

## Xi Jinping's Political Psychology, Memory, and 'New Era' Leadership: 'Political Optics' as *Camera Obscura* in China's Next Strategic Direction

By

Jumel G. Estrañero, MA

In November 2025, China held a high-profile commemoration for the 110th birthday of [Hu Yaobang](#), a historically liberal Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader. Some international subject matter experts thought it might herald a return to a *Deng Xiaoping*-style reform amid China's economic slowdown. Far from usual analysis, the recent tribute was not an embrace of liberal reform but denotes a well-crafted political act serving Xi Jinping's current objectives; a political spectacle rather than a reform signaling.

As a brief background, Deng Xiaoping's legacy of "reform and opening up" has long underpinned CCP legitimacy, emphasizing pragmatism, collective leadership, and [economic decentralization](#). Hu Yaobang, associated with political openness and intra-party tolerance, has historically been sensitive to commemoration owing to his connection to the [late-1980s liberalization debates](#). Amid economic slowdown and external pressure, symbolic gestures toward reform-era figures are closely scrutinized by domestic and international audiences.

Now, rather than openly rejecting [Deng Xiaoping's legacy](#), Xi appears to be engaging in a "[soft burial](#)" of the Deng era. Instead of banning Deng's legacy, Xi repackages the narrative, cultivating ambiguity and shifting focus toward party virtue and centralized authority rather than ideological pluralism or decentralized leadership. Instead of purges or denunciations, Xi is layering new historical narratives to diminish the centrality of Deng's reformist legacy without breaking existing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) taboos. Conversely, the phrase "[soft burial](#)" is significant: it underscores a non-confrontational but effective approach to 'ideological succession'. Rather than disavowing Deng (which could destabilize party legitimacy), Xi subtly redirects the historical narrative to enhance the legitimacy of "[Xi's New Era](#)" [framework](#). Through this process, the meaning and influence of Deng's "reform and opening up" are being diluted.

To reframe Hu's legacy, it has been sanitized and stripped of its more politically sensitive elements, such as his association with political openness. Official portrayals emphasize his loyalty and personal integrity rather than his liberal impulses. This reframing allows Xi to appropriate Hu's symbolic value while neutralizing his appeal and utility for liberal critics.

On the other hand, Xi's current style can be seen as undermining Deng's historical monopoly. Note that Deng's narrative of China's modernization and economic reform has long been foundational to CCP legitimacy. Xi is challenged by this because Deng's legacy anchors a different political model (collective leadership, economic pragmatism). Additionally, Xi seeks his version of legitimacy, his so-called "[New Era](#)" [leadership](#), centered on his thought and authority. By selectively and strategically elevating Hu, Xi reframes reform as a generational relay rather than Deng's unique achievement, subtly reducing Deng's doctrinal dominance and influence.

While leaders' deaths usually grieve their families, they also serve broader political goals. The CCP often uses the memories of fallen leaders as political assets to bolster its ideological legitimacy. Xi's handling of Hu's [commemoration](#) illustrates this control over symbolism and history. It subtly owns memory and political history, framing it as narrative management. Xi's tribute is strategic, not a policy change, rebranding Hu as loyal to the party. This shifts historical memory to support Xi's political aims.

### Not Market-Oriented Redirection

Contrary to some speculation in the democratic West, **this is not a signal of imminent liberalization or return to market-oriented Deng-style reforms.** This cautions against reading ceremonial gestures as evidence of substantive policy change. Meanwhile, here are some implications that can be drawn from the recent event. First, the strategy of legitimacy consolidation reinforces Xi's ideological authority while preserving historical continuity, thereby reducing internal resistance. Second, it reshapes reform discourse by co-opting reformist symbolism, allowing the CCP under Xi to neutralize historical references commonly invoked by liberals and dissenters. Third, it creates a risk of foreign misinterpretation, as international analysts may mistake symbolic gestures for substantive policy shifts if they focus on form rather than underlying narrative content. In other words, Xi Jinping's high-profile commemoration of former CCP leader Hu Yaobang should not be interpreted as a signal of political or economic liberalization. Instead, it reflects a *deliberate strategy* to reshape historical memory in ways that weaken Deng Xiaoping's reform-era monopoly over CCP legitimacy while reinforcing Xi's "[New Era](#)" authority. By selectively rehabilitating Hu's image, emphasizing loyalty and moral rectitude while erasing his reformist associations, Xi is managing ideological succession without destabilizing the Party. This approach consolidates power, narrows reform discourse, and increases the risk of misinterpretation by foreign observers.

Domestically, the commemoration reinforces centralized leadership and ideological discipline while narrowing the space for policy pluralism or elite contestation rooted in reform-era precedent. Therefore, observers must be keen on probable indicators. For example: (1) changes in official historiography or Party education materials referencing Deng Xiaoping; (2) expanded use of reform-era figures framed primarily around loyalty and discipline; and (3) continued elevation of "Xi Jinping Thought" as the primary interpretive lens for past and future reforms.

Understanding how the CCP manages historical narratives is crucial for interpreting China's long-term strategic posture, including economic policy, party governance, and diplomatic signaling. This narrative shift is less about immediate reforms and more about "ideological control" and "power legitimacy" within a one-party system. As independent analysts, we must be reminded not to infer market or government liberalization from symbolic gestures toward reform-era figures. Instead, we must focus our analysis on structural policy signals rather than commemorative politics.

Xi Jinping's approach does not reflect reformist revival but ideological succession management. By quietly and subtly burying Deng Xiaoping's legacy of "reform and opening up" without repudiating it, Xi is reshaping the foundations of CCP legitimacy to sustain centralized authority well beyond immediate economic or political cycles.

**Jumel G. Estrañero** is a defense, security, & political analyst and a university lecturer at the at De La Salle University in the Philippines. He has worked in the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the Office of Civil Defense, the National Security Council-Office of the President, and is currently in the Department of National Defense. He is the co-author of the books titled: *Disruptive Innovations*, *Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism: A Philippine Terrorism Handbook*, and *Global Security Studies Journal* (Springer Link, United States). *Ideas and/or views expressed here are entirely independent, and his own and do not in any form represent the author's organization and affiliation.*