

The 16th Party Congress

Implications for Understanding Chinese Politics

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Jiang Zemin emerged from the recent 16th Party Congress and First Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee with a sweeping victory. Not only were his “three represents” written into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) charter, but his allies also emerged in critical positions on the Politburo and its Standing Committee. Jiang himself will continue to hold the chairmanship of the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC). In terms of understanding Chinese politics, however, does this mean that personnel can be manipulated at will, without reference to institutions? Not entirely, for institutions are taking on greater force in Chinese politics, but Jiang has proven a master of working—and dominating—the institutions. Looking closely at the results of the recent CCP congress makes Jiang’s victory at the 15th Party Congress in 1997 all the more important. Although it is too early to predict what will ultimately ensue at the highest reaches of Chinese politics, Jiang’s domination of personnel decisions makes it very difficult for Hu Jintao, relying primarily on the institutional power of the office of general secretary, to consolidate power in his person.

THE 16TH PARTY CONGRESS of the Chinese Communist Party, held November 8–14, 2002, and the First Plenary Session of the new 16th Central Committee, held November 15, turned out to be sweeping victories for Jiang Zemin. Together they ensured that Jiang’s vision of Chinese development will continue for the next five years, and probably beyond that, unless there are sudden crises that intervene and disrupt the course of development. Jiang personally will continue to dominate the political process for a period of time, perhaps two to three years, or perhaps five years. What was most surprising was not that Jiang emerged victorious—he has been the dominant political actor in Beijing for at least five years—but that his victory was so comprehensive.

This victory consisted of at least the following four major points:

- Jiang was able to get the party to accept his vision of China's economic development. The vision that he set out in his political report to the congress was notable in that it foresaw China emerging very much along the lines of its East Asian neighbors. Jiang articulated what might be called an "East Coast" vision of China's development, emphasizing the importance of high technology and the professional classes. The vision ultimately laid out a hope for China to emerge as a middle-class society, a development which, if achieved, would profoundly transform Chinese society (and politics).¹
- Jiang won the ideological battle. When Jiang fleshed out his "three represents" (that the party represents the advanced forces of production, advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the vast majority of the people) by calling, in his July 1, 2001, speech, for the admission of private entrepreneurs and other "outstanding elements" of new strata into the CCP, there was widespread opposition within the conservative wing of the party.² Nevertheless, a little more than a year later, Jiang's political report and the revisions adopted to the CCP's charter accepted Jiang's vision.
- Because Jiang won the ideological battle, the conservative wing of the CCP lost badly. The conservative wing of the party—associated with old ideologues such as Deng Liqun but also with conservative bureaucrats represented by Li Peng—has been fading in strength in recent years, but it has nevertheless represented a substantial body of opinion within the party. It seems apparent that Jiang felt that his East Coast development strategy could not be promoted economically or politically unless the ideological issues were confronted. Jiang's mantra in his political report—that the party's ideology must "keep up with the times" (*yushi jujin*)—was like a steady drumbeat of criticism of his conservative challengers.
- Jiang won the personnel battles. Jiang's stacking of the Politburo and its Standing Committee was remarkable. Of the 15 full members of the Politburo who are not members of the Standing Committee, it appears that only Liu Yunshan, Wang Lequan, and Wang Zhaoguo can be considered allies of Hu Jintao (mostly on the basis of their common Chinese Communist Youth League [CCYL] backgrounds). The other 12 appear to be

either close allies of Jiang Zemin or at least acceptable to him. No one sticks out as likely to raise objections to Jiang's plans. On the critical Standing Committee, it appears that six of the nine members are allies of Jiang. It is particularly significant that Jiang's closest ally, Zeng Qinghong, not only was promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee, but also will oversee the work of the Secretariat, which is charged with drawing up documents, overseeing propaganda, and monitoring policy implementation. The makeup of the Standing Committee and the broader Politburo is sharply biased toward the East Coast, suggesting that these are people ready and willing to give substance to Jiang's vision.

If one assumes that this summary of the congress's results is basically correct (understanding that different observers will necessarily differ in their interpretations to a certain extent), then what conclusions (or hypotheses) can we draw about the state of Chinese politics? In particular, what do these results tell us about the way political institutions are or are not being created? This was, after all, the congress that was going to demonstrate the institutionalization of the Chinese political system, as power passed peacefully from one leader and generation to another.

Unfortunately, even following the party congress, there is no unique interpretation of events that will substantiate beyond a reasonable doubt any given explanation of Chinese politics, but hopefully this article can sort through some of the major issues and different interpretations.

INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISM

In sorting through the degree to which the Chinese political system is or is not institutionalized, one must first distinguish between rules and norms that have taken on real force and the sorts of expectations that are sometimes built up but in fact have no basis in the party's procedures. As an example of the former, regulations clearly govern retirement age at various levels. In particular, cadres at the ministerial level (*buji ganbu*) are expected to retire when they turn 65 or shortly thereafter (depending on the length of the term to which they have been appointed). No one is appointed to a new term as a ministerial-level official when he or she has reached the age of 65. Similarly, almost no

one (other than Politburo members, who are subject to a retirement age of 70) is appointed to a new term in the Central Committee after reaching the age of 65, primarily because members of the Central Committee now have real appointments as provincial, state, military, or central party officials; once they retire from those positions, they must also retire from the Central Committee at the next party congress. There were two exceptions to this rule at the recent party congress: Li Guixian and Xu Kuangdi, both of whom were born in 1937. Li is a vice chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which has no retirement age, and Xu is president of the College of Engineering, which likewise has no official retirement age. These positions allowed them to retain their memberships on the Central Committee, but political factors were no doubt involved as well. Xu was removed unexpectedly as mayor of Shanghai in May 2002, and his retention of Central Committee membership may have been a reward for putting up with this treatment. Li's retention is more difficult to understand, but personal relations may account for it.

The primary example of expectations being taken as an indication of institutionalization is the widespread belief that Hu Jintao was about to inherit power as well as position. This expectation was originally based on comments that Deng is believed to have made about Hu's political future. However, since the People's Republic of China (PRC) media have never quoted Deng on the subject, outsiders cannot judge exactly what was said, if anything. Nevertheless, Hu's subsequent promotion to vice president in 1998 and to vice chair of the Central Military Commission in 1999, as well as his high-profile visits to Russia, Europe, and the United States, seemed to confirm the belief that succession was, in fact, institutionalized.³ Whatever expectations may have been built up, there was never a rule binding the party to a particular course of action (e.g., that the vice president will succeed the president). More importantly, there was never any decision-making rule, inside the party or in the society, to determine whether or when Hu Jintao (or any other leader) would succeed to the top leadership position. Because of the absence of a clear-cut decision-making rule, political arrangements at the highest level of the party are necessarily less institutionalized; since they are less institutionalized, it is often difficult to say whether a particular succession accords with the growing institutionalization of the party.

The reason for raising this issue is that there is no reason that we, as outside observers, should assume that the passing of substantive power from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao would mark institutionalization. If

power did pass from Jiang to Hu, there are at least two possible explanations. The first is that the expectations that were raised were well founded on party procedure; that is, Hu's position as successor had been ratified by one or more party bodies, unbeknownst to outsiders. That endorsement would, in fact, mark some form of institutionalization, albeit a limited one (in that there was no decision-making rule). The other explanation is that the passing of real power (as opposed to mere title) to Hu would in fact constitute the forcible ouster of Jiang Zemin and his allies. That is to say, one possible interpretation of power passing from Jiang to Hu would be that Hu had been able to concentrate sufficient political resources to bring this transition about even despite Jiang's wishes and institutional rules. The passing of power under this scenario might appear smooth and institutionalized, but the reality would be that Hu had simply won a power struggle.

Conversely, as with the outcome of the recent party congress, it is difficult to say that power has not passed or will not pass to Hu. Hu was, after all, named general secretary of the CCP, and incumbency

does confer advantages. When Jiang Zemin was appointed general secretary 13 years ago, many thought he would be a transitional figure, but Jiang was able to use his institutional position to accumulate power gradually. It was a process that took a long time; perhaps one can say that Jiang only consolidated his power five years ago, at the 15th Party Congress, some eight years after taking office. By this reasoning, Jiang's apparent victory at the recent party congress does not necessarily mean that institutional-

ized succession (if that is how we are to interpret Hu's succession) has been derailed, but instead implies only that it has been delayed. It is probably not unreasonable to assume that Jiang felt that he had served in office many years before accumulating real power and that Hu could similarly grow into the job over time.

The key question, of course, concerns the relationship between Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin (and Jiang's protégé, Zeng Qinghong). Is Jiang willing to allow, or even support, Hu's eventual consolidation of power, or is he determined to derail Hu's succession? If the latter is the case,

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are there institutional constraints on Jiang's maneuvers, or is informal power everything?

JIANG AND HU

The relationship between Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin remains subject to rumor and differing interpretation. Hu was appointed as the seventh and youngest member of the Politburo Standing Committee at the 14th Party Congress (technically at the First Plenary Session of the 14th Central Committee) in 1992, apparently at the behest of Deng Xiaoping. The lead-up to the 14th Party Congress was dramatic, as Deng had started the year by traveling to Shenzhen and other southern locations in order to demand that the leadership return to his vision of reform and opening. He was apparently particularly disappointed in Jiang Zemin because Jiang had not carried the torch of reform as Deng had apparently hoped he would. Deng had pushed reform vigorously in early 1991, but neither Jiang nor other central leaders had responded; thus, Deng made his more dramatic foray into politics in early 1992. During the spring and summer of 1992, Deng apparently considered dumping Jiang, but instead he turned around and endorsed Jiang's leadership, even "consolidating" it by agreeing to the purge of Yang Shangkun and Yang Baibing and their followers in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Certainly Jiang's timely about-face on reform, including a self-criticism to the Politburo and a vigorous speech to the Central Party School, helped smooth relations with Deng. Military opposition to the "Yang family army"—apparently led by Zhang Aiping and other veterans of the Third Field Army, in which Jiang's father had fought and died—the support of Bo Yibo, and deft work by Zeng Qinghong turned the tide. For Deng, the issues appear to have been both the continuation of reform as he envisioned it and the stability of Chinese politics after he passed from the scene. Jiang's acceptance of Deng's program took care of the first issue. Deng accepted Jiang's continuation as general secretary and gave him a real chance of succeeding by agreeing to the removal of the Yang brothers.

But if Deng was persuaded to accept Jiang's continuation in office, he seems to have made one last effort to institutionalize succession by appointing the then-49-year-old Hu Jintao to the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). Hu apparently was also attractive to Deng and acceptable to Jiang because Hu disliked former party chief Zhao Ziyang and would help prevent Zhao from staging a comeback. If this version

of events is reasonably accurate, Hu was helpful to Jiang only to the extent that he could help consolidate Jiang's authority. To the extent that Hu, by his very presence as the youngest member of the PBSC—and by whatever instructions Deng may or may not have laid down—set a term limit on Jiang, he was an obstacle to Jiang's ambitions. It is thus not strange that a close personal relationship between the two never developed.

If their personal relationship was not close, the question of whether their relationship was antagonistic has been the source of rumors. For years, the Beijing rumor mill has been roiled with intimations that Jiang hoped to displace Hu, preferring to place his own protégé, Zeng Qinghong, in power. But if this preference indeed existed, there was never any solid evidence for it. Hu Jintao has stuck very closely to the words of Jiang Zemin; outsiders can find no light between them. Nevertheless, Zeng by all reports enjoyed a much closer, more easygoing relationship with Jiang.

The lineup that emerged from the 16th Party Congress and First Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee suggests that Hu will have a difficult time emerging as a leader in his own right. As noted above, only three of the 24 full members of the Politburo (Liu Yunshan, Wang Lequan, and Wang Zhaoguo) might be counted as allies of Hu; neither Song Defu (party secretary of Fujian Province) nor Le Keqiang (governor of Henan) was promoted to the Politburo, much less its Standing Committee as some had predicted. This lack of support is a potentially serious problem for Hu. Members of the PBSC are rarely appointed from outside the Politburo (though Zhu Rongji and Hu Jintao are notable exceptions), and only one slot on the PBSC will open up at the 17th Party Congress in 2007—that of Luo Gan, who will be 72 then.

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PACKING THE POLITBURO STANDING COMMITTEE

The biggest surprise to emerge from the recent party meetings was the decision to enlarge the PBSC from seven to nine members. Historically, there has not been a set size for the PBSC, but it has varied between five and seven members in the Reform Era. The last time it exceeded

those limits was when the 10th Central Committee was named in 1973; at that time, 10 people were named to the PBSC (a high of 11 served on the PBSC of the Eighth Central Committee in 1956). The decision to expand the PBSC was probably made quite late in the run-up to the 16th Party Congress. On October 22, on the eve of Jiang's departure for the Crawford summit and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Mexico, *People's Daily* published an editorial. Editorials not tied to regularly scheduled party or state events (such as New Year's) normally indicate the convening of a Politburo meeting. It seems likely that it was at this final Politburo meeting prior to the opening of the congress that Jiang was able to gain final acceptance for his major personnel moves, for on the same day on which the editorial appeared, the Xinhua News Agency announced that Jia Qinglin, the CCP secretary of Beijing, and Huang Ju, the CCP secretary of Shanghai, would be "transferred to the center." Their party positions were taken by Liu Qi and Chen Liangyu, who had been the mayors of Beijing and Shanghai, respectively. The results of party congress and plenum revealed that both Jia and Huang had been added to the Politburo Standing Committee, giving Jiang two additional close associates on that powerful body as well as two other allies (Liu and Chen) on the Politburo. That amounts to four of 24 seats (16 percent) apparently decided at the last minute, and all in favor of Jiang.

It is interesting to note that of the 21 living members of the Politburo named in 1997 (Xie Fei was named then, but died in 1999), every single one of the nine members under the age of 70—with the exceptions of Li Ruihuan and Li Tieying—joined the new Politburo Standing Committee (Hu Jintao, of course, was already a member of that body and stayed on as its general secretary). So, the most probable explanation for the expansion of the PBSC is that this move precluded a decision on which of those nine would not be appointed to the PBSC. That this decision appears to have favored Jiang Zemin suggests how successful he was at the 15th Party Congress in putting his allies in place to move up.

THE TWO LIS

The two members of the Politburo under the age of 70 who were not retained or promoted to the PBSC are Li Ruihuan and Li Tieying. Li Ruihuan was initially appointed to the Politburo in 1987 following the 13th Party Congress and moved up to the PBSC in the wake of

Tiananmen. He is 68 years old, and thus seemed to qualify for another term this time around. Li Tieying, 66, was completing his second term as a full member of the Politburo. Both are believed to have had considerable personal differences with Jiang Zemin, suggesting that their failure to be promoted came as a result of Jiang's pique. Rumors since the 16th Party Congress suggest another reason. It is now said that both had served two full terms at one level (PBSC in Li Ruihuan's case, and Politburo in Li Tieying's case) and neither was being promoted, so they had to leave the Politburo. If the CCP were merely following the institutional rules, these cases might suggest that the final makeup of the Politburo and its Standing Committee really was driven by institutional rules rather than the arbitrary exercise of personal authority.

What can be said is that if there is now a rule about serving only two terms at a given level, then it is a new rule, perhaps implemented with the two Lis in mind (much as the retirement age of 70 was implemented at the 15th Party Congress in part to provide a justification for ousting Qiao Shi). Tian Jiyun, for one, served three and one-half terms (from 1985 to 2002) as a full member of the Politburo without being either promoted or dismissed.

THE REST OF THE POLITBURO

Procedures for filling spots on the body of the Politburo are apparently only partially institutionalized. For instance, two slots seem to belong to the military, and those went to Cao Gangchuan and Guo Boxiong, as expected. In the Reform Era, major provincial-level administrative posts—Beijing, Shanghai, and usually Sichuan—have had representatives on the Politburo. The Politburo that emerged from the 14th Party Congress in 1992 had members from Beijing, Shanghai, Shandong, Guangdong, and Tianjin (though Tianjin CCP Secretary Tan Shaowen died in February 1993). The new Politburo expanded this provincial representation significantly; seats are now held by Beijing, Shanghai,

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Tianjin, Guangdong, Hubei, Xinjiang, and Jiangsu. What precisely this greater provincial representation will mean for the operation of the Politburo is not immediately clear, but the transfers of Jia Qinglin and Huang Ju, from Beijing and Shanghai, respectively, on the eve of the congress and their replacement by Liu Qi and Chen Liangyu did allow Jiang to place more of his allies on the Politburo.

The appointments made to the Politburo are significant because precedent suggests that members will only retire when they reach the age of 70 (or perhaps have served two terms) and that few people are likely to be appointed to the PBSC without having first served on the Politburo, at least as an alternate (as was the case with Zeng Qinghong). In this regard, it is interesting to note that only one full member of the Politburo—Cao Gangchuan—will be required to retire at the 17th Party Congress for age reasons. So, the Politburo appointed at this time is likely to stay largely intact for the next 10 years. This situation would make for a remarkably stable leadership body, if it holds, and suggests just how successful Jiang Zemin was at the recent congress.

CONCLUSION

When one looks back at the 16th Party Congress, two things emerge as salient for the understanding of Chinese politics. First, the rules and institutions do count. Retirements and promotions are guided, at least in part, by an increasingly institutionalized system. Second, and in considerable tension with the first conclusion, the rules guiding personnel selection can be and are manipulated to enhance the personal power of a leader. If one can say that Jiang consolidated his power at the 15th Party Congress in 1997, then one has to also note that he paved the way for both his retirement and his continued influence at the recent congress. When one factors in Jiang's retention of the leadership of the CMC, it seems apparent that for all the strides China has made toward institutionalization, informal power remains central to the system. This dynamic is not unexpected in a system in which power has long been conceived of as "monistic, unified, and indivisible."⁴ Political power is still not conceived of as something that can be shared; checks and balances, in the Chinese view, do not limit the unhealthy exercise of political power but rather erode the position of the political center. This problem is not exclusive to the communist system; it has bedev-

iled China throughout the 20th century. Against this tradition of political power, institutions continue to face an uphill battle.

This state of affairs makes Hu Jintao's task over the next several years difficult. Although the advantages of incumbency should never be underestimated, formal power alone may not be sufficient to allow Hu to "grow into" the job of general secretary, as Jiang did before him. Hu can use the formal power of his position to call meetings and set the agenda, but unless there is a particular issue involved—corruption and social disorder are likely possibilities—Hu may find it difficult to drive the agenda and secure the personnel appointments that would make his power substantive as well as figurative. At a minimum, that process will take several years, and meanwhile the constellation of forces—personnel networks—appears arrayed against him.

NOTES

1. Jiang also made comments regarding regional differences, income gaps, and the need for safety nets, but while such concerns acknowledged serious problems in Chinese society, Jiang appeared to want to deal with these issues as a way of supporting his East Coast development strategy rather than formulate a development strategy around the goal of social equality.

2. Joseph Fewsmith, "Is Political Reform Ahead? China Confronts Problems Facing Society—and the CCP," *China Leadership Monitor* 1 (winter 2002), and Joseph Fewsmith, "Rethinking the Role of the CCP: Explicating Jiang Zemin's Party Anniversary Speech," *China Leadership Monitor* 2 (spring 2002).

3. H. Lyman Miller, "The Succession of Hu Jintao," *China Leadership Monitor* 2 (spring 2002).

4. The phrase is that of Tang Tsou. See, for instance, his article "Chinese Politics at the Top: Factionalism or Informal Politics? Balance-of-Power Politics or a Game to Win All?" in *The Nature of Chinese Politics: From Mao to Jiang*, ed. Jonathan Unger (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 98–160.