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Xi's New Year's Speech Dismisses Difficulties

by Arran Hope



Xi Jinping delivers his New Year's address (Source: Xinhua)

On New Year's Eve, a prerecorded address from Chinese President Xi Jinping was broadcast across the Party's global network of official media outlets ([Youtube](#), December 31, 2023). The speech is an annual tradition, delivered from behind a wooden desk in rhetoric that is at once paternalistic and triumphalist, in which Xi surveys the high points of the outgoing year and looks to the year ahead. The form of this year's set-piece was no different, but the content departed from previous years in ways that are indicative of Xi's shifting priorities, and the Party's growing concerns about the state of the nation.

The most significant section of the speech addressed the economic difficulties that China has weathered in the last year:

“On the road ahead, trials and hardships [lit. ‘wind and rain’] will be the norm. Some enterprises are facing pressures, some of the masses are encountering difficulties finding jobs and meeting basic needs, and some places have hit by floods, typhoons, earthquakes, or other natural disasters (有风有雨是常态。一些企业面临经营压力，一些群众就业、生活遇到困难，一些地方发生洪涝、台风、地震等自然灾害).”

Any acknowledgement of social issues is a rarity in such speeches, and a departure from previous years. The tenor of Xi's New Year's addresses has shifted over the years, and particularly following the outbreak of the pandemic. (Consider, for instance, his 2020 address, which is completely devoid of negative energy ([CGTN](#), December 31, 2019)). Broaching these topics directly, as in this year's speech, is novel. Some

commentators have drawn comparisons to Mao apologizing in 1960 for his own mistakes, and speculated that this indicates Xi is facing pressure from within the Party ([VOA](#), January 4). Even if this feels hyperbolic, it gives a sense of how unusual such an admission is. The choreography of this moment in the speech is also fascinating. Throughout the rest of the address, the camera is either trained on Xi directly, or at a slight angle. However, the camera cuts back to a wider shot at a larger angle just at the very moment where Xi is about to refer to the difficulties facing the masses—the only such instance in the speech. This not only breaks up the sentence, it also creates a visual distance between Xi Jinping and the content of his words. The obfuscation of any culpability on the part of the Party is then enhanced by packaging this together with the natural disasters that have befallen China this year.

A substantial portion of the speech focuses on international affairs. This section has grown over Xi's tenure. He rattled off a list of important international events that China hosted, including the Chengdu FISU World University Games, the Hangzhou Asian Games, the China-Central Asia Summit, and the Third Belt and Road Summit on International Cooperation. This is a contrast from earlier years, when mentions of the world beyond China were restricted to a small paragraph at the end of the speech or included references to commemorating the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the Nanjing Massacre—something that has disappeared in the last few iterations. For instance, Xi's 2015 address proudly touts its assistance with containing the Ebola epidemic in Africa and assuaging a water shortage in the Maldives as the best examples of its outreach in the previous year ([Manchester Consulate](#), January 4, 2015). Clearly China's capacity to match its level of ambition has increased dramatically in the intervening years. But it is also clear that Xi has "full confidence in the future" for those ambitions, despite the "headwinds" that he briefly alludes to.

There is an additional possibility for Xi's insistence on focusing China's stature beyond the PRC's borders: To divert attention from the problems at home. Xi finishes the speech by emphasizing that his fundamental goal is to improve the lives of ordinary people. He elaborates by citing children's education, opportunities for young people, and elderly care as three key areas to strive to improve. However, these are not necessarily areas where Xi's China has made significant progress: China is the least educated middle-income country in the world, youth unemployment is at dangerously high levels, and the healthcare system has been plagued by corruption ([East Asia Forum](#), March 30, 2023; [China Brief](#), July 21, 2023; [China Brief](#), October 6, 2023). Interestingly, while Xinhua's translation of this piece calls these issues "a top priority of the government," Xi merely stated that they were "national affairs (国事)." His subsequent enjoinder that "everyone must work hard together to deal with these matters (大家要共同努力，把有些事办好)" again deflects responsibility for any shortcomings from the Party or his government.

The rest of the speech, in and among the stock Party phrases, was a mixture of lauding technological achievements from the past year and mentions of some of Xi's personal favorite topics. The former included the—by now annual—mention of the Comac C919 aircraft, as well as China's new large cruise ship, the Shenzhou spaceships and Fendouzhe deep-sea submersible, the latest Chinese-made mobile phones, new energy vehicles, lithium-ion batteries, and photovoltaics. The latter encompassed references to Xiong'an

New Area (Xi's pet smart city project outside Beijing), soccer through the summer "village super league (村超)" in Guizhou, and early Chinese civilization (such as the archeological sites of Erlitou, Sanxingdui, and Liangzhu). A mention of the "historical necessity (历史必然)" of national reunification, which Xi links explicitly to "national rejuvenation" echoed statements made in previous years. The integration of the "Greater Bay Area," another core project that Xi references, undergirded the PRC's designs on Hong Kong in the last decade. This kind of economic and infrastructural integration is a key part of the PRC's strategy for reunification, as well as its ambitions further beyond its borders.

Some of the context surrounding Xi's speech provides additional indications of the state of his China. On the home front, it appears that in many city centers, New Year's Eve celebrations were abruptly canceled. Fireworks displays were prohibited (officially over concerns about air pollution), with police confiscating and apprehending those who attempted to set them off and firefighters preemptively dousing them on the street before firing water cannons to disperse the crowd. Big screens in multiple cities were abruptly switched off with seconds to go before midnight, to the surprise and consternation of many of those assembled (officials in Yantai, Shandong Province cited "security control requirements"). In Shijiazhuang, a drone display was shut down, with the organizer prostrating himself on the floor in apology, before being marched off ([Chinadaily](#), December 31, 2023; [Youtube](#), January 2). Meanwhile, the two biggest headlines for the PRC's international outreach on New Year's Day were an announcement of Xi exchanging New Year greetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin and designating 2024 as China-DPRK Friendship Year alongside Kim Jong Un ([Xinhua](#), December 31, 2023; [Xinhua](#), January 1).

That so much of Xi's speech wraps itself in the triumphalist rhetoric of perpetual progress underlines the ironclad commitment to achieving the goals that he has spelled out in numerous other speeches over the past decade. Nods to "Chinese-style modernization," the "new development concept," and "constructing a new development model" are all redolent of the hubris of someone who sees China on the right track. There are chinks in the armor of Xi Jinping's China as this context and his brief *mea culpa* makes clear. But he is still unambiguous that China is a great country ("伟大的国度"), and that it will emerge stronger having weathered the current storm ("中国经济在风浪中强健了体魄、壮实了筋骨").

Arran Hope is the Editor of China Brief

Xi Demands Fealty Despite Domestic And Foreign Woes

by Willy Lam



Xi Jinping chairs the Democratic life meeting. (Source: [Beijing Municipal Commission of Planning and Resources](#))

The Politburo held a “democratic life meeting (民主生活会)” on December 21–22, 2023, in which President Xi Jinping gave an internal, unpublished speech. According to accounts provided to the author by three officials at the rank of department head or above, Xi admitted that he had repeatedly postponed the Third Plenum of the 20th Central Committee (which according to Party norms should have taken place in October) because he “could not offer any viable solution for the nation’s problems.” Xi, who is general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and commander-in-chief, went on to blame the other 23 Politburo members and other senior cadres, not only for failing to give him good advice but also for demonstrating signs of disobedience. Reports of Xi’s frank admission of the dire straits of the Party’s leadership were widely circulated on social media.

The official Xinhua read-out of the Politburo meeting also cited Xi as demanding “unison of thought” among top-tier officials. This entails adhering closely to the instructions of the “core leadership”—in other words, to Xi himself ([Xinhua](#), December 25, 2023). The supreme leader raised the “two safeguards (两个维护),” a slogan that refers to “safeguarding the authority of comrade Xi Jinping as core of the party” and “safeguarding Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era.” President Xi also admonished his close advisors to “take a firm grip on the internal laws of developments [of issues]; accurately distinguish between events and trends, crises and opportunities, and benefits and harms ... and effectively combat risks and take action on the basis of stability” ([People’s Daily](#), December 23, 2023). This

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instruction tallies with caveats given by Xi throughout the past year, in which he has warned that China faces unprecedented challenges and that the party-state apparatus must ready itself to tackle “black swans and gray rhinos.”

The PRC is currently facing an ongoing financial and banking crisis. This has manifested in runs on banks, initially involving county-level branches, and later municipal- and even provincial-level branches of giant state-owned financial institutions including the so-called Big Four (Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Bank of China, China Construction Bank, and Agriculture Bank of China) ([Bloomberg](#), November 9, 2023; [Asia Times](#), October 14, 2023). These government-owned banks could come under more pressure in the wake of an executive order issued in late December by US President Joe Biden that threatens to penalize any financial institutions that “facilitate significant transactions relating to Russia’s military industrial base” ([White House](#), December 22, 2023). Chinese banks have boosted their investment in Russia since its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and helped the Kremlin to shore up the value of the fast-devaluing ruble ([Radio Free Europe](#), December 22, 2023; [The Moscow Times](#), December 22, 2023). Washington, which has already forbidden US funds and other firms from investing in some sectors in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), could freeze Chinese banks’ access to US financial institutions as well as global mechanisms such as the SWIFT network that powers most international monetary transactions ([White House](#), August 9, 2023).

Chinese social media is rife with speculation that at least one of the Big Four banks cannot honor its promissory notes. In the past few months, branches of the four banks have already placed caps on how much cash people can withdraw, transfer, or exchange for US dollars. A major cause of the liquidity issues at these banks could be their excessive lending to the country’s defaulting real-estate giants. Evergrande, for instance, is burdened with debts totalling 2.4 trillion Renminbi (RMB) (\$335 billion). In October, Central Huijin Investment, an arm of China’s sovereign wealth fund, bought tens of millions of shares in the Big Four banks in an apparent move to buttress their solvency ([Finance.sina.com](#), October 12, 2023; [Security Times](#), October 12, 2023). According to the Shanghai Promissory Note Registrar (which tracks such financial instruments), there were more than 200 cases of the banks being unable to honor their notes in the months of July, August, and September ([Zhuanlan.Zhihu.com](#), November 13, 2023).

The Xi leadership has apparently come up with no effective measures to handle beyond printing money—in quantities never revealed to the public—and there is no clear policy solution. The Central Financial Work Conference at the end of October and the Central Economic Work Conference (CEWC) in December gave no new insight into what the party-state apparatus would do to help insolvent banks and overleveraged local-level finance vehicles ([CGTN.com](#), October 31, 2023). Instead, the CEWC saw the Party issue a warning for businesspeople and business journalists not to spread “negative news” about the development of various key sectors of the economy. The Ministry of State Security also issued repeated instructions urging domestic and foreign writers and Internet Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) to promote a buoyant and optimistic gloss on the economy’s prospects for the coming year ([People’s Daily](#), December 18, 2023; [Voice of America](#), December 14, 2023). In fact, one of the only solid indications from the government that acknowledges the banking crisis is that China’s central bank, the People’s Bank of China, gave instructions last month that restrictions be

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observed regarding the amount of government loans that could be funnelled to small- and medium-sized banks ([Reuters](#), January 3; [BBC Chinese](#), December 26, 2023).

The government has also been unable to provide details on what it is doing for those millions of citizens who have bought unfinished apartments and homes. Rumors indicate that Xi is making a big push for subsidized housing, which would fit his conviction that the state, rather than the market, should be the final arbiter of the provision of essential socio-economic services for the public ([China News Service](#), December 19, 2023; [Xinhua](#), September 15, 2023). Any details are yet to be released about this ambitious plan, which takes as its inspiration the experience of government-supported housing schemes prevalent before the start of the reform era. For example, there was no indication as to whether citizens who had bought unfinished apartments would be compensated, or how such compensation might occur ([Sohu.com](#), November 8, 2023; [130.com](#), September 4, 2023).

Xi's policy preferences continue to tilt away from Deng's strategy of reform and opening up, and closer to Mao's penchant for a dirigiste model. His words have sought to reassure the Western world that China is open for business on numerous occasions—including through meeting with leading CEOs of US companies in San Francisco on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November. However, the actions of this quasi-Maoist supreme leader indicate that he is equally keen on total Party control of the economy and the imperative of preventing the West from "infiltrating" the country. His eulogy of Mao Zedong at the late Chairman's 130th birthday on December 26, 2023, put it beyond doubt that he wants to reinstitute his predecessor's anti-market values in order to "attain the unfinished goal" of ushering in "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era." In his long keynote speech on the occasion, Xi clearly put Mao's policies—which were responsible for the death of up to 40 million Chinese by some estimates—above those of Deng's strategy of reform and opening ([China.news.cn](#), December 26, 2023). This was reinforced several days later, when a Caixin editorial commemorating the 45th anniversary of the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress (widely seen as elevating Deng to the position of paramount leader of the CCP) was censored ([China Digital Times](#), December 25, 2023). These preferences have led to a disastrous outflow of capital from multinationals and wealthy members of China's middle class, which is likely continue this year. Despite the restrictions imposed on banks, wealthy individuals and families were still able to move \$50 billion out of the country in 2023 ([New York Times Chinese Edition](#), November 28, 2023).

In his speech at the democratic life meeting, Xi accused former foreign minister Qin Gang and former defense minister General Li Shangfu of "betraying" him. As of now, at least a few dozen senior officers in the Rocket Force and its equipment procurement units have been removed. Unlike in previous purges, however, the wrongdoings of Qin, Li, and the others have not been disclosed. The supreme leader spent his first decade in power getting rid of cadres from rival factions such as the Shanghai Gang and the Communist Youth League Clique. It now seems apparent that he is committed to purging officials formerly deemed as members of his own inchoate Xi Jinping Faction ([Voice of America](#), January 4). If this is the case, a thorough shakeup will be administered within the party, government, and the military in the near future. This will severely hamper the ability of top-echelon government and PLA officials to function effectively, which will negatively impact the country's direction. While it is unlikely that Xi's position as "ruler for life" will be

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threatened by disgruntled fellow princelings such as General Liu Yuan (刘源), son of former state president Liu Shaoqi (Botanwang.com, November 8, 2023), the “unison of thought” among the top leadership and the unquestioned fealty that Xi prizes might be jeopardized. As such, it is difficult to see significant improvements in the coming year for either the PRC’s economy or its relations with key adversaries such as the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia.

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CCP Ideological Indoctrination, Part 2: The New Plan for Training Party Cadres

By John Dotson



At Lanzhou University (兰州大学), new CCP members take the Party loyalty oath on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP (June 22, 2021). (Source: [Xinhua](#))

Author's note: This is the second article in a two-part series focused on recent initiatives taken by the Chinese Communist Party to implement ideological indoctrination programs intended to reinforce the Party's ruling position, as well as the current official ideology of "Xi Jinping Thought." The first article in this series ("[CCP Ideological Indoctrination, Part 1: The PRC's New 'Patriotic Education Law'](#)"), which appeared in the December 15 issue of China Brief, profiled a new law intended to promote "patriotic education" among the general public. This follow-up article analyzes a revised CCP plan revealed in October 2023 for the intensified ideological training of Party officials.

On December 29, 2023, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping addressed a gathering of People's Republic of China (PRC) diplomatic personnel in Beijing's Great Hall of the People. He instructed his audience to compose a "diplomatic iron army (外交铁军)" representing China's interests. Notably, Xi emphasized the need for correct political thinking: asserting that they must "persist in our revolution (坚持自我革命)," "be steadfast in political conviction (政治信念坚定)," and "build a sturdy ideological line of defense (筑牢思想防线)" about themselves in the performance of their work ([Yang Guang Wang](#), December 30, 2023).

These comments are the latest example of an extensive series of efforts by the CCP leadership in late 2023 to reinforce ideological regimentation within the Party. On October 16, 2023, the CCP Central Committee promulgated a new document titled the *National Cadre Education and Training Plan (2023-2027)* [全国干部教育培训规划 (2023-2027 年)] (hereafter “2023 Cadre Plan”), which laid out extensive new requirements for ideological study on the part of CCP officials ([PRC Government](#), October 16, 2023). This move had been signaled at a CCP Politburo meeting at the end of August, which was reportedly convened to deliberate on new draft documents related to ideological training for Party members. The official coverage of the August meeting emphasized that forthcoming Party directives would further scrutinize “political judgment (政治判断力)”—signifying loyalty and obedience to the central Party leadership—and “strengthen political gatekeeping (加强政治把关)” for cadre reliability ([PRC Government](#), August 31, 2023).

Official state sources offered predictably laudatory coverage of the 2023 Cadre Plan. They asserted that the required training would “unceasingly use the Party’s innovative theories to firm hearts and forge spirits,” and “persist in making political training run through the entire course of a cadre’s maturation (坚持把政治训练贯穿干部成长全周期)” ([CCP Member Net](#), October 16, 2023), thereby further “raising the skills of cadres to promote quality development [and] serve the masses” ([CCP Central Party School](#), November 18, 2023).

The new plan—a successor to an earlier document released in 2019—heralds yet another step in the CCP’s steadily increasing drive for ideological regimentation and conformity within its own ranks. This process bears significant implications for the Party’s future implementation of both domestic and international policy. The specific contents of this new plan for indoctrinating Party members are therefore worthy of a closer look.

The Drive for Enhanced Ideological Regimentation Under Xi Jinping

Under Xi’s leadership, the Party-state apparatus has placed increasing focus on the ideological indoctrination of both Party members and the Chinese public as a whole. Xi has consistently stressed that ideological laxity has been a primary cause of the problems faced by the CCP. He has also repeatedly warned of the dangers of “historical nihilism (历史虚无主义)” —meaning a loss of faith in communism, and a failure to uphold the great accomplishments of the CCP in its ongoing mission to revive the Chinese nation ([CCP Party History Center](#), September 25, 2015). A prominent sub-narrative of this messaging is that a loss of ideological confidence among Soviet Communist Party members was a leading factor underlying the collapse of the Soviet Union. [1] The clear message from Xi’s central leadership—and a message not always fully appreciated by outside observers—is that correct ideology is an existential matter for the CCP, and a guiding force for PRC state policy.

The Xi leadership has thus inculcated Party officials with the officially-prescribed ideology of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想)” (“Xi Jinping Thought”; hereafter, XJT). This set of ideological precepts heavily emphasizes obedience to centralized Party directives and personal loyalty to Xi himself ([China Brief](#), September 22, 2023). The current

phase of this effort extends back to at least 2019, when the CCP introduced both the smartphone app *Xuexi Qiangguo* (学习强国) and a new policy document requiring enhanced and formalized ideological “education” for party members ([China Brief](#), December 31, 2019).

A series of measures have reinforced the drive to elevate the importance of correct ideology. These include the promotion of Wang Huning (王沪宁)—long recognized as the CCP’s lead ideologist—to the fourth-ranked position in the CCP Politburo Standing Committee at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, despite his lack of senior experience in either the Party’s functional bureaucracies or in provincial-level management ([PRC Government](#), October 23, 2022; [Global Taiwan Brief](#), November 2, 2022). This move demonstrated the newfound importance of loyalty to Xi as a requirement for advancement in the Party’s highest ranks, outweighing other credentials.

The Plan’s Overarching Theme: Loyalty to Xi Jinping

The text of the 2023 Cadre Plan shows clear intent for greater regimentation in the Party ranks. For instance, the plan describes its fundamental objective as follows:

To deepen and make more systematic the Party’s innovative theory weapons; to use [XJT]... to forge the heart and spirit to achieve outstanding results; to make the ideals and convictions of all cadres more steadfast, their ideology and willpower more unified, and their actions and steps more unanimous; and to deepen the sincerity of belief and conscientiousness of action towards the Party’s innovative theories. This must be used to guide practice and advance their work (2023 Cadre Plan, Section 1).

The plan is also clear about its purpose to indoctrinate CCP cadres in loyalty—not just to the Party as an institution, but to Xi Jinping himself. It directly asserts the need for reinforcing the political loyalty tenets of XJT, stating that cadres must “profoundly grasp the decisive meaning of the ‘Two Establishes,’ strengthen the ‘Four Consciousnesses,’ be steadfast in the ‘Two Safeguards,’ and make deeply studying [XJT] the main theme and central line ...” (Section 1). [2]

The plan also emphasizes that cadres hold the proper position in “politics (政治)”—employing coded language that, within current CCP discourse, means loyalty to Xi Jinping and the central CCP leadership. This provides one of the most striking sections in the document, which invokes variations of the “politics” theme 10 times in a single sentence:

Political training (政治训练) will be made more solid and effective; the party spirit of cadres will be strengthened, the style of work will be mastered; political judgment (政治判断力), political comprehension (政治领悟力), and political execution (政治执行力) will unceasingly be improved; political discipline (政治纪律) and political rules consciousness (政治规矩意识) will be advanced and strengthened; and consciousness of political stance (政治立场), political orientation (政治方向), political principles (政治原则), and the political path (政治道路) will maintain a high degree of unanimity with the Party center with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core. (Section 1)

Official commentary regarding the plan has also alluded to the Party's anxieties about threats to the CCP's ruling position, with a Central Party School commentary noting that cadre education must prepare Party members to “be on guard against dissolution hazards (防范化解风险)” (*emphasis added*) ([CCP Central Party School](#), November 18). This connects directly to Xi's oft-expressed anxieties regarding “color revolutions,” or other crises of “high winds and perilous waves (风高浪急)” that could threaten the survival of the CCP party-state ([China Brief](#), February 19, 2019; [Qiushi](#), November 1, 2022).



Party members in Fangshan County (方山县) (Shanxi Province) listen to a speech by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping as part of a “middle-aged and youth cadre training class (中青年干部培训班)” intended to “comprehensively raise up [participants] political quality, level of theory, and specialized abilities” (November 29, 2021). Requirements for such “collective training (集中培训)” are a significant component of the new cadre education plan. (Source: [Huoshuiedu](#))

Requirements for Party Members in the 2023 Plan

The 2023 Cadre Plan is considerably longer than its November 2019 predecessor and significantly increases the time that cadres will be required to devote to mandatory political training. [3] The 2023 document lays out requirements for both online self-study and in-person “collective training (集中培训)” for cadres ranging from lower individual and/or township levels, up to the higher-level “county level and above party-government leading cadres (县处级以上党政领导干部).” The plan divides cadres into two broad categories based on rank and/or the nature of posts they hold. Ideological training requirements grow heavier for those higher up in the Party hierarchy. Even for lower-level cadres, the plan mandates a total of 140 hours—more than three full work weeks—of combined online and in-person training each year. The chart below, drawn from the plan, provides a breakdown of these requirements:

Cadre Education and Training Quantization Quotas 干部教育培训量化指标		
Study Period Quotas 学时指标		
Cadre Classification 干部类别	Training Time Requirements 培训时间要求	
County level and above party-government leading cadres 县处级以上党政领导干部	Every 5 years, engage in collective study sessions adding up to at least 3 months or 550 study hours 每5年参加集中培训累计不少于3个月或550学时	Every year, engage in online self-study adding up to at least 50 hours 每年参加网络自学累计不少于50学时
Level 4 investigators and civil servants at corresponding or higher level (including those holding posts as leading party-government cadres at the township level) 四级调研员及相当层次职级以上公务员(含同时担任乡科级党政领导职务的干部)		
Leading personnel in state-owned enterprises and corresponding posts and above 国有企业相当职务层次以上领导人员		
Management personnel at posts of level 6 and above in state institutions 事业单位六级管理岗位(职员)以上人员		
Township level party-state leaders (not including level 4 investigators and civil servants at corresponding or higher level) 乡科级党政领导(不含已晋升四级调研员及相当层次职级以上公务员)	Every year, engage in collective study sessions adding up to at least 12 days or 90 study hours 每年参加集中培训累计不少于12天或90学时	
Level one director state personnel and civil servants at corresponding level or lower 一级主任科员及相当层次职级以下公务员		
Other management personnel in state-owned enterprise work units 国有企事业单位其他管理人员		
Specialist technical personnel 专业技术人员		

Figure 1: The new requirements for cadre political study, broken down by rank and time requirements, as provided in the 2023 Cadre Training Plan (Special Column 1). Chart translated by the author.

Management Responsibilities for Cadre Education

The document describes the leading roles of two bureaucratic systems (系统) in the cadre political training process. The first of these is the CCP Central Organization Department (中央组织部, COD), which handles cadre management and bears primary responsibility for the Party's "cadre academies (干部学院)" ([CCP Member Net](#), November 29, 2021). The second is the centrally-controlled CCP "party school (党校)" system, which operates an extensive network of institutions from the national to local level. [4] A lesser, ancillary role appears to reside with the "socialism academies (社会主义学院)" operated by the CCP United Front Work Department. [5]

The text indicates that the Central Party School (CPS) and COD will work together on the course materials for XJT courses. It employs language that, while vague in some respects, appears to reflect a higher degree of national-level centralization than the 2019 plan. The text also mentions a "national cadre training teaching materials editing and guidance committee[s]" that will "organize and compile national cadre study and training materials, and compile case studies of the implementation of [XJT]" (*Special Column #1*). Repeated mention of special status is given to the cadre academies of Pudong (浦东) (in Shanghai), Jinggangshan (井冈山) (in Jiangxi), and Yan'an (延安) (in Shaanxi) as model institutions in terms of developing seminars and teaching materials. This is likely because of these locations' associations with either economic success or the revolutionary history of the CCP, although this is not entirely clear (*Section 2, Part 2; Special Topic 5*).

The plan lays out additional stipulations for COD management of "central management cadres (中管干部)" and "state organ-level principal leading cadres (国家机关级正职领导干部)," who are to receive a full-time collective training program in XJT every five years. The COD is also tasked with organizing annual ideology study at the CPS for a select number of central management cadres and "leading cadres at department and bureau level (厅局级领导干部)." Meanwhile, at least 50 "department and bureau-level theory cadres (厅局级理论干部)" must go to the CPS for an advanced theory course in XJT every year (*Special Column #1*). Party committees at all levels throughout the country are directed to ensure enforcement of the provisions of the plan, and to create "cadre education leading small groups (干部教育领导小组)" and conferences to organize coordinating mechanisms (*Section 8*).

Cadre Training Course Content

Consistent with Xi Jinping's pervasive cult of personality, XJT is to be the core of all instruction. Course organizers are to:

"persist in making [XJT] the content of first importance in theory studies for party committees (and CCP leading groups), [which should] make specific arrangements to meticulously organize its implementation ... make it the central mandatory course in party schools ... effectively organizing theory training classes and advanced study theory classes; making it the central content of cadre

studies, comprehensively systematize studies, persist in deepening studies, integrating practice and study.” (Section 2, Part 1)

The plan contains specific stipulations for course content organized by Party schools at “city level and above (市级以上).” [6] In such syllabi, “Party theory education (党的理论教育)” and “Party spirit education (党性教育)” must constitute at least 70 percent of the course term, of which Party spirit education must constitute at least 20 percent. The plan also presents these specific requirements:

- At Party schools and cadre academies of all levels, in the Party spirit education classes, at least 50 percent of the course time should be classroom teaching.
- Among Party schools at various levels, in the principal classes, leading cadres should lecture for at least 20 percent of the course.
- In the principal classes organized by Party schools and cadre academies at city level and above, cadre training case-study teaching must be at least 15 percent of the coursework each term; seminar-based, simulation-based, experience-based, interview-based, and other interactive teaching methods should be at least 20 percent of the coursework each term (*Special Column 1*).

Conclusion

The 2023 Cadre Plan significantly increases the time that CCP members will be required to spend in both individual online study and in-classroom “collective training” alongside their counterparts. Furthermore, in terms of course content, the cultivation of practical skills such as effective management practices clearly takes a backseat to ideological indoctrination. The plan reinforces the message that the *sine qua non* for cadre evaluation and advancement will be adherence to the correct “politics” of loyalty to Xi Jinping and the Party center. The further propagation of this message—that it is more important to be “red” than “expert”—through the Party bureaucracy portends a more rigid and ideological policymaking process emanating outward from the CCP’s top leadership. This will likely have deleterious effects on the administrative efficiency of the CCP Party-state in the years to come.

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Notes

[1] Two such prominent examples include: *Be Vigilant for Danger in Times of Peace: Twenty Years of Historical Lessons from the Death of the Soviet Communist Party* (居安思危：苏共亡党二十年的历史教训) (Social Sciences Academic Press, 2011); and the film *Twenty-Year Reflections on the Death of the Soviet Party and Nation* (苏联亡党亡国二十年祭),

https://www.bilibili.com/video/av76350865/?share_medium=android&share_source=weibo&bbid=XY12CA11AB8969CBB25166F8FC5C5777E2625&ts=1582999546257

[2] Of note, Section 3 of the document focuses on driving home these slogans. The use of terms such as the “Two Establishes,” “Four Consciousnesses,” *et al.* may seem like empty jargon to those not steeped in the CCP’s current ideological discourse. However, within CCP discourse, these terms relate once again to faith in Communist ideology, to the Party as an institution, and—most of all—to personal loyalty to Xi Jinping himself. For a summary discussion of these terms, see: John Dotson, “CCP Renews Political Loyalty Indoctrination,” *China Brief* Vol. 23, Issue: 17 (September 22, 2023), <https://jamestown.org/program/ccp-renews-political-loyalty-indoctrination/>.

[3] The main body text of the 2019 document is 5,322 characters long; the basic text of the 2023 document is 7,191 characters long, plus six additional special topic image sections (character count not tallied by the author) that add considerably to its length.

[4] CCP party schools (党校) also operate under the dual identity of state “administrative academies (行政学院).” In this and other CCP policy documents, they are generally referred to under both designations as: “党校 (行政学院).”

[5] The “socialism academies (社会主义学院)” are institutions operated by the CCP United Front Work Department. They operate as a parallel system of party schools for persons who are not formally CCP members, but who are members of one of the CCP-subordinate “democratic parties” or otherwise connected to the united front system. See: “CCP Central Committee Publishes ‘Work Regulations for Academies of Socialism’” (中共中央印发《社会主义学院工作条例》), PRC Government (December 25, 2018). https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-12/25/content_5352099.htm.

[6] As the CPS is assigned a leading role in determining course content nationwide, this could also apply to other institutions (“cadre academies,” etc.) outside of the Party school system. However, this is not entirely clear from the text.

Taiwan's Offshore Islands: Assessments Of Support For Integration

by Kristian McGuire



Shi Islet (獅嶼), with anti-landing spikes on Lesser Kinmen (小金門) in the foreground, and Xiamen (廈門) in the background. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))Text

Kinmen County (金門縣) and Lienchiang County (連江縣; also referred to as Matsu (馬祖)) are a crucial site of activity for cross-Strait relations. Over the last year, Beijing has renewed its calls for using the islands to promote “cross-Strait integrated development (兩岸融合发展)” ([Taiwan Affairs Office](#), September 12, 2023). It has also expended considerable effort pushing to integrate the islands, which sit just off the shore of Fujian Province, with its own economy through a range of commercial and infrastructural initiatives ([China Brief](#), July 2, 2021). Meanwhile, politicians in Taiwan who support a return to greater engagement with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have put forward plans to deepen ties between the islands and the PRC, while Taipei has stressed national security concerns ([Taipei Times](#), August 23, 2023; [Mainland Affairs Council](#), June 21, 2022).

China will want to see greater cross-Strait engagement following Taiwan’s elections on January 13. This is a very real possibility, as all candidates have expressed openness to allowing some degree of increased cross-Strait integration. As such, the outcome of the election could herald changes for the islands, potentially advancing the PRC’s influence over these two Taiwan constituencies. The islands’ ties with the PRC and recent developments on further integration since the pandemic are therefore important to consider.

Kinmen And Matsu in Cross-Strait Relations

Kinmen and Matsu have historically played an outsized role in cross-Strait relations. On January 1, 1979, Beijing signaled a major shift in its Taiwan policy by officially declaring an end to its decades-long shelling of the islands. In 2001, Kinmen and Matsu became the sites of the first direct transportation, trade, and postal

links—known as the “Mini Three Links (小三通)”—between the Republic of China (ROC) and the PRC. More recently, Beijing and politicians in Taiwan who favor deeper ties with China have promoted water, electricity, natural gas, and transportation infrastructure links—the “New Four Links (新四通)” or “Mini Four Links (小四通)”—between the islands and the PRC’s nearby Fujian Province ([China Brief](#), August 31, 2020). Xi Jinping himself has advocated for the infrastructure projects ([Taiwan Work Office](#), April 12, 2019). With Taiwan’s 2024 elections approaching, Beijing issued a policy document in September 2023 on promoting Fujian Province as a core location for cross-Strait integrated development, in which the offshore islands and the infrastructure projects featured prominently ([State Council Information Office](#), September 12, 2023).

Taiwanese opposition politicians have, like Beijing, called for lifting the restrictions on cross-Strait tourism that Taipei imposed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: These restrictions have had a significant impact on Kinmen and Matsu. [1] Some Taiwanese politicians have also sustained old ideas about integrating the offshore islands with Fujian Province, goals that can only be realized with the support of Taiwan’s next administration.

Tourism and Cross-Strait Integrated Development

On February 2, 2020, China began limiting ferry service between its Fujian Province and the offshore islands in response to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. Soon thereafter, Taipei announced that all PRC nationals would be temporarily prohibited from entering Taiwan as a precaution against the pandemic. [2] Beijing has since criticized Taipei for obstructing cross-Strait travel ([Taiwan Affairs Office](#), September 16, 2020).

In mid-December 2022, Chen Fu-hai (陳福海) and Wang Chung-ming (王忠銘), the magistrates-elect of Kinmen County and Lienchiang County respectively, traveled to Xiamen, Fujian Province. They went to discuss China’s recently imposed ban on Taiwanese imports and the resumption of the Mini Three Links with Chinese officials. On December 22, 2022, the ROC’s Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) announced the “Lunar New Year Charter Ferry Program for Kinmen and Matsu,” the first major relaxation of cross-Strait travel restrictions. The program allowed residents of Kinmen and Matsu and their PRC spouses to travel between the offshore islands and China from January 7 to February 6, 2023. The “guiding principle” of the program was to resume “passenger transportation under the Mini Three Links in a gradual and orderly manner premised on keeping the risks of the pandemic under control” ([Mainland Affairs Council](#), December 22, 2022). The MAC defended its cautious approach to restoring the Mini Three Links against critics who argued for further relaxation of travel restrictions ([Mainland Affairs Council](#), December 24, 2022).

In late January 2023, Chen Fu-hai, former KMT presidential candidate Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱), and KMT legislator representing Kinmen County Chen Yu-jen (陳玉珍), traveled to Xiamen to meet with the head of the PRC’s Taiwan Affairs Office Song Tao (宋濤). The primary purpose of the trip, at least from Beijing’s perspective, was to discuss fully restoring the Mini Three Links ([Taiwan Affairs Office](#), February 1, 2023). A few days after the trip, the MAC announced that the charter ferry program for Kinmen and Matsu would be

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normalized and the number of routes and voyages would be increased ([Mainland Affairs Council](#), February 4, 2023).

Prospects for fully restoring the Mini Three Links appeared to dim in April 2023. ROC President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) met with US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy while transiting through the United States, upsetting Beijing ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC](#), April 6, 2023). While Tsai was in the United States, China's Fujian Maritime Safety Administration announced plans to conduct on-site inspections of direct cross-Strait cargo ships, as well as Mini Three Links cargo and passenger ships. This subsequently drew a rebuke from the MAC ([Mainland Affairs Council](#), April 5, 2023). The council also took issue with Beijing's unilateral decision the following month to allow group tours from Taiwan to visit China but maintain restrictions on Chinese tourists visiting Taiwan ([Global Times](#); [Mainland Affairs Council](#), May 19, 2023). At the time, Taipei still banned cross-Strait group tours.

Taipei has continued to urge Beijing to allow Chinese tourists to travel to Taiwan while gradually lifting its own restrictions on cross-Strait tourism ([Mainland Affairs Council](#), August 24, 2023). Initially, ROC officials insisted that the restoration of cross-Strait tourist travel should be based on the principle of reciprocity ([Central News Agency](#), March 13, 2023). Beijing has rejected that claim ([Taiwan Affairs Office](#), August 25, 2023). In November 2023, ROC Transportation Minister Wang Kwo-tsai (王國材) told Taiwan's legislature that the government intended to lift its ban on China-bound Taiwanese tour groups and other cross-Strait travel restrictions on March 1, 2024. Wang noted that the change in policy was made out of consideration for domestic travel agents who had complained about the negative effects the travel ban had wrought on their businesses ([Focus Taiwan](#), November 3, 2023).

Taipei's plan appears subject to change. Wang Kwo-tsai has indicated that it could be impacted by the result of the ROC's presidential election ([Focus Taiwan](#), November 3, 2023). And there have been conflicting statements from ROC officials as to whether the number of Taiwanese group tourists allowed to travel to China each day will be capped at 2,000, as originally planned ([Radio Taiwan International](#), November 13, 2023; [Taipei Times](#), November 24, 2023). Taipei hopes that Beijing will eventually respond favorably to its unilateral moves to restore tourism ties ([Radio Taiwan International](#), November 6, 2023).

Politicians from Kinmen and Matsu have continued to venture across the Taiwan Strait to implore Chinese officials to loosen the PRC's travel restrictions and promote their territories' economic interests in China ([Kinmen Daily News](#), April 18, 2023; [Matsu Daily News](#), December 14, 2023). Chen Fu-hai and Wang Chung-ming, as well as other opposition politicians, have kept alive old plans for greater cross-Strait integration involving the offshore islands. Under former ROC President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) (2008-2016), Taiwan and China worked together to develop a "common living circle (共同生活圈)" between the offshore islands and Fujian Province. This was centered on Kinmen and Xiamen, referred to as the "Two Gates (兩門)," and Matsu and Mawei District, Fuzhou City, known as the "Two Horses (兩馬)" ([Executive Yuan](#), September 4, 2008). The integration process, of which the Mini Four Links were intended to be a key component, has slowed under Taiwan's current government. Chen and Wang, however, have declared their

support for building a common living circle with the PRC and pushing ahead with the Mini Four Links ([China Times](#); [Matsu Daily News](#), September 14, 2023).

Chen Fu-hai has made some progress in the last decade. During his first term as Magistrate of Kinmen County (2014-2018), Kinmen and Xiamen completed a major water transfer project. Chen also expressed interest in establishing electricity and bridge linkages with Xiamen before losing his reelection bid in 2018 ([Central News Agency](#), August 4, 2018). Since regaining his position in December 2022, he has reaffirmed his commitment to the projects. Chen addressed the first meeting of the Kinmen County Kinmen-Xiamen Bridge Construction Promotion Association that month, vowing to promote the Kinmen-Xiamen bridge project once he assumed office ([Central News Agency](#), December 17, 2022). Since retaking office, he has argued that Beijing and Taipei should devolve more power to local authorities to advance the Mini Four Links projects ([Kinmen Daily News](#), September 15, 2023). In September 2023, the Kinmen County government agreed to forward a referendum proposal to construct the Kinmen-Xiamen Bridge to the Executive Yuan to determine whether the proposal falls within Kinmen's jurisdiction and can therefore be decided through a local referendum ([Central News Agency](#), September 20, 2023). However, ROC Deputy Minister of the Interior Wu Rong-hui (吳容輝) has suggested that the matter is not a local issue and, if formally proposed, may need to be decided through a national referendum ([Central News Agency](#), October 11, 2023).

Wang Chung-ming has been equally supportive of constructing a bridge between Matsu and Fuzhou. In May 2023, he led a delegation to Fuzhou for a conference with local officials. During the conference, officials from the two sides reached agreements on a variety of issues and formed a consensus on promoting the Mini Four Links ([United Daily News](#), May 20, 2023). The issue of deepening transportation ties was a special concern to both sides. At the start of the conference, the Lienchiang County government met with senior Fuzhou municipal officials to discuss building a bridge between Matsu and Fuzhou. The two sides ended up agreeing on a tentative route for the bridge ([Matsu Daily News](#), May 17, 2023).

Post-Election Possibilities

Lai Ching-te (賴清德), Taiwan's current vice president and the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's presidential candidate, has indicated that he might maintain a similarly cautious approach toward the offshore islands if elected. Amid renewed talk in 2023 of turning the offshore islands into permanent demilitarized zones and centers for engagement with China, Lai argued that peace with sovereignty is real peace and that peace is maintained through strength ([Kinmen County Council](#), February 22, 2023; [Central News Agency](#), May 30, 2023). However, Lai said that he is open to working with China on mutually beneficial projects on the basis of equality and dignity ([Central News Agency](#), May 30, 2023).

The KMT's presidential candidate Hou You-yi (侯友宜) has proposed deepening integration by turning Kinmen into a cross-Strait economic pilot zone and transportation hub. He is a proponent of letting the offshore islands move forward with the Mini Four Links projects and is in favor of holding a referendum on the Kinmen-Xiamen bridge project. Hou has added the caveat, however, that his support is based on the

assumption that the projects do not negatively impact Taiwan's national security ([Taipei Times](#), August 23, 2023).

Taiwan People's Party presidential candidate Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) is a staunch supporter of the Kinmen-Xiamen bridge project and the other Mini Four Links ([Radio Taiwan International](#), June 20, 2022). He supports deciding the fate of the bridge project through a referendum, and appears open to letting it be decided through a local referendum ([Central News Agency](#), December 14, 2023).

Conclusion

Taipei has gradually relaxed its cross-Strait travel restrictions since the end of the pandemic while injecting a sense of caution into the debate about the offshore islands' engagement with China. It has warned that Beijing's schemes for deepening the offshore islands' ties with Fujian Province are "part of the CCP's united front campaign against Taiwan to 'promote integration and unification'" ([Mainland Affairs Council](#), September 14, 2023). President of the Executive Yuan Chen Chien-jen (陳建仁) has argued that there is no urgency to move forward with the Mini Four Links as Taipei is already helping the offshore islands meet their needs for water, electricity and natural gas ([Central News Agency](#), October 6, 2023).

Surveying the three presidential candidates' positions, however, suggests that these territories' future remains unclear. No matter who becomes Taiwan's next president, he will have to analyze the current state of cross-Strait relations and determine how to balance the offshore islands' opening up to China with maintaining Taiwan's national security.

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Notes

[1] See Mainland Affairs Council, "Table 17 Mini-Three Links: Number of Visitors Arrivals at/Departures from Kinmen" and "Table 18 Mini-Three Links: Number of Visitors Arrivals at/Departures from Matsu," Cross-Strait Economic Statistics Monthly, No. 368 (December 2023), https://www.mac.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=2C28D363038C300F&sms=231F60B3498BBB19&s=08DD23979F2878D5. According to ROC government statistics, the number of visitors arriving in Kinmen from China

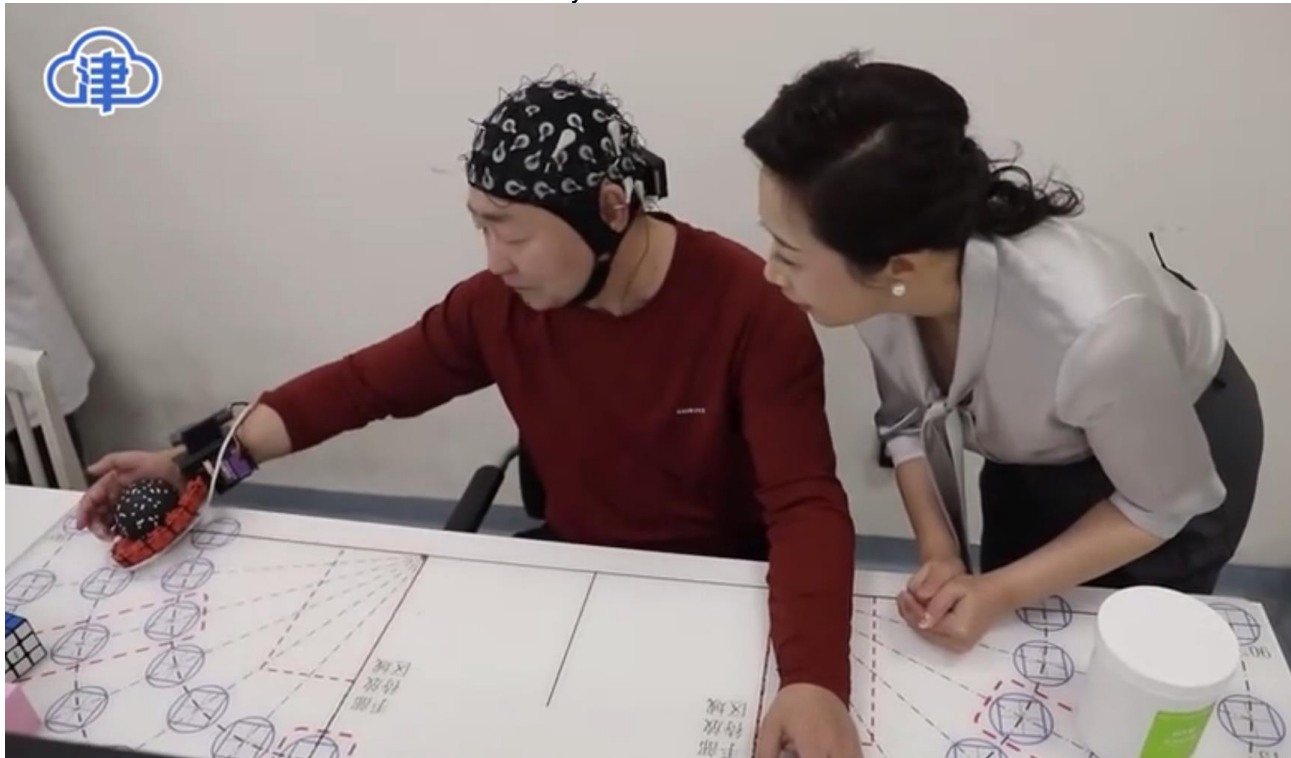
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dropped from more than 403,000 in 2019 to 0 in 2021 and 2022, and had only increased to approximately 2,000 a month as of October 2023. The number of visitors arriving in Matsu from China dropped from more than 11,000 in 2019 to 0 in 2021 and 2022, and had only increased to approximately 100 a month as of October 2023.

[2] Kristian McGuire, “Post-COVID-19 Cross-Strait Maritime Transportation Trends” (*Global Taiwan Brief*, October 19, 2022), <https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/10/post-covid-19-cross-strait-maritime-transportation-trends/>.

Brain-Computer Interfaces: Medical Miracles and Innovation Policy

by Zoë Moore



At Haihe labs, a patient controls a robotic sixth finger with imagination alone. (Source: Tencent QQ)

Decades of strategic investment in science at the central and local levels have manifested in significant advances in Brain-Computer Interfaces (BCIs, 脑机接口) ([Xinhua](#), November 15, 2023). This nascent technology is an increasingly important part of China's ambitions to become a science and technology superpower. A short feature on CCTV highlights BCIs' emergence as a key technology in the eyes of the state, among seven cutting-edge technologies identified by the 14th five-year plan and its Long-range Objectives Through the Year 2035. In the words of a Chinese para-athlete interviewed at the end of the segment, "this is a manifestation of Chinese-style modernization (中国式现代化的表现)" ([CCTV](#), January 3).

BCIs are a subfield of neuroscience and engineering research that rely on massive amounts of data to interpret biological states. They allow people to execute physical movements or use computers through thought alone and are primarily developed for medical applications. However, BCIs are highly contextual and calibrated devices that can be adjusted for specific situations and users. This raises concerns about human-

machine integration in military applications and data privacy in entertainment applications. Despite their rapid rise in recent years, China's progress in BCIs has been underreported.

China's Focus on BCI Research

Recently, various BCIs have been featured in innovation fairs and events within innovation clusters across China. For instance, a recent Shenzhen Hi-Tech innovation fair included a device that allowed seamless two-way reading and writing (“双向读写”) between brain and device. Such events also function as a form of science diplomacy, drawing international researchers to Chinese research hubs ([S&T Daily](#), November 16, 2023; [S&T Daily](#), November 15, 2023). Similarly, at the unveiling of Huangpu's “Future City/Greater Bay Area Metaverse Innovation Demonstration Center (未来之城·大湾区元宇宙创新示范中心),” BCIs were listed explicitly, alongside highly discussed artificial general intelligence, big data, and algorithms, as integrative digital technologies of the future ([S&T Daily](#), November 8, 2023). The devices were also present at the 2023 Global Panda Global Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition at Chengdu Hi-Tech Industrial Development Zone ([S&T Daily](#), November 7, 2023).

BCIs are engineering systems often developed for certain applications. Unless BCI systems are innovative in their design, they are applied rather than basic research. In contrast, brain-inspired computing (neuromorphic computing, 类脑计算) is a form of basic research that has also been named alongside BCI as a key technology. Neuromorphic computing challenges the theoretical foundations of computer science by mimicking brain processes to maximize information processing. Innovations in neuromorphic computing would extend past isolated devices to accelerate AI and machine learning-enabled tasks, providing an energy-efficient alternative to AI training. Shi Luping (施路平), a leader in the field at Tsinghua University, likens his research to “exploring a dark, unmapped ‘no man's land’ (在漆黑的、没有地图的‘无人区’探路).” He goes on to say that “it is precisely this kind of no man's land exploration that is likely to bring breakthroughs, so that key areas of science and technology bring great changes” ([Tsinghua News](#), September 26, 2021). “Great changes (巨大变革)” is a common formulation in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rhetoric over the past few years that promotes an image of China's ascendance in the world ([Qiushi](#), November 16, 2022).

Similarly, media coverage frequently eulogizes domestic advances in BCI technology, tying it to narratives of national rejuvenation. In 2023, a 2016 use of a BCI in outer space was lauded as a world-wide first accomplished by China, seven years after the fact ([Tencent QQ](#), December 28). Recently, an article on an innovation forum in Pujiang, Zhejiang Province, praises China for surpassing the United States in terms of patents and the volume of scientific publications, before discussing Belt and Road projects in Indonesia and Africa as other data points for emerging national strength ([Xinhua News](#), September 14). And in a separate piece on BCI technology, researcher Li Xiaojian (李骁健) warns of the risks of foreign forays into the field, citing Elon Musk's Neuralink trials as “quite radical and risky (比较激进, 有潜在风险).” The piece goes

on suggest that responsible medical development can instead be found in domestic research ([Nanfang Daily](#), November 10).

State-Backed BCI Research: Haihe Laboratories and China Brain Project

Haihe Laboratories

Haihe Laboratories (海河实验室), based in Tianjin, unveiled the Haihe Laboratory of Brain-Computer Interaction and Human-Computer Integration in March last year ([Tianjin Government](#), March 29, 2023). Its cutting-edge BCI research was framed in overtly political terms in a recent profile. One scientist asserts that they should “achieve indigenization through self-reliance in science and technology (我们应该通过科技自立自强来实现国产化)” ([Tencent QQ](#), December 28, 2023), citing directly principles of self-reliance and self-improvement prescribed by the 14th five-year plan. Another suggests that since export controls by the United States or other countries could limit their research, they focus on their capacity to independently develop products ([Tencent QQ](#), December 28, 2023).

Haihe lab scientists have developed the *Shengong* (神工) series of BCI products which, like other BCI devices, advance ideals of human-computer integration through applications-based interpretations of biological data. “Divine Armor (神工-神甲),” allows stroke patients to walk with a more normal gait by normalizing their walking patterns against a database of normal gait patterns and communicating that information through a robotic exoskeleton. Another device, the “Brain Whisperer (神工-脑语者),” is an implantable chip designed to improve brain signal acquisition accuracy. Other devices include a thought-controlled sixth robotic finger and a diagnostic tool for depression treatment ([Tencent QQ](#), December 28; [Tianjin Industrial and Information Technology Bureau](#), July 25, 2023). These devices realize the potential of data interpretation methods to further scientists’ abilities to produce products that read minds. They also serve as a case study for China’s efforts to invest in critical technologies to achieve Human-Computer Fused Intelligence (脑-机融合智能), fill a gap in domestic knowledge production to seize leadership on the international stage, and promote the cultivation of CCP priorities including self-reliance and cultivating indigenous talent ([Tianjin Media](#), June 25, 2022; [Tencent QQ](#), December 28, 2023).

China Brain Project

The China Brain Project (also known as the Brain Science and Brain-Inspired Intelligence project) is the most comprehensive state-backed initiative that funds BCI research. The project, launched alongside the 13th five-year plan in 2015, is framed as following a “one body and two wings (一体两翼)” structure, whereby investigating cognitive functions and research technology platforms contributes to both treatments of brain disorders and the creation of brain-machine intelligence technologies ([Medical Review](#), June 30, 2022). It stipulates collaboration between neuroscientists and AI researchers, emphasizing a reflexive nature between

the two domains of research and exercising favorability towards neuromorphic computing as a strand of theoretical research in computing.

Globally, governments fund neuromorphic computing and BCI research. For instance, Synchron, a leading Australian BCI company now based in the United States, received funding from DARPA. However, unlike initiatives such as the US BRAIN project, which focus on neuroscience discoveries, China Brain Project states human-machine hybrid intelligence as an explicit goal. This strategic goal brings political incentives to scientific research by invoking military applications. In 2018, military-civil fusion was referenced in a program announcement about neural prosthetics, though the launch centered disabled veterans and did not extend directly to warfare ([China Disabled Persons Federation](#), May 23, 2018).

Programing Innovation

China's five-year plans establish key priorities for economic and social development and require provincial and local officials to establish detailed plans to meet those priorities. Cadres at the local and provincial levels ensure binding statistics that serve as metrics for plan priorities and to exercise control over local officials. Haihe Labs serve as an example: The investment in and the very creation of Haihe Labs and their *Shengong* series was stipulated by the Tianjin government's proposal to meet the goals of the 14th five-year plan ([Fujian Government](#), 2021).

As far back as the seventh five-year 1985 plan for 1986-1990, Party direction has invoked technology as a focus for industrial transformation and strategic importance ([China Report](#), 1986). The 1985 document emphasizes industrial product transformation, special economic zones, strategy for acquiring foreign funds, and the stated goal to assimilate imported advanced technologies. The plan also mentions the establishment of a natural science fund to support basic research, though allusions to basic research are cursory, as the locus of strategy to transfer foreign technology transfer as a means to transform industry and spur economic growth.

In 2006 a fifteen-year plan, the Medium to Long-term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology, was issued at a time when China's basic research share was six percent of total research and development (R&D) expenditure, compared with 25 percent in the United States and Europe, and 14 percent in South Korea and Russia ([State Council](#), 2006; [Asia Policy](#), 2007). R&D expenditure in China was concentrated on applications-based solutions funded to solve governance problems. Issues such as academic corruption compromised the capacity to create world-class S&T labs. A relationships-based culture within the bureaucracy awarded funding to scientists with long-standing relationships with bureaucrats, instead of evaluating projects based on scientific merit alone. Clusters of scientists would game the system by helping each other climb to the top for funding ([Science](#), September 3, 2010; [PLoS ONE](#), April 3, 2018). These elements and a political climate resistant to protest or whistleblowers hindered China's own strategic goals of furthering science and technology research.

In 2010, the 12th five-year plan (2011–2015) placed much more central importance on scientific progress, focusing on the capacity of indigenous research and the construction of an "innovation country" ([Xinhua](#),

March 16, 2011). The 13th five-year plan (2016–2020) focused on innovation-driven development and was the catalyst for hundreds of new innovation hubs along with focus on named industries including energy vehicles, IT, and advanced medical devices ([MOST](#), December 22, 2016; [CSET](#), December 9, 2019). Recent academic research evaluates these efforts, highlighting some of the struggles of China’s innovation drive. Surveying 4.6 million patents filed in China between 1990 and 2014, one paper argues that bureaucratic targets for patents after 2006, combined with political competition, “pushed local governments to ‘game the numbers’ by channeling relatively more effort toward boosting non-novel—possibly junk—patents over novel patents” ([Comparative Political Studies](#), November 3, 2023). This research adds to the literature framing China as a “low productivity superpower” and suggests that there is a more nuanced reality behind the headline figures of China’s indigenous innovation drive.

Most recently, the 14th five-year plan (2021–2025) has emphasized high-quality development and placed extensive focus on basic research, urging major breakthroughs in “key and core technologies (关键核心技术),” such as BCI and brain-computer fusion technology (脑机融合) more broadly. It also provides higher targets for R&D expenditure and for high-value invention patents per 10,000 people ([Xinhua](#), March 3, 2021). The plan focuses on the establishment of China as a science powerhouse, characterized by “self-reliance and self-improvement (科技自立自强)” —the same phrase quoted above by a Haihe scientist. The plan stipulates a focus on basic research as a new pillar of focus without detracting from applied projects, and specifically urges investment in foundational resources for basic R&D such as resource banks, and a new platform for exchanging scientific research papers. As databases such as CNKI become increasingly inaccessible from outside the PRC, and government websites opt out of publishing statistics and legal documents, there is a possibility that the very organization of scientific knowledge-sharing and publication will suffer from an increasingly protectionist environment.

The Central Commission for Cybersecurity and Informatization’s provides further stipulations for the planning cycle related to technology development ([Central Commission for Cybersecurity and Informatization](#), December 28, 2021),. invoking a logic of innovation and strategy that relies on funding from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NNSFC) and citing the need to “strengthen ... strategic research deployments and scalable technological innovation in critical and advanced areas (加强 ... 键前沿领域的战略研究布局和技术融通创新).” Specific technologies include integrated circuits, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, neuromorphic computing, neural chips (神经芯片), and BCIs. A strategic focus on BCI and neuromorphic computing may prove beneficial in mobilizing financial and political support for the development of BCI devices. However, as with other areas of substantial investment in innovation, breakthroughs are anything but assured.

Conclusion

China’s focus on neurotechnology and new theories at the core of AI development are significant. Successful innovations in basic applications would stimulate spillover effects in innovation and advance China’s prestige as a knowledge base. By naming BCI as a key technology, the Party promotes these devices irrespective of

consumer markets or economic conditions. China's political climate may permit more disregard of data and ethics concerns that restrict riskier experimentation in other parts of the world. But for China to succeed in its aims of becoming a leading knowledge center, it would need to adopt nonfiscal reforms for academic organizations and key laboratories.

As with any technology, the development of mind-reading technologies is colored by its social and political context. While medical breakthroughs are to be lauded, China's context—the military-civil fusion strategy and the Party's alignment with these technologies—must be considered. The development of such projects for defense-related (as opposed to medical) purposes is not without precedent. China's BCI research must be understood in the context of the PRC's wider innovation drive, and as such its prioritizing of BCI in recent years merits further attention.

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