

**FROM PLA TO MBA
GAUGING THE FUTURE OF CHINA'S 'FIFTH GENERATION' OF
LEADERS**

By

Ivan Willis Rasmussen
PhD Candidate
The Fletcher School, Tufts University
WORKING PAPER

15 January 2012

Introduction: Geo-strategic or individual-specific?

Studies of political affairs in the People's Republic of China (PRC) typically consider the geo-strategic implications of China's economic rise, military modernization, and expanding global diplomatic presence. What is lacking from these grand studies is the perspective of internal Chinese affairs, particularly the individual politics of the Politburo.¹ While it is beyond the scope of this study to synthesize the full complexity of Chinese domestic politics, this essay does propose to examine the emergence of the "Fifth Generation" of Chinese leadership, the heir-apparent to the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao regime. Necessarily, I propose a constructivist approach to understanding Chinese domestic politics: Chinese foreign policy is created by individual leaders who approach decision-making with a myriad of experiences and sociological influences.² In contrast to realism, which presupposes that China acts in a manner consistent with relative power maximizing, constructivism focuses on the way individual behavior impacts state actions. By better understanding the character of key future Chinese leaders, analysts can begin to envision future Chinese international behavior and anticipate potential tensions. In the end, I argue that the Fifth Generation of Chinese leaders are more in-sync with Western and international values than preceding generations, but potential tensions may exist due to the political alienation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and vibrant Chinese nationalism.

Trends in Chinese leadership

The first generation of Chinese leadership began with Mao Zedong and the founding of the PRC. Since Mao, there have been three more generations of leaders which correspond with

¹ For the paper, I rely on the information provided the Hoover Institutes' China Leadership Monitor (CLM) and several National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) reports. These reports can be accessed online: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/clm/> and <http://www.nbr.org/>. Please note that this analysis emerges out of the study of Sino-US relations but has implications for general Chinese foreign relations.

² Johnston, Alistair Iain. *Social States: China in International Institutions 1980-2000*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

the following ‘paramount’ leaders and time periods: Deng Xiaoping (1979-1989), Jiang Zemin (1989-2003), and Hu Jintao (2003-current). As the generations have progressed, there has been a decrease in focus on individual power as the politburo has disaggregated decision making to its various organs.³ The early generations of Chinese leaders had a strong association with the PLA. Mao was the great leader of the PLA and Deng was a cadet under Mao but who explicitly contrasted Mao’s style (and stature). Jiang was less known for his military background but did have significant experience in Moscow and as the Mayor of Shanghai. It can be said that Jiang’s break with the past was part of the cause for Deng to re-enter politics in the early 1990s. In further contrast, Hu did not have the same level of military training but was administratively involved in maintaining internal security as the chief official in Tibet prior to his accession. Each of the first four generations can be described as follows:

Primary Leader	Military links	Economic policy	Individual style
Mao Zedong	PLA Leader and original revolutionary	Communist planning without private sector	Cult of the individual
Deng Xiaoping	Former PLA cadet (Tiananmen Sq)	Liberalization with a focus on rural growth	Directed state activity less overtly than Mao
Jiang Zemin	Former Mayor of Shanghai	Liberalization with focus on urban growth	Urban style, going beyond rural ideals
Hu Jintao	Limited (Chief administrator in Tibet)	Global integration (WTO)	Disaggregated power structure

As the primary leaders of the PLA have changed, so has the composition of the PRC’s key political organ, the Politburo. The Politburo was originally composed of mostly older men with PLA military experience. The civilian and military cooperation was central to the functioning of the state, which sought as its original primary objective the spread of the socialist revolution and international communism. Over time the links with the PLA have been weakened as China’s grand strategy has shifted to ‘peaceful development.’ Currently the Politburo is

³ See **Annex 1: From Mao to Hu**. Note that the photographs of the leaders of each generation decrease in size for each successive generation. Presentation by the author to DHP H271: The United States and East Asia since 1945 on 15 April 2009. The Fletcher School, Tufts University.

composed of many engineers and now involves more female participation and significantly less PLA involvement.⁴ Cheng Li describes this shift and the plurality of backgrounds in the current generation of leaders:

[F]or most of the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) the ruling elite was largely homogeneous in terms of sociological and professional backgrounds. Communist revolutionary veterans with backgrounds as peasants and soldiers comprised the first and second generations, while engineers-turned-technocrats made up the third and fourth generations. The emerging fifth generation is arguably the most diverse elite generation in the PRC's history in terms of class background, political association, educational credentials, and career paths.⁵

The changes are evident; however, less understood is the process of power succession in Chinese elite politics. In attempting to elucidate the 'election' of the fifth generation of leaders, I will show that the state apparatus is not as opaque as may be initially assumed.

A new cast of characters: Xi Jinping and the 'election' of the Fifth Generation

Chinese power succession is often characterized as opaque and unpredictable in contrast to "institutionalized" democratic regime changes. For example, Zheng and Chen find that "without transparent institutions concerning leadership change as in a democracy, the Chinese leadership has to find other means to cope with the succession issue."⁶ Analysts point to the instability in China after the death of Mao as indicative of the unpredictable elements of power succession in an authoritarian state. That having been said, much has changed since Mao. Elite politics in China are certainly not clear, but complex Chinese power succession can also result in fairly predictable changes in regime.

⁴ See **Annex 2: The 17th Congress and New Chinese Leadership**.

⁵ Cheng Li. "China's Fifth Generation: Is Diversity a Source of Strength or Weakness?". *Asia Policy*. Number 6. Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, July 2008. Page 55.

⁶ Zheng Yongnian and Chen Gang. "Xi Jinping's Rise and Political Implications". *China: An international journal*. Issue 7, 1. March 2009. Page 3: "In democracies, it is relatively easy to handle the problem of power succession. Selection of top leaders such as "President" or "Prime Minister" is institutionalised, and it is done in a more or less predictable manner by some "rules of game" in the form of legal regulations. Although various mechanisms of election and selection of the leadership exist within the CPC, the Party remains undemocratic."

The key element of the current process for power succession in China has become a formalized structure of internal alliances and an important social networking element of “who knows who”. Best situated within Chinese elite politics are those who have strong familial connections to previous leaders. These potential future leaders have been described as the “princelings” (*taizidang*) of Chinese politics. The princelings are second generation Chinese leaders, the progeny of former famous politicians. Xi Jinping is the son of Xi Zhongxun, a state councilor and prominent early Chinese revolutionary.⁷ Despite the emergence of the princelings, there are serious factional divisions within the system. The major Chinese political officials were elected through an “internal democratic process” in July 2007 as a compromise of the major factions, the Chinese Communist Youth League, the Shanghai group (originating from Jiang underlings), and the *taizidang*. The new members of the Politburo are generally older males; however, many have non-military experiences.⁸

As with many political systems, the power structure in China is not straightforward but based on two key elements: personal connections including an individual’s personal background and the necessary compromises between key political factions. Certainly the process of choosing officials is far from fully democratic or transparent; however, it does appear to be based a system common to many political systems with party politics. Well situated within this system, Xi Jinping’s embodies a continuation of CCP leadership transition policy. At the same time, Xi’s own biography shows the dramatic change over time in Chinese leadership generations.⁹ For example, Xi has experience having traveled outside of China. He also built his resume based on economic reform activities in major urban centers in Zhejiang, Fujian, and Shanghai. He does have some minimal military experience from 1979-1982, which may bolster his security

⁷ Nathan, Andrew and Bruce Gilley. *China’s New Rulers: The Secret File*. New York City, NY: The New York Review Book, 2002.

⁸ See **Annex 2: The 17th Congress and New Chinese Leadership**.

⁹ See **Annex 3: Biography of Xi Jinping**.

credentials but does not tie him to the PLA. It is interesting to also note that Xi is married to the famous Chinese folk singer Peng Liyuan. It is obvious that he has played a sagacious political game based on his contacts and background, which has propelled him towards the top of Chinese leadership. Even if Xi is considered to be the heir-apparent to Chinese Politburo leadership, it should be noted that he shares this power with a wide variety of future leaders, not least of all, another quickly rising economist and politician, Li Keqiang. The rise of Xi is an emergence that has been paralleled by several other such political ascensions, suggesting the further disaggregating of Chinese civil political power.

Concerns for the future

The Fifth Generation, led by Xi but containing a variety of strong political personalities, has a strong rapport with the West. This generation is generally more international in background and focused on economics and the social sciences. Despite a general move away from militarism and towards international norms, there remain major concerns for the future. These concerns exist in three areas: pluralism leading to conflict, PLA disconnect, and extreme nationalism. First, the increasing diversification of Chinese political power and interests could be a cause for tensions leading to conflict: “Differences in the career experiences and administrative backgrounds of China’s top leaders are often a source of tension and conflict.”¹⁰ As the Politburo has pluralized, the potential for disagreement has increased.

Along a similar line of analysis, the second potential concern for the future is the Politburo-PLA disconnect. Within Chinese leadership there is often a need to at least appear hard-line concerning security issues; even Hu had a significant background as the chief CCP official in Tibet. If Xi and the Fifth Generation are perceived of as weak on military issues, they may lose legitimacy. Perhaps even more disconcerting is the idea that as the PLA plays less and

¹⁰ Cheng Li, p 55.

less of a political role it will not accept a position of a professionalized military with limited political power. Rogue elements within the PLA may react to this situation with concerns of being politically ostracizing and even turn to violence to revive the security agenda. In the least, we have seen a gradual increase in military spending, indicating a policy of Politburo appeasement of PLA concerns. Generally the shift towards economic development over military expansion may be a false dichotomy, but the concern remains that the Politburo-PLA split may create destabilizing tensions.

Finally, *uber* Chinese nationalism has emerged as a major force in politics. This nationalism is a potentially uncontrollable force. In fact, the Fifth Generation of leaders is not immune from Chinese nationalism. Xi Jinping recently condemned US international economic and aid policy, thereby elevating the Chinese approach: “There are some bored foreigners who have nothing better to do than pointing fingers at us [China]. First, China doesn’t export Revolution; second, China doesn’t export hunger and poverty; third, China doesn’t come and cause you headaches, what more to be said?”¹¹ Chinese officials are usually moderate in their comments especially when speaking outside of China. Xi’s nationalism is supported domestically, particularly by younger Chinese generations often described as the “angry youth” (*fengqing*).¹² In fact, one commentator found that “Chinese nationalists instantly jumped on Mr Xi’s words, offering support for his hardline position and criticising the government for being too diplomatic in its dealings with foreigners. They lauded Mr Xi’s frankness in comparison to the staid caution of Mr Hu and Mr Wen.”¹³ Chinese nationalism is often directed towards Japan and Taiwan with even rhetoric against “the West”. Necessarily, the arrival of a generation of

¹¹ Xi Jinping. “Chinese VP blasts meddling foreigners”. 14 February 2009. Accessed online: <http://news.asiaone.com/News/the%2BStraits%2BTimes/Story/A1Story20090214-121872.html>.

¹² Osnos, Evan. “Angry Youth: The Next Generation’s neocon nationalists”. *The New Yorker*. 28 July 2008. Accessed online: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/28/080728fa_fact_osnos.

¹³ Moore, Malcom. “China’s ‘next leader’ in hardline rant”. *Telegraph*. 16 February 2009. Accessed online: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/4637039/Chinas-next-leader-in-hardline-rant.html>.

Chinese leaders who are very committed to nationalist ideals may be a cause of concern to those that foresee tensions in China's relationship with the outside world.

Conclusion: Sino-US relations, 'handcuffed together'

Despite potential tensions and causes for concern, I would argue that the US-Sino relationship remains in the situation of inescapable interdependence. The US now recognizes the strong economic hold, at least in terms of liquid reserves, that China has along with the emergent political power of China worldwide. On the other hand, Chinese development is sustained by international peace and stability of which the US is a driving force. There are inevitable tensions between the great power and the rising one. Luo Ping at once shows some of the dislike directed towards the US along with the need for positive relations, a strange dialectic of affairs: "We hate you guys, but there is nothing much we can do."¹⁴ Beyond emerging nationalism and significant security concerns, the US and China have spun the web of interdependence. Understanding the character and characters in the Fifth Generation of leaders will help the US anticipate potential problem spots in the relationship at the same time as elucidating the dynamic, not monolithic, state of Chinese domestic political affairs.

¹⁴ Luo Ping, the director general at China's Banking Regulation Commission (administers SWFs). Response to questions concerning the economic crisis. From Sender, Henry. "China to stick with US bonds". *Financial Times*. 11 February 2009. Accessed online: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ba857be6-f88f-11dd-aae8-000077b07658.html>.

Annex 1: From Mao to Hu

From Mao to Hu



Photo credits: <http://www.history.com/encyclopedia/wa/images/WHistMaoZedong.gif> and
http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-01/01/xin_0321204312138578918221.jpg

Annex 2: The 17th Congress (2007) and New Chinese leadership¹⁵

The 17th Central Committee Politburo

<i>Standing Committee (listed by rank order)</i>	
HU JINTAO 胡锦涛 (65)	PRC president; chairman, CCP & PRC Central Military Commission
WU BANGGUO 吴邦国 (66)	Chairman, National People's Congress
WEN JIABAO 温家宝 (65)	State Council premier
JIA QINGLIN 贾庆林 (67)	Chairman, CPPCC
LI CHANGCHUN 李长春 (63)	Supervises ideology-propaganda system
*XI JINPING 习近平 (54)	Executive Secretary, Secretariat; president, Central Party School
*LI KEQIANG 李克强 (52)	
**HE GUOQIANG 贺国强 (64)	Chairman, Central Discipline Inspection Commission
**ZHOU YONGKANG 周永康 (65)	State councilor
<i>Regular Members (listed by stroke order)</i>	
WANG GANG 王刚 (65)	
WANG LEQUAN 王乐泉 (63)	Secretary, Xinjiang UAR CP Committee
WANG ZHAOGUO 王兆国 (66)	Exec. vice chairman, NPC SC; president, ACFTU
*WANG QISHAN 王岐山 (59)	
HUI LIANGYU 回良玉 (63)	Vice premier
LIU QI 刘淇 (65)	Secretary, Beijing CP Committee
LIU YUNSHAN 刘云山 (60)	Secretariat; director, CCP Propaganda Department
*LIU YANDONG 刘延东 (62)	
*LI YUANCHAO 李源潮 (57)	Secretariat; director, CCP Organization Department
*WANG YANG 汪洋 (52)	Secretary, Guangdong CP Committee
*ZHANG GAOLI 张高丽 (62)	Secretary, Tianjin CP Committee
ZHANG DEJIANG 张德江 (61)	
YU ZHENGSHENG 俞正声 (62)	Secretary, Shanghai CP Committee
* XU CAIHOU 徐才厚 (64)	Vice chairman, CCP CMC
GUO BOXIONG 郭伯雄 (65)	Vice chairman, CPC CMC
*BO XILAI 薄熙来 (58)	Secretary, Chongqing CP Committee

* Newly added to the Politburo.
** Promoted onto the new Standing Committee from the outgoing Politburo.

¹⁵ Miller, Alice. "Chinese New Party Leadership". *Chinese Leadership Monitor*. No. 23. Winter, 2008. Accessed online: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/clm/>.

Annex 3: Biography of Xi Jinping¹⁶

2008	Vice State President of China
2007	President of Central Party School
2007	Political Bureau Standing Committee Member of CPC Central Committee
2007	17th CPC Central Committee Member
2007	Member of the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee
2007	Shanghai Party Secretary
2002–2007	Zhejiang Party Secretary
2002–2007	Alternate Member of 16th CPC Central Committee
2000–2002	Deputy Party Secretary of Fujian Province and Governor of Fujian
1998–2002	Studied Marxist theory and ideological education in an on-the-job postgraduate programme in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Tsinghua University and graduated with an LLD degree
1999–2000	Deputy Party Secretary and Acting Governor of Fujian
1996–1999	Deputy Party Secretary of Fujian
1995–1996	Deputy Party Secretary of Fujian, Secretary of the CPC Fuzhou Municipal Committee and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Fuzhou Municipal People’s Congress
1993–1995	Member of the Standing Committee of the CPC Fujian Provincial Committee, Secretary of the CPC Fuzhou Municipal Committee and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Fuzhou Municipal People’s Congress
1990–1993	Secretary of the CPC Fuzhou Municipal Committee and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Fuzhou Municipal People’s Congress, Fujian Province
1988–1990	Secretary of the CPC Ningde Prefectural Committee, Fujian Province
1985–1988	Vice Mayor of Xiamen, Fujian Province
1983–1985	Party Secretary of the Zhengding County, Hebei Province
1982–1983	Deputy Party Secretary of the Zhengding County, Hebei Province
1979–1982	Secretary at the General Office of the State Council and the General Office of the Central Military Commission (as an officer in active service)
1975–1979	Student of basic organic synthesis in the Chemical Engineering Department at Tsinghua University
1969–1975	Worked as an educated youth sent to the countryside at Liangjiahe Brigade, Wen’anyi Commune, Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province, and served as Party branch secretary
1953	Born in Beijing

¹⁶ From Zheng and Chen.

Bibliography

- “Chinese VP blasts meddlesome foreigners”. 14 February 2009. Accessed online: <http://news.asiaone.com/News/the%2BStraits%2BTimes/Story/A1Story20090214-121872.html>.
- Cheng Li. “China’s Fifth Generation: Is Diversity a Source of Strength or Weakness?”. *Asia Policy*. Number 6. Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, July 2008.
- Johnston, Alistair Iain. *Social States: China in International Institutions 1980-2000*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Miller, Alice. “Chinese New Party Leadership”. *Chinese Leadership Monitor*. No. 23. Winter, 2008. Accessed online: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/clm/>.
- Moore, Malcom. “China’s ‘next leader’ in hardline rant”. *Telegraph*. 16 February 2009. Accessed online: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/4637039/Chinas-next-leader-in-hardline-rant.html>.
- Nathan, Andrew and Bruce Gilley. *China’s New Rulers: The Secret File*. New York City, NY: The New York Review Book, 2002.
- Presentation by the author to DHP H271: The United States and East Asia since 1945 on 15 April 2009. The Fletcher School, Tufts University.
- Sender, Henry. “China to stick with US bonds”. *Financial Times*. 11 February 2009. Accessed online: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ba857be6-f88f-11dd-aae8-000077b07658.html>.
- Zheng Yongnian and Chen Gang. “Xi Jinping’s Rise and Political Implications”. *China: An international journal*. Issue 7, 1. March 2009.

Relevant websites

Hoover Institutes’ China Leadership Monitor (CLM): <http://www.hoover.org/publications/clm/>
National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) reports: <http://www.nbr.org/>