

## Views from the Common People: Appreciating Xi Jinping

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2018

One of the problems of spending time in universities and research institutions is that you lose touch with everyday realities. Think of the nerd at school, who was always top of the class and a complete social misfit – all of them ended up in such places. I am no exception, but I also find the context alienating and weird. So to get a sense of what life is like for the vast majority, I travel on buses, metros, trains, I walk the streets in cities and the countryside, talking at length with workers, cleaners, local administrators – wherever I can find them.

Obviously, I am speaking of China, where I do this frequently.

Let me begin with a simple observation from a cleaner. We talked about many things, but when we came to Xi Jinping, he simply said: ‘Chairman Xi is good guy [*bucuo*], because he has recovered Chairman Mao’. Wow, I thought, right to the point. He added, ‘Chairman Xi has the common people [*laobaixing*] at heart’.

More comprehensive was a low-level provincial administrator in the south, working in the countryside. It is not a high-paid job by any means. I told her that every morning I study Mao Zedong’s key works, in Chinese (as part of my language study). She told me that I should also study Xi Jinping.

Why? ‘He is a really good chairman’, she said. ‘He has done a lot for common people like us. My parents like him very much, and all the common people love him’. The term she used was *laobaixing*, a colloquial term for everyday workers, who have a simple life, work hard because they see it as a great duty for the country, and appreciate someone who takes them to heart.

Our conversation went on, after I indicated that I actually have all of Comrade Xi’s writings (thus far).

The first crucial virtue is obviously a focus on the common people (*laobaixing*), but the second is his integrity – *zhengzhi*, which includes the senses of honesty, uprightness, decency and fair-mindedness. Old communist virtues, but also ones that run deep in Chinese culture.

How does this integrity show up in everyday consciousness? More obvious is the most thoroughgoing anti-corruption campaign in living memory, on which I have written elsewhere. For this person, it is the focus on honesty and integrity that comes through most strongly in the campaign. The feeling is that China is back on the right track.

The other example of Comrade Xi's integrity was somewhat of a surprise: he is not a 'philanderer (*huaxin*)' like Donald Trump. For this woman, the fact that Trump is dealing with multiple accusations of chasing porn stars is a sign of his lack of integrity. By contrast, Chairman Xi's personal life is also an example of integrity. Honesty, kindness and faithfulness are key virtues in this domain as well.

Examples of such conversations could be repeated time and again. It is one thing to quote international opinion surveys, which indicate that up to \*\* percent of Chinese people approve of and are confident of the direction in which China is heading. It is another thing entirely to talk with people and get their sense of deep appreciation of what Xi Jinping is doing.