

The Problem of Hu Jintao's Successor

Alice Lyman Miller

One question that the Chinese Communist Party leadership is likely to address in preparation for the 17th Party Congress in 2007 is designation of the eventual successor to the party's top leader, Hu Jintao. Resolution of this question will challenge existing arrangements and power balances in the leadership and so spark controversy and infighting. Not surprisingly, Beijing has tightly guarded whatever discussion of this question may have already occurred and has given no intimation of who Hu's successor may be.

Precedents for Prepared Succession

The supposition that the 17th Party Congress will address the question of Hu Jintao's eventual successor presumes that the Hu leadership will employ the pattern set down in the 1990s that prepared Hu's own succession of Jiang Zemin as party general secretary in 2002. Hu's appointment followed a decade of preparation, during which he was steadily given positions in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, in the PRC state structure, and in the military hierarchy second only to Jiang himself. Hu's succession of the retiring Jiang Zemin was the first instance in a major communist country of an orderly, planned succession at the top, and it established a milestone precedent for future leadership transitions.

Hu Jintao's 2002 succession was the culmination of efforts begun by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s to institutionalize orderly succession, not only by leaders at the top but at all levels of the PRC political order. In a landmark speech in August 1980, at a time when the party leadership was dominated by revolutionary veterans in their late 70s, Deng called for an end to "lifetime tenure" of leaders in their posts. "What is essential," Deng stressed, "is to improve the systems of election, recruitment, appointment, removal, assessment, impeachment and rotation of cadres and, in light of specific conditions, to work out appropriate and explicit regulations for the terms of office and retirement of leading cadres of all categories and at all levels . . . No leading cadre should hold any office indefinitely."ⁱ

In step with Deng's call, the 1982 PRC constitution imposed limits of two five-year terms on the offices of the top posts in the PRC state structure, including the office of premier. The 1982 party constitution did not fix term limits for leadership posts in the CCP, but it did stipulate (Article 36) that "leading Party cadres at all levels . . . are not entitled to lifelong tenure." Deng's efforts to arrange orderly succession in the party's top post of general secretary—first Hu Yaobang in 1987 and then Zhao Ziyang in 1989—fell afoul of leadership infighting, but he was successful in engineering the retirement of the

aging generation of revolutionary veterans that accompanied his rise to power in the late 1970s in favor of younger, reform-minded leaders, first at an extraordinary party conference in 1985 and then at the 13th Party Congress in 1987.

During his 13-year tenure as party general secretary, Jiang Zemin continued the effort to institutionalize processes of orderly succession. The leadership appointments coming out of the 1997 15th Party Congress marked a turning point in this regard. In the politicking leading up to the congress, the leadership appears to have established an internal party norm that required Politburo members who had achieved the age of 70 or older to retire at the next party congress. By that norm, with one exception, all members of the Politburo—including political rivals of Jiang's—who were 70 or older retired at the 1997 party congress. Jiang, who was 71 at the time of the congress, was the single exception.

The 2002 16th Party Congress also furthered this long pattern of institutionalized orderly succession. Although the retirement of individual Politburo members undoubtedly reflected factional machinations and balance-of-power calculations, the fact remains that all members who had reached the age of 70 left their posts in favor of younger leaders, producing a sweeping turnover of leadership generations. Jiang himself stepped down, having served out the remaining three years of Zhao Ziyang's term as general secretary and two five-year terms of his own. This 20-year effort launched by Deng Xiaoping and furthered by Jiang Zemin to institutionalize processes of orderly leadership turnover has established a body of precedents that will inform deliberations on preparing for Hu Jintao's eventual retirement.

Hu Jintao and Institutionalized Leadership Turnover

Hu has himself promoted institutionalized processes of leadership succession as part of the broader package of party reforms he has pursued during his tenure as general secretary. Hu's point of departure in this respect has been the enjoinder in the 16th Party Congress's political report to "focus on establishing a sound mechanism of selection, appointment, management, and supervision, with a view to making it scientific, democratic, and institutionalized [*zhiduhua* 制度化]." The most recent effort in this regard was the promulgation by the party General Office on 6 August of three new sets of regulations governing appointment and tenure of leaders. In particular, the "Interim Regulations on Terms of Office for Leading Party and Government Cadres" stipulate a limit of two five-year terms for official positions throughout most of the political order. Article 2 of the "Regulations" specifies that they apply to all leaders who have not already reached retirement age and who serve "in chief positions in the work departments and organs of the CCP Central Committee, the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee, the State Council, and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference," as well as corresponding posts down to the county level. The new regulations serve both the effort to institutionalize processes of leadership turnover and also, by giving him the means to shake up much of the party apparatus, Hu's intensifying effort to consolidate his power.

The new “Regulations” in all probability do not apply to the post of general secretary or to the Politburo itself. Although technically an organ of the party Central Committee (which appoints its members), the Politburo seems unlikely to qualify as a “work organ” [*gongzuo bumen* 工作部门]. For one thing, it has the authority, in the name of the Central Committee, to appoint officials in all of the other Central Committee departments and to make appointments to itself, subject to Central Committee endorsement. In addition, the Politburo does not appear to be among the party departments that fall under the Work Committee for Organs Subordinate to the Central Committee [*Zhongyang zhishu jiguan gongzuo weiyuanhui* 中央直属机关工作委员会], presided over by Politburo alternate member Wang Gang.

Whether or not the “Regulations” apply to the Politburo and the general secretary, the weight of precedent and the momentum of Hu’s own promotion of institutionalization make it likely that the current leadership will address its own succession—including that of Hu—according to the procedures that put them into power at the top.

Preparation of Hu’s Successor

If the present leadership does address the question of Hu’s successor based on the precedents established by Hu’s own ascent, then Hu should be expected to retire after his second term as general secretary at the 17th Party Congress in 2012. In addition, the identity of his successor—though not named explicitly in PRC media and leadership statements—should become apparent by the individual’s elevation to the Politburo Standing Committee and by his or her gradual assumption of posts second only to Hu himself.

Hu Jintao’s own succession of Jiang Zemin culminated a decade of preparations and promotions on his way to the party’s top post.

- Hu was appointed to the Politburo Standing Committee at the 14th Central Committee’s First Plenum in 1992, immediately after the 14th Party Congress. On his appointment, Hu was two months short of the age of 50, and he had not served on the Politburo before. He was also appointed executive secretary of the party Secretariat, and so worked with Jiang Zemin in directing the party apparatus. He was also appointed president of the Central Party School, which over the ensuing decade emerged as an important center of ideas on political reform and other sensitive issues.
- At the 15th Central Committee’s First Plenum in 1997, Hu moved up in rank in the Politburo Standing Committee, from seventh to fifth among seven members. He continued his roles in the Secretariat and at the Central Party School.
- At the Ninth NPC in March 1998, Hu was appointed vice president of the PRC, second to Jiang Zemin. This post gave him a position that by state diplomatic protocol made it possible for him to begin receiving high-level foreign visitors and so establish international visibility.

- In 1999, Hu was appointed ranking vice chairman of both the party and state Central Military Commissions, making him the second-ranking military leader after Jiang himself.

Throughout this series of steps that put Hu in charge of the day-to-day operations of the party apparatus and made him the second-ranking state and military leader, PRC media made no explicit acknowledgment that he was the emerging successor to Jiang.

If the leadership around Hu does in fact intend to retire in 2012—as precedent and emerging norms require—and if the leadership intends to pursue a similar approach to preparing Hu’s successor, then preparations must be accelerated. The pseudonymous “Zong Hairen” asserts—according to his interpreters, Andrew Nathan and Bruce Gilley—that the outgoing Jiang leadership debated appointment of a “fifth generation” successor to Hu Jintao during the preparations for the 16th Party Congress in 2002, but ultimately dropped the issue in last-minute wrangling over appointments to the Politburo Standing Committee.ⁱⁱ Evidence from PRC media has since neither confirmed nor disproved this account, but in any case, the Hu leadership has a shorter time to prepare his successor than the decade that prepared Hu himself.

Who Succeeds Hu?

PRC media have thus far provided no inkling of who might be designated as Hu Jintao’s eventual successor. But a number of indicators may tip the successor’s identity before the 17th CCP Congress. One may be the transfer of a “fifth generation” leader to sensitive responsibilities in preparations for the congress. Hu Jintao’s designation—apparently by Deng Xiaoping himself—might have been surmised prior to the 1992 14th Party Congress, although at that point no precedent for prepared succession had been set. Hu had been appointed party secretary of Tibet in 1988, but by 1990, Hu appeared regularly in Beijing rather than Lhasa. (The story circulating at the time was that Hu had trouble adjusting to the thin Tibetan air.) In this context in Beijing, Deng reportedly proposed Hu as Jiang Zemin’s eventual successor. Over the year preceding the 14th Congress, Hu worked with Jiang Zemin and Organization Department director Lu Feng (a crony of Hu’s own mentor, party veteran Song Ping) in drafting the list of nominations for the new Central Committee. Hu’s “helicopter” appointment to the Politburo’s Standing Committee (without prior Politburo service) and his new position as Secretariat executive secretary—a post that would allow him to expand his personal contacts through the party apparatus—signaled his status as candidate successor. Another indicator may be media attention to provincial party leaders, perhaps the largest pool of potential candidates. Service in the provinces, together with experience at the national level, appears to be an increasingly important consideration for top appointment.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Zong Hairen” states that three “fifth generation” leaders—Li Keqiang, Xi Jinping, and Bo Xilai—were considered in 2002, and rumors and speculation recorded in the independent Hong Kong press continue to focus on these three, in addition to other leaders thought to have connections to Hu Jintao, such as Li Yuanchao. There is little discernible evidence from PRC media that any of these leaders has been tipped.

- Li Keqiang, age 51 this year, is the candidate most frequently speculated to become Hu's successor, largely because of his service in the Communist Youth League (CYL) under Hu's leadership in the early 1980s. In 1998, Li was appointed deputy secretary and thereafter secretary of the Henan CCP Committee. In 2004, Li was rotated to Liaoning, where he continues to serve as provincial party boss. In recent months, Li has been depicted interacting with high-level central leaders. In March, during panel discussions at the annual NPC session, Li presided over a meeting of the Liaoning provincial delegation with Premier Wen Jiabao. Li hosted inspections of the province by Politburo Standing Committee members Wu Guanzheng in early June and Li Changchun in early July. In addition, Li also accompanied retired NPC chairman and premier Li Peng on a tour of the province on 17–19 July—an unusual appearance by Li Peng that appears to have been reported only in Liaoning media. While all of these leaders praised the overall progress of Liaoning, none went out of his way to praise Li Keqiang's leadership in particular. Earlier in the year, Li announced a new policy of relying on Liaoning's coast to stimulate growth throughout the province, an initiative that did prompt attention in the national media, but none of Li's high-level visitors mentioned it, judging by available PRC media accounts.
- Xi Jinping, age 53 this year, is the son of Xi Zhongxun, a veteran revolutionary and member of Deng Xiaoping's reform coalition in the late 1970s. Xi has served his entire career in the provinces—over the past two decades mostly in Fujian, before becoming Zhejiang party chief in 2002—and so has no apparent experience in Beijing. In recent months, Xi has hosted inspection visits to Zhejiang by Politburo Standing Committee member Zeng Qinghong in early April and by Politburo members Wu Yi and Zeng Peiyan soon thereafter. As in the case of Li Keqiang, none of these leaders went out of the way to single out Xi's leadership. Paralleling his meeting with the Liaoning delegation at the March NPC session, Premier Wen Jiabao met with the Zhejiang delegation under Xi's leadership. In April, the party journal *Seeking Truth* published an article by Xi on the “new socialist countryside” concept.
- Bo Xilai, age 57 this year, is the son of veteran party leader Bo Yibo, who, at 98, is the eldest of the retired party elders. Bo Xilai received a national-level appointment in 2004 after long service in Liaoning Province. His post as minister of commerce in Wen Jiabao's State Council provides him with regular high-level interactions on the international stage, but it does not seem a post intended to prepare his advance to the top of the party apparatus.
- Li Yuanchao, age 56 this year, is also presumed to be connected to Hu Jintao by virtue of his CYL work in the mid-1980s. Li held a variety of central positions in propaganda work in the 1990s before his appointment as deputy party secretary in Jiangsu in 2000. He became party boss in the province in 2002, a position he still holds. Li has received no particular attention from high-level central leaders or in PRC media in recent months.

The Dilemma of Zeng Qinghong

In tipping a candidate to succeed Hu Jintao at the 17th Party Congress, the leadership will have at the same time to negotiate the fate of Zeng Qinghong. In the same transition of leadership generations in 2002–2003 that brought Hu Jintao to the top, Zeng acquired most of the same high-level positions that Hu acquired across the 1990s as he prepared to succeed Jiang Zemin. At the 16th Central Committee's First Plenum in November 2002, Zeng was appointed fifth-ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee—the position Hu attained after the 15th CCP Congress in 1997. Zeng also became executive secretary of the party Secretariat, the position from which Hu directed the party apparatus under Jiang Zemin's supervision for the decade after 1992. Zeng also took over the post of president of the Central Party School from Hu. In 2003, Zeng was appointed vice president of the PRC, second only to Hu in state protocol. The only position that Zeng has not acquired from among those formerly held by Hu is the post of vice chairman on the party and state Central Military Commissions.

As I have speculated in previous issues of the *Monitor*, this placement of Zeng Qinghong directly behind Hu Jintao may have been intended as a kind of interim insurance until the 2007 party congress. Positioning Zeng in this fashion may have been intended to provide an easy transfer of power to Zeng should Hu falter, either politically or physically, and in the absence of a designated longer-term successor.

Zeng, however, will be 68 in 2007, and therefore he will be too old to succeed Hu in 2012, if prevailing norms still apply. At 68, he is also not necessarily due for retirement at the 17th Party Congress. If he does not retire and if the leadership decides to position Hu's probable successor in the posts Hu held on his way to succeed Jiang Zemin, the position of Zeng Qinghong will need to be considered at the same time. Such considerations will necessarily involve the composition of the new Politburo Standing Committee and the reassignment of leadership posts among its members. At this point, such considerations must be extremely speculative, probably even among the members of the leadership itself at present.

The Role of Jiang Zemin

In the midst of what is already a period of intensifying politicking on the road to the 17th Congress, what is the role of Jiang Zemin? PRC media treatment of Jiang continues aimed at conveying the continuing relevance and authority of policies and approaches identified with him, while at the same time conveying no suggestion that he is playing an active role in the leadership's decision making.

This was particularly evident in the media attention paid to the publication of Jiang's three-volume *Selected Works* in August. Xinhua reports indicated that their publication was timed to coincide with Jiang's 80th birthday on 17 August and was seen as an opportunity to celebrate Jiang's contributions to the progress of reform during the years of his leadership. Publication of Jiang's *Selected Works* complements other publications devoted to him earlier this year, including a selection of his speeches on the

topic of “socialist market economy” in April and a book on his diplomacy, published in July with a foreword by Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing.

As the party pantheon expanded beyond Mao to include other veteran leaders following the 1981 resolution on party history, the party’s Central Documents Publishing House has edited the selected works of several top party leaders. These include authoritative editions of:

- *Selected Works of Zhou Enlai* (two volumes, 1982 and 1984).
- *Selected Works of Liu Shaoqi* (two volumes, 1982 and 1985).
- *Selected Works of Zhu De* (one volume, 1983).
- *Selected Works of Ren Bishi* (one volume, 1984).
- *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975–1982* (one volume, 1 July 1983; later incorporated as Vol. 2 of a three-volume *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1938–1992*).
- *Selected Works of Chen Yun, 1926–1985* (three volumes, 1984 and 1986; re-edited, 1995).
- *Selected Works of Li Xiannian, 1935–1988* (one volume, 1988).
- *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1938–1965* (one volume, 1989).
- *Selected Works of Peng Zhen, 1941–1990* (one volume, 1991).
- *Selected Works of Bo Yibo, 1937–1992* (one volume, 1992).
- *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1982–1992* (one volume, 1993).
- *Selected Works of Wan Li, 1944–1994* (one volume, 1995).
- *Selected Works of Ye Jianying, 1937–1983* (one volume, 1996).

The *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin* joins this listing as the only edition of the works of a “third generation” leader published thus far by the Central Documents Publishing House. More significantly, Jiang’s *Selected Works* were accorded the fanfare and authoritative commentary previously given only to the *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*. Their publication prompted a Central Committee “Decision” publicized on 16 August calling for party-wide study of the collection. In addition, Hu Jintao presided over a meeting attended by the full Politburo Standing Committee on the 15th and addressed the significance of studying Jiang’s *Selected Works* at length. Earlier, on 10 August, a *People’s Daily* editorial stressed similar themes. Publication of Deng Xiaoping’s *Selected Works, 1975–1982* on the party anniversary in 1983 and his *Selected Works, 1982–1992* in November 1993 had similarly prompted a Central Committee decision calling for party-wide study, a major leadership meeting to endorse their significance, and a *People’s Daily* editorial.

While celebrating the ongoing significance of Jiang’s *Selected Works* for current study, both the Central Committee decision and Hu Jintao’s long remarks at the meeting on the 15th underscored the continuity of the “major strategic concepts” put forward under Hu’s leadership—the enjoinder for “people-centered” governance, the “scientific development concept,” building a “harmonious socialist society,” and others—with the central concept associated with Jiang, the “three represents.” Both were also careful to hew to the longstanding authoritative formulation of “Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping theory, and the important thinking of the ‘three represents,’” a formulation that

goes back to May 2000 and that implicitly severs Jiang's claim to the concept as his exclusive intellectual property.

While the publicity surrounding Jiang's *Selected Works* underscores his continuing ideological authority along lines set down at the 16th Party Congress, his public profile seems intended to underscore his retirement. As has been the case since his full retirement in September 2004, Jiang's public appearances are reported only occasionally in the national media—the last two such appearances were his attendance at funeral observances for Taiwan negotiator and Shanghai mentor Wang Daohan on 30 December 2005 and his reception of top party leaders paying respects during Spring Festival celebrations in January this year. National media continue to report Jiang sending condolences on the deaths of party veterans, as they do with other retired top leaders. Local media have reported occasional appearances by Jiang, such as his visit to his alma mater Jiaotong University in Shanghai in April, but these reports are not replicated in the national media.

PRC media have thus been careful to depict the present party leadership as actively in charge and have sought not to paint an impression of kibitzing by retired elder leaders. In these circumstances, how much of a shadow Jiang casts over the politics of designating Hu Jintao's successor is an open question.

Notes

ⁱ Deng Xiaoping, "On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership," *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (1975-1982)* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), 314.

ⁱⁱ Andrew A. Nathan and Bruce Gilley, *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files*, second revised edition (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), 50-54.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cheng Li, "A Landslide Victory for Provincial Leaders," *China Leadership Monitor* 5 (Winter 2003), offers an insightful analysis of this trend.