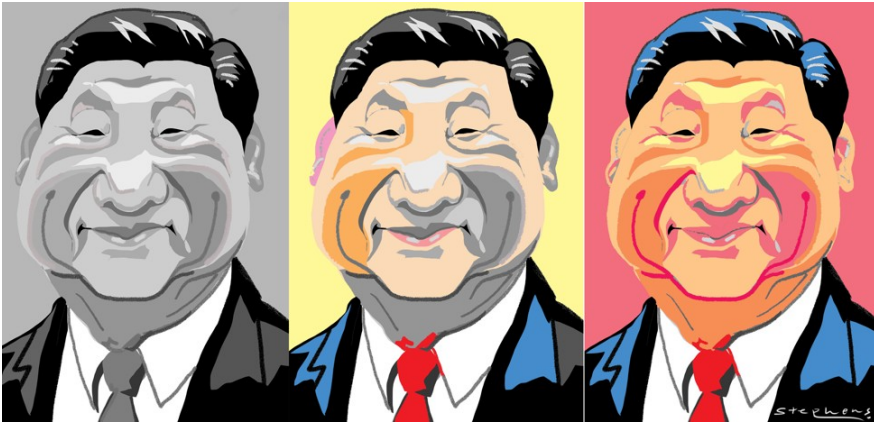
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Tom Plate

Tom Plate says the Chinese president is not as humourless, as vain or as aggressive as Westerners have been led to believe



Years ago, Singapore's founder Lee Kuan Yew would needle me, in all seriousness, about the time and effort we silly journalists invest in seeking to lay out a leader's personal traits. He dubbed our penchant for such detail "the Western journalist's exaggeration of eccentricity".

The irony was that Lee was a fascinating man, anything but coldly humourless, as the West's impression of him had it, with a global profile resulting not just from what he said but how he said it.

He entirely missed the point about "eccentricity". How is it possible to understand any leader's talents in the absence of sense of character?

Sure, Germany's Angela Merke will never win prizes as Miss Personality but admirers tell you she has one. Remember crabby Margaret Thatcher's famous "handbag strikes"? And were not America's leaders John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan celebrated, and more effective, due in part to their stylish wit?

Which brings us to the personality of Xi Jinping. Compared to what we know of our witless US president (about whom we probably know enough), the West knows little about China's president. Ignorance breeds speculation: Xi is allegedly power-mad, for example – a DNA-Napoleon in ambition; and, perhaps most creepily of all, has almost no sense of humour (see, for example, the dismissive remarks in Harvard professor Roderick MacFarquhar's recent article in *The New York Review of Books*).

But if you troll Chinese-language social media and other venues, a nuanced view emerges. Examples are not hard to find.

My favourite Xi-whizz moment (all comments in translation) came during a (presumably dreadfully boring) conference on the (presumably fast-declining) water quality of a lake in Jiangsu, once a popular vacation spot. Breaking into a dreary presentation on new policies for the lake, (a presumably bored) Xi interrupted to say, wryly: "We can determine the water quality by whether our mayors want to swim there."

Xi once got a light dig and a laugh out of former US president Barack Obama: “I met your wife Michelle, mother-in-law, and daughter Sasha in Beijing. When Michelle was about to leave, she asked me to formally convey to you [Obama] her best regards.” The leader of China even made droll fun of his mainland tourists: “When our citizens go overseas, they need to be more civilised. Don’t litter their bottled water, don’t destroy other’s coral reefs, eat less instant noodles and have more local seafood.” To the Australian Parliament, he quipped, “Tomorrow I am going to Tasmania, after which would mean that I have been through the entirety of Australia. I wonder if they are going to give me a certificate for this.”

All this is not to suggest that Xi is quite ready for a celebrity stand-up appearance in a Hollywood comedy club. But this man of international mystery would appear to have his moments – and with the impossible job that he has, might not as many light moments as possible be in the interest of his inner calm, not to mention world peace?

Public comments gleaned from China’s social media are often complimentary, of course: “Compared to the other Chinese leaders, Xi Jinping has a unique style of language ... Some people say that his words are full of humour and charm, full of confidence and assertiveness.”

Without some sense of personality, how is it possible to contextualise any leader’s officious texts (see the book volumes I and II of *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*)? Without colourations of character, we risk assessing a figure solely in black and white. Worse yet, we risk not seeing the figure as human, as opposed to some bloodless, fearless Star Trek data-robot. It’s not for mere show that when Xi travels, the battalion of bodyguards hovering around him is huge. Might that be because the president’s punishing anti-corruption campaign makes him a potential revenge target? But the Western perspective imagines only sheer ego behind the pomp. How about prudence?

Similarly, the recent shelving of police forces under the large tent of the People’s Liberation Army has been depicted as more personal-power consolidation. One hardly need descend into the conceptual chaos of modern psychiatry to imagine at least a measure of personal worry.



Chinese President Xi Jinping (centre) talks with officers and soldiers during an inspection of a division of the People's Liberation Army in the Central Theatre Command on January 3. Photo: Xinhua

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Photo: Xinhua

There's much fear in interpretations of China and its Xi. Now we hear that China has been "secretly" building a third aircraft carrier. Whoa – head for the bomb shelters. How one hides the enormity of a carrier construction is a puzzle.

The United States has 12 carriers ("publicly") so China needs to come up with nine more just to catch up, assuming that the US Navy doesn't lust for even more (what navy in history has been lust-less?).

Or, imagine, in a shoot-out at sea, all three Chinese carriers are sunk but somehow manage to take down twice as many US carriers. The US would still have six.

Direct war with the US is not destined to happen. The Chinese naval build-up is about regional regality; what Xi desires is not crass sovereignty but regional suzerainty. One might term it "one Chinese region, many national systems".

Simplifying China will in no way prove helpful, and dehumanising its leader could prove no laughing matter.

With respect to Lee Kuan Yew, it's not a matter of black and white: colourations count for a lot.

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