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## Positioning for Power at China's Communist Congress

No one in the party has the clout to anoint a successor to Chinese leader Hu Jintao, says Hamilton College professor Li Cheng

Hu Jintao's blessing as a future leader of China came early. Two months before his 50th birthday and 10 years before he assumed the top office, Deng Xiaoping fast-tracked him onto the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) and everyone knew who would be following in Jiang Zemin's footsteps.

The identification of Hu's successor is set to be a much less clear-cut affair.

"I don't think that anyone really has the real political clout to anoint a successor," said Kerry Brown, associate fellow with the Asia program at Chatham House in London. "Jiang Zemin's power is fairly diluted and Hu Jintao has nothing like even Jiang's authority. This creates uncertainty both inside and outside of China."

Speaking to CHINA ECONOMIC REVIEW in September, Li Cheng, professor of government at Hamilton College in New York state, said he didn't think a decision had even been reached yet on which cadres would be pushed up the political food chain as potential candidates at October's Chinese Communist Party (CPC) Congress.

"I just think there is likely to be large-scale leadership change on the PSC, Politburo and Central Committee," he said.

### SNAKES AND LADDERS

This theory is based largely on age. Of the nine PSC members, Luo Gan, Wu Guanzheng and Jia Qinglin are 72, 69 and 69 respectively, and Huang Ju died earlier this year. If, as expected, Luo, Wu and Jia retire, this would leave four seats open on the PSC - unless a decision is made to reduce the size of the committee, which has also been rumored.

Meanwhile, the average age of the 16 regular Politburo members is 66. Li believes the nine who are over 65 years old will retire if not promoted to the PSC. With disgraced former Shanghai party chief Chen Liangyu unlikely to return to the Politburo, there could be a significant number of new faces. As for the Central Committee, a 60% turnover rate is pretty standard.

State Council changes are also likely to be decided in October, although they won't happen until next March, with three of four vice premiers and all five state councilors set to move up or out.

Given Hu's tenure on the PSC prior to becoming leader, his successor will probably serve a similar apprenticeship. Li has identified four front-runners who could be appointed to the PSC in October with a view to taking over the reins in 2012. They are Li Keqiang, Li Yuanchao, Wang Yang and Xi Jinping.

They all possess leadership experience, intellectual caliber and - unlike the existing Politburo members - youth.

"The two Lis and Wang all have a strong chance of becoming PSC members," said Li Cheng. But he thinks Xi's chances may have been dealt a blow by his appointment as Shanghai party secretary in place of Chen.

"According to recent norms, no provincial leader can also serve on the PSC; they can only serve on the Politburo. Xi will have to wait another five years to get on the PSC and by then other people will be in better positions."

The situation is complicated by competition between the two key factions within the party - Hu Jintao and his Chinese.

Communist Youth League (CYLC) powerbase (known as the tuanpai) and the "Shanghai Gang" comprising elitist protégés of Jiang Zemin whose standard-bearer is now Vice President Zeng Qinghong.

With their Youth League backgrounds, Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao are inextricably tied to Hu, who led the organization in the 1980s. Including these two, 14 tuanpai alumni were shifted into provincial party or governorship posts between 2002 and mid-2006, supposedly as part of the president's bid to outmuscle Jiang loyalists.

### **PARTY PATRONAGE**

In September, Meng Xuenong, who was sacked as mayor of Beijing in 2003 for mishandling the SARS crisis, was named acting governor of Shanxi province. Reports linked his comeback to his role within the CYLC in the 1980s.

Former CYLC man Qiang Wei became the party secretary of far-western Qinghai province in March when Zhao Leiji, who also has a tuanpai past, took the party seat in Shaanxi. Like other recent appointees, both men joined the Central Committee in 2002 when Hu took over as general secretary.

Yet the series of provincial leadership changes that took place in March didn't represent a clean sweep for the Hu faction. Xi, the party's new top man in Shanghai, and Zhao Hongju, the man who replaced Xi as party secretary in Zhejiang, are more closely aligned with the Shanghai faction.

Writing in April, Willy Lam, a senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, claimed that Hu had "struck a deal with the various factions by allowing their affiliates to assume a fairly equitable share of the leadership positions."

Replacing Chen - a Shanghai faction member whose removal was tied as much to Hu's perceived political gain as it was to the party's crackdown on corruption - with a Hu loyalist was too risky. Xi was the compromise choice.

Fluctuations in this political dynamic will have implications that stretch beyond the career of Xi Jinping.

First of all, there is the future of Zeng to consider. Will he remain on the PSC through 2012 as a potential kingmaker or will he step down? And, if he steps down, will it be an enforced departure that signals a decline in the Shanghai faction or a voluntary retirement, safe in the knowledge that his and the party's legacies are in sound shape? Zeng is widely seen as a rallying figure for the "princelings" [children of high-ranking officials] of which he is one. Among this number are several who have been tipped for higher office.

Seats on the Politburo or a shot at a vice premiership on the State Council could await Zhou Xiaochuan, the central bank governor, Wang Qishan, mayor of Beijing, Bo Xilai, the commerce secretary, Ma Kai, head of the National Development Reform Commission, and Chen Yuan, governor of China Development Bank.

"Politics in China is not a zero-sum game," said Li. "The two sides have their differences but they are both trying to restore people's confidence in the party. Zeng belongs to the Shanghai faction and is loyal to Jiang, but at the same time he believes that the party must change itself."

## THE LONG GAME

It is on this issue of party reform that shifts in the balance of power could have their most far-reaching impact. If Hu can emerge from the CPC congress with strong party backing, then changes he has so far only hinted at could gain traction.

Addressing a meeting of Politburo members at the Central Party School in Beijing in June, Hu spoke of the need to "maintain the party leadership, empower the people and rule the country by law."

The existence of rule of law in a single party-led system is at odds with Western notions of democracy but the idea of developing the country "for the people and by the people" suggests a more transparent and accountable leadership.

Li contends that the informal power sharing between the Hu and Zeng offers hope for a future in which power is diffused more widely throughout the party. Neither side can win outright so they counterbalance one another, working out their differences through negotiation and compromise. If this can succeed, then a more institutionalized and open form of inner-party democracy is possible.

Brown is more skeptical, warning that the internal rivalry doesn't mean stability.

"Things do not stay constant - the party is doing deals within itself all the time," he said. "They talk about inner-party democracy but they do so through gritted teeth. It's a pragmatic admission that there needs to be a reflection of different positions in the party to let it survive until it becomes too fractious and people are dealt with."

A more realistic short- to medium-term prospect is the emergence of local-level cadres who are more able and qualified to serve the needs of an increasingly wealthy and autonomous society. This goes beyond Hu's ongoing corruption purge.

A reshuffling of local and provincial officials has seen obsolete posts removed and talented newcomers brought in. In recent years, rules have been issued stating that candidates for certain party posts must meet experience and educational criteria. Selection of standing committee members at most levels now involves a full assessment including public opinion surveys.

Training programs are provided for lower-level officials while the Central Party School offers more senior cadres the chance to pursue master's and doctoral studies mid-career. The lucky ones get to study overseas through CPC tie-ups with foreign universities.

A package of reforms proposed by Central Party School official Zhou Tianyong, which appeared in a Ministry of Finance-controlled journal earlier this year, would take things even further.

Zhou's team recommended that the membership of the National People's Congress, China's legislative body, be reduced by 85% to just 451 seats to enable more efficient decision-making. First for the chop would be representatives of the government and judiciary, neither of whom directly represent the people. They also suggested slimming the bureaucracy through job cuts and axing the townships and prefectures from China's five current administrative tiers.

The more daring proposals included ditching the requirement that party members be atheists and allow some religious freedom. But this came with the precursor that the party must remain the sole power.

"The party has to change a great deal but it is steeped in the one party system," said Li. "We shouldn't assume any such changes signal a change in ideology."