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## THE CHANGING SHAPE OF ELITE POWER POLITICS

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**Lowell Dittmer**

This paper reconsiders the core components of central power politics in China, and asks how they have changed in the course of China's reforms and the opening up to the outside world. It examines the structure and functions of the central arena of elite power politics, the distribution of power, the tense issue of leadership succession and the role of mass protests.

### **The Central Political Arena**

Let us begin by constructing a model of leadership policymaking and dispute resolution. During the Maoist era, informal groups within the political elite pursued their preferences through a tactically flexible Realpolitik, without much regard for constitutionally ordered formal political arrangements. Using policies and ideological lines as a rationale, the goal of factional maneuvering was the maximization of power. This was realized through the periodic sweeping purges of factional opponents, beginning at the top and ricocheting through the hierarchy, creating vacancies for appointing one's own protégés. Although opinion is divided among experts about whether the systemic goal of this power struggle was equilibration of a factional balance of power or rather a game to win or lose all, there is agreement that the struggle was incessant, albeit spasmodic in its intensity.

Elite conflict often involved mobilizing an influential constituency that might selectively express or withhold its support. Which constituencies and groups of leaders were influential varied according to circumstances: the PLA's power tended to wax during national security crises such as the Sino-Soviet border dispute or the various Taiwan Strait embroilments, whereas the Ministries might be expected to have greater leverage during severe economic setbacks such as the "three bad years" of 1960–62.

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The question of who had possessed power was also complicated by the fact that power came in two disparate forms: “authority” (*quanli*), based on the political leverage inherent in one’s formal rank and post in the Party, state and military hierarchies; and political influence (*shili*), made up of the personal relationships (*guanxi*) which a political actor accumulates in the course of a career. Whereas the exercise of these two forms of power is to some extent fungible and mutually complementary, Chinese Communist politics was considered distinctive in the degree to which the locus of power in the formal and informal realms sometimes diverged. This remained the case for a considerable time after Mao’s death. Thus Deng Xiaoping, relying on his informal influence, could re-emerge from political oblivion, after having been politically purged in 1976, to mount a successful challenge to the new leader, Hua Guofeng, even though Hua monopolized supreme formal power in the Party, state and military hierarchies. Deng subsequently could also assemble an ad hoc collection of cronies from the margins of official power to unseat the two heirs apparent, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, who formally outranked him.

If this description approximates the political situation in former times, to what extent has it gradually been rationalized during the era of reform and opening up? We can subdivide this question into three issues: the role of ideology, the existence of distinct and discrepant formal and informal realms, and the dynamics of factional struggle.

It is often alleged that leadership has become less “ideological” in the post-Mao era, but it is useful to distinguish between the decline or “death” of ideology, as forecast by Daniel Bell or Francis Fukuyama, and what Tang Tsou referred to five years ago in the pages of this journal as the “deradicalization” of ideology.<sup>1</sup> Starting very early in the reform program, virtually all of the radical hallmarks of Maoist ideology—class struggle as the “key link”, revolutionary “politics in command”, and radical transformation of “relations of production” through the nationalization of industry, collectivization of agriculture and repudiation of almost all private endeavours—have been refuted or strongly qualified. Thus the version of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought that emerged from the watershed Sixth Plenum of the 11th Party Congress in June 1981 after nearly two years of controversial retooling is far more compatible with the functional requisites of industrial modernization, as was the case in the belief systems of other successful late-industrializing countries (for example, Japan’s imperial rescript or Taiwan’s Three People’s Principles). In the mid-1990s even marketization became part of the official ideology.<sup>2</sup>

But the leadership has made clear that deradicalization does not imply abandoning the use of ideology as a political tool. It has no intention of forfeiting

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<sup>1</sup> Tsou Tang, “Chinese Politics at the Top: Factionalism or Informal Politics? Balance-of-Power Politics or a Game of Win All?”, *The China Journal*, No. 34 (July 1995), pp. 95–156.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Stephen B. Herschler, *The Sources of State Power in Communist China: Ideology and Organization in a Socialist Market Economy*, PhD dissertation, Political Science Department, University of Chicago, 2000.

its monopoly over dogma as a way of crafting public consensus, as indicated by the 1989–91 campaign against “peaceful evolution” or most recently by the attempt to cultivate “Jiang Zemin theory” through his “Three Emphases” and “Three Representations” campaigns. Nor has the use of ideology disappeared as a factional rallying call in high-level policy debates, as in the 1978 campaign in support of “practice as the sole criterion of truth” and against “whateverism”, the 1981 campaign in support of a “socialist spiritual civilization” and against “spiritual pollution” and “bourgeois humanism”, or the 1990–92 inner-Party quest to define and defend the essence of socialism against the “peaceful evolution” that was felt to have subverted socialism in Europe. The long, tenacious careers of Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun testify to the abiding utility of ideological symbol-manipulation skills, especially in building a factional base. The political use of ideology has become more discrete than during the Maoist era, in the sense that the losing faction is no longer publicly exposed and linked to the repudiated ideological position, as was Liu Shaoqi in 1969 or Lin Biao in 1973–74. But this represents less a displacement of ideological absolutism by cognitive pluralism (the “correct” position is still always unequivocally affirmed) so much as an increase in intralite political civility.

A distinction between formal and informal realms is normal and universal, but it is the degree of the hiatus, and the political incompatibility between the two, that has characteristically distinguished elite CCP politics. Although the discrepancy is coterminous with the history of the CCP,<sup>3</sup> since liberation in 1949 it has been formally sanctioned, as in the permission granted to elite “opinion groups” to “retain their opinions” in the aftermath of contrary elite decisions, or the functional distinction between the first and second “fronts” of the leadership (the first front being concerned with mundane managerial problems, the second front with long-term ideological issues). Having thus been granted organizational license, informal loyalty groups (latent factions) would quietly form, discuss and coordinate their positions on the issues of the day, bursting into public prominence (as manifest factions or conflict groups) only during periods of crisis when the leadership’s line suddenly became vulnerable.

It has sometimes been said that the tendency to create such informal groups has diminished in the reform era as a consequence of the institutionalization of formal bureaucratic arrangements, but there is more to it than that. There has indeed been an institutionalization of formal leadership arrangements in the post-Mao era, as indicated by the proliferation of rules and legal codes, the greater frequency and regularity of formal meetings (which now proceed almost like clockwork), and the greater security of cadre tenure. Whether this has entailed a reduction of informal group activity is hard to say, because the institutionalization of elite politics has also entailed a plugging of “leaks” and a decline of transparency. But we do know that serious elite disagreements

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the charismatic Li Lisan never held the position of secretary general, though he was clearly the dominant CCP leader from 1928 to 1930. Xiang Zhongfa officially held the post.

continue to erupt and that they are still resolved through purges, even with approximately the same periodicity. This is clear from a crude comparison of the Maoist and the post-Mao eras, both now of about the same duration.

During the Maoist era the major purges were of the Gao Gang-Rao Shushi group in the early 1950s, Peng Dehuai's grouping in the late 1950s, the Liu Shaoqi-Deng Xiaoping "bourgeois reactionary line" during the Cultural Revolution and the Lin Biao clique in 1971. During the reform era, the major purges were of the Gang of Four in 1976 (followed by their public trial in 1980), the removal of Hua Guofeng and the "small gang of four" in the early 1980s, the demotion of Hu Yaobang in January 1987, the purge of Zhao Ziyang and his supporters in 1989, the purge of the "Yang family clique" in 1992, the arrest of Chen Xitong and revamping of the Beijing municipal Party committee in 1995, and the involuntary retirement of Qiao Shi in 1997.

It should be noted that the purges still typically sweep up clusters of leaders, though the size of the cluster has diminished somewhat since the sweeping purges of the Cultural Revolution decade or the 1957 anti-Rightist movement. Moreover, despite the greater frequency and regularity of formal meetings, a consensus to purge a leading member is still first generated informally and then given a formal stamp of approval: thus the decision to demote Hu Yaobang was reached by an ad hoc work conference in January 1987 and not formalized until the 13th Party Congress many months later. Although Zhao Ziyang's fall was more promptly formalized by a Central Committee plenum in late July 1989 (partly in response to criticisms of the constitutional irregularity of Hu's demotion),<sup>4</sup> Zhao had been removed from the corridors of power and placed under house arrest several weeks before that. Continued reliance on informal decision-making behind the veneer of formally institutionalized proceedings, plus curtailment of the phase of public criticism that previously had legitimized a purge and provided an ideological rationale for it (however implausible), has made the purge mechanism even less transparent than during the Maoist era. In that earlier time, mass movements resulted in periodic breaches in the public-private barrier that normally kept information about inner-Party splits hidden from view.

What has changed and what has remained the same? There are at least two key differences. First, the emphasis on institutionalization has entailed greater security of cadre tenure and a reduction of negative sanctions against factional

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<sup>4</sup> The resolution to accept Hu's resignation was made at an enlarged meeting of the Politburo convened by Deng Xiaoping on 16 January 1987, comprising, in addition to the 18 members and 2 alternate members of the Politburo, 4 members of the secretariat, 17 members of the Central Advisory Committee, and "other comrades". Bo Yibo, a non-member, presented the summary of complaints. From the perspective of constitutional law, the meeting was problematic in that: (1) according to section 3, article 21 of the Party Constitution, the secretary general should convene the Politburo, not Deng Xiaoping; (2) according to Section 3, Article 20, the secretary general should be elected (or deposed) only by a plenary session of the entire Central Committee. See Zhongmei Yang, *Hu Yaobang: A Chinese Biography* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1988), pp. 156–7.

intrigue. Most post-Mao purge victims have been spared the public humiliation that many officials apparently used to dread as much as incarceration or death. Thus, whereas an elite faction during the Maoist era coalesced to enhance its members' mutual security or personal power, the reduction of sanctions has permitted factions to coalesce in support of shared policy interests as well. This is not to imply that the old bases for factional ties (*guanxihu*) no longer exist. Hu Yaobang's group was based on an "old school" tie dating back to Hu's leadership of the Chinese Communist Youth League before the Cultural Revolution; Chen Yun's more conservative grouping coalesced around control of the State Planning Commission and the Central Committee's Propaganda Department; and Jiang Zemin's "mainstream faction" was built during his long tenure in Shanghai. There is apparently a loose grouping, led by Hu Jintao, who share engineering credentials from Qinghua University, while Chen Xitong's *Beijing bang*, an "independent kingdom" like Peng Zhen's in the 1960s, allegedly coalesced in support of corrupt personal interests.

Second, although elite purges have not declined in number, they have declined in intensity. Since the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976, there have not been any sweeping purges in which a pattern of contagion is established and pursued on the basis of an imputed "line" of shared ideological dissent and conspiratorial association. And, with a few exceptions, purges no longer culminate in the death or physical incarceration of the target (as in the cases of Gao Gang, Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao).<sup>5</sup> What accounts for this apparent decline of intensity? Purges during the Maoist era sometimes partook of a self-consciously demonstrative use of violence in order to establish public markers of what was wrong and what was right, as a result of which a purge would typically be followed by mass criticism movements and struggles against preset quotas of "capitalist roaders" and other "enemies of the people". Such mass movements were in principle discontinued during the early reform era. Elite purges accordingly have become less polemicized and more tightly contained, losing at once their socially disruptive character and their pedagogical utility. In fact, the elimination of Yang Shangkun and Qiao Shi was given no official explanation other than retirement.

Although the death of Mao thus marked an important watershed in Party elite politics, the real heyday of informal politics seems not to have been the Maoist era but the Deng Xiaoping era. The Maoist era was characterized by a politics organized not around personal factions but around ideological lines. Sometimes, as during the Cultural Revolution, this resulted in vertical coalitions of elites and mass constituencies with transregional ideological linkages that had little

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<sup>5</sup> The exceptions include the Gang of Four, all of whom were incarcerated and all but one of whom (Yao Wenyuan) then died in prison; as well as Beijing Mayor Chen Xitong, who was jailed on corruption charges arising from the Shougang scandal, and his Deputy Mayor Wang Baosen, who committed suicide in the same connection. The latter cases are problematic because the victims were indicted on criminal rather than political charges, even though this was influenced by political considerations.



factional coherence based on geographic origin or primordial association. (The two were not necessarily mutually exclusive: for example, Jiang Qing was after all Mao's wife, Chen Boda was Mao's former secretary, Kang Sheng and Jiang Qing were both from Shandong, and so forth. But in principle ideology overrode such considerations, as illustrated by the way Mao ruthlessly decimated his old Hunan gang.)

The Deng regime, on the other hand, having repudiated ideological polarization and committed itself to bureaucratic rationalization and reform, paradoxically found itself obliged to rely on ad hoc, informal expedients to achieve reformist results. This began with Deng Xiaoping himself, who remained true to his word and never laid claim to the top Party or state positions, amassing informal power even as he divested himself of formal positions, with the result that he was able to manipulate the Tiananmen crackdown from a position outside the Politburo. The policy of leadership rejuvenation initiated by Deng and Hu in 1984–85 resulted in the wholesale retirement of senior cadres who possessed great informal power to nominally impotent “advisory” positions, from which Deng could, however, recall them in cases of perceived emergency. The famous “sitting committee” of retired oligarchs thus provided the quorum to decide upon the purges of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang and the suppression of the 1986 and 1989 mass protest movements.<sup>6</sup>

Only during the era of Jiang Zemin, it would seem, did the formalization of politics begin to come into its own. This was partly attributable to the demise of the senior revolutionary veterans who practised footloose informal power: Deng Yingchao and Hu Qiaomu died in 1992, Wang Zhen and Li Xiannian in 1993, Chen Yun in 1995, and Deng Xiaoping in 1997. Even before then, the Central Advisory Committee, the institutional base of this consultative elite, was surprisingly eliminated on schedule at the 14th Party Congress in 1992. The reforms instituted during Deng Xiaoping's tenure, such as term limits and premortem retirement, also kicked in, resulting for example in the 1992 retirement of Wan Li, the 1997 retirement of Bo Yibo and the rotation of Li Peng from his premiership to a less powerful People's Congress chairmanship. The extension of the principle of term limits also provided a pretext for the elimination of Qiao Shi in 1997 and for the scheduled retirement of Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, Zhu Rongji, et al., at the 16th Party Congress in 2002. The institutional innovation of retirement, unheard of among the Party elite before 1985, has taken effect with such speed and efficacy that in contrast to the unsinkable Deng

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<sup>6</sup> According to the recently released Tiananmen papers, when the Politburo Standing Committee stalemated on 17 May 1989 over Deng's proposal to invoke martial law (Li Peng and Yao Yilin voted in favour, Zhao Ziyang and Hu Qili opposed, and Qiao Shi abstained), the issue was submitted to Deng, in accord with a secret inner-party resolution. At this point Deng and the elders joined the Standing Committee to form a super-majority, which decided to blame Zhao and Hu for the failure of martial law and (on 27 May) to replace Zhao with Jiang Zemin. The order for the PLA to clear the Square was arranged by Deng and Yang Shangkun, as chair and vice-chair of the Central Military Committee. All of these decisions were ratified post hoc by a Central Committee Plenum in June.

Xiaoping after his second purge in 1976, Yang Shangkun, Yang Baibing, Wan Li, Qiao Shi, Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen seem to have vanished into political oblivion without a trace. The informal realm has become weakened to the extent that even though Jiang Zemin has been undertaking preparations to claim Deng Xiaoping's role of elderly puppetmaster upon his announced 2002 retirement from his position as chief of state, it is not at all clear that he will succeed in doing so.

### The Distribution of Power

At the pinnacle of political power today we find a coterie of several dozen men, each of whom may be expected to have a portfolio providing access to at least one formal hierarchical apparatus and a wide-ranging informal base. In the course of overseeing their various responsibilities and servicing their constituencies, these men may see their interests diverge on any number of policy issues.

Members are distinguished subtly but quite precisely in the distribution of their ranks and power, as frequently indicated by the sequential listing of their names in communiqués and press reports (although ranking may sometimes be disguised by listing them in order of brush strokes), the seating arrangements in group photographs or portraits, in public meetings or on the Tiananmen reviewing stand, even by the order in which they walk down the street. Because these niceties are so fastidiously observed, they are categorized as “protocol evidence”, on the basis of which not only rank order but alignment on key policy issues may be inferred (based on who attends meetings convened to launch a new policy initiative).<sup>7</sup> Members of the Politburo are actually deemed formally equal, with equal voting rights, although according to available accounts most sessions do not culminate in a formal vote. In terms of actual power they are unequal, depending on age and experience, depth and breadth of their career backgrounds, the relative stature of their contributions and the functional needs of the political system at a particular stage. Inequality is assured not only by the unequal distribution of such attributes but also by their recruitment pattern to the leadership elite. This is co-optive and permits individual incumbents to vouch for new recruits, who are then expected to remain beholden to them.

Inequality during recruitment may be exacerbated by the leadership's distribution of portfolios and perquisites of office, which is an enormous discretionary power. In particular, the chair may completely undercut an opponent by denying him a portfolio, discouraging his attendance at meetings or excluding him from the flow of internal documents, as was the case with Hu Yaobang from January 1987 until the spring of 1989, when he suffered a heart

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<sup>7</sup> Protocol evidence is not definitive. Thus a leader's absence from an official event may imply death or serious illness, temporary loss of favour, purge or the voluntary withholding of support for the event being sponsored, as in the case of the disappearance of Deng Xiaoping supporters between February and 8 April 1976, when Deng was being publicly criticized for his alleged “reversal of just verdicts”, or the lower profile of the radicals between 9 and 20 April 1976 when Deng was permitted to retain his Party membership.



attack while attending his last Politburo meeting.<sup>8</sup> The chair's normal political strategy, however, is not to undercut members but to distribute resources and perquisites fairly even-handedly, in keeping with the functional division of labour and the norms of collective leadership. If some members outrank him in terms of seniority or informal stature or have consistently divergent policy views, he is apt to form compensatory coalitions with weaker or more loyal members, playing balance-of-power politics to prevent anyone from acquiring sufficient power to challenge him. Thus Mao in the last 10 years of his life formed a coalition with the weaker but personally loyal Gang of Four against the more senior members of his leadership team—Zhou Enlai, Ye Jianying and Deng Xiaoping.<sup>9</sup> Deng's reliance on the relatively weak and junior Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang can be perceived in the same light, as can Jiang's anointment of the most junior member of the Standing Committee as his heir apparent, followed in the fall of 2000 by an attempt to promote the personally loyal Zeng Qinghong to counterbalance him.

It has been suggested that in the course of generational transition there has been a shift from monolithic to a more collegial distribution of power. A safer inference at this point, it seems to me, would be that the distribution of power varies cyclically in the course of the succession cycle, typically beginning with a relatively equal distribution of power at the outset but tending over time toward a more hierarchically skewed distribution as the paramount leader eliminates rivals and accumulates hegemony. Thus Deng Xiaoping began by sharing power with Ye Jianying, Li Xiannian, Chen Yun and Bo Yibo, but in the course of the 1980s succeeded in monopolizing power to the extent that he was able to coordinate the Tiananmen crackdown quite arbitrarily. Jiang Zemin in the early 1990s was considered a somewhat lacklustre member of a third-generation cohort that included Chen Xitong, Qiao Shi, Li Peng and Zhu Rongji, but by the end of the 1990s the second generation had died or been retired (for example, Bo Yibo, Wan Li, Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen), and he had reduced his own cohort to three (Jiang, Li and Zhu), among whom relations are said to be "complicated".

All other things being equal, one would expect alignments to reflect the seniority-skewed distribution of power, and this indeed seems normally to be the case. But under exceptional circumstances, a member of the younger generation may split with his patron over a decision that is damaging to his own political base. This was true of Zhao Ziyang in the early spring of 1989, when the elders

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<sup>8</sup> Hu Yaobang reportedly attended no central meetings after his deposal in January 1987, until the meeting on education at which he collapsed in April 1989. Pang Pang, *The Death of Hu Yaobang* (Honolulu: Center for Chinese Studies, 1989). During the Cultural Revolution, major purge victims were excluded from the flow of official documents, and Liu Shaoqi's phone line was even cut in January 1967. Although it is unclear to what extent this exclusion is still true, the security forces certainly still play an important role in isolating targets.

<sup>9</sup> Mao's shifts became ever more mercurial as he saw death approach and there are indications of his disenchantment with the Gang of Four toward the end of that period. But Mao also complained about the Rightists, and it is hard to see how the Gang of Four could have survived without Mao's support in view of the swiftness of their collapse as soon as he left the stage.

were pressuring him to crack down on the intellectuals who had signed three petitions in support of the release of “political prisoners” and were also pressuring Zhao to curb Shanghai’s *World Economic Herald* (which was supporting the dissident intellectuals). Zhao subsequently exacerbated the split among the political elite a couple of months later by opposing the suppression of the student protesters in Tiananmen Square, who reciprocated by aiming their barbs at Li Peng and Deng Xiaoping.

Separately, there may be several separate patron–client networks within the Politburo, giving rise to distinct factional interests. This seems to be the current situation, with three distinct hierarchical networks (what the Chinese call “tails”) emanating from Jiang Zemin, Li Peng and Zhu Rongji, who have not split ideologically but have different policy priorities and have also reportedly disagreed over such issues as how to handle the Falungong.

Central meetings are where the informal and formal powers contest their interests and sort out policy lines. All sorts of meetings are held by the Party elite, some of them according to more or less fixed schedules (these were frequently thrown into disarray by the storm and stress of the Maoist era), some named after the place they were held (the Lushan conference, or the annual summer meetings held at the Beidaihe resort), some distinguished by the number of attendees and some referred to merely as “working meetings” or “Party life” meetings. Although held for different purposes, they all provide a means—really the sole legitimate means—for mobilizing constituencies and sorting out policy decisions. The rules of procedure for such meetings appear to be rather flexible, but the chair can usually control the outcome by holding preparatory meetings, setting the agenda, choosing the participants (sometimes packing the meeting with non-members in an “expanded” session) and the speakers, and deciding whether to call the question.<sup>10</sup>

### Succession

Succession is both important and problematic in all Communist Party states.<sup>11</sup> China has had only two realized successions, yet six of the PRC’s major elite splits (Mao vs. Liu, Mao vs. Lin, Hua vs. Deng, Deng vs. Hu, Deng vs. Zhao and Jiang vs. Qiao Shi) have at least implicitly involved succession arrangements. In most other Communist systems the typical pattern is one of postmortem succession, in which the incumbents defer clear succession arrangements during their lifetimes, as in the successions to Stalin or Brezhnev. In such circumstances, the incumbent does not make premortem arrangements out of fear that the heir

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal and Bruce Dickson, *A Research Guide to Central Party and Government Meetings in China, 1949–1986* (revised and expanded edition, Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> See Myron Rush’s classic analysis in *Political Succession in the USSR* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), and his *How Communist States Change Their Rulers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

apparent might seek to succeed him pre-emptively, as occurred in the cases of Ulbricht in East Germany, Khrushchev in the Soviet Union or Gheorghiu-Dej in Romania. The Chinese in contrast are distinctive in the strength of their attachment to premortem succession arrangements. One consequence is that in China the period of susceptibility to succession disputes lasts throughout the incumbent's tenure.

Although succession is apt to precipitate a relatively raw form of power struggle, concerned more with who rules and not how or what for, the implications are apt to be profound and long lasting in terms of policies as well as power. There are at least two schools of thought about the implications: one is that succession incapacitates the system (the "succession crisis" school), and the second is that succession renews and invigorates the system. The scenario of a succession crisis implicitly assumes an unresolved postmortem succession, with the system paralyzed by indecision, rift and deadlock, as every major issue presupposes an answer to the moot question: who decides? Having just emerged from one oppressive incubus, the surviving members of the Politburo are not eager to throw themselves beneath another, and the leadership finds itself torn between fear of renewed tyranny and the need for strong leadership. Until such a leader emerges, decisions can be arrived at only through a process of circuitous and time-consuming consultation and compromise known as "collective leadership". While the leadership under these circumstances becomes at least temporarily more consultative, even pluralistic, the system tends to stagnate.<sup>12</sup>

Valerie Bunce and, with some important qualifications, Philip Roeder, argue in contrast that succession crises stimulate political innovation rather than paralyzing the system's capacity, as young and more imaginative successors seek to consolidate a new regime with policies designed to attract a politically significant constituency.<sup>13</sup> Thus succession in socialist countries is an opportunity for change analogous to electoral turnover in bourgeois democratic systems.

There are certain similarities between these two succession theories—both agree that succession tends to be followed by a return to strong personal rule—but for Bunce a strongman poses the danger of stagnation (as the competitive impetus for innovation is removed), while for Myron Rush (and Roeder, departing from Bunce), the new monocratic leadership may be expected to proceed with whatever innovations were introduced to mobilize support in the winner's grasp for supreme power. In the Chinese case, only two of the six struggles that involved succession have been postmortem (Hua vs. Deng, 1976–

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Valerie Bunce, *Do New Leaders Make a Difference? Succession and Public Policy Under Capitalism and Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Philip G. Roeder, "Do New Soviet Leaders Really Make a Difference? Rethinking the 'Succession Connection'", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 79 (1985), pp. 958–76. Roeder argues in contradistinction to Bunce that the innovative capacity of a new leader tends to be low, with the result that early years tend to be focused around consolidation, and reform is postponed till afterward.

81; and Jiang vs. Qiao, 1997). In these contests, the evidence appears to bear out Bunce at least in the first instance, for no sooner had Deng gained dominance than a series of boldly innovative programs and central endorsements for locally initiated experiments began to issue from the new leadership. In short, Deng did not consolidate his power before proceeding, but utilized reform as a way of consolidating his power. The case of the Jiang–Qiao split is more ambiguous, but it appears that Jiang moved rhetorically to coopt Qiao’s support for political reform before pushing him out of the Politburo at the First Plenum of the 15th Central Committee. After ridding himself of Qiao, Jiang failed to follow through on his rhetoric.

The more typical Chinese pattern is what we call a “*premortem succession crisis*”. What distinguishes a *premortem crisis* from a mere power struggle is that the incumbent has already manifested his intention to pass the torch, anoint an heir apparent and invest the latter with plenary powers. The incumbent then steps into the wings to think about more profound matters, always ready to reappear if needed, as in a monarchical regency. This arrangement often takes the form of two leadership “*fronts*”, the first led by the regent, who looks after routine affairs, the second by the incumbent, who allows himself to be “*kicked upstairs*” to deal with long-range planning issues (and sometimes to nurse fragile health).

The first regency was established by Mao Zedong in the late 1950s, setting the stage for a *premortem succession crisis* that was to last for the next decade and a half. Deng made analogous arrangements with first Hu Yaobang and then Zhao Ziyang. The recurrent pattern for both Mao and Deng was for the incumbent to designate an heir, grow disillusioned with him over time as various inadequacies became manifest (among them a failure to consult with the incumbent), and then in a climactic episode to become sharply disappointed with some initiative undertaken by the heir and on that basis to kick him out and find a new favourite. Deng Xiaoping became disenchanted first with Hu Yaobang and then Zhao Ziyang, yet Deng redeemed the regency pattern somewhat by facilitating the smooth succession of Jiang Zemin without further equivocation. And Jiang in turn has indicated his interest in maintaining the same pattern, announcing his intention to step down to make way for the fourth-generation leadership at the 16th Party Congress in 2002 (along with all but two of his Politburo Standing Committee colleagues). Yet Jiang has warned that the Taiwan issue will require the experienced hand of revolutionary veterans, suggesting his interest in retaining the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission. While the basic dynamic is dyadic, other players may also play a role: any rival contender for power will find both the pretext and opportunity to climb aboard the regent’s bandwagon, or to help sour the relationship between the incumbent and heir apparent in hopes of arranging another regency.

The systemic implications of this Don Juan pattern of *premortem succession arrangements* conformed to the Rush model during the Mao and Deng eras. There were conflicts of interest not only between the heir apparent and other potential successors, as in a *postmortem succession*, but also between the incumbent and his designated successor. The resultant pattern is one of stagnation in policymaking, in which innovation is inhibited and becomes difficult to

institutionalize: the incumbent's innovations are tolerated as those of a "lame duck" but not vigorously implemented, while innovation on the part of the heir apparent tends to arouse the suspicions of the incumbent. The graduated succession by Jiang Zemin escaped this dilemma in that Jiang simply avoided policy innovation during his regency, thereby avoiding the fate of Liu Shaoqi or Lin Biao—a pattern Hu Jintao so far seems eager to emulate. Thus there has been some institutional learning, the successor having learned the value of forbearance, the incumbent the need to avoid costly course reversals. The transition has become smoother and more stable. But perhaps the major lesson to date of the Chinese experience of successions has been the omnipresence and extreme sensitivity of the issue.

### **Mass Mobilization**

Mass mobilization has played some role in at least four of the past six elite splits, those involving Mao vs. Liu, Hua vs. Deng, Deng vs. Hu and Deng vs. Zhao. The role played by the masses has generally been that of a dependent variable, in which the winning party seeks post hoc popular legitimation for personnel shifts and policy innovations. Yet mass involvement may also function as an independent variable, polarizing cleavages that might otherwise have remained latent by bringing the always delicate issue of "face" into play. One prominent pattern during the Maoist era, in addition, was for activists aligned to the Gang of Four to use the mass movement as a "free ride" to elite careers.

The major distinguishing feature of mass mobilization since the Cultural Revolution is that the initiative seems to have irretrievably slipped from elite control, responding to changes in the socioeconomic environment rather than to elite policy initiatives. During the 1980s, it became possible to correlate mobilization with the economic cycle, augmented by incendiary incidents (creating a "cause" to rally around) and the presence of political entrepreneurs and symbolically appropriate holidays or anniversaries when mass activity is officially sanctioned. The Tiananmen protests of 1989, for instance, erupted during an economic downturn and were sparked off by Hu Yaobang's untimely death, galvanized by charismatic student speakers such as Wuerkaixi and Chai Ling, and escalated into a massive demonstration on the anniversary of the May Fourth Movement. Although such movements no longer provided a route for upward mobility, they could still have an impact on incumbent leaders, which varying with the power and skill of each: Deng was able to exploit mass protests at the Third Plenum in 1978, but neither Hu Yaobang nor Zhao Ziyang was able to do so in the autumn of 1986 and the spring of 1989.

A mass protest could occur either during a boom or a bust. If it occurred during a boom, there was less likelihood of a crackdown, because booms were typically periods of ascendancy for the "reform" faction, which disliked crackdowns on young reform supporters (moreover, a crackdown tended to have a chilling spillover effect on the economy). But the boom could trigger a countercyclical application of fiscal austerity that precipitated a hard landing, which might in turn trigger mass protest. Busts were conducive to renewed assertiveness by the more orthodox wing of the leadership, and any protest at this



point was likely to precipitate a crackdown, as well as political trouble for any sympathetic elite reformers. Thus both the December 1986 and June 1989 crackdowns occurred during a countercyclical phase, politically reinforcing fiscal and monetary austerity.

Since Deng's last hurrah in 1992, China has been characterized by mass political apathy and economic stability. On the economic side, Zhu Rongji's 1993–94 financial reforms achieved a "soft landing" to a bout of double-digit inflation and temporarily tamed China's business cycle, leaving in its wake a basically stable but deflationary economy with a gradually declining (although still high) rate of economic growth. The major concern accordingly shifted from a search for countercyclical tools to efforts to reduce industrial overcapacity and compete for foreign investment through continuing industrial and financial reforms. On the political side, the sanguinary Tiananmen crackdown of 1989 seems to have had a lasting deterrent effect on nationwide mass movements, as the Chinese populace turned its attention exclusively to economic activities. The leadership's concern has gradually shifted from a fear of mass movements to growing concern about mass detachment from politics. Although public protests began to revive in the last half of the 1990s, these only occurred at the local level, with few national ramifications. The impact on elite conflict, at least in the short run, seems to have been conducive to "overwhelming stability" (*wending ya dao yiqie*).

### Conclusion

Certain recurrent patterns have become discernible that help us understand the nature of the elite power game in China. One is that, now and perhaps for the foreseeable future, it is still men and not laws or ideas that govern China, and that their interpersonal behaviour follows certain general rules. Thus it is possible to depict the overall warp and woof of elite politics and to clarify the choices and penalties at hand, even though we may not necessarily be able to predict which options the political actors will choose. If this conception is correct, it behooves analysts to focus on those institutional nodes where the pattern is scrambled. One area of special sensitivity is clearly that of leadership succession. The Chinese preference for premortem arrangements, although designed to minimize uncertainty, makes succession more explosive by forcing the transition when all of the principals still have multiple live options. The issue of mass involvement has been so sensitive that the masses in the post-Mao era have been effectively excluded from elite decision-making and personnel transitions. Even so, the spectre of the "masses" continues to haunt elite political discussions.

China has matured, and some observers have posited that the political system has made the transition from "strongman leadership" toward functionally integrated team efforts, from charismatic ideology toward technocracy, from impulse toward rational calculation, from mass mobilization to stable institutions. Although there are tendencies in this direction, it is really too soon to judge. The "end of strongman leadership", for one thing, seems a considerable overstatement. Informed Beijing observers note that Jiang has exhibited no interest in ceding his strongman prerogatives and, beginning from a position as



first among equals, has taken every opportunity to strengthen his own position and diminish that of his rivals. But in doing so, the Jiang–Qiao showdown was not a game to win all or lose all, in the sense that Qiao Shi obtained some concessions for playing by the rules. For instance, even though Li Peng vetoed Qiao's choice of reformer Tian Jiyun as his replacement, Tian was permitted to remain NPC vice-chair and a full Politburo member; and Qiao's protégé Wei Jianxing remained chair of the Central Discipline Inspection Committee, overriding Jiang's preference for Shanghai Party secretary Huang Ju. Otherwise the Jiang–Qiao showdown fits the pattern of a classic power struggle, with clear winners and losers.

Similarly, predictions of the advent of “collective leadership” following the demise of the charismatic generation of revolutionary veterans seem to have been overblown. Although Jiang Zemin no doubt lacks the stature of Mao or Deng, they are not his current competition. Their charismatic brilliance is irrelevant to his bid to establish hierarchical supremacy over his own generation, at which he seems to have largely succeeded. And to the extent that Jiang's personal star fades, it will not be owing to some institutionalized collective leadership or elite pluralism but to specific coalitions of rival personal factions.

The assumption that because Jiang fathered no significant new policy initiatives during his eight-year regency he can be dismissed as ineffectual by foreign observers represents a serious political miscalculation. Jiang's focus during his regency was on retaining his nominal ascendancy, a process in which a high-profile policy resumé was a risk, even a liability. Since redefining political succession, Jiang has gone on to firmly establish his personal power, where his touch has been quite masterful, whatever the fate of his policy innovations.

The other side of the coin is that Jiang's leadership position depends upon the acquiescence of his colleagues. It is noteworthy that Jiang's nomination of his trusted advisor Zeng Qinghong for full Politburo membership at the Fifth Plenum of the 15th Central Committee in October 2000 was reportedly rejected by the Politburo standing committee by a vote of five to two.<sup>14</sup>

This is not necessarily to say that elite pluralism has usurped the role of first among equals in the Politburo—Zeng may be a special case, whose promotion was opposed for a host of idiosyncratic reasons. In general, the 15th Central Committee leadership does seem to have been united on most basic ideological and policy issues. But unless each vote is carefully elicited by a quid pro quo tailored to their particular interests, “politburocrats” are apt to resist naked power plays. Thus the struggle between hierarchy and collegiality remains unsettled, a matter of constant negotiation and political tradeoffs.

At the same time, the Party leadership as a whole is weaker than during the Mao or Deng eras, reflecting the declining role of ideology as a guide to correct political action, the various unintended consequences of reform such as growing economic and social inequality, budget deficits, corruption, the decentralization

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<sup>14</sup> Willy Wo-lap Lam, “Not All the President's Men”, *South China Morning Post*, 25 October 2000, p. 16.

of power and the advent of the market as an alternative source of political resources. The Jiang regime has been intent upon correcting this decline in the role of ideology and in the effectiveness of central power since the early 1990s, but has found the effort difficult. For one thing, the necessary but much-lamented post-Mao ideological deradicalization has entailed a diffraction of Manichaeian political morality into one suffused by grays, no longer permitting new and dramatic ideologically based policy initiatives.

In this more stable and bureaucratically permissive context, elite groups may combine in pursuit of policies that enhance their bureaucratic or economic interests, no longer impelled by the need, for their own security, to focus so exclusively on personal connections. And a convergence of factional interests with broader economic and even class interests in society is increasingly discernible, as illustrated by loosely coordinated responses to the gyrations of the economic cycle. The residual reform bloc, relying implicitly on the intellectuals and on the young and the entrepreneurial for mass support, has tended to support fiscal and monetary stimuli, intellectual openness and the decentralization or devolution of power to the grass roots; while the “Leftist”, more orthodox, bloc, favours fiscal and monetary austerity, centralization and greater distributive equity and intellectual repression, and relies upon beneficiaries of the socialist status quo—probably leaving the middle class split. While these are only latent tendencies at present, it is possible to envisage a gradual institutionalization of factional loyalties around different policy tendencies and social preferences, perhaps even leading eventually to a multiparty system. But China has far to go to reach that stage.