
China's Road Ahead: Will the New Generation of Leaders Make a Difference?

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China's journey into the twenty-first century is a dialectic of hope and fear. There has been a triumphant mood in the country during the past two years. Several historic events—Beijing's successful bid to host the 2008 Olympics, Shanghai's "coming-of-age show" during the recently held Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting, the Chinese soccer team's qualifying for its first ever World Cup Games, and China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO)—have brought pride and optimism to the Chinese people. Not since the Opium Wars has the Chinese nation spoken louder and more clearly about its courage, commitment, and confidence in integrating with the outside world than today.

Yet, China's progress and promises have been accompanied by problems and pitfalls. After over two decades of remarkable socio-economic development, China is at a crossroads. The undesirable side effects of economic reform—for example, enormous economic disparity and rampant official corruption—have put those who uncritically sing the praises of the reform to the test. China's accession to the WTO will have a negative impact on the country's agricultural sector. The total number of unemployed laborers is expected to reach 170 million within a few years.¹ Some have argued that the recent political and economic crises in Argentina should be a wakeup call for China.² In fact, the Chinese authorities worry about the growing unemployment rate. Not surprisingly, the government is determined to crackdown on any organized pro-

tests, including the Falun Gong, a semi-religious sect that claims to have tens of millions of adherents in the country.³ Some observers believe that the Chinese regime is sitting on top of a volcano of mass social disturbance, much as its imperial and nationalist predecessors did at the beginning and middle of the last century.⁴

Crucial to any assessment of China's future, especially the unfolding of these paradoxical developments, is an understanding of what kind of leadership will emerge, what kind of political institutions the new leaders will establish, and what kind of policies they will

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adopt. China is in the midst of political succession. The top Chinese leadership will undergo a generational change within a year when both the 16th Party Congress and the 10th National People's Congress (NPC) convene. It is estimated that over 50 percent of China's high-ranking lead-

ers are due to retire, including five members of the seven-man Politburo standing committee—the highest decision-making body in the People's Republic of China (PRC). New faces will fill the posts of secretary general of the Party, president and premier of the state, and head of the NPC.

These two upcoming meetings will mark a shift of power to the so-called "fourth generation" of Chinese leaders (the first three generations were represented by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin, respectively). The fourth generation includes predominantly those leaders born in the 1940s and early 1950s. The new leaders will likely provide a new vision for the country, especially in the wake of the rapidly changing domestic and international environment.

Collective Characteristics of the Fourth Generation

Each generation has its unique characteristics, which are largely due to the major socio-political event that the members of the generation encountered during their formative years.⁵ The concept of political generations in China has often been based on the distinctive political experiences of elites, such as the "Long March generation," "the anti-Japanese war generation," and "the socialist transformation generation."⁶ A generation named and defined by a major historical event is certainly not unique to China. Many Western scholars use events such as the Depression, the Holocaust, and the Second World War as "a way to show how cohorts adapt and societies reconstitute themselves after such disruptions."⁷

China's fourth generation of leaders is comprised of those who were

young during the Cultural Revolution (CR). Most of them were either in high school or college in 1966 when the CR began. The Cultural Revolution, arguably the most extraordinary event in contemporary China, and the dramatic changes thereafter, had an ever-lasting impact on the collective characteristics of this generation of leaders. Any systematic analysis of the fourth generation of leaders without discussing their collective experiences during the CR is akin to describing American "baby boomers" without ever referring to "the Vietnam War." Because of their CR experience, the fourth generation will likely be the least ideological, the most diverse, and the most capable generation of leaders in the PRC history.

The members of the fourth generation grew up in a political environment characterized by idealism, collectivism, moralism, and radicalism. A majority of them served as Mao's "Red Guards," the most active participants in the CR. They were taught to sacrifice themselves for socialism and revolution. But as time passed, their faith eroded, their devotion was betrayed, and their dream shattered. Some new leaders have attributed their political advancement today to the lessons learned and the wisdom derived from the CR.⁸

In fact, members of this generation experienced ideological disillusionment twice, first because of Marxist communism and Mao's socialism, then because of the "omnipotent market" advocated by "Harvard economic geniuses" like Jeffrey Sachs. In the early 1980s, many prominent members of the fourth generation, such as Bo Xilai, the current governor of Liaoning, were very enthusiastic about Western liberal economic theories. However, observing important events in the 1990s, such as Russia's experience with shock therapy and the spiraling East Asian financial crisis made them wonder if Adam Smith might have been as wrong as Karl Marx. As a result, new leaders are far more interested in discussing issues than defending "isms."

Because of the hardships they endured during their youth, the new leaders have a deep understanding of China's problems. They are thus more capable and more innovative in dealing with the tough socio-economic challenges that their country faces. Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao (leading candidates to succeed President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji, respectively) were both sent from Beijing to Gansu, a poor province where they worked for over a decade. Li Keqiang (now governor of Henan) and Xi Jinping (now governor of Fujian) were sent to the countryside where they worked as farmers for many years. Enormous physical hardship and an ever-changing political environment instilled within them valuable traits such as adaptability, endurance, grassroots consciousness, and political sophistication.

Although fourth generation leaders share similar memories of the CR, they often have a diverse spectrum of political affiliations and class backgrounds. This is in part because the criteria for political recruitment were profoundly

different when they joined the party.⁹ This means that, unlike the previous generations of leaders who usually shared strong bonding experiences such as the Long March and the Anti-Japanese War, fourth generation leaders lack political solidarity. Similar to the leadership in post-Communist Russia, China's fourth generation leaders may lack both a common ideology and a willingness to commit to the existing political system.

The fourth generation's educational and occupational backgrounds reflect the diversity of its members. Although both the third and fourth generations are known for the predominance of technocrats, there are more financial experts and lawyers in the fourth generation than in any previous one. Currently, young leaders in charge of China's financial system are usually economists by training. Just a few years ago, Soviet-trained engineers occupied the most important positions in the financial system. Some new leaders studied in the United States, and some studied law and political science. This new trend reflects the central authorities' efforts to establish and consolidate the Chinese legal system. In the early 1980s, there were only 3,000 lawyers in a country of over one billion people. China now has 150,000 lawyers. The number of applicants for master's degrees in law increased from about 18,000 in 2001 to about 27,000 in 2002.¹⁰ Engineers, economists, and lawyers are all professional experts, but variations in their expertise will likely lead to differences in their political perspectives and policy choices.

Idiosyncratic Characteristics of Rising Stars

Analyzing career patterns and political behaviors of fourth generation leaders reveals a paradox. The rising stars of the fourth generation—Vice President Hu Jintao, Vice Premier Wen Jiabao, and Head of CCP Organization Department Zeng Qinghong—have all expedited their political careers through *guanxi* (connections), yet they are now far more interested in seeking legitimacy through institutional channels than their predecessors were. To a great extent, their career advancements are due to the fact that the criteria for political leadership have shifted from revolutionary credentials, such as participation in the Communist revolution, to administrative skills, such as coalition building.

Hu, Wen, and Zeng are all capable political tacticians, but at the same time, their capacity to control China's political apparatus is limited. Their idiosyncratic attributes reflect the broad shift from an all-powerful single leader, such as Mao or Deng, to greater collective leadership, as evidenced by the Jiang era. The fourth generation will likely rely even more on power-sharing, negotiation, consultation, and consensus-building.

Hu Jintao is undoubtedly poised to take the helm. If he survives the next few months without a major blunder, he will replace Jiang as secretary

general of the CCP and president of the state. Hu was not a protégé of Jiang, but rather was originally promoted by Deng to the national leadership, then later appointed by Jiang as a successor. This places Hu in a very advantageous position: he has Jiang's endorsement, but his rise to the top leadership will not be seen as a result of Jiang's favoritism. His appointments as vice-president of the PRC in 1998, and vice-chair of the Central Military Commission in 1999 make it clear that there is an unambiguous pecking order in the political succession.

Hu is the favorite in the upcoming succession, not only because he holds these two important positions, 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.¹¹

In addition, Hu Jintao has been known for his low-profile personality. This is the main reason foreign observers often characterize him as a "mystery."¹² Hu Jintao has to be cautious politically because he knows too well that, in the history of the PRC, many appointed heirs fell suddenly from favor. It would be unwise for Hu Jintao to be in the spotlight too much or to express his opinions too openly, while his boss, Jiang Zemin, is still in charge. It is still the "Jiang administration;" it should be Jiang's show. It will be Hu's show when he officially assumes power.

However, Hu Jintao has kept a low-profile for another reason—to be very cautious with Western media. It is not in his best interests to be portrayed as a rigid, conservative, communist hardliner who opposes further economic and political change in China. Yet, it would be even more damaging for him at home if he is characterized by the Western media as a pro-American reformer—a Gorbachev-like figure. At present, most Chinese want to avoid what they view as Russia's "historic misstep." From Hu's perspective, the mystery and confusion about him in the Western media serve his best interests.

Another advantage for Hu is his leadership experience in youth affairs and his nationalistic appeal to young people. Hu's widely publicized television speech in response to the embassy bombing in Belgrade is an example of his nationalistic appeal during a time of crisis. Because he has the image of being both open-minded and effective in expressing patriotic sentiment, Hu is acceptable to both the liberal and conservative wings of the CCP.

While all these factors suggest that Hu Jintao's chance of succeeding Jiang is secure, he has three main shortcomings. First, he has little connection with the military. Second, he achieved very little as a provincial chief either in Guizhou or in Tibet, and has also accomplished little at the national level. Third,

he has yet to demonstrate his competence in economic and foreign affairs. Hu's health may also be an issue. He took a sick leave and lived in Beijing for a few years while he was the Party chief in Tibet. Hu was also reported to be absent from some important events due to health problems.¹³

Wen Jiabao, one of the most popular political leaders in the country, is most likely to replace Zhu Rongji as premier in 2003. Wen's experience is remarkable. He has worked as the chief of staff for three bosses (Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Jiang Zemin), two of whom were purged, while he survived. Wen also has gained broad administrative experience over the past decade, handling political crises such as the 1989 Tiananmen incident, coordinating power transitions, and commanding the anti-flood campaign in 1998 (which gained him as much popularity in China as Mayor Giuliani received in New York City).

Since the late 1990s, Wen has supervised the nation's agricultural affairs and has overseen financial and banking reform. He is 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.

Wen has strong support from Zhu Rongji, and is an acceptable leader to many, including Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. However, Wen has three main weaknesses. First, unlike Hu, Wen does not possess any solid power base. Second, like Hu, Wen does not have much connection with the military. Third, Wen has no provincial-level leadership experience (his only experience is as a bureau-level official in Gansu province). Also, Wen's political courage will be tested as he moves to the "driver's seat" in the State Council.

Zeng Qinghong's idiosyncratic personality and performance are equally remarkable. Zeng is a well-rounded tactician with a long-term vision and a great sense of timing. Many of the choices he has made during his career demonstrate his unconventional wisdom. In the early 1980s, when a majority of princelings rushed to be part of the business sector, especially businesses involved in foreign trade, Zeng quit his position as deputy director of the Foreign Trade Department under the Ministry of the Petroleum Industry, one of the most lucrative jobs in the country.

When he was the head of the Organization Department in Shanghai in the early 1980s, Zeng selected five bright young college graduates from 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.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, it was Zeng who initiated the recent investigative report on official corruption and social unrest in China, revealing the enormity of socio-political problems.

Zeng has been patient about his own promotion and has been cautious to avoid unnecessary conflicts with other political "heavyweights" of similar age. The western media recently reported that Zeng experienced a major setback because he did not get promoted from an alternate to a full member of the Politburo at a recent Central Committee meeting. But this can be seen as another example of Zeng's great sense of timing and priority. As head of the CCP Organization Department, Zeng is in charge of personnel affairs. His priority at present is perhaps to promote his own people, first to top provincial and ministerial leadership positions, and then to the next Central Committee. Zeng will almost certainly obtain a seat on the Politburo standing committee during the 16th Party Congress. For now, a full seat on the Politburo is not important to him.

Zeng's main weakness, however, is his close affiliation with Jiang. Zeng has often been seen as Jiang's "hand, ear and brain." Zeng has played a crucial role in the formation of the "Shanghai Gang"—leaders who have been promoted from Shanghai by Jiang Zemin. The promotion of many Shanghai leaders to the national leadership should be attributed to both Jiang and Zeng, especially now since Zeng is in charge of personnel affairs. Zeng is not popular with either the CCP establishment or the public. Deputies of both the Party congress and the NPC routinely used their votes to block the election of members of the "Shanghai Gang" to the national leadership.¹⁵

All three of these front-runners in the new generation are capable political leaders. None of them is a "lightweight" figurehead. To put it in a different way, none of them are powerful enough to eliminate either of the other two potential rivals. Power-sharing and consensus-building are essential for all of them. It is possible that two of these heavyweights will form a coalition to get rid of one rival. However, in the new political climate, coalition-building takes time, and often involves political negotiation and compromise. To a certain extent, these new leaders are similar to Jiang Zemin, who has remained in power through coalition-building and political maneuvering. The difference is that Jiang's legitimacy was based on the support of Deng for many years, while top contenders of the fourth generation can stand on their own.

A frequently raised question is whether Jiang will continue to serve as chair of the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC) after the 16th Party Congress, playing an important behind-the-scenes role as the paramount leader, much as Deng did before. Although this scenario is possible, it is more likely that Jiang's successors will push him aside for three reasons. First, Jiang is no Deng Xiaoping. Jiang has never had the enormous power and influence that Deng wielded during the 1980s and early 1990s. Jiang could not even place some of his protégés on the central committee during the last Party Congress.

Second, there is increasing pressure within the CCP establishment to make political institutionalization genuine. Some of the most important measures of political reform today are term limits and the age limit for retirement. Although Jiang may intend to hold on as chair of the CMC after the 16th Party Congress, it is difficult to imagine that a leader who is neither head of state nor a standing committee member of the Politburo can overrule decisions made by the Politburo.

Third, the importance of this military position is highly suspect since the military's will to interfere in politics is increasingly remote. Not one of the three top contenders is associated with the military, but at the same time, no strong military man has emerged among the new generation of leadership. It is most likely that Hu, Wen, Zeng, and other civilian leaders will work together to prevent the emergence of a strong military figure.

If the above analysis is correct, China's political succession will not be as turbulent, unpredictable, or violent as was the case during both the Mao and Deng eras. The upcoming leadership change will feature compromise, rather than vicious factional conflict causing catastrophic social destruction. This power transition can be seen as a major step toward a more institutionalized power transition in the PRC.

The New Leaders and the New Mandate

A smooth power transition may provide an excellent opportunity for the upcoming leaders to make a fundamental breakthrough in China's political development. The new leadership will probably move in that direction, partly because the fourth generation is the most capable, most confident, and least dogmatic elite generation in the CCP history, but mainly because the new leaders' legitimacy will depend largely on political progress in China. The new leaders' main task is to prevent the CCP's sudden fall from power, which has occurred in many Communist or Leninist one-party regimes during the past decade.

Although it is too early to assess how far and how fast the new leadership's political reform will progress, we can foresee some possible changes based on the political discourse, initiatives, and signals articulated by current Chinese leaders. Members of the fourth generation have already participated in the policy making process and many have served as advisers to Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji. The following are the three main areas of possible political change. The top priority for the fourth generation of leaders will be institution building. This scenario will probably include a number of aspects:

- The so-called "inner Party democracy" (*dangnei minzhu*) will be more effectively institutionalized. Specifically, the "election with more

candidates than seats" (*cha'e xuanju*) will be more widely implemented at all levels;

- A consolidation of the legal system will take place. China's accession to the WTO, the rapid growth of the legal profession, and the greater autonomy now enjoyed by Chinese lawyers will all contribute to this development;
- The new leaders will pursue structural change to better define the relationship among the State, the Party, and the military. They will probably establish a national security council, a new State institution that is above the Party and the military.

Second, China's new leaders are unlikely to lift the ban on any opposition party in the near future. Instead, they will encourage more political participation from various interest groups through the existing institutional channels and will allow more civil liberties. During the past few years, a large number of genuine non-governmental organizations have emerged. Consumer associations and environmental groups have become increasingly aggressive in expressing their interests and concerns. Gay communities have appeared in all Chinese cities and some of their representatives have proposed that the NPC pass a law allowing same-sex marriage in China.¹⁶

One of the most important developments will be regional representation in the policy making process. While it is unrealistic that the Politburo will be composed of "one province, one seat" as some public intellectuals have advocated, leaders in poor and inland provinces will have more say than before.¹⁷ In fact, many prominent members of the fourth generation come from poor and inland provinces; they will likely pursue a policy of more balanced regional economic development. The previous policies that favored coastal cities such as Shanghai and Shenzhen will likely be replaced by policies that stimulate development in inland regions. This change is appropriate because regional disparity has become a serious political issue in the country.

Freedom of the press is the third major aspect of possible change. To a certain extent, this is already happening. As a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* observed, "Information on even the most sensitive topics is available from foreign sources across increasingly porous borders, and even China's State-run media has become a regular source of news on many domestic problems."¹⁸ Furthermore, the rapid commercialization of the Chinese media and the recent permission for foreign media firms such as AOL-Time Warner and Fox News to enter the Chinese market will contribute to the freedom of the press.

China's political democratization, however, requires a peaceful external environment conducive to China's overall strategy for domestic development. The country has experienced several major crises in its foreign policies during

the past few years. Understandably, Chinese leaders are increasingly nervous about China's security environment. If the 11 September terrorist attacks had not occurred, a significant number of Americans would regard China as a major threat. President Bush's two recent trips to China have highlighted common interests.

While 11 September has led to a dramatic turn in U.S.-China relations, an even more dramatic turn occurred in cross-Taiwan Strait relations. It has become increasingly clear to Chinese leaders that they do not need to use force to halt the Taiwan independence movement. They now have four better cards to play. Economically, Taiwan has become increasingly dependent on mainland China. Approximately 300,000 Taiwanese business people have settled in Shanghai and southern Jiangsu.¹⁹ The upcoming 2008 Olympics in Beijing will reinforce the Chinese cultural identity of many Taiwanese. Diplomatically, in the wake of the 11 September attacks, many western nations have shifted their policy priorities to anti-terrorism. Taiwan's pro-independence movement may lose its foreign support. Politically, the new generation of leadership in China will very likely play the democratization card on the mainland in order to lure the hearts and minds of the Taiwanese. This is an important motivation for Chinese leaders to pursue political reform.

It is yet to be seen whether these four cards will lead to a major breakthrough in Taiwan Strait relations. But the dark scenario that envisions China using force to achieve no more than a Pyrrhic victory, which frightened many people several years ago, has now diminished. A more capable and accountable Chinese leadership is not only good news for China, but also for the United States, Taiwan, and the entire world because global peace and prosperity in the twenty-first century require a cooperative and responsible China.

Challenges and opportunities always co-exist. What makes this moment in Chinese history extraordinary, and the upcoming generation of leaders particularly promising is that economic and socio-political problems within Chinese society are now acknowledged, and the new leaders are committed to dealing with these problems. No one can claim for sure that the new Chinese leaders will fulfill this new "mandate." China's dialectical twists and turns in the past century have taught students of China to be humble and cautious. Yet, no one seems to doubt that the world's most populous country is in the throes of far-reaching change. Greater changes seem inevitable as this more diversified, more committed, and less dogmatic generation of leaders aggressively rise to power in China at the dawn of a new century. ●

Notes

1. According to official Chinese sources, the total number of registered unemployed workers in urban areas reached 6.81 million at the end of 2001. This number did not include 5.15 million laid-off workers from State-owned enterprises and numerous rural surplus laborers estimated by some experts to account for 20 percent of the total rural population. *China Daily*, 7 February 2002: 1. *Shichang bao* (Market daily), 10 December 2001: 1.
2. Su Xiaohui, "Jialu WTO hou de Zhongguo jingji anquan" (Economic security of China after its accession to the WTO). *Duowei xinwen she* (Chinese News Net): 3 February 2002.
3. For a detailed discussion of the origin and characteristics of Falun Gong, see Richard Madsen, "Understanding Falun Gong," *Current History*, September 2000: 243-247.
4. For example, see Gordon Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001).
5. Karl Mannheim, "Consciousness of Class and Consciousness of Generation," in Karl Mannheim, *Essays on Sociology of Knowledge* (London: RKP, 1952).
6. For a detailed discussion of the definition and concepts of the Chinese elite generations, see Cheng Li, *China's Leaders: The New Generation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001): 6-10.
7. Thomas Gold, "Youth and State" *China Quarterly* 127 (1991): 594.
8. *Zhonghua yincai* (China's Talents), No. 5 (March 1999): 12.
9. My study of 522 high-ranking leaders in the fourth generation shows that about half of them joined the Party during the decade of the CR. Another 35 percent joined the Party before, and 15 percent joined after the CR. See Li, *China's Leaders*: 218-221.
10. *Shijie ribao* (World journal), 13 January 2002: A8.
11. Cheng Li, "After Hu, Who? China's Provincial Leaders Waiting in Line," *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue No. 1 (Winter 2002).
12. Henry Chu, "A High Interest in Low-Profile Official." *Los Angeles Times*, 22 February 2002.
13. *Shijie ribao*, 23 February 2002: A3.
14. For a further discussion of Zeng, see Li, *China's Leaders*: 159-164.
15. Cheng Li and Lynn White, "The Fifteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Full-Fledged Technocratic Leadership with Partial Control by Jiang Zemin," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (March 1998): 231-264.
16. Li Yinhe, professor of sociology in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, recently proposed a draft resolution on same-sex marriage in China for discussion in the NPC. A new magazine published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences early this year was devoted entirely to gay issues in China. *Xiandai wenming huabao* (Modern civilization), Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 2002).
17. Wu An-chia, "Leadership Changes at the Fourth Plenum," *Issues and Studies*, vol. 30, no. 10 (October 1994): 134.
18. George Gilboy and Eric Heginbotham, "China's Coming Transformation." *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (July/August 2001): 34.
19. *Shijie ribao*, 29 September 2001: A9.