

China's Top Future Leaders to Watch: Biographical Sketches of Possible Members of the post-2012 Politburo (Part 1)

Cheng Li

“Leadership,” noted the distinguished American historian and presidential biographer James MacGregor Burns, “is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth.”¹ This remark is particularly insightful when applied to the study of the present situation in China. The country’s upcoming leadership change has been in the spotlight in many parts of the world over the past two years, especially in the wake of the recent dramatic fall of Bo Xilai, a charismatic and notoriously ambitious Politburo member. As China rapidly becomes a global economic powerhouse, its government policies—monetary, trade, taxation, industrial, environmental, energy, foreign, and defense—will have a major impact on the global economy and regional security. At the same time, the Chinese-style collective leadership, which is embodied in the Politburo and especially its Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party—is still a governance experiment for the PRC political system and a mysterious novelty to the outside world.

The composition of the new Politburo, including generational attributes and individual idiosyncratic characteristics, group dynamics, and the factional balance of power, will have profound implications for China’s economic priorities, social stability, political trajectory, and foreign relations.² To a great extent, these leaders’ political position and policy preferences are often shaped or constrained by their personal experience, leadership expertise, factional affiliation, and bureaucratic portfolio. It would be helpful for China watchers overseas to grasp the biographical features of the top Chinese leaders who will likely govern the country for most of this decade and beyond.

This series will provide concise and primarily fact-based biographies for 25 to 30 possible members of the next Politburo, focusing on the following three aspects: personal and professional background, family and patron-client ties, and political prospects and policy preferences. The aim is to present a complete set of biographical sketches of all members of this supreme leadership body by the time the 18th Party Congress has wrapped up in the fall of 2012.*

Xi Jinping 习近平

- Born 1953
- PRC vice president (2008–present)
- Vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (2010–present)
- Politburo Standing Committee member (2007–present)
- Executive member of the Secretariat (2007–present)
- President of the Central Party School (2007–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (2002–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Xi Jinping was born in 1953 in Fuping County, Shaanxi Province (some official biographers say that he was born and grew up in Beijing and that Fuping is his ancestral home). Xi was a “sent-down youth” (1969–1975) at an agricultural commune in Yanchuan County, Shaanxi.³ He joined the CCP in 1974, received his undergraduate education in chemical engineering from the Chemical Engineering Department at Tsinghua University (1975–79), and later graduated with a doctoral degree in law (via part-time studies, 1998–2002) from the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Tsinghua University. Early in his career (1979–1982) he served as a personal secretary (mishu) to Geng Biao, then minister of defense. Subsequently, Xi served as deputy secretary and secretary of Zhengding County, Hebei Province (1982–85), and thereafter in Fujian Province as executive vice mayor of Xiamen City (1985–88), party secretary of Ningde County (1988–1990), party secretary of Fuzhou City (1990–96), deputy party secretary of Fujian Province (1996–99), governor of Fujian Province (1999–2002), governor of Zhejiang Province (2002), and party secretary of Zhejiang Province (2002–2007). In March 2007, Xi was appointed party secretary of Shanghai. He was first elected to the Central Committee as an alternate member at the 15th Party Congress in 1997.

Family and Patron-Client Ties

Xi is a princeling, the son of Xi Zhongxun, a former Politburo member and vice premier who was one of the architects of China’s Special Economic Zones in the early 1980s.⁴ Xi Jinping is widely considered to be a protégé of both former PRC president Jiang Zemin and former PRC vice president Zeng Qinghong. Xi’s wife (his second marriage), Peng Liyuan, is a famous Chinese folksinger who currently serves in the People’s Liberation Army at the rank of major general. Their only daughter, Xi Mingze, is currently enrolled at Harvard University as a sophomore. Xi’s first marriage produced no children. His ex-wife, Ke Lingling, is the daughter of Ke Hua, former PRC ambassador to the United Kingdom, where Ke Lingling currently lives.

Political Prospects and Policy Preferences

Barring something entirely unforeseen, Xi will succeed Hu Jintao as general secretary of the CCP at the 18th Party Congress in the fall of 2012, president of the PRC at the 12th National People’s Congress in March 2013, and chairman of the Central Military Commission in 2014. Xi has long been known for his market-friendly approach to economic development. Yet he has also displayed strong support for “big companies,”

especially China's flagship state-owned enterprises, which monopolize many major industrial sectors in the country. Xi's experience in the military—serving as a personal assistant to the minister of defense early in his career—also makes him stand out among his peers. Xi's views concerning China's political reforms appear to be remarkably conservative, seemingly in line with old-fashioned Marxist doctrines.

Li Keqiang 李克强

- Born 1955
- Executive vice premier (2008–present)
- Politburo Standing Committee member (2007–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (1997–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Li Keqiang was born in 1955 in Dingyuan County, Anhui Province. Li joined the CCP in 1976. He was a sent-down youth at an agricultural commune in Anhui's Fengyang County from 1974 to 1976, and served as party secretary in a Production Brigade in the county (1976–78). Li received both a bachelor's degree in law (1982) and a doctoral degree in economics (1994, on a part-time basis) from Peking University. He advanced his early career mainly through the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL), serving as secretary of the CCYL Committee at Peking University (1982–83), alternate member (1983–85), secretary (1985–93), and first secretary (1993–98) of the Secretariat of the CCYL Central Committee. In 1998, Li was transferred to Henan Province, where he served as deputy party secretary and governor (1998–2004). He then served as party secretary of Liaoning Province (2004–07).

Family and Patron-Client Ties

Li comes from a mid-level official family—his father was a county-level local cadre in Fengyang County, Anhui Province.⁵ Li is widely considered to be a protégé of Hu Jintao, whom he met at the CCYL Central Committee in the early 1980s. Li's wife, Cheng Hong, is currently a professor of English language and literature at Capital University of Economics and Business in Beijing. The couple have one daughter, who graduated from Peking University and currently studies in the United States, according to some unverified sources.

Political Prospects and Policy Preferences

Li is in line to succeed Wen Jiabao as premier of the State Council at the 12th National People's Congress, which will be held in March 2013. But some critics believe that Li lacks former premier Zhu Rongji's political courage and Wen Jiabao's charisma (and also Wen's quick sense of how to respond to crises). As the country needs a strong premier like Zhu Rongji to effectively control localities and vested corporate interest groups, there is a slight possibility that Li will have to take the chairmanship of the National People's Congress (currently the No. 2 top position in the power hierarchy in the country) and leave the premiership to a "tough" leader such as Wang Qishan. One should not overlook Li's strengths, however. For example, in the current 371-member (including alternates) Central Committee of the CCP, a total of 86 (23 percent) used to work closely with Li Keqiang in the CCYL leadership. Based on his previous work and the populist policy agenda he shares with his mentor Hu Jintao, Li's hot-button policy issues will include increasing employment, offering more affordable housing, providing basic health care, balancing regional development, and promoting innovation in clean energy technology.

Wang Qishan 王岐山

- Born 1948
- Vice premier (2008–present)
- Politburo member (2007–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (2002–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Wang Qishan was born in 1948 in Tianzhen County, Shanxi Province (some unofficial biographers say he was born in Qingdao City, Shandong Province, and that Tianzhen was his ancestral home). Wang was a sent-down youth at an agricultural commune in Yan'an County, Shaanxi (1969-1971), then was a staff member at the Shaanxi Museum (1971–73 and 1973–79), joining the CCP in 1983. He received an undergraduate education from the history department at the Northwestern University in Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province (1976). Early in his career, Wang worked as a researcher and director at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (1979–82) and then moved to the Rural Policy Research Office of the CCP Central Committee (1982–88). Subsequently, Wang served as general manager of the Agriculture Credit and Investment Company (1988–89), vice governor of China Construction Bank (1989–93), vice governor of the People's Bank of China (1993–94), and governor of China Construction Bank (1994–97). Wang was transferred to Guangdong Province in 1997 to serve as vice governor. Three years later, in 2000, he was appointed director of the State Council General Office of Economic Reform. Wang then worked as party secretary of Hainan Province (2002–03). At the peak of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) crisis, Wang was appointed mayor of Beijing (2004–07). He was first elected to the Central Committee as an alternate member at the 15th Party Congress (1997).

Family and Patron-Client Ties

Wang's father was a professor at Tsinghua University who also worked as an engineer at the Design Institute in the Ministry of Construction.⁶ A princeling, Wang Qishan is the son-in-law of Yao Yilin, a former Politburo Standing Committee member and vice premier. Wang is widely considered to be a protégé of both Zhu Rongji and Jiang Zemin. During his work in the financial sector in the 1990s, Wang established his patron/mentor relationship with Zhu, who was in charge of China's financial affairs at the time. Wang's patron/mentor ties with Jiang Zemin are partly due to the fact that Wang's father-in-law, Yao Yilin, was a major supporter of Jiang in the Politburo Standing Committee and partly because Wang has formed a strong personal friendship with Jiang's son, Jiang Mianheng. Wang's wife is Yao Mingshan, whom he met in Yan'an in 1969 when both were sent-down youths there. Yao used to work as an official at the China Native Produce & Animal Import and Export Corporation.

Political Prospects and Policy Preferences

Wang is almost certain to obtain a seat in the next Politburo Standing Committee. It is unclear, however, what government position and/or other party post he will concurrently hold. He may serve as executive vice premier of the State Council, and in the case that Li

Keqiang moves to be chairman of the NPC, Wang will be a leading candidate for premier. Wang may also serve as chairman of the NPC. His widely known nickname in China is “the chief of the fire brigade.” The Chinese public regard Wang as a leader who is capable and trustworthy during times of emergency or crisis. Based on his previous leadership experiences and policy initiatives, Wang will most likely promote the development of foreign investment and trade, the liberalization of China’s financial system, and tax-revenue reforms, which are crucial for central-local economic relations. Due to his strong ties with major state-owned enterprises, it is unclear whether he will favor state monopoly or promote the private sector.

Li Yuanchao 李源潮

- Born 1950
- Director of the CCP Organization Department (2007–present)
- Politburo member (2007–present)
- Member of the Secretariat (2007–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (2007–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Li was born in 1950 in Lianshui County, Jiangsu Province (some unofficial biographers name Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, as his birthplace, and Lianshui as his ancestral home). He joined the CCP in 1978, having done his “sent-down” work in Dafeng County, Jiangsu Province from 1968 to 1972. Li studied mathematics at Shanghai Normal University (1972–74), taught at the Nanchang Middle School and Luwan District Spare-time Vocational School, both in Shanghai (1974–78), and in the management department at Fudan University (1982–83). He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in mathematics from Fudan University (1982), a master’s degree (obtained through part-time study) in economic management from Peking University (1990), and a doctoral degree (also on a part-time basis) in law from the Central Party School (1998). He pursued mid-career training at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (2002). After serving as deputy secretary and secretary of the Chinese Communist Youth League in Shanghai in 1983, Li became secretary of the Secretariat of the CCYL Central Committee (1983–93). He served as deputy director of the Information Office of the State Council and of the General Office of Foreign Publicity of the CCP Central Committee (1993–96), and vice minister of the Ministry of Culture (1996–2000). In 2000, he was transferred to Jiangsu Province where he first served as its deputy party secretary (2000–02), and then concurrently as party secretary of Nanjing City (2000–03). Li served as party secretary of Jiangsu Province (2003–07). He was first elected to the Central Committee as an alternate member at the 16th Party Congress (2002).

Family and Patron-Client Ties

A princeling, Li is the son of Li Gancheng, who served as a vice mayor of Shanghai in the early 1960s.⁷ Li is widely considered to be a protégé of Hu Jintao, whom he met at the CCYL Central Committee in the early 1980s. Li’s wife, Gao Jianjin, is a professor of music at the Institute of Musicology of the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. They have one son, Li Haijin, who graduated as an accounting major from Fudan University in 2007 and then worked as a salesperson in the U.S. office for Novartis International, a multinational pharmaceutical company based in Basel, Switzerland. Li Haijin is currently an MBA student at Yale University.

Political Prospects and Policy Preferences

Li is almost certain to obtain a seat in the next Politburo Standing Committee. He could take over any area of leadership responsibility assigned to a member of the PSC. Most likely, he will take over the posts that Xi Jinping currently holds, namely vice president of the PRC, executive member of the Secretariat, and president of the Central Party

School. Or Li may instead serve as chairman of the NPC or secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. His unusual combination of identities—a Shanghai-originated leader who has not been associated with the so-called Shanghai Gang, a princeling who advanced his career primarily from the CCYL, and an enthusiastic supporter of Hu-Wen’s macroeconomic control policy who recently ran a fast-growing coastal province—may help him gain broader support in the leadership. Li is one of the few fifth-generation leaders who have called for serious political reforms, inner-party democracy, and tougher measures to deal with official corruption.

Zhang Dejiang 张德江

- Born 1946
- Vice premier (2008–present)
- Politburo member (2002–present)
- Chongqing party secretary (2012–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (1997–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Zhang Dejiang was born in 1946 in Tai'an County, Liaoning Province. He joined the CCP in 1971, following his “sent-down” work period (1968–70) in Wangqing County, Jilin Province. After working in a county propaganda department (1970–72), Zhang studied Korean language at Yanbian University in Yanji City, Jilin Province (1972–75) and worked as a party official at the university (1975–78) before studying in North Korea. He received an undergraduate education in economics at Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang, North Korea (1980). Zhang later served as vice president of Yanbian University (1980–83). He served as deputy party secretary of Yanji City (1983–85) and of Yanbian Prefecture, Jilin Province (1985–86). He later moved to Beijing, where he served as vice minister of Civil Affairs (1986–90). Zhang served as deputy party secretary of Jilin Province and concurrently as party secretary of Yanbian Prefecture (1990–95). He also served as party secretary of Jilin Province (1995–98) and party secretary of Zhejiang Province (1998–2002). Zhang was first elected to the Central Committee as an alternate member at the 14th Party Congress (1992).

Family and Patron-Client Ties

A princeling, Zhang is the son of Zhang Zhiyi, a former PLA major general, who served as deputy commander of the Artillery Force in the Guangzhou Military Region.⁸ Zhang is considered to be a protégé of Jiang Zemin.⁹ Their patron-client ties can be traced back at least to 1990 when Jiang first visited North Korea as general secretary of the CCP. Zhang helped prepare the trip for Jiang. Zhang's wife, Xin Shusen, previously served as vice president of China Construction Bank and is currently secretary of the Discipline Inspection Committee of China Construction Bank. She is also a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Political Prospects and Policy Preference

As a two-term Politburo member, Zhang is most likely to be promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee. He may remain in the State Council if either Li Keqiang or Wang Qishan moves to another leadership body, thus Zhang may be promoted to be executive vice premier. Alternatively, Zhang may serve either as secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, which is responsible for party discipline and investigating corruption, or secretary of the Central Political and Legislative Committee, which is responsible for public security. Based on his previous leadership experience and policy positions in the State Council, Zhang may continue to promote policies in favor of the development of state-owned enterprises, state monopoly, and so-called indigenous innovation (economic protectionism).

Notes

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¹ James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership*. New York: Harper Collins, 1978, p. 2.

² For a more detailed discussion of the role of and the selection process for the Politburo Standing Committee, see Cheng Li, "The Battle for China's Top Nine Leadership Posts." *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Winter 2012): 131–145; and Li Cheng, *The Road to Zhongnanhai* 通往中南海之路 (New York: Mirror Books, 2012).

³ The "sent-down youth" (插队知青) refers to young, educated urban dwellers who during the Cultural Revolution left their cities to serve as manual laborers in the countryside.

⁴ For more information about Xi's family background and his early experiences, see Liang Jian 梁剑, *New Biography of Xi Jinping* (习近平新传; New York: Mirror Books, 2012); and Wu Ming 吴鸣, *Biography of Xi Jinping* (习近平传; Hong Kong: 文化艺术出版社, 2008).

⁵ For more information about Li Keqiang's family background and his early experiences, see Hong Qing 洪清, *He will be China's Top Manager: The Biography of Li Keqiang* (他将是中国大管家—李克强传; New York: Mirror Books, 2010).

⁶ For more information about Wang's family background and his early experiences, see Guo Qing 郭清, *From Yao Yilin to Wang Qishan* (从姚依林到王岐山; Hong Kong: 财大出版社, 2009).

⁷ For more information about Li Yuanchao's family background and his early experiences, see Liu Fangyuan 刘方远, *The Biography of Li Yuanchao* (李源潮传; New York: Mirror Books, 2010).

⁸ This is based on nonofficial and unverified sources.

⁹ For more information about Zhang Dejiang's family background and his early experiences, see Wu Ming 吴鸣, *"South King" Zhang Dejiang* (南天王张德江; Hong Kong: 文化艺术出版社, 2006).