

National People's Congress Completes Jiang-Hu Succession

Lyman Miller

At its annual meeting in March 2005, China's parliament formally transferred former top leader Jiang Zemin's last official post to his successor Hu Jintao. The transfer completes an unprecedented process of orderly leadership succession that began two and a half years ago. Since the National People's Congress (NPC), Jiang has assumed a nearly invisible public posture consistent with those of other retired elders among the Chinese leadership. Meanwhile, Hu has been depicted as moving carefully in new policy directions while maintaining continuity with the policies associated with Jiang Zemin.

During the March 5–14, 2005, third annual session of the 10th National People's Congress, Jiang Zemin formally resigned as chairman of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Central Military Commission (CMC), his last official post.¹ On March 8, the NPC accepted a letter of resignation from Jiang, and on March 13 Hu Jintao was elected by the full NPC session to replace him. Hu's succession as chairman of the PRC CMC completes the transfer of the top party, state, and military leadership positions previously held by Jiang Zemin that began at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002. At the 16th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee's First Plenum the day after the party congress closed, Hu was elected party general secretary. At the 10th NPC's first annual session in March 2003, he assumed Jiang's post as PRC president, the top state post in the Chinese political order. Nearly two years after the party congress, at the 16th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in September 2004, Jiang yielded his post as CCP CMC chairman. Thereafter, Hu's succession to the parallel PRC CMC post at the March NPC session was a foregone conclusion, despite the silence of PRC media on the subject.

Nevertheless, throughout the March 2005 proceedings a fussy attention to the details of institutional process and to the nominal authority of the NPC in China's political order was evident, as delegates preserved a façade of open and orderly deliberation while leaving no uncertainty about the outcome. On March 4, NPC spokesman Jiang Enzhu stated at a press conference that the NPC session would "consider" Jiang Zemin's request to resign from the position of PRC CMC chairman and prepare for the election of a new chairman, without mentioning Hu as the intended successor. An editorial greeting the opening of the NPC session in *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) on March 5 similarly avoided mentioning Hu as the successor.

On March 8, the official news agency Xinhua reported that the NPC had accepted Jiang's resignation and spelled out the nomination and voting procedures for the election

of a new PRC CMC chairman, but again did not identify Hu. On March 10, Xinhua reported that the NPC session would soon “deliberate on the list of the nominee” for the PRC CMC post, adding that “the name of the nominee has not been revealed” but that “it is widely expected” that Hu would take the post. On March 12, Xinhua’s Hong Kong-based subsidiary *Zhongguo tongxunsh*e stated that Hu would “complete the legal succession procedures” and “take the baton” from Jiang “in a smooth transition.” Finally on March 13, Hu was elected chairman of the PRC CMC, as reported by Xinhua.

Jiang Zemin’s Public Posture

Since retiring from his last official post at the March 2005 NPC session, Jiang Zemin has maintained a virtually invisible public posture. Jiang did not attend the NPC session that accepted his resignation from his last post, nor did he appear during Spring Festival celebrations in February. His last public appearance reported by PRC media was on January 15, when he attended a memorial service for Song Renqiong—who served as a Politburo member in the early 1980s—together with Hu Jintao and the rest of the top party leadership. On that occasion, Jiang was listed second, following Hu and ahead of the remaining Politburo Standing Committee lineup listed in rank order, the protocol followed for comparable occasions since the 2002 party congress.

Jiang has been reported since the March NPC session sending condolences on the deaths of lower-ranking leaders. According to Xinhua on March 10, he “expressed condolences” on the death of the deceased honorary president of Tongji University, Jiang’s alma mater in Shanghai, and on April 14 he similarly conveyed his condolences on the death of former Liaoning party chief Guo Feng. In reporting the death of China’s pioneering sociologist Fei Xiaotong on April 29, Xinhua recalled that Jiang had “visited” Fei when he had fallen ill, but gave no indication of when precisely that was.

Since his retirement, the top leadership and PRC media have continued to salute Jiang’s role in formulating key policy departures that remain on the party agenda. At military occasions, Hu Jintao has repeatedly stressed the need to proceed on the basis of “Jiang Zemin’s thinking on national defense and army-building.” Occasional media accounts of the history of the “three represents”—the formulation that encapsulates the party’s effort to co-opt into the CCP the entrepreneurs and professional and technical elites that have been emerging in the course of economic reform—recall Jiang’s role in “crystallizing the party’s collective wisdom” and enunciating the three represents in early 2000. As has been standard since May 2000, however, party leaders and authoritative media commentary continue routinely to refer only to implementing “the important thinking of the three represents” as a major item on the party agenda, without reference to Jiang’s role in formulating them.

Jiang’s public appearances have receded in step with his successive retirements from his leadership positions. After the 2002 party congress, Jiang appeared routinely at major military events (frequently in the company of Hu Jintao, who was always listed second after Jiang), at major party and state occasions (at which he was ranked

immediately after Hu), and in courtesy meetings with major foreign visitors. Following his retirement from the CCP CMC in September 2004, Jiang's appearances dropped off sharply. He stopped appearing at most major party and state events—including National Day celebrations on October 1, 2004—and stopped receiving foreign dignitaries—including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who met with top Chinese leaders during her March 2005 visit to Beijing, soon after the NPC session closed. Jiang's last meeting with a foreign visitor was with Philippines President Gloria Arroyo on September 2, 2004, on the eve of the 16th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum. From the Fourth Plenum to his retirement from the PRC CMC chairmanship at the March 2005 NPC session, he appeared in public only twice—at a late December 30 Beijing opera performance marking the New Year and at the memorial ceremonies for Song Renqiong.

Jiang's public appearance pattern now closely resembles that of Deng Xiaoping following his retirement from his last post—as PRC CMC chairman—in March 1990 until his death in February 1997. It also follows the pattern of other high-level leaders in the party hierarchy who have retired in recent years. Such retired party elders appear in public rarely, at most a few times a year. Their public activities are usually confined to attending memorial ceremonies for deceased comrades, voting in local NPC delegate elections, and receiving courtesy calls by the current party leadership on major holidays—such as Spring Festival—and on party anniversaries.

Hu Jintao as PLA Leader

As they did following Hu's succession to the post of CCP CMC chairman at the 16th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in September 2004, PRC media have recently stressed both the institutional and political appropriateness of the party chief assuming overall leadership over China's military and Hu's readiness to assume the post. *Zhongguo tongxunshe's* March 12 report predicting Hu Jintao's election as PRC CMC chairman the next day stated that Hu's succession to that post would be consistent with “the precedent of ‘one person wearing both hats’” of the two CMCs and would “complete the legal succession procedures” for the post. Xinhua's March 13 dispatch on Hu's election stated that Hu's taking the post was “conducive to adhering to the principle and institution of the party's absolute leadership over the army.” Editorials on the close of the NPC session in *People's Daily* and in the army newspaper *Liberation Army Daily (Jiefangjun bao)* on March 15 repeated Xinhua's formulation.

On March 13, the day he was elected chairman of the PRC CMC, Hu met with assembled People's Liberation Army (PLA) delegates to the NPC and delivered what Xinhua called “an important speech” on major aspects of military policy. On March 15, Xinhua publicized a PLA General Political Department circular praising Hu's remarks as “scientifically analyzing changes in the world's strategic pattern and China's security situation” and as “charting the orientation for further promoting national defense and army-building”; the circular explicitly called for the speech's “relay, study, and implementation.” On March 16, *Liberation Army Daily* reported remarks by all four PLA general department directors stressing the importance of Hu's speech.

Recent PLA leadership statements and media comment have also begun to depict Hu as imparting his own refinements and emphases to military affairs, even while building on the foundation laid by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. For example, on the eve of the NPC session, Xinhua on March 1 cited CMC Vice Chairmen Guo Boxiong, Cao Gangchuan, and Xu Caihou—the top PLA brass—stressing that Hu had himself “personally examined and determined” plans for PLA participation in the study of the CCP’s “advanced nature.” (For a more detailed assessment of this study campaign in the PLA, see the article by James Mulvenon, “Power, Money, and Sex: The PLA and the Educational Campaign to Maintain the Advanced Nature of the Party,” in this issue of *CLM*.) On March 14, the CCP-controlled Hong Kong newspaper *Ta kung pao* credited Hu with setting forth “a series of expositions” and “many new ideas” about military affairs that not only “continued the thinking of Jiang Zemin” but also “clarified” the PLA’s mission. The article cited General Wen Zongren—currently political commissar of the PLA’s premier think tank, the Academy of Military Sciences—applauding Hu’s “assignment” of “new missions” to the PLA.

Hu’s Role in Other Policy Sectors

PRC media have also stressed Hu’s maintenance of the policy orientation of his predecessor, while in some instances highlighting how Hu has instigated new departures in sensitive policy sectors. For example:

- On March 28, 2005, *People’s Daily* depicted Hu continuing the broad foreign policy efforts of Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin in “great power” diplomacy.
- Citing principles of Japan policy set down by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, a *People’s Daily* commentator article on April 29 described Hu Jintao’s five-point proposal for stabilizing Sino-Japanese relations—enunciated during Hu’s April 23 meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi in Jakarta—as “a continuation and development of China’s good-neighbor policy toward Japan established by several generations of Chinese leaders.” It also went on to point out that Hu’s proposal “gives us a new way to think” about relations between the two countries.
- On March 5, Shanghai-based Taiwan affairs expert Zhang Nianchi took note of new departures in Hu Jintao’s remarks on Taiwan policy that had been delivered to a panel the day before at the annual session of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, the united front umbrella organization that meets concurrently with the NPC. Taking Jiang Zemin’s 1995 “eight points” on Taiwan policy as a point of departure, Hu’s “four-point opinions” on cross-Strait relations, Zhang suggested, offered a “new explanation” of the Taiwan question by “pointing out clearly” the importance of gradualism in “merging the two sides,” thereby “resolving some confusions of the past.”

Hu Jintao as “Core” Leader?

PRC media continue occasionally to use the authoritative formulation referring to Jiang Zemin as the “core of the party’s third generation central leadership collective” (*dang disandai zhongyang lingdao jiti de hexin*). Since the 2002 party congress, with one exception, they have not likewise referred to Hu Jintao as the “core” of the succeeding fourth generation leadership. The sole exception occurred on the eve of the NPC session when, in the midst of China Central Television’s (CCTV) nationally relayed news program on February 25, a brief review of social development policies since the 2002 party congress referred once to “the new generation leadership with General Secretary Hu Jintao as core.”

Thereafter, the mystery deepened:

- With the exception of Hong Kong media, the CCTV reference to Hu as the “core” of the new leadership was subsequently not replicated in other PRC media, including the official news agency Xinhua and the party Central Committee’s newspaper, *People’s Daily*.
- On February 27, a dispatch in the PRC-controlled Hong Kong newspaper *Wen wei po*, datelined the previous day from Beijing, took note of the CCTV reference as “the first time” that Hu had been referred to as the leadership “core.” It also cited a “political observer” in Beijing as stating that the CCTV program had been “planned and finalized with the participation of a number of central departments” and so “was aired upon careful consideration by the central authorities.” To underscore the import of the reference to Hu, the observer added that CCTV’s programming was “extremely political” and was a “weather vane” for gauging political trends in China.
- Also on February 27, *Zhongguo tongxunshe*, Xinhua’s branch in Hong Kong, took note of the CCTV reference to Hu and, citing the *Wen wei po* account, repeated the comments of the Beijing “political observer” on the significance of the reference.
- By this time, independent media in Hong Kong had taken note of the CCTV reference to Hu and run with it.
- On February 28, the independent Hong Kong newspaper *Economic Daily* (*Ching chi jih pao*) reported that CCTV had removed from its web site the video and the transcript of the February 25 newscast that included the reference to Hu as the “core.”
- Finally, on March 2—five days after the CCTV reference to Hu as the “core” leader and just before the NPC session opened in Beijing—CCTV restored the video and the transcript of the February 25 newscast, but this time the reference to Hu as the “core” had been replaced with the formulation standard since the 2002 party congress, which refers to “the party Central Committee with Comrade Hu Jintao as general secretary.”
- Neither CCTV nor other PRC media have since clarified the revision.

It is inviting to see the reference to Hu Jintao as the “core” of the new leadership—and its subsequent expurgation—as an indication of leadership infighting with respect to the elevation of Hu’s political status, perhaps at the expense of Jiang Zemin. However, this interpretation must address several difficulties that seem decisively to recommend against it. First, if—as *Wen wei po*’s “political observer”

suggested—the initial CCTV reference was “aired upon careful consideration of the central authorities” and with the approval of relevant “central departments,” then why did the rest of PRC media not follow suit, especially other authoritative and carefully monitored media such as Xinhua and *People’s Daily*? Second, if it was a trial balloon intended to test an elevation of Hu’s status on the eve of his succession to Jiang Zemin’s last post, then why were the only media to pick up the CCTV reference Hong Kong’s communist-controlled media, a conundrum all the more mysterious since Hong Kong is purportedly the policy bailiwick of Jiang crony Zeng Qinghong? Finally, it would be useful to explain why the CCTV reference to Hu as the “core of the new generation leadership” does not precisely parallel the formulation used to refer to Deng Xiaoping and Jiang—as “core of the central leadership collective” of their respective generations.

The most probable explanation is that the CCTV reference to Hu as the “core of the new generation leadership” was a slip by the CCTV announcer. Given the careful editorial scrutiny that CCTV news reporting presumably receives—as do other major PRC news media—such mistakes are rare. In addition, because of the political sensitivity of references to the party general secretary, a slip in this instance would constitute a glaring mistake. But slips and other anomalies from conventional practice have occurred in the past, as the record of tightly controlled media in all communist countries shows. In 1983, for example, the initial Soviet television newscasts on the U.S. invasion of Grenada showed a map of Spain with an arrow pointing at Granada as a backdrop. Over a several-month period in the same year, Vladimir Danchev used his position as a news broadcaster on Moscow Radio’s English-language programs to express his dissent against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan by substituting his own derogatory descriptions of Soviet actions for the prepared news script’s upbeat and positive ones.

Finally, in the context of the broader themes associated with the Hu leadership, a reference only to “the party Central Committee with Comrade Hu Jintao as general secretary”—eschewing the hierarchical implications of referring to Hu as the “core of the fourth generation leadership”—comports with the emphasis on collective decision-making and a consultative leadership style that Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao have promoted since the 2002 party congress. In that light, the difference in formulation applied to Hu from that applied to Jiang seems more likely a deliberate political reform decision than an artifact of some subterranean power struggle.

Notes

¹ China has two Central Military Commissions—one a body of the Chinese Communist Party, the other of the PRC state. The party CMC has existed since the 1920s and served as the party’s highest military decision-making body. The PRC CMC was established in 1982 alongside the CCP CMC. According to the 1982 PRC constitution, the PRC CMC commands the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), while according to the 1982 CCP constitution the CCP CMC supervises party organs within the PLA. Since 1982, potential conflicts of authority between the two bodies have been averted by the practice of appointing the same man to serve as chairman of both bodies and the same members to serve on both bodies. Deng Xiaoping served as chairman of both the CCP and PRC CMCs until his retirement in 1989–90, when he was succeeded in both positions by Jiang Zemin.