

Promotion of Qiu He Raises Questions about Direction of Reform

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For the last two years, the Chinese media have widely discussed the ‘Qiu He Phenomenon,’ attempting to understand the significance of a local county party secretary’s using autocratic methods to jump-start the economy of Jiangsu’s poorest county. Qiu He has been both praised and criticized; now he has been promoted to vice governor of Jiangsu, and at 50 years of age he could rise farther in China’s political system. So, whereas promotions to vice governorships rarely raise eyebrows, Qiu He’s promotion has been widely discussed. Known as an “official with personality” (*gexing guanyuan*), Qiu He stands out among the ranks of China’s generally staid bureaucracy and makes us think about what types of officials might be promoted under Hu Jintao and what this means for the building of institutions in China.

On January 20, the Xinhua News Agency reported that Zhang Jiuhan and Qiu He had been elected vice governors of Jiangsu Province. Zhang’s election raised no eyebrows. His career reflects a steady climb through the ranks, though his long experience in the provincial Communist Youth League (CYL) suggests the ever-increasing importance of that group as a route to career advancement. Born in 1950 in Jiangdu City, on the north bank of the Yangzi River just east of Yangzhou (the city where Jiang Zemin was raised), Zhang began work in 1970 on a branch farm of the Laoshan tree farm (*linchang*), and he has spent most of the rest of his career in agriculture. He joined the CCP in 1972. After 1971, he served as deputy secretary of the CYL committee of the “May Seventh” Cadre School where he was working. From 1990 to 1992, he served as deputy secretary of the Jiangsu provincial CYL (at the time Li Yuanchao, the current party secretary of Jiangsu, was deputy head of the China Youth Association (*quanguo qinglian*)). From 1992 to 1993, while he was deputy head of the provincial Economic Planning Commission, Zhang was deputy team leader of the anti-poverty work team sent to Muyang County in northern Jiangsu. From 2000 to 2002, Zhang was an “in-office graduate student” (*zaizhi yanjiusheng*) at the Central Party School and spent a year in residence at the party school as part of the young cadres training program. In 2001, he became party secretary of Yancheng City. This seems to be a noncontroversial career spent in agriculture, party work, economics, and the CYL.

Qiu He is by far the more controversial figure. Qiu was born in January 1957, so he is only 49 years old now. Born in Binhai County in northern Jiangsu, Qiu studied at Nanjing Agricultural Institute. After graduating in 1982, he became a researcher in the provincial agricultural academy and secretary of the academy's CYL. By late 1984 he was already deputy secretary of the party office at the academy. After a period at the Jiangsu party school, Qiu became deputy director of the plant protection institute. In 1990 he was appointed deputy director of planning section of the provincial science commission and the rural science and technology section. In 1995, he went to the University of Maryland for eight months of training,¹ and in 1996 he became a member of the planning group for the establishment of Suqian City (which was created by merging four counties). By the end of the year, he was vice mayor of Suqian City, a member of the city standing committee, and three months after taking that position, asked to be made (concurrently) party secretary of Muyang County, the largest and poorest of the four counties under Suqian City.² In August 2001, he was named party secretary of Suqian City.³

So like Zhang Jiuhuan (and Li Yuanchao), Qiu He is from northern Jiangsu and a CYL cadre. Both Zhang and Qiu worked in Muyang County, though Zhang was there about three years before Qiu arrived. As interesting as this concentration of northern Jiangsu and CYL experience is, what drew the attention of the Chinese media was the elevation of Qiu He, one of the most controversial figures in local politics.

The “Qiu He phenomenon” began when the influential *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern weekend) published a long, thought-provoking piece on February 5, 2004.⁴ Eschewing the common dualities of “good” and “bad,” the article described an autocrat who rode roughshod over those who opposed him but promoted economic development and introduced, contrary to his own behavior, democratic methods. Indeed, his behavior was so controversial that *Focus Interview* (*Jiaodian fangtan*), China's *60 Minutes*-like program, reported on him unfavorably three times.

When Qiu He went to Muyang County in 1996, as noted above, it had just been incorporated into the newly established Suqian City, which had the dubious distinction of being the poorest city in Jiangsu—reaching only one-third of the per capita wealth of Jiangsu's average. It was, according to a later article, a place that “even the spirits could not make better.”⁵ It was also unbelievably filthy. On Qiu's first night as party secretary, he walked through the county seat, on inspection, and stepped in human feces four times. The next day, over 5,000 cadres, in a Maoist-style campaign, were ordered to do sanitation work, and within two weeks there was a dramatic change in the physical appearance of Muyang.

Next Qiu He set his sights on public order. But after a few efforts to “strike hard” at crime, he discovered that whatever arrangements he had made were quickly leaked. At a thousand-person meeting of the county political and legal system, Qiu declared that “the problem in public order is that the police and criminals are all together.” The public security head angrily responded, “This is an insult to our public security bureau. Take back that statement to avoid a [negative] influence.” Qiu He responded steelily, “Let the facts speak for themselves. We'll see if I'm right or wrong.” The public security head

was transferred out shortly thereafter, and the new head soon discovered that some 1,884 people had been wrongfully detained. Qiu He quickly rotated 41 station chiefs and started arresting those who were suspected of criminal activities. In 1997, the county broke 4,656 cases.

Prior to Qiu He's arrival, Muyang had a reputation for selling offices. Yu Jingzhong, a vice chairman of the provincial people's congress, had written a report, "Rampant Selling of Offices and Titles in Muyang," but it had no effect on the position of Muyang's party secretary. When Suqian City was established in 1996, the party secretary was named as one of the deputy mayors. But after Qiu He arrived, 243 cadres were caught, including seven at the deputy department (*chu*) level (a county head is at the *chu* level, so those at the deputy department level are considered leading cadres). One official told the *Nanfang zhoumo* reporter that these exposures reflected a political struggle among officials, but also said that these iron-fisted efforts to fight corruption won over the support of the people.

Finances were also in terrible shape. In 1996, the county had a reported income of 120 million yuan, but 30 million yuan of that was false, so the actual income was about 90 million yuan. There were also accumulated budget deficits and wages in arrears totaling 91.5 million yuan. Expenses for the year totaled 260 million yuan, so the deficit was gaping. Qiu He's solution was to withhold 10 percent of the wages of all public employees and demand eight days a year of unpaid labor from the peasants. In three years, Muyang had constructed 424 kilometers of asphalt road, 156 kilometers of cement road, and 1,680 kilometers of crushed stone road, greatly enhancing transportation. In addition, Qiu He demanded that one-third of cadres leave their posts and go into business (at least temporarily), and another third would rotate in their posts, stepping down for a period while others took over.

Bent on reconstructing the town, Qiu He mobilized—apparently through forced loans—some 5 billion yuan of capital from residents. He also forced people out their homes, which were bulldozed and rebuilt as two-story buildings (shop space on the ground floor and residence above) with neat, white tiled walls. These were among his most controversial measures. Peasants traveled to Beijing to petition—all to no avail. But later, according to the media, peasants thanked Qiu He as land values rose. *Renmin wang* quoted one petitioner who said that he did not file protests anymore. "It seems that at that time, I was backward. I couldn't see as far as Qiu He."⁶

Qiu He also sold off publicly owned enterprises, including school and hospitals. The controversy aroused by these extreme measures brought *Focus Interview* to Muyang twice. Qiu He explained that when the government ran everything, it was the poor who were hurt and the rich who benefited. The government, he said, should subsidize the poor directly and let market forces work. Having reportedly read every edition of Samuelson's classic text on economics from the eighth through the 14th, Qiu declared, "The control of public authority should be as small as possible and market control as great as possible."⁷

Qiu He clearly used high-handed and autocratic methods to enforce his rule and bring about results. His efforts to enhance social order were especially high-handed. The

police even set targets for the number to be arrested. As one cadre said to *Nanfang Zhoumo*, “Isn’t this like catching rightists in the old days? Of course public order improved, but certainly there were many people wrongfully seized.”

As autocratic as Qiu He’s methods were, Suqian’s economy improved. In 2005, over 10 million yuan came into the city for investment in the 323 new industrial projects that were started. Fiscal revenue reached 2.59 billion yuan, up 38 percent from the year before, and GDP was 38.7 billion yuan, up from 20 billion yuan in 2000.⁸

Qiu He became known not only for his economic accomplishments but also for his political reforms. In July 2004, he became the first official to introduce the cadre “public showing” (*gongshi*) system (whereby the names of cadres who are about to be promoted are publicized so that anyone with evidence of corruption or other problems can report them before the cadre officially takes office).⁹ The Central Organization Department liked the idea and began to spread it throughout the country. After becoming Suqian party secretary, Qiu began experimenting with the “public recommendation, public selection” (*gongtui gongxuan*) and “public recommendation, direct election” (*gongtui zhixuan*) methods.¹⁰

Hu Jintao and Other Leaders Visit

Three months after *Nanfang Zhoumo* ran its long article on Qiu He, Hu Jintao visited Suqian City. He went first to Muyang County, listening to the reports of the party secretary and Qiu He, then, changing his itinerary, he went into the city and chatted with passersby. According to Qiu He, the general secretary was most interested in building political democracy. He asked most questions, and in greatest detail, about the public showing of cadres in Muyang and the public recommendation campaigns in Suqian, Qiu said.¹¹ Hu listened intently, another account said, but proffered no opinion. According to the same account, Qiu He said that he understood the general secretary to mean, “To choose one person is a mechanism; to choose a leadership team (*banzi*) is a system (*zhidu*).”¹² Was this an admonition to Qiu He?

In any event, Hu’s visit has been followed by a great number of high-level visits—nearly 40 people at the provincial/ministerial level visited Suqian, including 15 from central ministries, the CDIC, and the Central Organization Department. Presumably this intense, high-level interest reflected policy concerns with poverty, social order problems, and what type of political reforms might be compatible both with CCP rule and economic development. What is undeniable is that, for whatever reason, Qiu He became very well known to a large number of important officials, which makes his recent promotion all the more interesting.

Among these visitors was state auditor general, Li Jinhua, who visited Suqian in August 2004 and declared, “Facts prove that Suqian’s way of thinking about development is correct; its reforms are very forceful and effective.”¹³ In June 2005, Jiangsu provincial party secretary Li Yuanchao visited and “fully affirmed” the educational and health reforms Qiu He had introduced.¹⁴ Wen Jiabao, who was then still

vice premier, visited Suqian in July 2001 and found the peasants there very unhappy. He told of one woman who, not recognizing the vice premier, spent a long time complaining about her burdens. “The matter has become an obsession on my mind,” Wen later said. “Each time when I went to Jiangsu, I always wondered about the current situation in Suqian. Are those peasants happy now?”¹⁵

Controversy

Whatever higher leaders thought of Qiu—and they were apparently well disposed toward him—media reports on him led to a lively exchange on China’s Internet. One article posted on the Internet from *Zhongguo jingji shibao* (China economic times) called Qiu He “autocratic” and his method “rule by man” (rather than rule of law). The author noted that the original *Nanfang Zhoumo* article had quoted one official as saying that “people were angry but dared not say anything” and that “Qiu He’s position was special [presumably because of his concurrent post on the Suqian standing committee], so reporting him would be useless.” The author went on to say Qiu He had not even consulted other members of the leadership (one of the reforms the leadership has been trying to promote), and that he simply “used his power (not authority) to compel people” to do what he wanted. Concluding, the author declared, “In fact, Qiu He’s ‘reforms’ are a microcosm of local officials all over China striving to attain political achievements.”¹⁶

One blogger argued that *Nanfang Zhoumo* had sold out. Qiu He’s political ambitions, the writer said were obvious. The negative reports appearing on *Jiaodian fangtan* and elsewhere were giving him too bad a name, so he had to find some outlet to make his name—and *Nanfang Zhoumo* was it.¹⁷

Others were supportive of Qiu He. For instance, one blogger wrote that when Qiu He asked, “Can’t one use rule by man to promote rule of law? Can’t one use nondemocratic means to promote democracy?,” he was raising a challenge to all public intellectuals. The problem, he said, was that between rule by man and rule of law there existed a large “gray area.” Because it is impossible to simply fly over this gray area, one must ask what sort of methods to use while crossing it. Criticizing intellectuals who like to use such dualities as “democratic” versus “autocratic” and “rule by man” versus “rule by law,” he said that the common people prefer to use “order” and “chaos.” So strong cadres like Qiu He were basing themselves on the social psychology of the people. “Rule by man under public supervision,” the writer suggested, was a necessary strategy for crossing this gray area.¹⁸

Another writer argued that China has over 2,000 county party secretaries but that most of them were not able to raise their people out of poverty. The people of Muyang, he says, were fortunate. Qiu He had a vision of how to bring about economic development and used his position to maximize his power. Although this writer still hoped for the creation of institutions, his lament was that there were just too few people like Qiu He.¹⁹

A colleague of Qiu He's, Liu Bin, the deputy secretary general of Suqian, defended Qiu against criticisms. According to Liu, the reforms that Qiu He was carrying out were smashing through irregular things and eliminating contradictions. Under the conditions in which there are no effective political structures, the only way to create healthy institutions is through "rule by men."²⁰

The well-known legal specialist Cai Dingjian, from the Chinese University of Politics and Law, rejected such arguments. Cai praises Qiu He as a good person who has done much for the common people, but says, "The tragedy of strongman politics is that good officials always want to do everything themselves, to change the fate of the people, and to become the savior of the people, but they don't let people grasp their own fates." Although Cai praises Qiu's promotion of democratic elections and his strict management of officials, he argues that the test of a good official is the degree to which they contribute to the creation of institutions. Qiu He, Cai says, is an "autocratic official with unlimited power" who lacks a sense of law and human rights, "and even lacks basic respect for people." An official like this can use his power for good—or evil. Most important, when he leaves his post, nothing is left behind.²¹

Implications

Since Qiu He's promotion, the implications of his rise have been debated on the Internet. Most of these discussions have reflected an official bias. For instance, one lesson that a highly laudatory article on *Renmin wang* drew from Qiu He's election as deputy governor was that it reflected a tendency to select cadres who dare to tackle and accomplish tasks rather than those cautious officials who simply try to make sure that nothing goes wrong on their watch. Another lesson concerned the development model for backward areas. The northern Jiangsu area had long been supported by the Jiangsu government, but with little to show for it. What Qiu He had done, his supporters argued, was to mobilize the spirit of a backward area. With this spirit, it could rely on itself and dare to adopt new methods.²² When reading such comments, it is hard not to think back to Chen Yonggui and the Dazhai spirit, icons of the Cultural Revolution.

Beijing Youth News was even more bullish on Qiu He. It declared that his promotion signaled the maturation of politics—officials such as Qiu He gave the political system greater vitality and reflected a good style and morality among officials. Qiu He's elevation also "reflected the will of the people" and "brings hope for the improvement of democracy."²³

Similarly, *Yangcheng wanbao's* website carried an article that declared that Qiu He's elevation reflected a breakthrough in the conservative promotion system that has dominated China and revealed a greater tolerance for the expression of personality. Moreover, it declared that 2005 might be considered the year for officials with personality—from Auditor General Li Jinhua to Pan Yue (deputy director of the State Environmental Protection Administration), from Commerce Minister Bo Xilai to deputy education minister Bo Xilai, and from Beijing mayor Wang Qishan to Wuhan mayor Li Xiansheng. What this showed, the article maintained, was that "as long as you govern for

the people (*zhizheng weimin*)” and “as long as you have the interests of the people in your heart” you can rise in the political system.²⁴

This theme of “governing for the people” was central to an article in the party theoretical journal, *Qiu Shi* (Seeking Truth) on Jiangsu Province. Although not specifically about Qiu He or Suqian, the article touted Jiangsu as a model of development: “Jiangsu Province consistently includes the party’s aim of ‘serving the interests of the party and governing for the people’ throughout detailed practice of developing the economy and benefiting ordinary people.”²⁵ Given the apparently close relationship between Jiangsu party secretary Li Yuanchao and CCP general secretary Hu Jintao, it is hard not to read such an article as a reflection of contemporary Chinese politics. And Li Yuanchao apparently approves of Qiu He. But what does Qiu He’s promotion say about building good government at the local level? It seems to indicate a preference for those who are good at mobilization rather than at building institutions. But, of course, China is much larger than Suqian.

Notes

¹ This detail can be found in Liu Binglu, “Qiu He Suqian shinian zhilu” (Ten Years of Qiu He and Suqian), *Xin jingbao*, retrieved from www.chinaelections.org/printnew.asp?newsid={B094F965-599C-4F43-ADB6-B2596A043293} on February 9, 2006.

² “Zhengyi renwu dangxuan fushengzhang, Qiu He shengqian ju tupo yiyi?” (Controversial figure elected vice governor, what breakthrough meaning is there in Qiu He’s promotion?), *Renmin wang*, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/30178/4092364.html>, retrieved February 10, 2006.

³ Qiu He’s biography can be found on the Suqian city government website, suqian.gov.cn.

⁴ Zhang Li, “Zuifu zhengyi de shiwei shuji” (The most controversial city party secretary), *Nanfang Zhoumo*, February 5, 2004. retrieved from www.chinaelections.org/printnew.asp?newsid={EAC4177F-D108-4A7B-B206-A11AA0DCC156} on February 9, 2006.

⁵ “Zhengyi renwu dangxuan fushengzhang,” *Renmin wang*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Renmin wang* reported that he had read the 12th through the 17th editions. See “Zhengyi renwu dangxuan fushengzhang.”

⁸ Liu Binglu, “Qiu He Suqian shinian zhi lu” (Ten Years of Qiu He and Suqian), *Xin jingbao*, retrieved from www.chinaelections.org/printnew.asp?newsid={B094F965-599C-4F43-ADB6-B2596A043293} on February 9, 2006.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ “Zhengyi renwu dangxuan fushengzhang,” *Renmin wang*.

¹¹ Zhang Li, “Zhengyi Qiu He,” (The Controversial Qiu He), *Nanfang Zhoumo*, April 1, 2005, retrieved from www.sachina.edu.cn/Htmlatanews/2005/04/268.html on February 11, 2006.

¹² Liu Binglu, “Qiu He Suqian shinian zhi lu.”

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Premier Wen Jiabao’s Stories of Visiting the Countryside on Two Occasions,” *Zhongguo xinwenshe*, March 11, 2004, trans. FBIS, [cpp20040311000220](http://www.fbis.gov/cpp20040311000220).

¹⁶ Chen Jiren, “”Zhuzhe gaige guanghuan de zhuazhi he renzhi geng zhide jingti” (Be wary of autocratic and personal rule covering up the bright light of reform), posted on *Zhongguo zhengzhixue wang*, the website of the Graduate Institute of Political Science at Huazhong Normal University.

¹⁷ See comments following above article.

¹⁸ Guo Songmin, “Qiu He de ‘huise didai zhili moshi’” (Qiu He’s governance model for the grey area), rednet.com.cn.

¹⁹ Mao Shoulong, “Cong ‘Qiu He xianxiang’ fansi zhidu jianshe” (Reflecting on institutional creation from the ‘Qiu He phenomenon’), *Huasha kuaidi*, April 12, 2004, retrieved from www.chinaelections.org/printnew.asp?newsid={22271A7A-2DEF-415F-AFF9-731E19351ED5}.

²⁰ Liu Binglu, “Qiu He Suqian shinian zhi lu.”

²¹ Cai Dingjian, “Women xuyao zenyang de gaigejia?” (What type of reformer do we need?). Originally from *Xinwen zhoukan*, posted on www.polisino.org.

²² “Zhengyi renwu dangxuan fushengzhang,” *Renmin wang*.

²³ Liang Jiangtao, “Qiu He dangxuan fu shengzhang de yangben yiyi” (The meaning of Qiu He’s election as vice governor), *Beijing qingnianbao*, January 23, 2006, retrieved from www.chinaelections.org/ptintnews.asp?newsid={A19EA2B9-970B-4593-9AC6-A874EB4BF8A2}.

²⁴ Cao Lin, “Renyong gexing guan yuan zhangxian tizhi kongjian de kuozhan” (Using officials with personality manifests the growing space within the system), *Jinyang wang—Yangcheng Wanbao*, January 26, 2006, retrieved from www.chinaelections.org/printnew.asp?newsid={07132A1F-6075-4243-B642-C540229D9899}.

²⁵ Qiu Shi, “Allowing the Results of Development to Benefit All People.” *Qiu Shi*, no. 4 (February 16, 2005), pp. 19–24, trans. FBIS, cpp20050525000045.