

Where Have All the Elders Gone?

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The sweeping turnover of top party and state leaders completed in 2003 brought about the retirement of more than a dozen influential men who had dominated China's politics in the 1990s. Together they join a group of leaders, commonly referred to as the "elders," who presumably retain significant political influence in the decision making of their successors. Since retiring, however, the elders have presented a very low public profile, so divining the extent and nature of their influence is a highly speculative enterprise.

Who Are the Elders?

The turnover of top party leaders at the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2002 and of top state leaders at the 10th National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2003 ended the official careers of some of China's most widely known leaders. Among them were NPC Chairman Li Peng, Premier Zhu Rongji, and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Chairman Li Ruihuan—all of whom left concurrent posts as members of the Politburo Standing Committee, the party's key decision-making core. In addition, Jiang Zemin went into semiretirement, ceding his posts as party general secretary, the party's top position, and as People's Republic of China (PRC) president to Hu Jintao while retaining his posts as chairman of the party and state Central Military Commissions (CMC), China's top military positions. Altogether, six of seven members of the party's Politburo Standing Committee and seven regular members of the Politburo retired at the party congress and left their various posts in other hierarchies the following spring.

Most of these retiring 13 join a group of elders who had retired from high-level party, state, and military posts in previous episodes of leadership succession since the Reform Era was launched by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. Orderly succession and rejuvenation of the leadership's ranks were major emphases in the political reforms Deng introduced in the early 1980s. For that purpose, a new body adjunct to the party Central Committee was created at the 12th Party Congress in 1982, onto which aging party leaders could retire and still have a backbench voice in current leadership decision making. The new PRC constitution adopted in 1982 also mandated term limits on the top state posts including PRC president, NPC chairman, and State Council premier.

A first wave of leaders retired at a national party conference in 1985, and by the end of the decade, most of the generation of veteran revolutionary leaders who had helped found the PRC and had dominated the politics of the 1980s had retired. Deng himself resigned from his party Politburo Standing Committee post at the 13th Party Congress in 1987 and from his positions as chairman of the party and state Central Military Commissions in 1989 and 1990, respectively.

A second wave of retirements accompanied the consolidation of Jiang Zemin's position as China's top leader in the 1990s. In addition, the Central Advisory Commission was abolished at the 14th Party Congress in 1992. Along with this second wave of retirements, many of the most prominent party veterans died off, including former state economic planner and PRC president Li Xiannian, party ideologue Hu Qiaomu, former NPC chairman Peng Zhen, economic czar Chen Yun, and former PRC president Yang Shangkun. Deng himself died in 1997. As a result, a group of eight elders has survived down to the present, and they are now joined by the new retirees from the 2002–3 leadership transition.

Table 1 lists the resulting group of elders who may influence leadership politics today, together with the age each achieves in 2004, their dates of retirement, and their most prominent positions before retiring. It does not include Deng Liqun, a party secretary from 1982 to 1987 who voiced opposition to policy decisions by the Jiang leadership from a leftward direction beginning in the 1990s and up until the eve of the 16th Party Congress in 2002; Yang Baibing, who was director of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) General Political Department until 1992 and retired from the Politburo in 1997; and Li Tieying, who retired from the Politburo in 2002 but is still active as an NPC vice chairman.

Table 1
Prominent Elders in Contemporary China

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age in 2004</i>	<i>Date retired</i>	<i>Most prominent positions</i>
Bo Yibo	96	1983	Vice premier
Song Renqiong	95	1985	Politburo
Wang Li	88	1992; 1993	Politburo; NPC chairman
Song Ping	87	1992	Politburo Standing Committee
Qiao Shi	80	1997; 1998	Politburo Standing Committee; NPC chairman
Liu Huaqing	85	1997; 1998	Politburo Standing Committee; CMC
Zhang Wannian	76	1997; 1998	CMC vice chairman
Zhang Zhen	90	1997; 1998	CMC vice chairman
Li Peng	76	2002; 2003	Politburo Standing Committee; NPC chairman
Zhu Rongji	76	2002; 2003	Politburo Standing Committee; premier
Li Ruihuan	70	2002; 2003	Politburo Standing Committee; CPPCC chairman
Wei Jianxing	73	2002	Politburo Standing Committee
Li Lanqing	72	2002; 2003	Politburo Standing Committee; vice premier
Ding Guan'gen	75	2002	Politburo
Tian Jiyun	75	2002; 2003	Politburo; NPC Standing Committee
Chi Haotian	75	2002; 2003	Politburo; defense minister, CMC
Jiang Chunyun	74	2002; 2003	Politburo; NPC Standing Committee
Qian Qichen	76	2002; 2003	Politburo; vice premier

The Elders' Public Roles

Since the elders retired, PRC media have continued to report on some of their activities. Media attention has varied from leader to leader, but none has a particularly prominent public profile.

Since the completion of the leadership transition at the NPC session in March 2003, public appearances by the elders have been confined to a few ceremonial roles. The most frequent occasion for the elders to be mentioned in the media is in connection with the activity that elders everywhere perform: attending funerals for or conveying condolences on the death of other veteran comrades. Memorial ceremonies for deceased PLA leaders Zhang Aiping and Yang Chengwu on July 12, 2003, and February 22, 2004, respectively, occasioned large turnouts of retired elders. In addition, most of the elders were accounted for in Xinhua's reporting on the current roster of top party and government leaders, led by party General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, conveying greetings to the elders on January 18, 2004, during the Spring Festival, the traditional holiday celebrating family and community ties. In addition, a few of the elders were reported voting on December 10, 2003, in local people's congress elections. Among the elders, Wei Jianxing, Li Lanqing, Tian Jiyun, Ding Guan'gen, Zhang Wannian, Chi Haotian, Liu Huaqing, Zhang Zhen, Qiao Shi, Song Ping, and Song Renqiong have appeared in public only in these roles and only on a handful of occasions.

In addition to these roles, three other elders—Bo Yibo, Li Peng, and Qian Qichen—have authored publications over the past year. Bo Yibo, who has published frequently since his retirement—including a long, two-volume reminiscence on politics and policy issues in the 1950s and 1960s—wrote a preface for a biography of the revolutionary-era leader Liu Zhidan that was also published separately in the party history journal *Studies in Chinese Communist Party History* (*Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*) in November 2003. Li Peng published a diary he purportedly kept on decision making regarding construction of the Three Gorges Dam, a project that he was personally visibly invested in during his tenure as premier and NPC chairman in the 1990s. In addition to his recently published memoir on foreign policy issues during his tenure as foreign minister (see the article by Robert Suettinger in this issue of *China Leadership Monitor*), Qian Qichen published an analysis of the Bush administration's national security strategy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Institute of International Studies journal *Studies in International Issues* (*Guoji wenti yanjiu*) that was republished in the party newspaper *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) on January 19, 2004.

Alone among the elders, Qian Qichen has traveled outside China since retirement. In November 2003, Qian toured the United States, meeting with President Bush and Vice President Cheney in Washington and addressing a forum on U.S.-China relations at Texas A & M University. PRC media identified Qian throughout the trip only as “former vice premier.”

Former premier and NPC chairman Li Peng was reported making inspection tours, mostly of local sites associated with energy production. In September 2003, Li

was reported visiting a new power station in Zhejiang. In late December he visited Shenzhen, and in early January 2004 he inspected energy-related sites at Daya Bay in Guangdong. In most cases, his tours were reported only in local media. The only other leader reported by PRC media inspecting local areas since last year's NPC session was former NPC chairman Wang Li, who, according to the Beijing city newspaper *Beijing Daily (Beijing ribao)*, toured new public parks in the city in November.

The elders most active in public view have been Li Peng and Qian Qichen, but even they have made fewer than a dozen public appearances in the year since the 10th NPC. Among their colleagues, former CPPCC chairman Li Ruihuan has appeared nine times, while former premier Zhu Rongji has been reported appearing only five times.

Evaluating the Elders' Private Influence

This narrow span of mostly ceremonial public activities provides little means to assess these elders' relative influence on the political process and on current leadership decision making. Some independent Hong Kong China-watching magazines and Western media attribute great influence to the elders, providing a picture of them frequently injecting usually conservative perspectives into leadership policy discussions, manipulating coteries of younger leaders whom they patronized while they were in power, and effectively braking progress toward policy change in any meaningful direction. The basis for these accounts appears to be the rumors and speculations that, as in all great power capitals, are exchanged among midlevel officials and are passed on to relatives and contacts among the foreign media. Such accounts frequently conflict, sometimes depicting specific elders espousing contradictory political views in any given episode. As the preceding suggests, the elders' treatment in PRC media offers little help in separating those stories that contain a kernel of truth—of which there must be a few—from those stories that do not—of which there are clearly many.

Although the Hu-Wen leadership has introduced a token of transparency in PRC media reporting on top leadership decision making since coming to power, there has been no explicit confirmation that the elders actively work to influence the policy process among the top leadership. If the elders do wield influence in current leadership decision making—and certainly some do—it is likely through three avenues. These are:

- *Access to the top leadership decision-making process.* The elders presumably continue to receive at least some portion of the paper flow pertaining to the top level of the policy process—minutes of Politburo and perhaps Politburo Standing Committee meetings, documentary materials, and policy option papers. They may also have the right to attend sessions of the party Politburo, kibitzing in on discussions and injecting their own opinions.
- *Patronage networks.* Most of the members of the current top leadership were promoted thanks to close relationships and work experience with one or more of the elders. Luo Gan, the party Politburo Standing Committee member who currently holds the law-and-order portfolio among the top leadership, had a long working

relationship with Li Peng. Premier Wen Jiabao worked closely on economic policy with his predecessor Zhu Rongji. Politburo Standing Committee member Zeng Qinghong, who currently manages the day-to-day affairs of the party apparatus on behalf of Hu Jintao, worked closely with Jiang Zemin as his chief of staff. Hu Jintao's rise benefited from the patronage of Song Ping, who as Gansu party chief recommended his subordinate Hu for promotion to the capital in the early 1980s and who likely aided consideration—by Deng Xiaoping—of Hu's promotion to the Politburo Standing Committee in 1992. These patron-client relationships undoubtedly continue and mean that individual elders can count on serious consideration of their views by the younger leaders whose careers they promoted.

- *Connections.* Each of the elders has long experience among the various bureaucracies that make up the party, government, and military institutional hierarchies of the PRC, so they likely remain familiar with and interested in the affairs of these bureaucracies while in retirement. Li Peng's inspection tours of energy-related sites, reported in PRC media over the past year, underscore his abiding interest in the policy sector from which he rose to prominence and which continued to animate his interest after he assumed top-level duties.

The degree of actual power these avenues provide is difficult to estimate, and the influence of the individual elders likely varies from leader to leader. In addition, the influence of even powerful elders may wane over time, as younger leaders consolidate their positions and no longer depend on their patrons to sustain them.

Jiang Zemin

Jiang Zemin entered a period of semiretirement when he ceded his positions as China's top party and state leader to Hu Jintao in the recent transition but retained his positions as the PRC's top military leader. The profile created by his public appearances since the NPC in 2003 resembles that of Deng Xiaoping in the period from 1987, when he retired from the Politburo Standing Committee, to 1990, when he resigned from the state CMC, his last official post. In that respect, Jiang's appearances and reported activities fall into a few narrow categories:

- *Presiding over military occasions.* PRC media do not normally report sessions of the CMC itself, but in his role as chairman of the party and state CMCs, Jiang normally presides over events sponsored by the CMC and other major military occasions. Over the past year, Jiang has presided over six such occasions—meeting relatives of the sailors lost in the Ming 361 submarine accident in May 2003; delivering a major speech on the PLA at 50th anniversary celebrations for the PLA National Industry, Science, and Technology University in September 2003; and greeting delegates to conferences of military attachés and on building the party in the army, among others. In his role as CMC chairman, Jiang has also signed seven CMC decrees.
- *Attending official events.* Jiang attended the leadership reception hosted by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao to mark the Spring Festival holiday on January 20, 2004. He also

presented a medal to China's first astronaut at a rally in December 2003 sponsored by the party Central Committee and the State Council and presided over by Hu Jintao.

- *Greeting foreign dignitaries.* Over the past year, Jiang has met a dozen visiting foreign statesmen. These include Pakistan President Musharraf (twice), Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee, U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, former president George H.W. Bush, former national security adviser and secretary of state Henry Kissinger, former president Bill Clinton, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard Myers. Strictly speaking, most of these are courtesy meetings with Jiang as retired statesman. But, the accounts of the meetings by the PRC news agency Xinhua frequently include Jiang's comments on current issues, underscoring the continuing authority of his statements on such occasions in representing Beijing's foreign policy positions. Like most of the elders, however, Jiang has not traveled outside China since retiring from his top party and state posts. His last foreign trip was to the summit with President Bush in Crawford, Texas, in October 2002.

In other respects, Jiang's public roles resemble those of the fully retired elders. Jiang has been reported attending the same funeral observances for fallen comrades as other elders and voting in district people's congress elections in Beijing in December 2003.

PRC media continue to underscore Jiang's prevailing authority over military affairs, and commentary in the PLA newspaper *Liberation Army Daily* (*Jiefangjun bao*) and elsewhere routinely credits him with providing the conceptual framework for the PLA's mission, modernization, and training. Leadership statements and commentary in all PRC media continue to emphasize the role of the "three represents"—which Jiang enunciated during a tour of south China in February 2000—in guiding the party's orientation and work. However, such statements and commentary do not routinely link the three represents concept directly to Jiang, referring only to the "important thinking"—not "Jiang Zemin's important thinking"—of the three represents. This omission follows the practice that has been standard since the concept received Politburo endorsement in May 2000; a parallel formulation was used to write the three represents into the party constitution at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002 and presumably will be used in amending the PRC constitution at the NPC session in March 2004.

Implications

The carefully circumscribed treatment of the activities of the elders in PRC media reflects a purposeful effort to play down their presumed involvement in the affairs of state and to underscore the frontline roles of the new crop of younger leaders. Early in the reform years, Deng Xiaoping sought to establish such an image of China's politics at a time when many of the revolutionary-veteran leaders around him were declining into decrepitude. The actual degree of influence, however great it may or may not be, that the elders continue to wield in the day-to-day policymaking of the Hu-Wen leadership is carefully screened from view to leave the public impression that the new leaders are in charge of the country's fortunes.

The resemblance of Jiang Zemin's carefully managed public profile to that of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1980s raises the possibility that Jiang, who will be 78 in 2004, will serve a comparably short tenure in his last official posts before retiring altogether. If Deng's pattern provides any clue, Jiang may turn over his military posts to Hu Jintao relatively soon, perhaps at a Central Committee plenum in fall 2004.