

## ***China's Political Succession: Four Myths in the U.S.***

By Cheng Li

As the Bush administration struggles to craft a coherent policy toward China, important developments within China are also taking place that may influence the trajectory of U.S.-China relations. One of the most important developments is the jockeying within the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the leadership transition that will take place at the 16th Party Congress scheduled for September 2002.

The Congress is notable for several reasons. First, the Congress will select leaders for the Party's key positions, including membership on the Central Committee, the Politburo, and general-secretary. These leaders will be anointed to various positions within the government, including the President, at the National Peoples Congress (NPC) held in March 2003.

Second, there will be a significant generational shift in leadership, due to rules drawn up by current Party leader and President Jiang Zemin in 1997. Originally aimed at sidelining political rivals, the rules require Party leaders to give up their positions if they are more than 70 years old. Along with Jiang, four of the other six members of the Communist Party's highest body—the politburo standing committee—are due to reach retirement age at next year's Party Congress. An estimated 50% of all central government officials are due to retire at the Congress.

The Congress will mark the shift to the so-called "fourth generation" of Chinese leaders (the first three generations represented by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin, respectively). Now in their late 50s to early 60s, these men are on track to lead China for at least five years, until the next congress in 2007, and barring crises, more probably for 10 years.

Members of the fourth generation currently occupy 49 percent of the seats in the Central Committee (out of 344), 19 percent of the full members of the Politburo, 48 percent of ministers in the State Council, 52 percent of provincial party secretaries, and 77 percent of provincial governors.

The leading candidate of this generation to succeed Jiang Zemin is Hu Jintao; currently number five in the Party hierarchy and serving as Vice President and vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission. Other "fourth generation" leaders include Zeng Qinghong, a close associate of Jiang Zemin, Guangdong province chief Li Changchun, and Vice Premier Wen Jiabao.

Finally, the Congress will likely witness the articulation of a new vision for the Communist Party. It is widely believed that the Party will be urged to expand its membership to include traditionally banned groups—like private businessmen—in order to become more representative of the country. Proposals are also being floated that would subject more party posts to limited intra-party elections.

For Hu and the other six men expected to sit on the Politburo Standing Committee after 2002, an urgent task is to install as many allies as possible in the senior ministerial and provincial ranks, so that those leaders can support them at the Party Congress with their Central Committee votes. Recent rounds of ministerial and provincial personnel shuffles have begun that process. More personnel decisions will be made at the party's annual Beidaihe beach-resort retreat in August.

For China watchers, no issue has generated more anxiety and confusion than the question



concerning the characteristics of Jiang Zemin's successors. While there is little doubt that this generation will rule China for most of this decade and beyond, our knowledge of the political attitudes and policy orientation of new Chinese leaders is very limited. There are more myths, rumors, and wishful thinking than thoughtful analysis and well-grounded assessment. Wrong perceptions about China's new leaders can make U.S. policies toward China ineffective. If our sights are distorted, our policies will be too.

Four myths are especially common among American China watchers.

### Myth Number One

*Chinese Communist leaders are ineffective, incompetent, politically rigid, narrow-minded, and shortsighted.*

In fact, under the current leadership, China has sustained remarkable economic growth and has maintained social stability, despite all the odds facing the country. This does not necessarily mean that the political elite should receive most of the credit for China's development. Societal forces have played the principal role in China's progress. But demonizing Chinese leaders serves no constructive purpose and is detrimental to further progress.

Collectively, the fourth generation of leaders is less dogmatic and more capable compared to other political elite generations in the PRC history. This can largely be attributed to the fact that this generation grew up during the Cultural Revolution, an era characterized by idealism, collectivism, and radicalism. They were taught to sacrifice themselves for socialism. But as time passed, their

faith was eroded and their dream was shattered.

In fact, members of this generation experienced ideological disillusionment twice. The first time was with Marx's communism and Mao's socialism. The second time was with "the great ideas" suggested by "Harvard economic geniuses" like Jeffrey Sachs. In the early 1980s, many prominent members of the fourth generation were very enthusiastic about Western liberal economic theories. However, important events in the 1990s had a strong impact on them—for example, undesirable side-effects resulting from China's market reform; Russia's shock therapy that led to only shock, but no therapy; and the East Asian financial crisis. Some have wondered if Adam Smith might have been as wrong as Karl Marx, although the consequences of their errors have been profoundly different. As a result, new leaders are far more interested in discussing issues than defending "isms."

In many ways, fourth generation leaders are probably more capable than their predecessors when dealing with the tough issues that China faces. This is related to their experience during the Cultural Revolution, when many were sent to remote areas. Enormous physical hardship and an ever-changing political environment nurtured within them some valuable traits, such as adaptability, endurance, and political sophistication.

### Myth Number Two

*A vicious power struggle is going on among various factions, especially among the top contenders of the fourth generation, thus leading to a major internal crisis.*

China watchers have long been obsessed with an individual leader's factional identity and the change in relative power of that particular faction. The recent attention given to the *Tiananmen Papers* reinforces this conventional approach. Of course, factional politics was, is, and will be a key part of the Chinese political process. However, some profound changes and broad trends in Chinese politics may be overlooked if too much attention is given to factional politics.

What is most evident in Chinese politics today is the broad shift from an all-powerful single leader, such as Mao or Deng, to a greater collective leadership, which is now characteristic of the Jiang era. It seems highly likely that the fourth generation will progress even further in this direction. They will rely even more on power sharing, negotiation, consultation, and consensus building.

It is true that nepotism in various forms (e.g. school ties, blood ties, and patron-client ties) has played a very important role in the recruitment of Chinese leaders. But at the same time, there has been a strong effort by the political establishment to constrain nepotism. During the past few years, a number of institutional mechanisms have been adopted to prevent various forms of favoritism. These mechanisms include elections within the Party, term limits, retirement age limits, and regular reshuffling of both provincial and military leaders.

As a result of these institutional developments, no faction, no institution, no region, and no individual can dominate power. Everyone has to compromise; this process favors those who are skillful in coalition building. The career experience and personality of Wen Jiabao, a leading candidate to

succeed Premier Zhu Rongji in the next People's Congress, are exemplary. Wen worked as a chief of staff for three secretary-generals of the Party, two of whom were purged while he survived. Wen also gained broad administrative experience—handling political crises such as the 1989 Tiananmen movement, coordinating power transitions, commanding the anti-flood campaign in 1998, supervising the nation's agricultural affairs, and overseeing the financial and banking reform. Wen's talent as a superb administrator and his role as a coalition-builder explain his legendary survival and success.

### Myth Number Three

*Chinese leaders can be divided into dichotomous groups such as conservatives vs. liberals, hardliners vs. reformers, and radicals vs. moderates.*

Western China watchers have long divided Chinese leaders into two contending camps. This dichotomous categorization is too simplistic, if not entirely misleading. On most occasions, policy differences among Chinese leaders are not as substantial as foreign observers may have thought. Quite often, Chinese leaders disagree with each other only upon priority, timing, and tactics, not so much upon principle, objective, and direction.

In terms of China's domestic politics, the new leaders will probably accelerate China's political reform, but modify the pace and emphasis of economic reforms. It is likely that they will consolidate China's legal system; institutionalize the so-called "inner Party democracy;" and redefine the Chinese Communist Party to include more intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and technical specialists. The new leaders will be more likely to rely on govern-

ment policies to reduce growing disparities between coastal and inland regions, between urban and rural areas, between non-state and state-owned firms. The establishment of the social safety net will be a priority.

### Myth Number Four

*Since some fourth generation leaders were trained in the U.S., they may form a pro-American force in China's policy-making circle.*

This optimistic interpretation is subject to the test of future events. Evidence gathered thus far is not so optimistic. Several points should be made here. First, some prominent leaders in the fourth generation studied in the West, but their overall presence in both national and provincial levels of leadership is still marginal. Although it is expected that more Western-trained Chinese leaders will enter the top leadership, they will still be a minority in the foreseeable future. These new leaders who were trained overseas are usually cautious and avoid being seen as pro-West or pro-America.

Second, those who studied in the West may not have a favorable view of the Western political and economic system. For example, during the crises over the presidential election in Taiwan and the embassy bombing incident in Belgrade, the harshest condemnation against the U.S. policy toward China came from a few members of Chinese think tanks who recently received PhDs in political science from American universities.

Third and finally, one may reasonably argue that the tensions and conflicts in the relationships between China and the United States have nothing to do with ideology, but have to do with the nature of realpolitik. For those

Chinese leaders with this perspective, the cause of tensions in Sino-U.S. relations is clear: the most powerful country in the world wants to contain an emerging power. China's new leaders—military hard-liners and U.S.-educated technocrats alike—may believe this to be the case.

Because of recent troubling events in U.S.-China relations, nationalism is rising. China's new leaders are cynical about the moral superiority of the U.S., resentful of American arrogance, and doubtful about the total adoption of a Western economic and political system. Yet, even during crises, such as the tragic, accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade or the recent spyplane imbroglio, they understand the need for cooperation instead of confrontation. Their policies toward the U.S. will be firm, but not aggressive.

### Implications for the U.S.

What are the implications of all these factors for the U.S.? What, if anything, can Washington do to affect the dynamics of China's political development, including its leadership succession? It is naive to assume that new Chinese leaders, especially those trained in the West, will provide opportunities for the U.S. to remold China in line with American interests. But it is even more dangerous to assume that a so-called "China threat" is imminent, and that a major conflict between China and the U.S. is inevitable. For China, a radical and xenophobic foreign policy probably requires a charismatic and xenophobic Chinese leader, but no such leader exists now, nor will likely emerge in the foreseeable future.

Two realities should make our policy-makers humble. First, U.S. influence over China's domestic politics,

including its political succession, is very limited. And second, global peace and prosperity in the 21st century requires a cooperative and responsible China. Our humility will lead us to seek a constructive rela-

tionship with China's new leaders. Humility is always a sign of strength, not weakness.

*(Cheng Li <cli@hamilton.edu> is professor of government at*

*Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. His new book, China's Leaders: The New Generation (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), discusses these issues in more detail.)*

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