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ZHENG Yongnian and CHEN Gang

With his special background and unique experiences, examination of Xi Jinping’s rise as potential top leader provides some hints in the analysis of current Chinese elite politics. Recounting Xi’s elevation and how the Chinese Communist Party handles power succession under Hu Jintao’s leadership, this paper aims to assess whether, and to what degree, the selection of top leaders is being institutionalised. It is argued that although factional politics is evident in China, they differ from traditional power succession and must be conducted in the newly-emerging formal and informal institutions that prevent overwhelming domination of one faction, encourage factional accommodation and thus reduce serious power struggles. Building on the so-called intra-party democracy in recent years is a part of the effort to institutionalise elite politics. Xi’s princeling background shows that family connections are still important for political careers in China, but his clean reputation and governing experiences in both rich and poor regions also suggest that the Party’s efforts to institutionalise its elite management system has made cadres’ promotions more related to their performance and merits.

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Although Li Keqiang, protégé and former colleague of Hu Jintao in the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL), had long been regarded as the first choice for potential successor to Hu, Xi Jinping, introduced in strict hierarchical order in the 17th Party Congress press conference, emerged ahead of Li in the Political Bureau Standing Committee, signalling that he is most likely to become the next supreme leader at the Party’s next national congress in 2012. As a compromise candidate among Hu Jintao’s CCYL clique, Zeng Qinghong’s princeling group (taizidang) and Jiang Zemin’s Shanghai Gang, Xi’s elevation has special implications for Chinese politics today and in the future.\(^1\) For a long time, China scholars have debated on whether, and to what degree Chinese elite politics has been institutionalised. This paper, through examining Xi’s rise as a chosen successor and how the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) handles power succession under Hu’s leadership, aims to reflect some new socio-cultural characteristics of today’s Chinese elite politics and assess whether and to what degree the selection of top leaders is being institutionalised.

The reasons for focusing on leadership succession in the case of Xi are twofold. First, the CPC is the only party which organises political life in China, and power succession is the agenda with the highest priority for every party leadership. Second, the politics of power succession can most reflect the nature of elite politics, although elite politics takes place in different political contexts. Power succession is the core of Chinese elite politics.

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\(^1\) Members of the CCYL clique refer to those who share working experience in the same organisation (the Central Committee of the CCYL). These cadres are not necessarily all members of a faction, but their sense of belonging to the same group has been dramatically enhanced since Hu Jintao was elected CPC General Secretary. Princelings (taizidang) refer to children of former high-ranking officials of the CPC. It is more of a categorical group than a factional group. The Shanghai Gang members refer to politicians who have used Shanghai as a springboard to launch their political careers. Since Jiang Zemin was elected CPC General Secretary in 1989, the Shanghai Gang gradually became a dominant faction based on a patron-client relationship between Jiang and his followers. For a detailed study of China’s factional politics, see, for examples, Bo Zhiyue, *China’s Elite Politics: Political Transition and Power Balancing* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2007); Cheng Li, *China’s Leaders: The New Generation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001); Jonathan Unger (ed.), *The Nature of Chinese Politics: From Mao to Jiang* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002).
In democracies, it is relatively easy to handle the problem of power succession. The 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 and constitutional conventions. Although various mechanisms of election and selection of the leadership exist within the CPC, the Party remains undemocratic. Without transparent institutions concerning leadership change as in a democracy, the Chinese leadership has to find other means to cope with the succession issue. The succession issue has been affecting the country’s political stability since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Mao Zedong ruled China for several decades. He did not need to worry about power succession. Since he owned ultimate power, he was supposed to be able to appoint anyone of his choice to be his successor. Still, during his time, bitter political struggles that resulted from power succession occurred and plunged the country into chaos, as in the cases of his appointed successors Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao.

After returning to power, Deng Xiaoping realised the importance of power succession. As a victim of Mao’s personal dictatorship, Deng called for the reform of China’s political and leadership system. To institutionalise China’s power succession was one of the key agenda items in Deng’s reform plan. However, power succession during the Deng era also did not go smoothly,

2 For discussions of the differences between elections of presidents and prime ministers, see Richard Rose and Ezra Suleiman (eds.), Presidents and Prime Ministers (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1980).


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as evidenced by the ousting of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang by irregular political means.\(^5\)

With the passing of the old generation of leaders, the issue of power succession becomes increasingly important. Since China’s new leaders lack the personal and autocratic power that their old counterparts shared based on their revolutionary experience, they have to build up new power bases by discovering new rules and methods. The party leadership after Deng has made enormous efforts in institutionalising elite politics. Many formal institutions have been established, but informal rules continue to play a role in handling power succession. At the level of formal politics, one can look at the development of formal institutions and institutionalised formal rules, and how these formal institutions affect elite politics. At the level of informal politics, one can examine what informal rules exist and how they affect elite politics. It is worth noting that formal and informal politics can be hardly separated when one examines elite politics. This is so because with the institutionalisation of elite politics, most informal politics take place within and between formal institutions. The scholarly community would agree that compared to the Maoist era and even the Deng era, Chinese politics today have been greatly institutionalised. While no institutions could effectively constrain Mao, in contemporary China, political leaders are constrained by various institutions. This means that it will be more effective to examine informal elite politics within and between institutions.

The case study of Xi shows that Hu Jintao, just like his predecessor Jiang Zemin, cannot dictate in choosing his own success, so he had to appeal to other means in handling power succession. After Xi has emerged as the chosen successor from the so-called “democratic process of electing new party leadership,” he also faces the “Number Two” or the “Successor-Designate”

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issue, i.e., a question of how he “tries to maximise his chance of succession or minimise the danger to his career in a political environment.” The chosen successor is not merely a product of the political process or a recipient to that process. He can actually play a crucial role in the whole process of power succession, meaning that he is not that helpless in deciding his own political fate. Once he is chosen, he should know all the challenges of being the Number Two. In China’s institutional environment, there are formal and informal rules and norms that the chosen successor has to follow; and violation of these institutionalised rules and norms would make him/her vulnerable to the power game and thus jeopardise his/her chance for a smooth succession. Among many others, the chosen successor usually faces two major challenges, namely, managing his/her relations with the existing leader, and developing a broad network of political support.

“Intra-Party Democracy” and the Rise of Xi

In October 2007, Hu Jintao said in his report to the 17th Party Congress that the Party should “expand intra-party democracy to develop people’s democracy” by increasing transparency in Party affairs and “opposing and preventing arbitrary decision-making by an individual or a minority of people”. “We will reform the intra-party electoral system and improve the system for nominating candidates and electoral methods,” he said in the report.

Such a target of “intra-party democracy” was not simply lip service, as members of the 17th CPC Central Committee were elected with a 7.7 per cent margin, higher than the 5.1 per cent at the 16th Party Congress five years ago. Meanwhile, in choosing delegates prior to the Party Congress, all

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7 Zheng, “Crossing the Political Minefields of Succession”, p. 67.
8 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 During the 17th Party Congress, 204 out of the 221 candidates were elected as members of the new CPC Central Committee. About half of the new members were new faces.
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38 constituencies adopted a 15 per cent margin in the elections, five percentage points higher than that in 2002.

It was reported that prior to the 17th Party Congress, the CPC Central Organisation Department held a tentative election among provincial/ministerial-level-and-above officials, asking them to vote on candidates of Political Bureau Standing Committee Members. Xi got the most votes, followed by Li Keqiang, He Guoqiang and Zhou Yongkang.\(^\text{12}\) For the purpose of political stability, Hu and other leaders accepted the election results, implying that votes are important in deciding future leaders of the Party. Meng Jianzhu, who also obtained quite a number of votes during the process, was promoted from the obscure position of Jiangxi Party Secretary to the vice-premier-level State Councillor and authoritative Minister of Public Security.

After the 17th Party Congress, the officially-run Xinhua news agency published a lengthy on-the-spot record on the procedure for the formation of the new leadership.\(^\text{13}\) It is worth citing the story in length.

On 25 June 2007, over 400 people, including members and alternate members of the 16th CPC Central Committee and leading officials of relevant departments participated in picking proposed members of the Political Bureau from a list of almost 200 candidates. Hu Jintao presided over the event and set, on behalf of the CPC Central Committee, the conditions for the new Political Bureau members, with emphasis on political firmness, capacity, and image among the Party members and ordinary people. The candidates must be 63 or younger and were at least in a position of minister, according to the rules. The outcome of the recommendation is in conformity with the reality of the Party cadres as a number of excellent people were recommended.

The democratic recommendation of the new Party leadership is of great importance for the CPC which has over 70 million members and is managing a country with a population of 1.3 billion, Hu was quoted as saying. On 27 September, the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the 16th CPC Central Committee met and approved the candidates of the new central leadership of the Party. On 8 October, the Political Bureau of the 16th CPC


Central Committee discussed and approved the list, and it decided to propose the list of candidates to the First Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Committee and the First Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

On 21 October, the 17th CPC National Congress elected the 17th CPC Central Committee and the 17th CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. One day later, the 17th CPC Central Committee elected a new central leadership of the Party.

While one still does not know what actually happened to the so-called “democratic process of electing the new party leadership”, it is certainly true, as the report stated, that for the first time, the participants of the Central Committee’s plenary session could recommend the candidates of the Political Bureau members. The report thus regarded this event as a milestone in the history of the Party’s efforts to develop the internal democracy. It is certainly true that political struggle for power succession had troubled the CPC leadership even since the birth of the CPC. Since now no single leader dictates the power succession, new institutions and methods, including ones with democratic elements, have to be instituted. This is for, as indicated in the title of the report, the stability of the Party and the state.

Therefore, despite its opaqueness and lack of supervision, the intra-party “election” still helped to change the rules of games on the succession issue and became an important step to push forward the “intra-party democracy” proposed by the Political Report of the 17th Party Congress. China has for years been attempting grass-roots elections and democracy at the village and township levels with caution, but the unexpected trial at the top level may more or less change the bottom-up conception of China’s political reforms.

Actually, the CPC is trying to combine the mechanisms of election and consultation with certain formal and informal criteria followed when selecting future top leaders. Ex-Vice State President Zeng Qinghong reportedly revealed the five criteria set by the then Political Bureau Standing Committee in 2002 for picking up future leaders. According to Zeng, the Standing Committee

14 “The Inside Story about How Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang Became Heir-apparent”, Dong xiang, no. 275 (July 2008): 6–7. The five criteria are as follows: (1) the age of the candidates range from 45 to 55 years old; (2) the candidates and their family members should be incorruptible; (3) the candidates have undergone tests in their political careers and found to have firmly adhered to the policies
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had invited former Political Bureau members for their advice on the candidate lists worked out on the basis of the five criteria. After 12 rounds of discussion and evaluation, the Standing Committee finally worked out a five-person list including Li Keqiang, Wang Yang, Ling Jihua, Xi Jinping and Li Yuanchao. Zeng not only mentioned the polls inside the Political Bureau, in which Xi and Li almost got the same votes, but also noted that the Political Bureau finally solicited opinions from retired leaders such as Wan Li, Jiang Zemin, Song Ping, Qiao Shi and Liu Huaqing, most of whom suggested Xi be more suitable.

Such an intra-party “democratic assessment” (minzhu pingyi) mechanism through voting and consultation is expected to expand to a wider range. Before the annual session of the National People’s Congress in March 2008, candidates of new state, parliamentary and cabinet leaders all went through such scrutiny that started from November 2007. The CPC Secretariat sent out candidate lists and questionnaires to local provincial leaders, soliciting their opinions on the high-level personnel arrangement. Such a procedure will gradually be institutionalised and expand to various provincial-level regions for selecting candidates to local leaders.

The political capital of the central leadership figure in Chinese politics since the founding of the PRC in 1949 has been diminishing with each generation. Mao ruled like a God, and Deng Xiaoping, while nowhere near as autocratic as Mao, drew on a long history as a revolutionary and had massive credibility in the Party and with the public. Conversely, Jiang Zemin formulated by the 15th and 16th Party Congress; (4) the candidates are aspirant about the country’s future; (5) the candidates can be accepted within and outside the CPC.

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
took years to be taken seriously, while Hu Jintao is the weakest compared with Mao, Deng or Jiang.\textsuperscript{22} The farewell to the strong-man politics has pushed forward China’s leadership structure in an increasingly power-sharing direction that facilitates intra-party consultations, bargaining or even polls in secret behind closed doors. The weaker the top leader is, the more he will rely on “collective decision-making” (\textit{jiti juece}) when appointing successors and enacting national strategies. Certain informal rules and institutions based on balance of power among different factions and restriction of top leaders’ power have come into being in China’s elite politics, ensuring that candidateship of future successors is not solely the reflection of the incumbent top leader’s own will, but an outcome of compromises among different groups and one step further, the result of polls in a limited range. This way of producing future leadership guarantees policy continuation and stability while forestalls individual dictatorship. As the Party chooses rather than the public, future leaders, no matter who they are, will be committed to preserving the CPC power and represent the extensive interest of different groups inside the Party instead of one faction.

\textbf{Xi’s Special Background and Past Experience}

Xi was selected because he was acceptable to various factions inside the Party due to a number of factors, including his special family background, unique personal experience and low-profile, open-minded characteristics. His father, Xi Zhongxun, was a revolution veteran who later became a vice-premier. With Deng Xiaoping’s support, he pioneered the reform and open-door policy in Guangdong in the 1980s. China’s reformist leaders still appreciate elder Xi’s contribution to the country. In the early days of China’s reform, Xi Zhongxun kept good relations with then CPC General Secretary Hu Yaobang, an aggressive reform-minded leader whose death in April 1989 gave rise to the immediate student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square.\textsuperscript{23} Angered by Hu’s promotion of bold political reforms and his tolerance of China’s liberal intelligentsia, Deng Xiaoping who was calling the shots at that time forced Hu to resign in 1987 from his post as General Secretary. Xi Zhongxun paid a high price for his siding with Hu, losing his post in the powerful Politburo

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Wu Ming, \textit{Xijinping zhuan} (Biography of Xi Jinping) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Culture and Art Press, 2008), pp. 135–6.
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in 1987 and assuming a sinecure of Vice Chairman of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee in 1988. Xi Zhongxun’s alliance with Hu, however, in the long run gave political credits to his son in the eyes of liberal Party officials and the so-called “Youth League faction” (tuan pai), a group of high-level officials with working experience in the CCYL. The “Youth League faction” was first represented by Hu Baobang, who acted as CCYL First Secretary in the 1950s and 1960s, and is now represented by the incumbent Chinese President Hu Jintao. As top CPC positions are increasingly being dominated by officials with CCYL and princeling backgrounds, Xi’s special family setting facilitated him greatly in China’s political arena.

Despite being the son of a high-ranking official, Xi Jinping had bitter experiences in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) when his father was purged and jailed. Xi gained some military background in his 20s when serving as a secretary to Geng Biao in the General Office of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and later cut his administrative teeth in the coastal provinces of Fujian and Zhejiang.

As a princeling, Xi maintained a very good relationship with Zeng Qinghong, who was also known as a princeling and played a vital role in airlifting Xi from Zhejiang to Shanghai and later to the Political Bureau Standing Committee. Thanks to his father’s strong support in the 1980s to former General Secretary Hu Yaobang, a liberal reformist with CCYL background, Xi Jinping was probably acceptable to Hu Jintao.

Compared with Li Keqiang, Xi has special political capital: his close connection with Party patriarchs, his long-time working experience in coastal provinces — China’s economic powerhouse, and his skills in dealing with foreign, Hong Kong and Taiwan business people.

From 1982 to 2007, rising through the ranks in three provinces (northern Hebei, southeastern Fujian and eastern Zhejiang) and one municipality (Shanghai), Xi accumulated abundant local grass-roots working experience (difang jiceng gongzuo jingyan) that the leadership values, which Li Keqiang lacks. Li stayed in Beijing until 1998 when he left the CCYL Central Committee and was directly shifted to serve as the Deputy Party Secretary of Henan Province.

Xi’s local political performance (zhengji) in Fujian and Zhejiang Province was particularly important for his entry into the Political Bureau. He spent 17 years in Fujian, starting from the Vice Mayor of Xiamen City in 1985 to Party Secretary of Ningde, Fuzhou to finally the Governor of Fujian.
Xiamen was one of China’s four special economic zones in the 1980s with a relatively developed economy and special policy treatment from the central government, while Ningde was the poorest region in Fujian Province. In the CPC’s increasingly-institutionalised elite management system that puts more focus on cadres’ performance and experience, such governing experiences in both rich and poor regions have become important for officials to be promoted to higher positions.

During his tenure as Fujian Governor, Xi helped the province come out from the shadow of the “Yuanhua case”, China’s largest smuggling and corruption crime in history, and gained value experiences on cross-Strait relations when incumbent Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui’s characterisation of China-Taiwan relations as “special state-to-state relations” in 1999 directly challenged the CPC’s “one-China” policy.

In 2002, Xi was shifted to Party Secretary of the affluent Zhejiang Province, where he expended considerable effort to promote the “Zhejiang experience” of economic success nationwide through inviting scholars from Beijing to do relevant research. Since the early 1990s, transfers among provinces have become frequent for members of the political elite. In both the Mao and Deng eras, central leaders often used transfers to weaken political opponents, enforce central policies, or resolve a conflict. In the post-Deng era, the new system of transfers may still be used for these purposes, but it also institutionalises a broader range of relatively frequent elite rotations. Such rotations provide not only a leverage for central leaders over local officials, but also good opportunities to test appointees’ capacity to cope with different scenarios and vested interest in new locations. Moving cadres from one province to another has become an essential part of a set of systematic institutions for the CPC to find eligible candidates to govern this vast and complex country. In Zhejiang, Xi reportedly became a part-time columnist for the Zhejiang Daily, using the pen name “Zhe Xin” to regularly write commentaries on current affairs in the province.

24 Ibid., pp. 236–8.
26 Ibid., p. 99.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., p. 228.
side through paying visits to 69 of Zhejiang’s 90 county-level regions in the first nine months of his tenure there.\textsuperscript{29}

Shanghai was the last stopover before Xi entered the Political Bureau. He was shifted to Shanghai to fill the power vacancy after former Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Liangyu and his faction were purged and jailed due to chain corruptions caused by a pension fund scandal. During the seven-month short stay, Xi helped mop up Shanghai, and reportedly called on officials to declare their assets when he took over in Shanghai.\textsuperscript{30} As a result, “Xi’s considered to be very clean”, says a Shanghai-based Western executive who requested anonymity for fear of negative business repercussions.\textsuperscript{31}

When Xi was shifted to the more important Shanghai Municipality, some political watchers, however, expressed their pessimism about his prospect as a top leader successor, saying it was not likely for him to be further promoted to the Political Bureau Standing Committee in a short time and Xi should at least stay in Shanghai for two or more years.\textsuperscript{32} From past experiences, the newly-appointed Shanghai Party Secretary usually could secure a normal seat in the Political Bureau but not in the smaller-sized Standing Committee of Political Bureau. Only after some years in Shanghai could he be further promoted to the Standing Committee. The way of promoting Xi was different from the common practice in the current CPC bureaucracy, making Shanghai change its top leader twice in 2007. Actually the CPC top decision-makers could have directly helicoptered Xi to the Political Bureau Standing Committee from the position of Zhejiang Party Secretary, as was done for Li Keqiang. No outsider knows for sure what caused Xi’s half-year stopover in Shanghai before he went to Beijing, but the episode itself showed again the unpredictability in China’s political arena that is still far from transparent.

Xi’s biographical information shows that working experience as local officials in different provinces/cities is becoming indispensable for the candidature of top leadership. Since promoting economic growth has become

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 225.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
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the priority task for the Party-state, governance experience in the coastal provinces, the country's economic powerhouse, are also extremely important in future successors’ portfolios. A political elite’s family background can be an invaluable asset assisting the political career of an ambitious young man.

The rise of Xi Jinping from the taizidang (princelings) surprised many observers. Xi Jinping, however, should not be regarded as a dark horse if one has paid close attention to his special family background and working experience. The taizidang was sidelined in the 1980s when Deng Xiaoping was in power. Chinese people had ill feelings about the taizidang at that time since many of them engaged in rent-seeking activities and became rich through their fathers’ guanxi (or connections). However, many taizidang members, such as Xi Jinping, Bo Xilai and Liu Yandong, were politically ambitious. They gave up opportunities to get rich and accepted low positions in various local Party organisations and governments. Over the years, they became experienced in managing Party and government affairs. After Jiang Zemin came to power after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, taizidang members began to appear on China’s political stage. Today, its members occupy important positions in the areas of politics, the economy, military and social organisations. To a large degree, the taizidang are the most powerful political force in today’s China. They can be viewed as “royal families” of the CPC and their members are regarded as loyal to the regime that their fathers established. The taizidang also gets strong support from old revolutionaries, most of whom are retired from Party and government positions.

The appointments of the CCYL and taizidang political figures are favourable for Hu Jintao. Although Hu’s power base is the CCYL, he also has the strong support from the taizidang, especially old revolutionaries. At the 17th Party Congress, Hu’s main political constraints came from the “Shanghai Gang”. With the strong presence of both the CCYL and taizidang, the Shanghai Gang became the weaker group in the leadership. The decline of the Shanghai Gang was visible. Huang Ju (Vice Premier) died in early 2007, and Chen Liangyu was removed after he was charged of corruption in the same year. Zeng Qinghong, due to his age, stepped down. Needless to say, some influence continued as Jiang’s associates Zhang Dejiang and Zhang Gaoli are members of the Political Bureau. Conflicting interests exist between the CCYL and taizidang, and eventually one of the factions must become dominant in order to guarantee a smooth process for the next power succession. From another perspective, considering the above-mentioned “tentative election”
before the 17th Party Congress, it appeared unlikely that all the officials who cast their votes were members of any of the three factions and thereby selected Xi in a trilateral fashion. The choice of Xi thus embodied the strife between the single faction of the CCYL on the one hand, and all the non-CCYL key officials in the Party on the other, more than between the three factions. However, this was an acceptable outcome for Hu Jintao himself since this not only showed his magnanimity and respect for “intra-Party democracy,” but also reduced the political risk of appointing heir-apparent at his own will.33

The CPC’s Effort to Institutionalise Succession Process

In its 87-year history, the CPC leadership has experienced great uncertainty in dealing with power succession. Leadership succession is unusually important because power is highly concentrated at the top and whoever ultimately succeeds can make a great deal of difference to interest redistribution among different leaders and factions, and thus to the whole political system. Throughout CPC history, succession has been a source of inordinate concern and occasional outbursts of concentrated, disruptive strife,34 and the Party-state only experienced three uninterrupted succeions since 1949 (i.e. from Mao Zedong to Hua Guofeng in 1976,35 from Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin in 1989 and from Jiang to Hu Jintao in 2002).

The decade-long Cultural Revolution witnessed the rotation of first Liu Shaoqi, then Lin Biao, Wang Hongwen (more tentatively) and finally Hua Guofeng in the precarious role of heir apparent. Even Deng Xiaoping himself, with strong intentions to institutionalise the process, made two abortive selections, i.e. Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, before finally settling on Jiang Zemin.

In the past three decades of reform and opening-up, with gradual development of intra-party democracy, the CPC has been trying to make the transition to a more institutionalised succession procedure for the sake of

33 In history, both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping discredited their authority when they had to dethrone heir-apparents designated by themselves.
35 Hua Guofeng was ousted by Deng Xiaoping in 1981. Hua died on 20 August 2008.
greater stability and predictability. In Deng’s era, the succession issue was still not institutionalised. Although both Jiang Zeming and Hu Jintao were picked up by Deng, who had overwhelming authority and unmatchable charisma that beat any figure in the Chinese political arena at that time, their roads to the power zenith were quite different.

Unlike Hu who went through a decade of heir apparent (1992–2002), Jiang Zemin had no such experience and was helicoptered directly and unexpectedly from the position of Shanghai Party Secretary to the CPC General Secretary after the sudden fall of Zhao Ziyang during the Tiananmen incident in 1989.

The CPC leadership succession has gone from postmortem (after the death of the incumbent leader) to premortem (before the death of the incumbent leader). Deng Xiaoping’s de facto paramountship lasted until his death in 1997, eight years after Jiang became CPC General Secretary. Jiang’s influence inside the Party after his retirement, however, has been greatly restricted. In that sense, the power transition from Jiang to Hu was CPC’s first smooth premortem succession after 1949.

During the 17th Party Congress in October 2007, the CPC leadership’s endeavour to institutionalise and stabilise such premortem succession became evident when two political stars Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, in their 50s, joined the Political Bureau Standing Committee. Their anticipated roles inside the future leadership were clearer after Xi became Vice State President and Li became Vice Premier during the parliamentary session in March 2008.

The choice of Xi and Li as potential successors is the outcome of many compromises among major factions inside the Party, as well as an indicator of China’s increasingly pluralistic political structure and its attempt to institutionalise leadership succession in a democratic way. Although Hu Jintao favoured Li, the new representative of the “Youth League faction”, he still accepted Xi, strongly supported by former CPC General Secretary Jiang Zemin and former Chinese Vice President Zeng Qinghong, as his successor candidate. Through uplifting Xi ahead of Li in the Political Bureau Standing Committee, Jiang’s “Shanghai faction” and Zeng’s “princeling group” successfully retained their political influence in the officialdom that might otherwise be overwhelmed by the “Youth League faction”. Although Hu’s paramount power has been checked and balanced in this kind of king-making process, his reputation was elevated inside the Party for his compromises and tolerance as incumbent CPC General Secretary. The connection of Xi’s father to Hu
Yaobang and the “Youth League faction” also made Xi himself an acceptable choice for Hu. Meanwhile Li Keqiang’s rise to the Politburo Standing Committee balances Xi and guarantees the political interest of “Youth League faction” even after Hu’s step-down. If Li Yuanchao, another young Politburo member and Director of CPC Organisation Department with Youth League background, becomes Chairman of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee in the future, two of the next CPC leadership troika will be Hu’s former colleagues in the Youth League, which will safeguard Hu’s political legacy in the long term. Mao or Deng’s eras of selecting heir-apparent at one person’s will has gone, ruling out the possibility of one clique’s dominance inside the leadership and guaranteeing a stable balance of power in the domestic political arena.

Beijing Olympics: A Critical Test for Xi Jinping

Closed on 24 August 2008, the Beijing Olympic Games were seen as an unparalleled success by most Chinese — their team’s topping the gold medal table inspired nationwide excitement, and Beijing impressed foreign visitors with its hospitality and efficiency. With no terrorist attacks or other disruptive incidents in Beijing during the 17 days, all the CPC’s efforts paid off, winning the praise of “truly exceptional Games” from International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Jacques Rogge at the closing ceremony.36

The successful Games were also slated as Chinese State Vice President Xi Jinping’s “coming out party”, strengthening his heir-apparent position amid the official Olympic fanfare. Xi was put in charge of the preparations for the Beijing Games. This became his first big political test since he emerged as China’s leader-in-waiting following the 17th Party Congress in October 2007.37

The Beijing Olympics further established Mr. Xi as a national leader while helping the Party leadership with a smooth leadership succession. Xi had abundant local governance experience before being granted the first


37 Officially Beijing’s Party Secretary Liu Qi, a lower-ranking Politburo member, remained the top organiser of the Beijing Games, but inside the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee, the de facto highest decision-making group, Xi was designated to take charge of preparations for the Games after the 17th Party Congress.
candidateship to paramount power, but he still needed new chances to prove he was qualified enough for a national leader.

No other event was more suitable than the Beijing Olympics to serve as such a test task for Xi. It was a comprehensive mission that involved not only foreign affairs, but also security safeguards, logistics, transportation, media management, environmental protection and other preparatory work that needed extensive domestic coordination among the military forces (PLA), the police, the Party, different governmental bureaucracies and localities.

The number of terrorist plots by Xinjiang Muslim separatists, the protests along the global Olympic torch relay route triggered by the Tibet violent riots in March, as well as the increasing domestic unrest amidst rising inflation and social inequality in 2008, heaped the Games with such high risks and such great international pressure that it was almost impossible for the organisers to handle. With the Party and people having high expectations for success, there was little room for failure. Under such circumstances, Xi made an important adjustment to the goals of the Beijing Olympics from “the best Olympics” to a “safe Olympics”. In a keynote speech at a conference one month before the Olympics opened, Xi said “a safe Olympics is the biggest indicator of the success of the Games”.

Thanks to the Party’s skill in mobilising the nation, and partly, Xi’s gifted coordination ability and by luck, the Games went as well as China’s leaders had hoped. Xi’s smoothly passing through this crucial test not only means he is nearer to the crown, but also has significant importance for the institutionalised leadership succession between generations.

To institutionalise such a takeover and ensure that the future successor will have a broad view over the country’s domestic politics, economy, national defence as well as foreign affairs, Xi, according to the division of labour inside the Political Bureau Standing Committee, was asked to become more involved in state and Party affairs than his peer Li Keqiang, who participated more deeply in the economic and administrative work. Almost all of Xi’s activities during the Games were representing the state, complying with his identity as China’s State Vice President and implying the probability of his taking over the state leadership in the next term.

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During the Games, Xi played the second most high-profile role next to President Hu Jintao. Xi not only met a number of important foreign guests including Singapore’s Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and US President George W. Bush, but also inspected major Olympic venues and all the co-host cities in China and hosted a dinner banquet for members of the Olympic Family in Beijing.

He responded to the chorus of criticism China received in light of the Olympics by saying: “The world is a big place and you’ve got all sorts of people and that’s why it is so colourful.” Such remarks suited the taste of the West, showing his flexibility and some sort of charm in the international arena. Interestingly, Xi was also involved in the athletics. Mr. Xi helped console the national sadness over the injury of Chinese hurdler Liu Xiang who had won China’s first gold medal in a men’s track and field event in the 2004 Olympics but was unable to compete in the 110-metre hurdles in Beijing. Xi telegraphed the General Administration of Sport to express concern and sympathy for Liu Xiang, saying “we all understand that Liu quit the race due to injury” and “we hope that after he recovers, he will continue to train hard and struggle harder for the national glory.”

Stepping Stones to Top Leadership

Xi’s position today is similar to Hu Jintao after 1992, when Deng Xiaoping and other senior leaders selected Hu for the Political Bureau Standing Committee as the youngest member to ensure a smooth power transition after Jiang. To institutionalise such candidacy and ensure that the future successor has a broad view over the vast country’s domestic politics, economy, foreign affairs and national defence, several stepping stones are needed on the way to the power pinnacle.

In 1993, Hu took charge of the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee, which oversaw day-to-day operations of the Central Committee, and became President of the Central Party School, which was a convenient tool for him to develop his connections with other high rank CPC cadres and thus bring up his own supporters.

39 “Is the Nation Ready to be a Gracious, Open-minded Games Host?”, South China Morning Post, 14 July 2008.
Five years later in 1998, Hu became Vice State President. One year later, he was appointed Vice Chairman of the CMC. By that time, his heir-apparent status was institutionally confirmed. These two positions — Vice State President and Vice Chairman of the CMC — helped him gain diplomatic and military calibre that any provincial leader lacks.

Xi Jinping is on a similar path. During the 17th Party Congress, Xi entered the Political Bureau Standing Committee and became the top-ranking member of the Secretariat of the CPC. Two months later, Xi assumed the post of President of the Central Party School. At the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress in March 2008, he was elected as the country’s Vice-President.

The Vice-Chairmanship of the CMC is still a key position for the final confirmation of heir-apparent. During the 17th Party Congress in 2007, Xi did not join the CMC, showing that the succession issue remained open at that time and Xi still needed to stand up to the test before establishing his paramount leadership. Although the overseas media had expected Xi to take over this important seat one year later at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 17th CPC Central Committee in October 2008, Xi did not get the military title so soon despite the credit for the successful Olympics.41

It took Hu seven years to obtain the Vice-Chairmanship of the CMC Committee after joining the Political Bureau Standing Committee. To secure such a position, Hu had to pass the test of handling knotty diplomatic issues such as the US bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade in 1999. Different from Hu, Xi’s possible succession is imminent, which will lead to a takeover of this military position in a much shorter time.

The complicated Hong Kong and Macau issues, foreign affairs and Beijing Olympics are political tests for Xi, while those for Li Keqiang are economic macro-control (hongguan tiaokong) and “super-ministries” reform (dabuzhi gaige).42 As long as they do not make serious mistakes in these areas, their future leadership will be established as expected.

42 The “super-ministries” reform, kicked off in the annual session of the National People’s Congress in March 2008, aimed to merge ministries and commissions with similar functions and overlapping powers into larger-sized ministries.
Xi replaced his patron Zeng Qinghong to head the Central Leading Group on Hong Kong and Macao Affairs in November 2007. The CPC is now facing headaches in both places: Hong Kong people’s demand for general elections and Macau’s corruption and expanding income gap.

To Xi’s advantage, the National People’s Congress in December 2007 set the timetable for Hong Kong’s general election of its Chief Executive to be held in 2017 after many years of strife between Beijing and the pro-democracy forces in Hong Kong. From 6–8 July 2008, Xi Jinping paid a visit to Hong Kong to see Hong Kong’s preparations for organising the 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Equestrian Events. In fact, he also wanted to make use of this trip to lift the popularity of the pro-Beijing camp before a crucial Hong Kong legislative election scheduled for 7 September 2008. Despite Xi’s visit in July and the travel of China’s 51 Olympic gold medallists to Hong Kong just days before polling day to spread some patriotic “feel-good”, Beijing still failed to make the headway they had confidently predicted in the election, while the pan-democrats managed to maintain enough seats in the Legislative Council to veto legislation. By virtue of having over one-third of the seats in the Legislative Council, the pan-democrats’ ability to veto legislation is definitely not good news for Beijing, as discussions on the electoral arrangements for the 2012 Legislative Council elections would take place during the following legislature.43 The complicated Hong Kong issue, therefore, will continue to pose challenges not only to the ruling CPC as a whole, but also to Xi specifically during his heir-apparent period.

As China is the world’s most populous country with a rapidly growing economy and expanding overseas influence, its top leader is therefore a global leader. To prove he has such standing in the international arena, Xi has been much more involved in foreign affairs than his potential competitor Li Keqiang. Xi has been receiving more foreign guests in Beijing, while Li has focused on domestic economic and social affairs. From 17–25 June 2008, Xi paid his first visit to foreign countries after becoming China’s Vice State President. All the five nations he visited, namely North Korea, Mongolia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Yemen are very friendly and strategically important to China. North Korea and Mongolia are neighbouring countries relating to China’s security concern, while the other three oil-rich West Asian countries are of increasing importance to China against the backdrop of international oil price hikes.

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Due to the division of work among leaders, even in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, the most serious disaster in 30 years, Xi visited disaster areas only in Shaanxi and Gansu and steered clear of the worst-hit areas of Sichuan Province, while Li Keqiang went to inspect the quake-stricken area of Sichuan immediately after the catastrophe occurred. Despite Xi’s absence, his wife Peng Liyuan, a famous folk singer in the country and his sixteen-year-old daughter Xi Mingze, both went to Sichuan Province after the quake to participate in the disaster relief work.44 Peng reportedly sang songs for survivors of the earthquake and soldiers on rescue missions while his daughter worked for seven days as a volunteer in the worst-hit area. Their aid activity in Sichuan was widely reported by the Chinese media, shoring up Xi’s popularity and enhancing his political credibility in the country.

Li Keqiang’s posturing to succeed in the premiership has become increasingly salient after he became Vice Premier in March 2008. He has been more involved in domestic economic and social affairs, playing a higher-profile role in the Sichuan Earthquake relief work and economic macro-control (hongguan tiaokong) than Xi. In July 2008, Li replaced Wen to become Director of the State Council Three Gorges Project Construction Committee. According to previous experiences, only Chinese Premiers assumed such a post in their tenure. Li Peng, Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao consecutively headed the State Council Three Gorges Project Construction Committee after its establishment in 1993. In contrast with Li’s area of intractable domestic affairs that involve many vested interests, Xi’s work is easier and higher-profile, so the best strategy for Xi is to play safe and avoid big mistakes.

Xi’s Emphasis on “Collective Leadership”

The first important speech Xi made publicly after the Beijing Olympics was to address the opening ceremony of the new semester at the Central Party School in September 2008. In his speech, Xi put special focus on the formation of the solid “central collective leadership” to ensure the CPC’s correct decision-making and effective implementation of policies.45

The evolution of the four generations of Chinese leaders illustrates a consistent trend towards a more collective leadership, and away from “strong-

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man” politics. Unlike Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping who owned omnipotent political power due to their charisma and revolutionary credentials, both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao had to build their leadership on broad administrative experiences, patron-client ties and political compromises.

The profound shift in the source and legitimacy of leadership becomes even more salient for the emerging fifth generation of leaders. Many of the rising stars of the new generation share similarities in terms of leadership credentials, but differ significantly with respect to socio-political backgrounds and career paths.

The two candidateships (Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang) in the Political Bureau Standing Committee signify a new model for the CPC’s leadership succession, and Xi fully understands that even if he smoothly takes over the paramount leadership in the next term, he has to share the supreme power with Li and other rising stars to a larger extent than his predecessors.

Besides the two front-runners, another four “young” men in their 50s entered the Political Bureau in the 17th Party Congress in 2007. These six Political Bureau members have jointly formed the main part of a succession team expected to replace the fourth generation of leaders cored by Hu Jintao in 2012–13.

As none of them holds overwhelming political advantages over the others, more power-sharing with checks and balances and more pluralistic decision-making processes are expected to be seen inside the leadership of Xi’s era. Compared with previous handovers through appointing “heir-apparent” by charismatic leaders, such a collective leadership succession model fosters competition and outstanding performance among rising stars rather than low-profile styles of leadership.

As the first among equals in the next generation of CPC leaders, Xi himself has proved to be more high-profile than Hu Jintao during the candidacy period, because the collective leadership succession model imposes peer-pressure and fosters competition among rising stars. Overshadowed by Jiang Zemin, Hu played a very low-profile role in the political arena in the

47 Ibid.
48 They are Vice Premier Wang Qishan, Central Organisation Department Director Li Yuanchao, Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai and Guangdong Party Secretary Wang Yang.
early stage of his candidacy, rarely involved in eye-catching diplomatic or domestic activities.

Xi, however, not only took full charge of the worldwide-focused Beijing Olympics in his first year in the Political Bureau, but was also deeply engaged in thorny Hong Kong affairs in which local democratisation demands have always been a headache for the CPC. Beijing has allowed Hong Kong to elect its leader directly by 2017 and legislators by 2020, but details are yet to be worked out through the joint efforts of both Beijing and the special administrative region. Despite the immediate Olympic effect, Hong Kong’s pro-democracy camp still won more than a third of the seats in legislative elections in September 2008, retaining its veto power over major legislation. The Hong Kong issue could be the next critical test for Xi after the Olympics.

Increasing collective leadership has at least two implications for Xi. First he has to perform in certain areas to outrun his peers and justify his candidacy. Second, he also needs teamwork and support from his colleagues (some may be his rivals) for decision-making and policy-implementation when the governance of the world’s most populous country is evolving so rapidly.

Collective leadership is not only a mechanism of power-sharing through checks and balances among competing political camps, but also entails a more dynamic and pluralistic decision-making process through which political leaders can represent various social and geographic contingencies. The enhanced collective leadership will prevent Chinese elite politics from being a zero-sum game, and thus help to stabilise and institutionalise the succession issue. As more pluralistic politics with conflicting interests forestall extreme policies, they may also prolong the decision-making process and even cause policy deadlocks.

Fifth-Generation Leadership: Doctorates with Tough Experience

Since the establishment of the PRC, the CPC has experienced leadership reshufflings in four generations: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi as core of the first generation, Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun and Hu Yaobang representing the second generation, Jiang Zemin and Li Peng in the third generation and Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao as representatives of the fourth.

As “Red Army” veterans, the leaders in the first two generations had revolutionary war experience, and many of them were not well-educated. Most of them tended to accept orthodox communist teachings and were sceptical or even hostile towards liberal ideas from the western world. Deng Xiaoping, who had overseas study experience in the west, was an exception.

Quite a number of third-generation leaders including Jiang Zemin and Li Peng had overseas study experiences. Jiang and Zhu Rongji, typical technocrats that could talk with foreign guests in English, had an international outlook, which helped China join the World Trade Organisation and avoid confrontation with the United States. As for the fourth generation, Hu Jintao, who once served as a political tutor at Tsinghua University during Mao’s Cultural Revolution, tends to follow the current political guidelines with only minor adjustments and is loathe to taking politically-innovative actions.

The fifth generation of leaders, born after the founding of the PRC, had bitter experiences during the Cultural Revolution when most of them were sent to work in rural production teams (chadui) for “socialist re-education” and had to delay their university studies. Compared with Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao who smoothly finished their college studies before the Cultural Revolution, Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao’s early days were much harsher. They therefore understood more about the pains of the grassroots people and the weak points of the country’s bureaucratic system.50

Although their tertiary education was affected by the Cultural Revolution, they devoted great attention to postgraduate studies when they had already assumed important posts and when the culture of “diplomaism” started to dominate officialdom. Although some of the on-the-job postgraduate education may be questionable, it more or less provided those leaders with broader vision and more critical perspectives.51

In contrast to the third and fourth generation leadership, tagged by observers as “club of engineers”, the fifth generation earned their doctorates

50 During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Xi Jinping was sent to work in the rural production team at Yanchuan County, Shaanxi Province; Li Keqiang was in Fengyang County, Anhui Province; Li Yuanchao was in Dafeng County, Jiangsu Province.

51 From 1998 to 2002, Xi studied Marxist theory as a doctoral student in the Beijing-based Tsinghua University, where he received his doctorate at the age of 48. Through 1999 to 2002, however, he also served as Governor of Fujian Province, more than a thousand miles from Beijing.
from the humanities and social sciences. Li Keqiang, having a doctorate from the School of Economics at Beijing University, once co-authored a treatise titled “On the Tri-Structure of China’s Economy” and won the country’s top award in economics — the Sun Yefang Economic Prize.

Different from their predecessors, the fifth generation had closer exchanges with academia. Both Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao used to be students of Li Yining, a liberal Chinese economist who is famous for his advocacy of reform and free market economy.

As a doctoral student in law at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Tsinghua University, Xi Jinping was influenced by a liberal intellectual environment there. For years, the school has gathered many open-minded and liberal scholars such as Professor Li Qiang, Qin Hui and Sun Liping.

China’s leadership is in transition, from engineering technocrats to social science intellectuals. With more leaders majoring economics, law, political science and public administration, the way of governing the country is changing gradually. Leaders with backgrounds in the social sciences tend to better understand human nature and respect social diversity, while engineers are more focused on statistical growth and efficiency.

**Future Political Bureau: Dominated by Princelings and the CCYL**

Xi’s and Li’s rise as future China’s top leaders indicates an evident trend in China’s political arena: the offspring of veteran CPC leaders (princelings) and officials with CCYL working experience (tuan pai) have become the dominant force inside the ruling Party.

Among the current 25 Political Bureau members, 11 were born after 1944.\(^{52}\) They are very likely to stay in the Political Bureau or even enter the Standing Committee (Xi and Li are already inside the Standing Committee) in the next term.\(^{53}\)

Of those 11 members, seven, namely, Xi Jinping, Wang Qishan, Liu Yandong, Li Yuanchao, Zhang Dejiang, Yu Zhengsheng and Bo Xilai have

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\(^{52}\) These 11 promising members are Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, Wang Qishan, Liu Yunshan, Liu Yandong, Li Yuanchao, Wang Yang, Zhang Gaoli, Zhang Dejiang, Yu Zhengsheng and Bo Xilai.

\(^{53}\) There is an informal rule inside the Politburo that 68-year-olds-or-above members must retire during the reshuffle. The next Party Congress is expected to be held in 2012.
princiling background while five, namely Li Keqiang, Liu Yunshan, Liu Yandong, Li Yuanchao and Wang Yang have CCYL working experiences.

This suggests that after the 18th Party Congress in 2012, the Political Bureau Standing Committee, the de facto top decision-making body, will for the first time be halved by princelings and CCYL cadres. Princelings have special advantages not only because they have good political networks and connections, but also because they are loyalists to the CPC ruling and understand all kinds of formal and informal rules inside China’s officialdom.

Inside the CCYL bureaucracy, cadres are on average much younger than their peers in other government or Party departments because of the particularity of their work targeting youth. They are usually promoted at a faster speed and this kind of comparative advantage in age could become decisive in such a political system lacking elections and clear criteria for evaluating officials’ merits.

Competitions to some extent do exist between princelings and CCYL cadres, but they are mild and within control. The two groups have no ideological divergences and adopt similar supportive stances towards reform, opening-up as well as the one-party domination.

As understanding the CCYL system is a shortcut towards high-ranking posts, more princelings may join the CCYL to seek faster promotion. CCYL cadres also want to build more connections with princelings to expand their social networks for brighter political prospects. The two groups therefore have a sort of merging tendency in the long run, and speculation that their conflicts will undercut CPC’s ruling is groundless.

Inside the incumbent Political Bureau, Li Yuanchao and Liu Yandong are both princelings and CCYL cadres. Li, born in 1950 and with a doctorate from the Central Party School, is likely to head China’s parliament (National People’s Congress) after 2012 and become one of the troika together with Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang.

Although power is still highly concentrated at the top in today’s China, whoever ultimately succeeds usually cannot make a great deal of difference to the political system. The political game has been transformed from the conventional model of “winner-takes-all” to the new model of power balancing, which is non-zero-sum and entertains the possibility of multiple winners in terms of political outcomes.54

54 Bo Zhiyue, China’s Elite Politics: Political Transition and Power Balancing (Singapore: World Scientific, 2007), pp. 7–8.
Having been highly institutionalised and framed by compromises among factions, the succession issue is no longer a cause of political instability. Instead, it has turned itself into a technical problem on how to select successors through power-balancing and on how to train them. With the gradual improvement of the intra-Party democracy, the CPC expects to fully institutionalise its power succession.

Conclusion

With a special background and unique experiences, Xi’s rise as potential paramount leader provides some hints for analysis of current Chinese elite politics. First, his princeling background shows that family connections are still extremely important for political careers in China due to the top-down official-selection systems. Princelings have comparative advantages over their peers in terms of information and social relations, which often guarantee their access to the fast track that will finally lead to important political or economic positions. Princelings as a whole may not be united closely enough to form a political faction due to their diversified interest, but their impact upon China’s politics and economy has always been strong and should not be ignored.

Secondly, Xi has managed to keep his reputation clean, untainted by allegations of corruption that have been the downfall of many other CPC leaders. Having worked in the Fujian Province for 17 years, Xi himself was immune from Fujian’s “Yuanhua case”, China’s most notorious smuggling case in history. Rampant corruption has long been regarded by top Chinese leaders as one of the biggest threats to their ruling, so almost all officials caught in corruption cases find their political careers terminated there. Born into affluent families, politically-ambitious princelings usually do not have strong incentive to be involved in corruption.

Thirdly, Xi’s pro-business performance in the coastal provincial governments has earned him a high reputation among domestic and overseas business leaders. Since China’s accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001, its huge success in global trade has reinforced the mercantile mindset among incumbent Party leaders, who increasingly value the capability of developing the economy as an important index for selecting successors. As a “pro-business campaigner”, Xi seems at ease with the business world, having attended high-profile events such as the Davos Economic Summit and keeping good relations with US Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and other big names in finance and business circles.
In the context of succession politics, factional politics is becoming increasingly important in the post-Deng era. The most important factor is that after the age of strongman, the young generation of leaders needs political support. What Susan Shirk called “reciprocal accountability” can be applied to factional politics. Shirk argued that Chinese Communist politics is characterised by “reciprocal accountability”, namely, the leaders choose the officials and the officials choose the leaders. In any communist state including China, institutions are hierarchical in the sense that the top leaders of the Party appoint subordinate officials of the Party, government and military. However, on the other hand, according to the Party rules, the Central Committee (CC) has the authority to choose the Party leaders, and the CC consists of Party, government and military officials appointed by Party leaders. Therefore, “the leaders appoint the officials and the officials in the CC choose the leaders. Government officials are both the agents and the constituents of party leaders. The lines of accountability run in both directions, turning a hierarchical relationship into one of ‘reciprocal accountability.’”

However, as Shirk has cautioned, power is not shared equally between leaders and the CC under reciprocal accountability and top-down authority is much stronger than bottom-up authority. Also, while Shirk found that such a reciprocal relationship is embedded in formal institutions of the CPC, it is also embedded in China’s informal factional politics. While factions support their leaders, their leaders have to take care of factional interests.

Although factional politics is evident in China, it differs itself from traditional power succession and has to be conducted in the newly-emerging formal and informal institutions that prevent overwhelming domination of one faction, encourage factional accommodation and thus reduce serious power struggles. Building the so-called intra-Party democracy in recent years is an important part of the efforts to institutionalise elite politics. Xi’s success over Li shows that though Hu is in the paramount position, his single faction of the CCYL is still effectively checked and balanced by other non-CCYL key officials in the CPC. Hu has proactively built up his power base, namely the CCYL. However, he has to accommodate other leaders and their interests. He ousted Chen Liangyu, a major figure in the Shanghai gang, but accommodated other political figures who had close association with Jiang Zemin such as Jia Qinglin, Li Changchun and Zhang Gaoli. Also, while his power base is the

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CCYL, Hu is willing to accept other factions, especially the princelings such as Xi, into his administration. Most notably, as mentioned in this paper, the new members of the Political Bureau were collectively selected through voting. The CPC is interested in introducing some kind of voting system in two areas. The first is in selecting the appointments to major positions, besides opening up to more input from the public and the Party members, candidates are likely to be confirmed by a Party committee vote. The second is that major policies are to be subjected to a Party committee vote as well.\footnote{Zhengxu Wang and Yongnian Zheng, “Key Policy Outcomes of the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party”, Briefing Series, Issue 31, China Policy Institute, University of Nottingham, November 2007.}

As a forerunner, Xi faces huge pressures due to the vast attention paid to him. There are no guarantees that Xi will step into Hu Jintao’s shoes in 2012, and he has to pass many tests when being involved in state affairs, especially diplomatic activities. Those tests are also training programmes that help future successors become familiar with state affairs and diplomatic etiquette which are usually novel to local leaders. Despite his satisfactory handling of the Beijing Olympics, he was still not granted the important title of the CMC Vice Chairman following the CPC plenum, which indicated that his heir-apparent position has not been fully confirmed and he still needs to outperform his potential rivals in the Politburo. Despite all the efforts towards institutionalisation on the part of the Party leadership, the nature of elite politics will not change much and power struggles will continue. If Xi succeeds, he will become the first top leader with princeling background in PRC history. The new phenomena could become a harbinger of the political rise of princelings as a stratum when the CPC has been transforming itself from a revolutionary party into a ruling party.

Appendix: Brief Biography of Xi Jinping\footnote{Sources: Authors; Chinese Government’s official web portal at <http://english.gov.cn/2008-03/15/content_922965.htm> [1 July 2008].}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Vice State President of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>President of Central Party School</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Political Bureau Standing Committee Member of CPC Central Committee</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>17th CPC Central Committee Member</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>Member of the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee</td>
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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

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