Xi Jinping has been President of China for almost two years. In what way is his leadership similar to or different from his predecessors? What is his impact on China's political landscape? Harvard Professor Roderick MacFarquhar of history and political science places Xi's family lineage and policy initiatives in China's contemporary social and political context and postulates his motivations.

MacFarquhar recalls China's vicissitudes in the contemporary era. In some ways China is always in transition, from Chairman Mao's class struggle to Deng Xiaoping's economic opening up and development, then to Jiang Zemin's "three represents" and Hu Jintao's "harmonious society", and now to Xi Jinping's "China dream". While China dream to ordinary Chinese may mean an apartment in Beijing or a job after college, to the Chinese leadership, it means to restore China's stature it once had prior to the century of humiliation inflicted by the western powers, and to once again command respect on the world stage after over three decades of economic reform. China's foreign policy has also been in transition, from Jiang Zemin's friendly posture to the U.S., to Hu Jintao's more turbulent course with the U.S., to Xi Jinping's assertive stand on the South and East China Sea disputes and on the Indian border.

While Xi asserts China's rights abroad, he attempts to build nationalistic support domestically. Why? MacFarquhar postulates two reasons. First, Xi is about to embark on more economic reforms which will inevitably hurt some people's interests. Xi needs to consolidate support to the Party and to himself before he pushes out unpopular policies. Second, Xi is obsessed with the downfall of Mikhail Gorbachev and ponders what went wrong in the Soviet Union. He attributes the Soviet's failure to the fact that Gorbachev let intellectuals speak out to build momentum for reform, when he faced too much resistance to reform from the bureaucracies. Xi learns from this diagnosis that to forge the necessary "perestroika" (reform), one cannot allow "glasnost" (openness), since this intellectual openness can lead to unintended consequences. One must instead squash dissidents and consolidate public opinion, in order to allow further economic reforms necessary to rejuvenate the Chinese nation and ultimately realize the China dream he has in mind.

Xi's way of taking on the bureaucracy is through the anti-corruption campaign. Economic opening up of the last three decades has resulted in rampant corruption throughout the country. Xi wishes to reinvigorate the Party and re-legitimize its leadership by tackling this very thorny problem. He put Wang Qishan to head the Party's Discipline and Inspection Committee, who is known for his abundant energy and unyielding determination, as well as the fact that he has no children. Wang is charged to catch all "tigers and flies", terrifying all bureaucrats from top down. Not knowing what would happen to themselves, all officials are anxious. MacFarquhar anticipates that this general anxiety could exacerbate capital outflow from China and emigration...
overseas by Chinese officials and their family members, thus negatively impacting China’s economic reform programs.

In this campaign, Zhou Yongkang, former chief of national security and police, was a big tiger to fall. By prosecuting Zhou, Xi broke the convention of not going after retired Politbureau Standing Committee members. Five of the current seven Politbureau Standing Committee members will retire in 2017. These people must be all worried what would happen to them after they retire, since some must be vulnerable to corruption charges. Could they be united against Xi’s unprecedented move? Was Zhou selected to target because he was close to Bo Xilai, once a potential competitor to the supreme leadership position? Is Zhou the last big tiger to fall in this campaign? No one knows for sure. What we do know is that Xi endangers the Party’s solidarity by attacking corruption of the bureaucracy through Wang Qishan. MacFarquhar quotes a popular saying to illustrate the severity of corruption and the dilemma of attacking it: if corruption is not attacked, the country is finished; if corruption is attacked, the Party is finished.

Xi also differs from his predecessors in that he really has no boss behind the scene to report to. Even Deng Xiaoping had to consider the thoughts and feelings of Chen Yun, Li Xiannian and a few others who were revolutionaries more senior than Deng himself. Since Xi’s immediate predecessor, Hu Jintao, always played a low-key role in a collective leadership, Xi emerges to be a powerful figure with essentially no built-in checks and balances. He has set up several important committees headed by himself, including the Committee of National Security and the Committee of Economic Reform.

MacFarquhar further postulates how Xi was chosen to be the Chinese supreme leader in the first place. Xi is the first leader not chosen by either Chairman Mao or Deng Xiaoping, but he must have had the backing of the previous top leadership: Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin and their respective factions. These people wanted to choose a Party princeling in order to ensure the commitment of the younger generation of leaders to the Party and to uphold the Party’s legacy steadfast for posterity. Bo Xilai was an obvious candidate, but his problem was his flamboyant personality, and his campaign of “singing red songs and attacking corruption” in Sichuan Province became excessive to the older leaders. In comparison, Xi not only has the right kind of family lineage, but also has a somber and modest demeanor.

Undoubtedly Xi faces many challenges. In addition to rampant corruption, the current democracy movement in Hong Kong poses another dilemma for Xi. If Beijing sends in the People’s Liberation Army to clamp down the demonstrations as Xi’s instinct would tell him, Hong Kong as an international economic and financial center of the world as we know it would be finished. Alternatively Xi could invite Hong Kong democracy movement leaders to Beijing and give these young leaders a tour of inner China. This tour would show them how poor and dynamic the mainland is and explain to them that the mainland aspires to become like Hong Kong some day with economic prosperity, and that political stability is a pre-requisite for realizing this dream. In this tour, Xi could call for civic responsibilities of these young leaders. There could be a chance for mutual understanding and tacit agreement between the two sides, but this is not a sure thing. MacFarquhar admits that there are no well-rounded good solutions.
Xi has to balance the need of preserving Hong Kong as a viable economic center and the need of thwarting the transmission of Hong Kong’s dissent and instability into the mainland.