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LEADERSHIP TRANSITION, INTRA-PARTY DEMOCRACY, AND INSTITUTION BUILDING IN CHINA

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Gang Lin

Abstract

Recent leadership transition in China was a mixture of institutional formalization and political personalization. Intra-party democracy has been conducted within the framework of one-party rule and guided by the predetermined principle of democratic centralism. Past choices of rules constrain China's institution building, while providing new opportunities for the reform elite.

The world's most populous nation has a new leader, Hu Jintao. His election in November 2002 as Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary and in March 2003 as Chinese president was the first smooth power transfer in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that was not prompted by natural death or political crisis. However, the re-election of former Party and state leader Jiang Zemin as Party Central Military Commission (CMC) chairman, and his continued influence in Chinese politics, has fomented outsiders' speculation as to who is actually at the core, if any, of China's new leadership. Many speculate that Jiang still utters a strong voice on critical policy issues through informal channels, following the codes of conduct established by China's former leader Deng Xiaoping, who gradually transferred power to younger leaders over several years. It is safe to say that leadership transition in China is far from sharply defined—or complete—in the absence of free and competitive elections.

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Prior to the 16th Party Congress held in November 2002, China's leaders had started "searching aggressively for a new set of principles and policies" to ensure its survival amid an increasingly market-oriented pluralistic society and a mounting identity crisis.¹ Consequently, the "institutionalization, formalization, and procedural routinization (*zhiduhua, guifanhua, chengxuhua*) of socialist democracy" have become the watchwords of China's new leaders in their long journey toward institution building (*zhidu jianshe*).² The new leadership apparently seeks to develop "intra-party democracy" (*dangnei minzhu*) without overhauling the existing one-party system. The leaders believe that "intra-party democracy is the life of the Party and plays an important exemplary and leading role in people's democracy."³ China's ongoing institution building and political reform, therefore, are contingent on the path of socialist democracy taken by the CCP several decades ago.

This article examines China's institution building from the perspective of path dependency. Following Douglass North, the term "institutions" is used to refer to the "rules of the game" in society, which include current laws and jurisprudence, accepted habits, and formal or informal codes of conduct.⁴ The concept of "path dependency," as used by Robin Cowan and Philip Gunby, emphasizes the impact of past choice of rules on current institution building.⁵ Using leadership transition and the development of intra-party democracy as two cases for study, this article attempts to demonstrate China's progress and difficulties in institution building. The questions to be examined include: What are the formal or informal rules guiding China's leadership transition? Are they changing all the time? What would be the new rules, if any, governing intra-party politics? Has intra-party democracy become a top priority in the new leaders' agenda for political reform? Will the Party resolve the tension between the principle of majority rule and that of democratic centralism (*minzhu jizhongzhi*)? What are the constraints of the old system on China's institution building and political reform?

1. Elisabeth Rosenthal, "China's Communists Try to Decide What They Stand for," *New York Times*, May 1, 2002.

2. Jiang Zemin, speech at the Central Party School, May 31, 2002, New Chinese News Agency, <<http://www.xinhuanet.com>>.

3. Jiang Zemin, *Report to the 16th National Party Congress* (November 8, 2002) [in Chinese] (Beijing: Remin chubanshe, 2002), p. 52.

4. Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

5. Robin Cowan and Philip Gunby, "Sprayed to Death: Path Dependency, Lock-in and Pest Control Strategies," *Economic Journal* 106:435 (May 1996), pp. 521-42.

Leadership Transition and Rule Making

The catastrophic 1966–76 Cultural Revolution and the resultant social chaos prompted the Chinese political elite to work to resolve the problem of over-concentration of power in one elderly person. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, China's reformers, led by Deng Xiaoping, who was purged twice (1966 and 1976) by Mao Zedong but came back to power when Deng was 73 years old, have tried to abolish the life-tenure system for Party leaders. Consequently, adoption of age and term limits for Party and state officials, and reliance on knowledge and expertise as criteria for selecting cadres, have been practiced, incrementally, in areas from the periphery to the upper level of power. At the center of power, Deng became China's de facto paramount leader, while Hua Guofeng, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Jiang Zemin served consecutively as the nominal top leader of the Party, with the title of chairman or general secretary. In contrast to Deng's dominance of Chinese politics for near two decades, none of the others—except for Jiang—finished his *full* term.⁶ It was only after Deng gradually faded from the center stage of Chinese politics in 1994 that Jiang consolidated his authority and closed the gap between formal and informal power.⁷ During the Deng era, political succession did not involve a life-or-death struggle among the Party elite, and ideological and policy disputes were much less fierce than those during the Mao era. These preexisting rules of the game established a set of parameters for leadership transition from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, providing both constraints and opportunities for political actors in the new round of the power game.

1. Age and Term Limits: Formal and Informal Rules

The question of whether Jiang would retire from the general secretaryship after his two full terms of service (1992–2002, discounting the three-year transition period from 1989 to 1992) stimulated speculation among overseas China watchers prior to the 16th Congress. Although the PRC presidency, the National People's Congress (NPC) chairmanship, and the State Council premiership have been constitutionally subject to the two-term limit since 1982, and a mandatory retirement age of 65 has been applied to ministerial

6. Hua Guofeng gave his chairmanship to Hu Yaobang one year earlier than the 12th Congress (1982), Hu Yaobang left his office prior to the 13th Party Congress (1987), and Zhao Ziyang was replaced by Jiang Zemin in 1989, three years before the 14th Party Congress (1992).

7. The fourth plenary of the 14th Central Committee, convened in September 1994, announced that leadership transition from the second generation (Deng) to the third (Jiang) had been completed. For a discussion of formal and informal power being brought back into close alignment by Jiang, see Lowell Dittmer, "Chinese Leadership Succession to the Fourth Generation," in Gang Lin and Xiaobo Hu, eds., *China after Jiang* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press,) p. 33.

and provincial officials during the past decade, no such age and term limits were specified as a *formal* rule for national Party leaders. At the 15th Party Congress in 1997, an *informal* age limit of 70 was applied to the election of Politburo members when Qiao Shi (71), Liu Huaqing (81), Yang Baibing (77), and Zou Jiahua (71) retired from the Politburo, with the only exception for Jiang, who was then 71. No term limit for Politburo members was implemented at the Party congress, however. Li Peng managed to stay on the Politburo Standing Committee for his third term, and Tian Jiyun and Li Tieying were also exempted from retirement after their two full terms on the Politburo.

There is some reason to believe that *both* age and term limits were informally applied to the leadership transition at the 16th Congress. Hu Jintao's succession as Party general secretary and PRC president thereafter indicated that the general secretaryship, the highest Party position that has been attached to the state presidency since 1993, was inaudibly subjected to both age and two-term limits for the first time in PRC history. Moreover, all incumbent Politburo members who were over 70 retired from the Politburo without exception, including Jiang Zemin (76), Li Peng (74), Zhu Rongji (74), Wei Jianxing (71), Li Lanqing (70), Ding Guangen (73), Tian Jiyun (73), Chi Haotian (73), Zhang Wannian (74), Jiang Chunyun (72), and Qian Qichen (74). In addition, Li Ruihuan (68) and Li Tieying (66) also retired, even though they were under 70. Some China watchers interpreted Li Ruihuan's retirement as the result of a power showdown between him and Jiang; a more likely reason is that Li had served on the Politburo Standing Committee for two full terms. Likewise, while Li Tieying seemed not to have reached the informal age limit, he left the Politburo, apparently because of the term limit.

Evidently, the informal two-term limit was not applicable to Politburo members who would be promoted into higher ranks. For example, Hu Jintao became general secretary after serving on the Politburo Standing Committee for two full terms. Likewise, Wu Bangguo and Wen Jiabao joined the Politburo at the 14th Congress (Wu as a full member, Wen as an alternate), and were promoted into the Politburo Standing Committee after serving two full terms. Six other members of the new Politburo Standing Committee (Jia Qinglin, Zeng Qinghong, Huang Ju, Wu Guangzheng, Li Changchun, and Luo Gan) had been on the Politburo for one full term before they were promoted. All nine members, except for Luo Gan (67), were under 65 years old when they were elected or reelected to the Politburo Standing Committee, and are likely to serve for two terms, as they will be less than 70 at the 17th Party Congress scheduled for 2007.

While the age limit for national Party leaders—which refers to Politburo members (including regular members and Standing Committee members)—is 70, members of the Central Committee are generally not supposed to be over

65. While there are a few exceptions on the new 16th Central Committee, all of them concurrently served as state leaders (as vice chairman of the NPC, or vice chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)), thus extending the age limit to 70. In other words, the age limit is more generous for national Party leaders and state leaders than for provincial and ministerial officials, but informal rules of the game do exist.

The incremental practice of age and term limits for Party and government officials from lower levels to upper levels reflected a clear path dependency—leadership transition is constrained by past choice of rules to end the life-tenure system. This does not suggest that political actors have to follow historical precedent without modification. They can still make special cases or reinterpret the rules under certain circumstances, resulting in a mixture of institutional formalization and political personalization. For example, abolishing the life-tenure system was a rule chosen by the reform elite led by Deng, but Deng enjoyed considerable leeway to play with the rule. Although Deng, at the age of over 70, did not take the Party chairmanship, he could still exert supreme power in different capacities, such as Party vice chairman (1977–82), Politburo Standing Committee member (1982–87), Central Advisory Commission director (1982–87), and CMC chairman (1981–89). When Deng retired from the Politburo Standing Committee and the Central Committee at the 13th Congress in 1987, an internal regulation was stipulated, giving Deng the final say on critical issues. After Deng officially retired from the CMC chairmanship in 1989, he still wielded informal influence for several years, spotlighted by his 1992 trip around southern China. However, the basic rules of abolishing the life-tenure system, as well as those of age and term limits, are compelling and point to the direction of future development.

2. A “Grace Period” for the Retiring Jiang

Except for the CMC chairmanship, informal age and term limits were also applied to military leadership selection at the 16th Congress. Among eight CMC members, Jiang Zemin, aged 76, maintained his chairmanship after two full terms of service, enjoying a grace period prior to his full retirement, apparently overdue. Hu Jintao continued to serve as CMC vice chairman (starting in 1999). Cao Gangchuan (67) and Guo Boxiong (66), who joined the CMC in 1998 and 1999, respectively, acquired vice chairmanships. Xu Caihou (58), who joined the CMC in 1999 as well, retained his membership. In addition, three new faces were added to the CMC: Liang Guanglie, Liao Xilong, and Li Jinai. At the same time, Xu, Liang, Liao, and Li, respectively, took charge of the PLA's four headquarters—the General Political Department, the General Staff Department, the General Logistics Department, and the General Armaments Department.

Jiang's retention of the CMC chairmanship while giving up the general secretaryship suggests that it is more difficult to transfer supreme military power in China from one supreme leader to another. Although the Chinese military is not directly involved in Party and government affairs under normal circumstances, it usually plays a key role in case of emergency, or under unique conditions.⁸ For example, Mao Zedong successfully mobilized military support before initiating the Cultural Revolution, which was stopped 10 years later, ironically by military intervention and the arrest of the "Gang of Four," a radical faction headed by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing. Following past experience that "power comes from the barrel of a gun" and the principle of "the Party commands the gun," China's supreme leaders understand very well that control of the military is the most important means for power. Because the CMC is the source of great power, those who have this power—Mao, Deng, and Jiang—have all been reluctant to give it up. During the Mao era, the CMC chairmanship was closely attached to the Party chairmanship; in fact, Mao gained military leadership as early as 1935, even before he became the Party's top leader. After Deng became China's paramount leader, he took the CMC chairmanship from Mao's designated successor Hua Guofeng in 1981, arranging for Hu Yaobang to succeed Hua as the Party leader. Although Deng retired from other Party positions in 1987, he retained the CMC chairmanship for two more years and remained China's *de facto* military as well as civil leader between 1989 and 1994.

Deng's patriarchal reign over China from the CMC chairmanship (as well as from the Central Advisory Commission directorship) in the 1980s has far-reaching implications for China's leadership transition and Party-military relations. First, the traditional principle of "the Party commands the gun" no longer requires that the *de jure* Party leader concurrently serve as military chief. Second, a relevant regulation in the Party constitution was revised so that the CMC chairman does not need to be a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, the Politburo, or the Central Committee. Third, because of Deng's paramount status in the Party, military leadership is perceived as the core of political power in China. Consequently, Deng's detaching of the CMC chairmanship from the Party headship not only provided an institutional precedent for Jiang to follow but also helped create the image that Jiang is still China's paramount leader. Although Jiang's retirement as general secretary enhanced the informal rule of subjecting Party leaders to age and term limits, his retention of the CMC chairmanship has highlighted the uniqueness of military power transfer in China. While other CMC members who were over the age of 70 obediently retired at the 16th Congress, routin-

8. Hu Wei, *Zhengfu Guocheng* [Process of government] (Zhejiang: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1998), p. 94.

izing the existing informal rules, Jiang's clinging to power has eclipsed any such institutionalized process of leadership transition in the military.

Civil-military relations in China are far from being clearly sorted out. According to the 1982 Constitution, the State CMC directs the armed forces of the country, and the State CMC chairman, elected by the National People's Congress, is responsible to the NPC and its Standing Committee. At the same time, the Party Constitution shows that the Party's CMC is the highest military leading organ. In fact, the two CMCs are different institutions in name, but have the same personnel. This design is a mix of the Party's intention to maintain "absolute control of the army" and its attempts to rule military affairs through legal procedures and state organs. However, neither chairmanship of the two institutions is subject to the term limit.

The CMC organizational structure is less formalized as well. Assignment of personnel to the Party's CMC is decided (*juding*) by the Central Committee, presumably by affirmative hand raising—rather than secret voting—by the Central Committee members. At the 14th Congress, the Central Committee approved seven members for the CMC, with Jiang Zemin as its chairman, Generals Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zheng as two vice chairmen, and Chi Haotian (minister for national defense), General Zhang Wannian, Yu Yongbo (director of the General Political Department), and Fu Quanyou (chief of General Staff Department) as other members. Three years later, the 14th Central Committee, at its fifth plenum, decided to promote Chi and Zhang as vice chairmen, and added Wang Ke (director of the General Logistics Department) and General Wang Ruilin to the CMC, for a total of nine members. The number of CMC members approved by the 15th Central Committee in 1997 was reduced to seven, resulting from the retirement of Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zheng, but increased to eleven only two years later. Adding new faces to the CMC *between* two Party congresses may have served as a buffer to slow the leadership transition in the army *during* the congress period, but it also reveals the difficulty of a straightforward power transfer in the military.

It is unclear how long Jiang will keep the CMC chairmanship. The unusual even number (eight) of CMC members suggests that Jiang may serve as a transitional figure.⁹ If Deng's precedent is instructive, Jiang's grace period may not last more than two years. China watchers cannot help but wonder, during this transition, who in fact will prove to be China's supreme leader,

9. One can speculate that Jiang's name might have been added to the predetermined seven-member list of the CMC at the last moment. This speculation is supported by some reliable stories that during the 16th Party Congress, high-ranking military officials strongly demanded that Jiang stay in the CMC. This does not mean that Jiang was really prepared to retire before the Congress. However, by not listing his name in the original list, the retirement could be justified of six senior CMC members who were over 70, such as Chi Haotian, Zhang Wannian, Yu Yongbo, Fu Quanyou, Wang Ke, and Wang Ruilin.

Jiang or Hu. Such speculation was encouraged by the fact that various official Chinese media ranked China's new leaders inconsistently right after the 16th Congress. While most official media, including the *People's Daily* and the Chinese website of Xinhua News Agency, still ranked Jiang as China's number one leader, Xinhua's English website placed Hu Jintao and the other eight members of the Politburo Standing Committee on the top list of Who's Who of Party Leadership, followed by members of the Politburo and the CMC, and secretaries of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission.¹⁰

This inconsistency vividly demonstrates China's incomplete progress toward formalization of its leadership transition. Formally, the Politburo and its Standing Committee, ritually elected by the Party's Central Committee, exert the authority of the latter (meeting only several days yearly) when it is not in session. Members of the Politburo and its Standing Committee therefore are considered to be China's top leaders, according to the Party's institutional design. Informally, the retiring Jiang is perceived as China's most senior leader—his seminal idea of “Three Represents” (*sange daibiao*, which means that the CCP should “always represent the developmental requirement of China's advanced productive forces, represent the developing orientation of China's advanced culture, and represent the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people”) has been enshrined in the Party Constitution, and several of his protégés have taken strategic posts within the Politburo Standing Committee.¹¹ Reportedly, in a secret acceptance speech after being appointed the Party's boss, Hu pledged that he would “seek instruction and listen to the views” of Jiang on important matters, similar to what the Party did for Deng at the 13th Congress.¹²

Such an arrangement has rekindled China watchers' memory that Deng, two years after he left the Politburo Standing Committee but kept the CMC chairmanship, played a critical role during the 1989 Tiananmen incident that forced the dismissal of his successor, Zhao Ziyang. Despite the similarities of political arrangements in 1987 and 2002, leadership transition in general, and party-military relations in particular, are less personalized today than 15 years ago. First, Deng's prestige within the military came from his longtime revolutionary experience. By contrast, Jiang's connections with the army began only when he assumed the CMC chairmanship after he became Party general secretary. As Party general secretary, Hu can legitimately take lead-

10. See *People's Daily*, November 16, 2002; New Chinese News Agency, <<http://www.xinhuanet.com>>, accessed on November 16, 2002, and <<http://www.chinaview.cn>>.

11. The essence of “Three Represents” is to redefine the Party as an ever-innovating organization corresponding to China's ongoing socioeconomic and cultural changes, with its ruling constituency (*zhizheng jichu*) being expanded from the working class to the public.

12. Erik Eckholm, “China's New Leader Promises Not to Sever Tether to Jiang,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2002.

ership over the military. According to official media, the Politburo convened a meeting in summer 2003, discussing military affairs without Jiang's attendance. This suggests that Party-military relations have been reshaped along the predetermined principle of "the Party commands the gun." Second, Deng's tremendous influence in Chinese politics was enhanced by a group of members of the "Old Guard."¹³ To the contrary, Jiang's power base is limited to the CMC, and his protégés on the Politburo Standing Committee seem to work with Hu more cooperatively than competitively.¹⁴ Third, Hu's formal power, not only as general secretary but also as PRC president, has not only given him great visibility in dealing with foreign and domestic affairs (SARS in particular), but also has helped him maintain a good working relationship with Premier Wen Jiabo. This distinguishes Hu from Zhao Ziyang, whose political showdown with Premier Li Peng was partly attributable to the practice of "separating the Party from the government" (*dangzheng fenkai*) in the 1980s, to which this essay will now turn. In brief, Jiang's grace period is unlikely to be accompanied by a fierce power struggle among the Party elite at the juncture of leadership transition.

3. Anchoring Party Leadership to the Government

Another unwritten norm adopted in the recent leadership transition is the so-called "*jiandang yuzheng*" (anchoring Party leadership to the government).¹⁵ This norm was applied visibly at the Eighth National People's Congress in 1993, when General Secretary Jiang Zemin assumed the PRC presidency and the other three key members of the Politburo Standing Committee—Li Peng, Qiao Shi, and Li Ruihuan—took office, respectively, as premier, NPC chairman, and CPPCC chairman.¹⁶ The Ninth NPC in 1998 and Tenth NPC in 2003 followed this rule, with top Party leaders currently holding the key government positions. Meanwhile, in 24 of China's 31 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, the Party secretary concurrently serves as chairman of the standing committee of the provincial people's congress.¹⁷ In most

13. This group, besides Deng himself, includes PRC President Yang Shangkun, Vice President Wang Zhen, former PRC President Li Xiannian, former NPC chairman Peng Zhen, Central Advisory Commission (CAC) Director Chen Yu, and CAC Vice Directors Bo Yibo and Song Renqiong.

14. Cheng Li, "Jiang's Game and Hu's Advantages," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, November 21, 2002, <<http://www.fpif.org>>.

15. Zhu Guanglei, *Dangdai Zhongguo Zhengfu Guocheng* [Process of government in contemporary China] (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1997), p. 77.

16. Prior to 1993, Politburo member Yang Shangkun served as PRC president, Politburo Standing Committee member Li Peng served as premier, Politburo member Wan Li served as NPC chairman, and former PRC President Li Xiaonian served as CPPCC chairman.

17. Seven provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions where the Party secretary does not serve as provincial People's Congress chair are Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Hubei,

ministries of the government's State Council, the head of the Party Group (*dangzu*) concurrently serves as minister.

This norm is consistent with the Party's tradition and ruling principle. After the establishment of the PRC, Party Chairman Mao Zedong concurrently served as state head between 1949 and 1959, Party Vice Chairman Liu Shaoqi served as NPC chairman from 1954 to 1959, and Zhou Enlai, another vice chairman, retained the premiership until he died in 1976. One of the most dramatic institutional changes in the history of the PRC was the abolition of the state presidency during the Cultural Revolution. While the state presidency was reinstated in 1983, it did not resume its supreme status until 1993, when it was institutionally reattached to the Party's top leadership.

"Separating the Party from the government" was another practice associated with the principle of one-party rule, which can be traced to 1959, when Mao gave the PRC presidency to Liu Shaoqi and kept the Party and CMC chairmanships for himself. With this arrangement, Mao remained the paramount leader on the "second front," while Liu, as the Party's number two leader and state president, took care of day-to-day state affairs on the "first front." The "first front," according to Mao, referred to the sphere where policies were implemented, and the "second front" to the area where important policy guidelines were decided. However, the institutional tension between the Party chairmanship and PRC presidency quickly resulted in Liu's dismissal and abolition of the state presidency. Mao's second designated successor, Lin Biao, attempted to restore the presidency during the Cultural Revolution, but this only made Mao suspicious of him, and contributed to Lin's sudden downfall in 1971. After the Cultural Revolution, Deng tried to separate the Party's role from that of the government. However, functional ambiguity between the general secretaryship and premiership created power conflicts and institutional friction throughout the 1980s; this has been considerably reduced since the state presidency was attached to the Party general secretaryship.

Both practices of "anchoring Party leadership to the government" and "separating the Party from the government" follow the Chinese regime's general principle of one-party rule. Their alternating appearance in PRC history reveals the political elite's capability for developing different practices from the same principle. During the Mao era, there were no term limits for Party chairman, state president, or premier. Under these circumstances, separating the Party from the government between 1959 and 1966 could help dilute

Guangdong, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Interestingly, Party secretaries in these localities, except for Tibet, are all Politburo members, too busy to have an additional job in their domain. See New Chinese News Agency, *Local Government*, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-02/20/content_476046.htm>, accessed on April 15, 2003.

Mao's radical ideas and his absolute dominance of Chinese politics.¹⁸ Mao's manipulation of power and his radicalism, however, resulted in the chaotic Cultural Revolution, when the Party greatly enhanced its unitary leadership (*yiyuanhua lingdao*) and the government simply became the Party's instrument for political campaigns, propaganda, and popular mobilization. After Mao, the state presidency and premiership are subject to two-term limits according to the 1982 Constitution. However, no term limits for Party leaders have ever been written into the Party Constitution. Interestingly, owing to the political ups-and-downs throughout the 1980s, the three formal Party leaders, Hua Guofeng (1976–81), Hu Yaobang (1981–87), and Zhao Ziyang (1987–89), all failed to finish their full terms. Zhao Ziyang yielded his premiership to Li Peng in 1988, whereas the state presidency was transferred from Li Xiannian (1983–88) to Yang Shangkun (1988–93). Because of political tranquility among the leadership in the 1990s, Jiang Zemin finished his two full terms as both Party general secretary (1992–2002) and state president (1993–2003). Had the general secretaryship not been attached to the state presidency, Jiang might have been able to keep his position as Party boss. From the perspective of leadership transition, “anchoring Party leadership to the government” has informally subjected the Party leader to the two-term limit, first formalized in the governmental sphere in the 1982 Constitution. Furthermore, while “anchoring Party leadership to the government” in the 1950s served to enhance Mao's monopoly over Chinese politics, its resurrection in the 1990s helped to domesticate the Party to gradually routinized state procedures demanded by a growing market economy. For example, since the 16th Congress, China's official media has frequently reported issues discussed at the regular Politburo meetings, as well as activities of Party leadership small groups that were once unavailable to outsiders.

To summarize, while Mao exerted both formal and informal supreme power of the Party to the end of his life, Deng succeeded Mao as China's paramount leader without taking the nominal number-one position of the Party. With Deng's endorsement, Jiang acquired both the formal number-one position (starting from 1989) and informal supreme power (starting from 1994), retaining them until his retirement from the Party general secretaryship and state presidency. However, Jiang's retention of political influence through the CMC chairmanship, following Deng's precedent in 1987, recreated a gap between formal and informal power that was closed about 10 years ago. The abolition of the life-tenure system for Party leaders started from the sphere of formal power, but failed to move on in the area of informal power characterized by personal manipulation. Without a multiparty system al-

18. Xiaobo Hu, *Political Economy of Decentralization and Resource Allocation in Contemporary China* (dissertation, Duke University, December 1994).

lowing for electoral competition for government positions, leadership transition in China is less transparent than that in liberal democracies. While the PRC Constitution does stipulate the two-term limit for key government positions, the informal rules of age and term limits for Party leaders are yet to be formalized and written into the Party Constitution, and military-power transfer is even less predictable. For the same reason, the problems of the Party's dominance over government and the overlapping of the functions of the Party with those of the government cannot be really resolved. Under such an institutional framework, China's future development inexorably hinges on the Party's ruling style and capability. Thus, it is reasonable to keep a close watch on China's ongoing "Party-building" program, which is aimed at redefining the Party's identity and enhancing its ruling capability through marginal political reform.

Intra-Party Democracy: Institutional Innovations and Constraints

1. Three Represents, Two Vanguard, and One Developmental Party

Intra-party democracy, the institutional dimension of party building, is closely associated with the Party's theoretical innovations regarding the concept of the "Three Represents." In response to the current wave of global economic interdependence and political democratization, the CCP has tried to "keep pace with the times" and perpetuate its lifespan by transforming itself from a revolutionary party into a ruling party, or what I call "a developmental party." It attempts to accumulate credit from building a "well-off" society by directly managing government affairs, in what I would conceptualize as "governmentalization of the Party" (*zhengdang zhengfu hua*), and also seeks to increase its ruling capability by developing intra-party democracy. First, in its search for new ruling legitimacy, the Party claims its credentials in representing "the advanced productive forces," promoting China's economic development, and rejuvenating the Chinese nation. Moreover, to expand its ruling constituencies, the Party redefines itself as not only a vanguard of the working class, but also a vanguard of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation. By juxtaposing "two vanguards" that are not mutually exclusive concepts, the Party has actually diluted its identification with the working class and moved itself in the direction of a "party of all the people" (*quanmindang*).¹⁹ Further, to find a theoretical justification for promoting intra-party democracy in particular and people's democracy in general, the concept of "political civilization" has been fashioned, after the existing "two

19. Joseph Fewsmith, "The Sixteenth Party Congress: A Preview," in *China Leadership Monitor* (Hoover Institution, 2002), <<http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org>>.

civilizations” in CCP terminology, “material civilization” and “spiritual civilization.”²⁰

These theoretical innovations can also be explored from the perspective of path dependency, which has been applied in the field of social sciences not so much to ideological development as to institution building and historical evolution. Ideological evolution in China, however, is also constrained by past choice of pattern in theoretical discourse. Despite Beijing’s de-emphasis on communist doctrine for day-to-day policymaking for more than two decades, communism is still held by the Party as a remote ideal. The impact of the preexisting ideological framework on current theoretical modifications is unavoidable. First, “advanced productive forces” and “advanced productive relations” are a pair of concepts in Marxist political economics. During the Mao era, advanced productive relations were conceptually equal to the state ownership that was assumed to be the best means for economic development. By using Marxist terminology but shifting their theoretical focus from productive relations to productive forces, the reform elite after Mao attempted to accommodate different ownership systems while maintaining the “sacred” Marxist doctrine on the surface. Second, the CCP, in the past, was defined as the vanguard of the working class, which is part of the Chinese people. The usage of the “two vanguards” exactly reflects the Party’s dilemma between retaining its traditional identity and developing new ruling constituencies. Third, while “political civilization” is a new concept created by the reform elite, one can still find conceptual linkage between political civilization and material and spiritual civilizations. Some Chinese scholars even point out the linkage between “Three Represents” and “three civilizations”—material civilization related to China’s advanced productive forces, spiritual civilization related to China’s advanced culture, and political civilization related to the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.

In brief, the “Three Represents” campaign constitutes a theoretical dimension of ongoing Party building. If the idea of “two vanguards” has moved the CCP toward the direction of a developmental party for the whole people, the new concept of “political civilization” is revealing Beijing’s flexibility and bottom line in its search for intra-party democracy.

2. *Institutional Innovations*

Chinese reformers realize that as the CCP has been transformed from a revolutionary party of the proletariat into a developmental party for the whole of

20. “Political civilization” refers to advanced political ideas, political institutions, and civilized political behavior. For a more detailed discussion of “Three Represents,” “two vanguards,” and “political civilization,” see Gang Lin, “Ideology and Political Institutions for a New Era,” in Gang Lin and Xiaobo Hu, eds., *China after Jiang*, pp. 40–46.

the Chinese people, the Party must change its ruling style and enhance its governing capability. The growing diversification of Party membership, as well as of Chinese society, calls for interest coordination and integration within the Party and poses a new challenge to the post-Jiang leadership's ruling style that is guided by Leninist democratic centralism. Constrained by the past choice of rules, the Party elite is apparently searching for institutional innovations without overhauling the existing one-Party system. Intra-party democracy has thus become the Party's priority in its institution building. Some Party officials, including leading members at the Central Party School, have started to search for mechanisms to promote intra-party "democracy," even extolling the virtues of a so-called "Third Way"—an institutional compromise between single-party authoritarianism and multiparty democracy.²¹ Major measures being adopted or under consideration include expanding power-sharing among the Party elite, developing a division of power within the Party, and allowing limited intra-party electoral competition.²²

Power sharing among the party elite. Collective leadership has been one of the important principles of the Party. Both Mao and Deng emphasized that the first secretary of any Party committee should not have a final say on important policy issues, which should be decided by all committee members according to the principle of democratic centralism.²³ Nevertheless, both men ended up as patriarchal leaders who together dominated Chinese politics for half a century because they failed to institutionalize Party committees as policymaking organs through developing sufficient meeting regulations and operational procedures. The Central Committee has functioned only symbolically throughout PRC history. Real decisions are made by the Politburo, particularly its Standing Committee, headed by the core leader.²⁴ Similarly, standing committee members (*changwei*) of Party committees at the local level, especially Party secretaries, are the real decision-makers in their domains. In view of the political corruption resulting from power concentration in only a few hands, the Party has chosen some local Party committees as test sites for improvement of policymaking mechanisms. Measures include increasing meeting time periods and leaving important decisions to the full

21. Jeremy Page, "China Opens up Political Debate to Strengthen Party," Reuters News, July 20, 2002.

22. The following seven paragraphs, except for one, are a summary of this author's earlier discussion of intra-party democracy, but with significant revisions and supplements. See Gang Lin, "Ideology and Political Institutions for a New Era," in Gang Lin and Xiaobo Hu, eds., *China after Jiang*, pp. 46–60.

23. Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Remin chubanshe, 1986), pp. 820–21; Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), pp. 331, 341.

24. Hu Wei, *Zhengfu Guocheng*, pp. 87–88.

membership of these Party committees, rather than solely to the “standing members” (*changwei*) or secretaries. For example, in April 2002, the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee selected three Party leaders at the municipal level by a secret vote among all committee members, and in December, the Shandong Provincial Party Committee also selected 17 municipal Party leaders by vote.²⁵ However, it is difficult to transform the Central Committee into a real policy-making institution, as most of its members are scattered nationwide, serving as local Party or government leaders. This membership structure, following precedent norms, does not suggest that the Central Committee will improve its function significantly in the foreseeable future.

Another institutional innovation regarding power sharing among the Party elite is to improve the functions of Party congresses, which have been theoretically defined as the highest power organ of the Party. Chinese political scientists such as Liao Gailong and Gao Fang advocated as early as the 1980s that the National Party Congress return to an earlier CCP norm by convening its annual meetings.²⁶ In the late 1980s, counties under the jurisdiction of Jiaojiang city in Zhejiang Province convened annual meetings of local Party congresses.²⁷ Prior to the 16th National Party Congress, some scholars and experts at the Central Party School and other universities also proposed that Party congresses at all levels should convene once a year (*lianhuizhi*). Their main arguments were: (1) the Party congress system should be as essential to the Party as the NPC system is to the state; (2) Party congresses should convene annual meetings, and operating procedures and regulations must be improved to ensure good discussion; and (3) at any given level, Party congresses are the most important political bodies, with power to decide crucial issues and supervise other Party organizations.²⁸ Other scholars believe that the main function of Party congresses is to elect Party committees. The priority on strengthening Party congresses is therefore designed to improve their electoral functions by providing more candidates than positions to Party

25. New Chinese News Agency, *Minzhu Zhengzhi Xin Pianzhang* [A new chapter in democracy], October 20, 2002, <<http://www.xinhuanet.com>>; Duoweinews, December 19, 2002, <<http://www.duoweinews.com>>.

26. Gao Fang, *Zhengzhixue yu Zhengzhi Tizhi Gaige* [Political science and reform of political institutions] (Beijing: Zhongguo guji chubanshe, 2002), pp. 411–13, 416–18, 952–53.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 919.

28. Jin Taijun, “Xinshiji Zhongguo Zhengzhi Gaige Ruogan Zhongda Wenti de Sikao” [Thought on several important issues regarding China’s political reform in the new century], *Zhongguo Zhengzhi* [Chinese Politics], no. 11 (2001), p. 30; Wang Changjiang et al., *Xinshiji Dang de Jianshe de Weida Gangling—Xuexi Jiang Zemin Zongshuji Qiyi Jianghua Fudao* [Great platform for party construction in the new century—Instruction to studying general secretary Jiang Zemin’s “July 1” speech] (Beijing: Zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 2001), pp. 126–30.

congress delegates, so that delegates can have free choice in electing committee members. As a compromise, the Party decided at its 16th Congress to try out the system of Party congresses with regular annual meetings in more cities and counties and to “explore ways to give play to the role of delegates when Party congresses are not in session.”²⁹ It remains to be seen how the Party will redefine the functions of Party congresses in the years to come.

Division of power within the party. Historically, the CCP’s ruling system was designed according to the Marxist-Leninist principle of “combining legislative and executive into one organ” (*yixing heyi*) to ensure power concentration and political efficiency. Prior to the 16th Congress, some experts in China proposed discarding the idea of *yixing heyi* and establishing check-and-balance mechanisms among the Party committee, Party executive committee (a new institution to be established according to the proposal), and Party discipline inspection committee (DIC).³⁰ The three committees, each with its own different personnel, would be responsible to the Party congress. When the Party congress is adjourned, the Party committee would lead the executive committee and the DIC. The Party committee would make decisions based on the principle of collective leadership. The executive committee would implement policies, giving responsibility to the leading cadre (*shouzhang fuzezhi*), for the sake of efficiency. To increase the authority of the DIC, its members could attend and speak at the executive committee’s meetings, review documents issued by the executive committee, and watch policy implementation; the DIC’s personnel should be appointed vertically, free of control of the Party committee and executive committee within the same domain.

Despite these innovative ideas, one can still find the institutional linkage between this proposal and the old norm favoring power concentration. First, the plan proposes that Party committees lead executive committees and DICs when Party congresses are adjourned. In other words, the proposal still assumes that Party committees are superior to executive committees and DICs. Second, the main function of DICs is supposed to be watching executive committees, rather than Party committees. In other words, the proposed relations between Party committees on the one hand and executive committees and DICs on the other hand would be an institutional combination of vertical control and parallel checks and balances.

It is unclear whether China’s new Party leadership will put this kind of proposal in its reform agenda. In view of the Party’s tradition of democratic

29. Jiang Zemin, “Report to the 16th National Party Congress.”

30. Li Yongzhong, “Guanyu Gaige Dangwei ‘Yixing Heyi’ Lingdao Tizhi de Sikao” [On reforming the leading system of “combining executive and legislative functions into one organ” within party committees], *Tizhi Gaige* [System Reform], no. 4 (2002), pp. 29–30.

centralism and its current experiment with reform of the Party committee system, a more likely scenario is that plenary sessions of Party committees will become major venues for collective decision-making, while standing members of Party committees will be responsible for policy implementation. In other words, a division of power might occur within a local Party committee following the norm of “fusion of power,” but not between two parallel Party organizations.

Introducing electoral mechanisms into the party. Electoral competition was absent during the Mao era. It was not until the early 1980s that the reform elite under Deng began to allow limited electoral competition within the Party. At the 12th Congress in 1982, delegates were allowed to add names to, and delete names from, the list of nominees for the Central Committee provided by the leadership.³¹ At the 13th Congress in 1987, the election rules for the Central Committee were further reformed to require more nominees than the number of seats (*cha e xuanju*). With the reform, the number of candidates for membership in the Central Committee must exceed the number of slots by 5%.³² The marginal difference in number between candidates and seats, plus the Party’s control of the nomination process, has significantly limited the voters’ free choice and veto power, but it nevertheless prevents the most disliked nominees from being elected to the Central Committee. For instance, the Party mobilized delegates to make sure that some candidates would be elected at the 15th Congress, but delegates intentionally voted for others, forcing the Party to discard this practice at the next Congress. In selecting preliminary candidates for the new 16th Central Committee, the Party took several rounds of consultations to shorten the name list from 514 to 375, but only 32,200 Party heads at the county level and above were involved in recommending possible candidates and it was the Politburo Standing Committee that finally decided the list. During the 16th Congress, delegates, who were grouped into 38 delegations, preliminarily elected 198 full members out of 208 candidates and 158 alternate members out of 167 candidates. When delegates as a whole formally elected the Central Committee on November 14, 2002, all candidates preliminarily elected by the 38 delegations were elected to the Central Committee.³³ As can be seen from the procedures for (s)electing Central Committee members at the 16th Congress, Party leaders obviously prefer coordination and consensus building to

31. James Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Politics: An Introduction* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 81.

32. Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 73.

33. He Ping and Liu Siyang, “Dang de Xinyijie Zhongyang Weiyuanhui Danshengji” [The birth of the new central committee of the CCP], November 14, 2002, <<http://www.xinhuanet.com>>.

electoral competition and majority votes. The “margin of elimination” (*chae*) remains the same (5%) as 15 years ago, when the rule of “more nominees than the number of seats” was first introduced into the Party. Also, this rule has not been applied to the (s)elections of Politburo members and higher Party and state leaders, although some scholars in China argue that even the Party general secretary should be subject to real elections.

Electoral competition for Party positions is more significant at the grass-roots level, where village Party branches in some regions have experimented with the two-ballot system since 1992. At the first stage, candidates are recommended by ordinary villagers through secret votes and then nominated by township Party Committees. At the second stage, village Party members elect the secretary and other Party branch members.³⁴ The significance of the two-ballot system is to prevent those most disliked from being elected, but the system cannot guarantee that those elected are the most liked by Party members or ordinary villagers, since official candidates are determined by township Party committees. In other words, villagers have a certain veto power, but not comprehensive voting power. In 2002, the Party mandated that all who want to be village Party secretaries must first stand for election to the village committee, subjecting Party cadres to the electoral process.³⁵ After the 16th Congress, Party leaders in Yaan City, Sichuan Province, conducted an experiment of convening annual meetings in a township Party congress. More than 82% of candidates for delegates to the congress were self-nominated or recommended by ordinary Party members, rather than being appointed by upper-level Party cadres. Through secret vote, one village Party secretary failed to be elected, while another ordinary Party member at the same village won a majority of votes.³⁶ The institutional roots of these intra-party elections can be traced to the relatively competitive village elections for village committees initiated in the 1980s.

3. Institutional Constraints

In developing intra-party democracy, Chinese leaders have adopted a cost-efficient and risk-averse strategy to improve existing institutions within the Party’s traditional system of democratic centralism. Democratic centralism is

34. Lianjiang Li, “The Two-Ballot System in Shanxi Province: Subjecting Village Party Secretaries to a Public Vote,” *China Quarterly*, no. 42 (1999), p. 107.

35. Jean C. Oi, “State Responses to Rural Discontent in China: Tax-for-Fee Reform and Increased Party Control,” *Asia Program Special Report 107: Crisis in the Hinterland: Rural Discontent in China* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, January 2003), p. 7.

36. “Dangdaibiao Changrenzhi Gaige Xin Changshi” [A new experiment of reforming the local party congress system], *Zhongguo Guangbowang* [Chinese Broadcasting Net], December 24, 2002, <<http://www.cnradio.com>>.

defined as a system that practices centralism on the basis of democracy while carrying out democracy under centralized guidance. It emphasizes theoretically both free input from Party members before decisions are made by the leaders and strict discipline to implement Party decisions, once made. Such a dialectical principle can provide either opportunities or constraints for the reform elite in the ongoing undertaking of Party building, depending on which variable, centralism or democracy, is emphasized by the Party.

In the past, the principle of democratic centralism was elaborated by Mao, who noted that “individual Party members are subordinate to the organization, that the minority is subordinate to the majority, that lower Party organizations are subordinate to the higher ones, and that all the constituent organizations and members of the Party are subordinate to its central leadership” (*geren fucong zuzhi, shaoshu fucong duoshu, xiaji fucong shangji, quandang fucong zhongyang*). The phrase “central leadership” is ambiguous; it can refer to the National Party Congress, the Central Committee, the Politburo and its standing committee, or, historically, Mao himself. While the 8th Party Congress in 1956 used “the National Party Congress and the Central Committee” to replace “central leadership” in the revised Party Constitution, “central leadership” was adopted again by the Party’s 9th Congress (1969), 10th Congress (1973), and 11th Congress (1977). Since the 12th Congress in 1982, the phrase “the National Party Congress and Central Committee” has been reinstated in the Party Constitution.³⁷ Furthermore, at the 15th Congress, the Party called for improving the systems of Party congresses and committees, suggesting a trend toward expanding power sharing among the Party elite via strengthening the two existing institutions. If the National Party Congress, an “electoral college” for selecting the Central Committee and a rubber stamp for endorsing Party Constitution revision, is to actually transform itself into the “highest decision-making organ” in the future, the empowered organ may provide an ongoing institutional forum where delegates meet once a year, and from which they periodically supervise the Central Committee. Likewise, if collective decision-making is seriously practiced at plenary sessions of the Central Committee, the process may provide a new channel for *all* committee members to participate actively in nationwide Party affairs. If these institutional innovations are implemented successfully, they will add more “democratic elements” into the dialectical principle of democratic centralism.

On the other hand, the sacred idea of centralism has set a parameter for developing intra-party democracy. Obsessed with the idea of centralism, the Party tends to accept a *single* power center as an unshakable norm, making it very difficult to establish horizontal check-and-balance mechanisms within

37. Gao Fang, *Zhengzhixue yu Zhengzhi Tizhi Gaige*, p. 476.

the Party. For the same reason, intra-Party electoral competition is marginal because top Party leaders usually nominate candidates for the lower-level positions. While the Party Constitution stipulates that local Party congresses elect Party committees at the same level (Article 25), it also authorizes Party organizations at the higher level to appoint or transfer the principal leaders of Party organizations at the lower level when local Party congresses are adjourned and the appointment and transfer are considered necessary (Article 13). In fact, provincial Party secretaries usually are appointed by the center leadership, rather than elected by provincial Party congresses. In the case that the provincial Party congress elects the Party secretary, the only candidate is either incumbent or predetermined by the center leadership. The Party Constitution requires local Party committees make policies according to resolutions made by Party congresses at the same level, and upon instructions given by Party committees at a higher level (Article 26). It is unclear how China's new leaders will redefine such an ambiguous relationship and establish political accountability on the part of local Party committees within the framework of democratic centralism. This demonstrates the inexorable impact of past choice of rules on current Party building.

Conclusion

Recent leadership transition in China has been a mixture of institutional formalization and political personalization. The succession of the top leadership is contingent upon the previously selected path of ending the tenure system. While the age and term limits for Party leaders are yet to be formalized, the gradual development of these informal rules clearly follows the institutional trajectory started in the past—starting with setting term limits for state leaders and age limits for provincial and ministerial officials, followed by attaching Party leadership to state leadership, and finally by abolishing the life-tenure system for national Party leaders. However, Jiang's retention of the CMC chairmanship, following the precedent created by Deng in the 1980s, has left an exception for the retiring paramount leader. This incomplete leadership transition hints at China's progress and difficulties in formalizing its informal politics.

China's new leaders have attempted to develop intra-party democracy through theoretical and institutional innovations. The advancement of the "Three-Represents" idea reflects the Party's effort to reconcile its traditional doctrine with a growing pluralistic society. Although the Party is eager to redefine itself as the vanguard of the Chinese people, it cannot easily divest itself of the old coat—the vanguard of the working class. Using "two vanguards" to identify the Party vividly demonstrates the impact of past choice of doctrines on current ideological innovation. Institutionally, China's new leaders hope to develop intra-party democracy through sharing power with

more Party elites and allowing limited electoral competition within the Party. These measures are aimed at enhancing the Party's art of leadership and raising its capacity to resist corruption, prevent degeneration, and withstand risks. No signs indicate that the new leadership is going to change the one-Party ruling system or discard the principle of democratic centralism for the foreseeable future. The preexisting rules have provided both constraints and opportunities for political actors in a new round of the game.

It may be worthwhile to recall that prior to Taiwan's democratic breakthrough in 1986, the ruling Nationalists (Kuomintang, or KMT) led by Chiang Ching-kuo had planned to reform the KMT *before* comprehensive reforms of the whole society, but the Nationalist Party's authoritarian internal structure did not change until many years after Taiwan's political democratization. Can China's new leaders reach the goal of developing intra-Party democracy without *concomitantly* democratizing the whole society? Even if institutional innovations within the Party make the leadership more responsible to its members, such changes do not render it accountable to society as a whole. In the absence of meaningful restraints on the Party's monopoly of power and the consequent blurring of lines between Party and state authority, China's institution building is likely to be incomplete and fraught with theoretical inconsistency and strategic ambiguity. In other words, path dependency, rather than path breaking, is instructive as a means to observe China's leadership transition and institution building.