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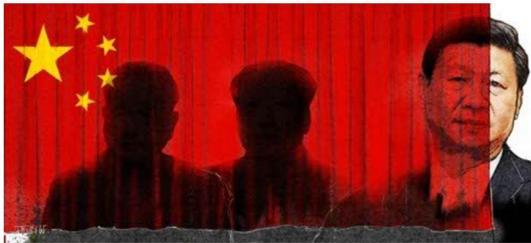
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## Why Xi Jinping remains an international man of mystery to most in the US

Tom Plate says even in informed circles there is little consensus about the Chinese president, who will be the most intriguing leader to watch, for most of 2016 at least

Tom Plate

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BY TOM PLATE

Watch this man carefully. For at least until Nov. 8, when who follows Barack Obama is to be revealed, 2016's most fascinating leader-figure will be Xi Jinping.

Although ensconced as president three years ago (with all grandiose title trimmings attached), and immediately outward-bound as China's glove-trotting salesman-in-chief - opening doors, closing deals, scaring the West witless - this Beijing-born son of a Chinese icon remains a totally enigmatic figure. In the U.S. particularly, the avuncular face of China has seemed frustratingly hard to read.

Even in America's best-informed circles, there is little consensus as to who Xi is. To optimists, especially hopeful economists, he is the keeper of the common-sense flame of Deng Xiaoping, the genius leader who undoubtedly saved Communism politically by all but abandoning it economically. As Harvard professor Ezra F. Vogel put it in his masterpiece *Deng Xiaoping*: "Deng guided the transformation of China into a country scarcely recognizable from the one he had inherited in 1978."

On this reading, the 62-year-old Xi remains the committed Beijing-based gang Deng-er. But to pessimists, Xi seems more the post-modern Mao man, grumpily chafing over the sins of materialism (now such the topic in the halls of the Central Party School, the ideological-education wing of the Communist Party, of which Xi is the general secretary) and the breakdown

of Party discipline. In some U.S. circles, he is seen as using the current anti-corruption campaign to gin up some kind of loyal Chinese Tea Party. The fear is not only that this true-red Communist will concoct a cultural devolution and trigger a back-to-basics Chinese dynasty; but also push East Asia into a tributary-traditional, Beijing-reliant geopolitical system.

Respected Columbia University Prof. Andrew Nathan offers pessimism: "I fear that Xi is creating great danger for China. By undercutting the institutionalized system that Deng built, he hangs the survival of the regime on his ability to bear an enormous workload, make the right decisions, and not make big mistakes. He is trying to bottle up a growing diversity of social and intellectual forces that are bound to grow stronger. He may be breaking down, rather than building up, the consensus within the political leadership and among economic and intellectual elites over China's path of development.... As he departs from Deng Xiaoping's path, he risks undermining the regime's adaptability and resilience."

Such polar-opposite portraits lack key nuance, especially in dealing with one of the most complex systems in political history. As an eminent source of mine sees it: "It is true that Xi has concentrated power to an extent not seen in a long time. But at the core is a life-and-death struggle to re-establish the moral authority of the Communist Party. The reasons for his doing it are not as your Columbia professor thinks but much deeper."

Xi will always try to take the long view about his China, as if the main monk of a new, emerging Chinese Confucianism. A few months ago he wrote, remarkably: "Future China will be under a group of people with the right view, right mindfulness and positive energy. The real crisis is not of economic or financial, but it is the crisis of morality and spirituality. The more blessed one is, the more energy one has. Be friends with the wise ones, move with those who are kind. Always have the people in mind with boundless great love." (*Translation*)

Such warm daintiness words might well strike the Western eye as okay for a spiritual pope but not a secular one -- not to mention an avowed Communist atheist whose government demonstrably does not love the irreverent blogger or treacherous tweeter, much less the upstart Uighur. Yet Xi's massive anti-corruption campaign, headed by the very capable Wang Qishan, at times does have the feeling of a spiritual cleansing (or am I wrong - just a commonplace political purge?).

Xi became China's maximum leader through not so much Party connection as policy competence. Highly regarded, he was put in overall charge of 2008 Olympics preparations, and back in the mid-nineties had been Beijing's man hovering over the re-acquisition of Hong Kong to ensure it would not be bungled. To his Party partisans, he seemed the always-reliable deliveryman. One man very impressed by Xi was the late Singapore master Lee Kuan Yew: "I would put him in the Nelson Mandela class of persons. A person with enormous emotional stability who does not allow his personal misfortunes or sufferings affect his judgment."

At the same time, Xi's climb to the top has made enemies of immense intensity (a nervous-making story all but hidden from the mainland and world media), with attendant threats that have ballooned the size of his security contingent. In addition to the anti-corruption drive, Xi has

pushed for a restructuring of the vast PLA military to nail down Party control over a sector that sometimes careered toward the semi-sovereign. This revamp is a heavy lift.

Xi certainly deserves no Nobel Peace Prize simply for sweet-thoughts in Confucian-like prose (while rather less poetically beefing up regional ocean reefs). But there is one area of achievement that does merit a look from the Norwegian Nobel Committee: he and Taiwan's leader Ma Jung-yeou as joint candidates for the 2106 Nobel Peace Prize for their cross-strait de-tensioning. Xi may be no saint, but Ma is no Communist: In Singapore recently this political odd couple put on a most welcome public display of diplomacy in the first such cross-strait meeting at that high a level since 1947. Absurd to propose Xi and Ma for the Nobel, you say? I might agree if someone can just explain why it's any more absurd than the 2009 Nobel Peace award to Obama ... just nine months after he took office. That was ridiculous. The Xi-Ma idea is not and has some charm.

**Columnist and Professor Tom Plate will soon start on book #5 in the 'Giants of Asia' series: 'Searching for Xi Jinping'.**

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