

## **China's Leadership Succession and Its Implications: Trends and Paradoxes**

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The forecasting of the much-anticipated 16th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been marked by the classic dialectic rhythm: optimism alternating with cynicism, certainty giving way to ambiguity. Speculation that Jiang Zemin intends to resign from all three of his posts leads to the hope that the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress will signify the first orderly and institutionalized transition of power in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Yet, this optimistic view has recently been overshadowed by rumors that Jiang may decide to retain the posts of secretary general of the Party and chairman of the Central Military Commission.

Jiang's role after the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress is truly important. However, during the past decade many students of Chinese politics have failed to grasp the changing nature of the Chinese political landscape. Their methods often oversimplified elite factional politics and ignored the institutional restraints that individual leaders, including Jiang himself, had to confront. As a result, they missed the broad trends of Chinese politics, and thus failed to see the big picture.

The prevalence of rumors and the prolonged period of uncertainty prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress are understandable. During this time of political succession it is natural for political heavyweights and their various constituencies to build coalitions. Coalition building takes time, and often involves political negotiation and compromise. This reflects some of the broad trends in Chinese politics today – for instance, the trend from a paramount leader, such as Mao or Deng, to a greater collective leadership. This trend that began during the Jiang era is even more critical today. Due to their own limitations the upcoming generation of leaders, the so-called fourth generation, will likely rely even more on power sharing and consensus building.

An analysis of China's political landscape and elite behaviors also reveals some paradoxes. Increasingly, intra-Party elections and regional representation have gained importance in the selection of members to the Central Committee. However, the process of choosing top leaders (e.g. candidates for the Politburo and its standing committee) is by no means transparent. In spite of institutional mechanisms that have been adopted in order to curtail favoritism, new leaders have all

expedited their political careers through *guanxi* (connections). In addition, while the military's influence on political succession has declined during the past decade, the Central Military Commission is still extremely important. This is why Jiang appears hesitant to retire from his role as chairman.

In the following four sections, I will outline four interrelated broad trends in Chinese elite politics today. I will explain the reasoning behind these tendencies and the possible results of paradoxical tensions. A discussion of these trends and some unfolding seemingly contradictory developments can shed light on what kind of leaders will rule China for most of this decade and beyond, and even more importantly, *how* this most populous country in the world will be governed.

### **I. From “Strong-Man” Politics to a Collective Leadership**

A review of post 1949 elite politics in China reveals an unquestionable trend from an all-powerful, god-like, and charismatic single leader to a collective leadership. Throughout the Mao era, especially during the Cultural Revolution, Mao wielded enormous power. Mao treated succession as if it was his own private matter. Discussion of the transition of power after Mao was taboo. The omnipresent slogan “Long Live Chairman Mao” reinforced the illusion of Mao's “immortality.”

During the Deng era, political succession and the generational change in the Chinese leadership became a public concern. Yet, because of Deng's legendary political career, no leaders dared to challenge Deng's authority even though he did not hold any important leadership position following the Tiananmen crisis. However, for many years during the 1990s, people in China and Sinologists abroad speculated about when the geriatric Deng would die. Consequently, stock markets in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Shenzhen often fluctuated wildly.

Jiang Zemin is no Deng Xiaoping. He has neither the charisma nor the revolutionary experience that Deng had. Jiang lacks the enormous power and influence that Deng once wielded. When Jiang was appointed by Deng as general secretary of the Party after the Tiananmen crisis in 1989, Jiang lacked a solid basis of power in both the Party hierarchy and the military. To a certain extent, Jiang has remained in power since 1989 largely through coalition building and political compromise. During the last Party Congress Jiang was unable to place some of his supporters on the central committee. He will likely encounter resistance from other leaders if he intends to promote several more of the so-called “Shanghai Gang” to the Politburo in the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. Jiang's power is constrained by institutional rules and procedures, which were initiated during the Deng era and have been reinforced since the late 1990s (as I will discuss later). For this reason people in

China and Sinologists abroad are concerned about Jiang's scheduled retirement during the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress this November.

The changes of public sentiment in China – from “whether Mao would ever die” to “when Deng will die” to “when Jiang will retire” – illustrate the trend of “strong-man” politics gradually being replaced by a more collective leadership. Due to their own weaknesses, the new generation of leaders will rely even more on power sharing and consensus building. The passing of revolutionary veterans, the lessons learned from the Cultural Revolution, more diversified channels for elite recruitment, the growing demand in Chinese society for a less authoritarian and more accountable government, and the dynamic interaction between the central and provincial governments all contribute to this trend.

## **II. From Revolutionary Mobilizers to Technocratic Managers**

Since the early 1980s, the criteria for elite recruitment have shifted from revolutionary credentials, class background and ideological purity to technical expertise and administrative skills. The first and second generations of leaders in the PRC were largely peasants-turned-soldiers. They were skilled at ideological campaigns and revolutionary mobilization, but knew little of economics, management and technology. In contrast, many third and fourth generation leaders are well educated and more capable of dealing with economic and technological issues. In addition, because of both the increasing complicity of China's modern economy and the growing demand from various bureaucratic and regional constituencies in China, the fourth generation leaders are particularly known for their skills in coalition building. This is particularly evident among the three rising stars in the fourth generation – Vice President Hu Jintao, Vice Premier Wen Jiabao and Director of the CCP Organization Department Zeng Qinghong.

Hu Jintao is the favorite in the upcoming succession, not only because he is a successor endorsed by both Deng and Jiang, but also because he has established broad political associations throughout his career. Hu is a prominent member of the so-called Qinghua University clique; he headed the Chinese Communist Youth League in the early 1980s; and he has served as president of the Central Party School since 1993. All three of these institutions have become the main sources of elite recruitment.

Hu is acceptable to both the liberal and conservative wings of the CCP. He is open-minded about future political reform in China. During his presidency at the Central Party School, he has supervised some bold research programs to reform the CCP. Yet, Hu's widely publicized television speech in response to the Embassy bombing in Belgrade was an example of his nationalistic appeal during a time

of crisis. While all these factors suggest that Hu Jintao will succeed Jiang, he has two primary shortcomings. First, Hu achieved very little during his tenures as provincial chief in Guizhou and Tibet and has accomplished little at the national level. Secondly, he has yet to demonstrate his competence in economic and foreign affairs.

Wen Jiabao is the most likely candidate to replace Zhu Rongji as premier in the spring of 2003. Wen is one of the most popular political leaders in the country. He is often seen as a Zhou Enlai-like figure. Wen's experience is remarkable; he worked as chief of staff for three top leaders Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Jiang Zemin. A crafty political mind, Wen survived the purging of former bosses Zhao and Hu. Wen has gained broad administrative experience over the past decade –surviving political crises such as the 1989 Tiananmen incident, coordinating power transitions, and commanding the anti-flood campaign in 1998.

Furthermore, since the late 1990s, Wen has supervised the nation's agricultural affairs and has overseen the reform of the financial and banking systems. Wen appears a quick learner and a brilliant self-taught economist. His skill as a superb administrator and his role as a coalition-builder explain his legendary survival and success. However, Wen has two main weaknesses. First, Wen does not possess a solid power base. Second, Wen has no provincial-level leadership experience.

Zeng Qinghong's personality and performance are also remarkable. Zeng is a well-rounded tactician with a long-term vision and a great sense of timing. When he was the head of the Organization Department in Shanghai in the early 1980s, Zeng selected five bright young college graduates in the city and sent them to the United States to study political science instead of the then-fashionable academic disciplines such as physics and engineering. Unlike many of his peers at that time, Zeng sensed the importance of political science and law to the future of China's reform. Not surprisingly, it was Zeng who initiated the recent investigative report on official corruption and social unrest in the country. This report revealed the enormity of the socio-political problems that China faces.

For over a decade, Zeng served as a chief-of-staff for Jiang Zemin. Largely because of Zeng's political connections and his coalition building skills, Jiang has gradually consolidated his power in Beijing. Zeng's main weakness, however, is that he has been too closely tied to Jiang. Zeng has intimidated many other leaders because of his formidable skills in political manipulation.

All three men, Hu, Wen and Zeng, are capable political tacticians. None of them is a figurehead. To put it a different way, none of them is powerful enough to knock out any of the other two potential

rivals. Power sharing and consensus building are essential for all three. It is possible that two of these leaders might form a coalition to get rid of one rival. But in the new political climate, coalition building takes time, and it often involves political negotiation and compromise, thus further contributing to political institutionalization in the country.

### III. From the Prevalence of Favoritism to a More Institutionalized Selection of Elites

The career paths and political socialization of the leaders of the new generation display some paradoxes. Nepotism in various forms (e.g. blood ties, school ties, regional identities, bureaucratic and/or institutional affiliations, or patron-client ties) has played a very important role in the selection of new leaders. Political networks such as the “Shanghai Gang,” the “Princelings’ Party” (*taizidang*), “the Qinghua Clique,” the “Fellow Provincials” (*tongxiang*), the “Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) Officials”, and the “Personal Secretary Clusters” (*mishuqun*) have served as important sources of elite recruitment among the fourth generation of leaders. In addition, some new political groups, for example, “the Returnees from Study Overseas” (*haiguipai*), have also emerged as a distinct elite group within the central leadership.

But, at the same time, the growing diversification of political networks may contribute to the dispersion of power and highlight the need for sharing power. More importantly in the 1990’s institutional mechanisms such as formal regulations and informal norms, have been more effectively implemented, in order to curtail various forms of favoritism. These institutional developments include:

- **"Election with more candidates than seats" (*cha'e xuanjiu*)** If the CCP central committee plans to elect 200 full members, it will provide five percent more candidates (210) on the ballot. This method has been adopted since the Thirteenth Party Congress, but has become increasingly effective during recent years. According to recently released reports by the Organization Department of the CCP, the slate of nominees for the deputies for the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress has risen to 12.5 percent more names than slots. The deputies in the Party congress have increasingly used their votes to prevent princelings and those favored by top leaders, especially the members of the Shanghai Gang, from being elected.
- **Term limits** A term limit of five years has been established for top posts in both the Party and the government with some exceptions. An individual leader cannot hold the same position for more than two terms. The CCP Constitution does not state that these

term limits should apply to the highest positions of the CCP leadership (namely, general secretary and chairman of the Central Military Commission). Yet, it has been effectively implemented in the highest posts in government, including the posts of president and premier of the PRC and chairman of the NPC. Term limits have been strictly implemented for provincial level leaders or below.

- **Age limits for retirement** Based on CCP regulations or norms, leaders above a certain level cannot exceed a certain age limit. According to the regulations issued by the Politburo in 1997, except in extraordinary circumstances, all top leaders (including the standing members of the Politburo, and the premier and vice premier of the State Council) must retire by age 70. All ministers of the State Council, provincial chiefs, and top military officers in the military regions cannot hold these posts after age 65, and their deputies should not continue to serve after age 63.
- **Regional representation on the CCP Central Committee** Since the mid-1990s, institutional measures or political norms have been established to curtail over-representation of certain regions in the central leadership. On the 15th Central Committee, all but one of the thirty-one provincial-level administrations has two full members.
- **Regular reshuffling and “Law of avoidance” in selection of local leaders** The Organization Department of the CCP recently attempted to limit the number of provincial top leaders who work in their native areas. In June 1999, it issued “The Regulation of Cadre Exchange,” which specifies the following three rules: 1) county and municipal top leaders should not be selected from the same region; 2) those who head a county or city for more than ten years should be transferred to another area; and 3) provincial leaders should be transferred more frequently to another province or to the central government.
- **Restraints on the promotion of children of high-ranking officials** As early as in the mid-1980s, especially during Hu Yaobang’s tenure as secretary general of the CCP, the Organization Department of the CCP issued orders to limit the appointment of princelings, particularly those princelings whose revolutionary veteran fathers were still alive. The appointment of children of high-ranking officials to the county level of leadership or above should be confirmed by the Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee.

All the above rules and norms indicate there is increasing pressure within the CCP for genuine political institutionalization. These developments have also affected the behaviors of the fourth generation leadership. New leaders are far more interested in seeking legitimacy through institutional channels than their predecessors had been. As new leaders move into the highest level of authority, having a princeling background or membership in the Shanghai Gang, which was previously an avenue to success, may now become a liability. As a result of these institutional developments, no individual, no faction, no institution, and no region can dominate power. Everyone has to compromise, and those who are skillful in coalition building are often favored. This indicates that the upcoming political succession will be more likely to feature compromise and power-sharing, rather than vicious factional fighting.

#### **IV. From the “Soldier as King-Maker” to the Professionalization of the Military**

For most of the PRC’s history, the military has played a crucial role in domestic politics. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, military officers not only occupied a large number of seats on the Politburo, but also concurrently held top posts in most of the provinces. Deng Xiaoping made efforts to professionalize the PLA and to undermine military factionalism by reshuffling top officers. However, from 1989 to 1992 strong military figures such as Yang Shangkun and his brother, Yang Baibing gained enormous power in the Party and the government. This is because Deng had been forced to rely on the military to crackdown on the 1989 Tiananmen protests. Later, Deng returned to the path of military professionalization that he had initiated by removing the Yang brothers from the Central Military Commission.

During the past decade, the possibility that China’s military will interfere in politics, especially political succession, has become increasingly remote. This is evident in the following events and developments:

- The establishment of Group Armies (*jituanjun*), which directly obey the command of the Central Military Commission rather than the military regions.
- Regular reshuffling of top officers in military regions.
- The successful ban of Chinese military involvement in business in the late 1990s
- Decreasing representation of the military on the central committee, especially the Politburo; (no military figure serves on the standing committee of the Politburo.)
- Civilian leaders hold the top posts on the Central Military Commission.

In addition, no strong military man has emerged in the fourth generation of leadership. The fact that none of the rising stars in the fourth generation is associated with the military suggests that they will likely work together to prevent the emergence of a strong military figure. Of course, the military is always an important bureaucratic institution in an authoritarian country such as China. One cannot completely eliminate the possibility that the military may return to a central role in the political life of the country. But this would take place only under truly extraordinary circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

China has witnessed some important institutional developments during the reform era. Yet, China's new leaders have to deal with a long list of daunting economic and socio-political challenges: economic disparity, the negative impact (especially on Chinese farmers) of China's entry into the WTO, urban unemployment, rampant official corruption, ethnic tensions, large-scale industrial accidents and environmental disasters. None of these problems has an easy solution. Thus, one can expect a high level of contentiousness and conflict to persist in China in the years to come.

One can argue that some cleavages within the new generation of leaders, especially the lack of consensus on major social and economic policies, are so fundamental that compromise will become very difficult, if not impossible. On the international front, China has been surrounded by an extremely unstable and increasingly unpredictable external environment. Besides, the issue of Taiwan and other problems in U.S.-China relations, though no longer imminent, largely remain.

But one can also argue that, as China faces all these daunting challenges both at home and abroad, new Chinese leaders will unite rather than divide. The fear of chaos and the collapse of the regime (as experienced by many ruling parties in other countries during the past decade) may pressure political rivals and factions to cooperate.

What are the implications of all these institutional developments in Chinese elite politics for the United States? I believe that these institutional developments and political trends in China converge with the interests of the United States. The United States wants to see neither the reemergence of a paramount authoritarian Chinese leader nor the rise of a strong Chinese military regime. Chinese history shows that a radical and xenophobic foreign policy often required a charismatic (and paranoid) Chinese leader. None of the front-runners of the fourth generation seems to have such characteristics.

New technocratic leaders in China are not democrats, but they do not have an ideology fundamentally hostile to American values. The Chinese leadership will also become increasingly

diversified. More lawyers, entrepreneurs, public intellectuals, and social advocates permeate the upper tiers of power and participate in the political process and discourse. China's road to a more open and liberal state will not be smooth. But its ongoing effort for political institutionalization will most likely lead in that direction. The United States should welcome this development, because global peace and prosperity in the 21st century requires a stable, cooperative, and responsible China.