

# CPC Futures

*The New Era of  
Socialism with  
Chinese Characteristics*

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# 2

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## **CPC Elite Politics and the 20th Party Congress**

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Power succession is at the core of Chinese elite politics. Through examining potential rising stars on the eve of the 20th Party Congress and how the CPC handles power succession under Xi's leadership, this chapter aims to reflect on some new socio-cultural characteristics about today's Chinese elite politics and to assess whether and to what degree the selection of top leaders is being institutionalised.

### **Rising Stars from the Provinces and Regions**

Chinese provincial leaders constitute the largest bloc in the CPC Central Committee. They form a major link through which the central leadership implements its policies. These officials are heavyweights in Chinese politics who manage the economies of provinces and regions that dwarf those of whole countries.

The provincial leadership reshuffle preceding the Party Congress may shed some light on the upcoming restructure in the CPC Politburo and other leading apparatus. In 2021, Ma Xingrui replaced Chen Quanguo, a Politburo member, as the Xinjiang party chief, likely paving the way for promoting Ma to Politburo membership in 2022. Younger provincial party secretaries are also frontrunners for a seat on the Politburo, including Liaoning Party Secretary Zhang Guoqing, Shandong Party Secretary Li Ganjie (both born in 1964), Hainan Party Secretary Shen Xiaoming (1963), Shaanxi Party Secretary Liu Guozhong (1962), Zhejiang Party Secretary Yuan Jiajun (1962) and Fujian Party Secretary Yin Li (1962) (Appendix 1).

The young provincial leaders have diverse backgrounds, including working experience in coastal areas like Zhejiang, Shanghai and Fujian, in the military and aerospace industry, Communist Youth League, technology and engineering fields, and public health. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is noteworthy that two officials with a public health background, Yin Li and Shen Xiaoming, have been promoted to become party secretary of Fujian and Hainan provinces, respectively.

Many technocrats at the ministerial/provincial level have been promoted during Xi Jinping's tenure, including from the military and aerospace industries, and electronic and environmental engineering, medical or other strategic new industries. Behind this new round of technocratic appointment lies China's ambition to gain tech supremacy, a cleaner environment and closer integration of military and civilian industries (see also Tai Ming Cheung's chapter in this volume).

Ma Xingrui, Zhang Qingwei, Zhang Guoqing and Yuan Jiajun all rose through the aerospace industry (Chen 2020: 124–34). Yin Li and Shen Xiaoming are both highly experienced health professionals. These groups of promotions reflect the rising priority of industrial innovation and social welfare respectively in Xi's administration. Of these technocrats, Zhang Guoqing and Shen Xiaoming are younger provincial party secretaries with ties to Xi. Zhang's doctoral studies at Tsinghua University overlapped with those of Xi (1998–2002). Shen was Secretary to the CPC Education Committee in Shanghai when Xi served as the city's party secretary (2007). Both seem well-positioned to ascend to the Politburo in 2022 or 2027.

Shen Yiqin, the only female and ethnic minority (Bai) provincial party secretary, may be promoted to a deputy-national-level position after the 20th Party Congress, or even replace Sun Chunlan as the single female Politburo member in 2022. Shen's career in Guizhou also means she has worked closely with Xi allies such as Li Zhanshu or Chen Min'er (Thomas 2021).

### **Frontrunners in the Ministries, CPC Central Agencies**

Compared to their provincial peers, cabinet ministers usually have smaller chances of being promoted to the Politburo or other national-level leadership positions. Nevertheless, it is still possible for some with close connections to the top leadership or who have earlier experience as provincial party secretaries to join the top echelon. Incumbent Politburo members like Liu He (former deputy minister in charge of the National Development and Reform Commission) and Yang Jiechi (former foreign minister) were cases in point during the leadership reshuffle at the 19th Party Congress in 2017.

Among the 26 ministers in the State Council, 14 were born in the 1960s (Appendix 2). Like their colleagues in the provinces, ministers born in the 1960s have brighter prospects for further promotion in 2022 compared to their older peers. Lu Hao, minister of natural resources and former governor of Heilongjiang province, is currently the youngest minister in the State Council (Appendix 2). He was born in 1967 and worked as the first secretary of the Chinese Communist Youth League, which has served as a cradle for generations of Chinese leaders, including former CPC General Secretaries Hu Yaobang and Hu Jintao. In the League's bureaucracy, cadres are on average much younger than their peers in other government or party departments. They are usually promoted at a faster speed and this kind of comparative advantage in age can be decisive at a Party Congress when age becomes an important criterion for promotion.

While many rising stars have not worked with Xi directly, they appear to have enjoyed the political patronage of Xi's allies or clients on the Politburo. Both Chen Xiaojiang and Hou Kai (Appendix 2) proved themselves in anti-corruption agencies, working under Zhao Leji and Yang Xiaodu. Tang Renjian was twice Liu He's deputy in the general office of the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission. Hu Heping was a protégé of Chen Xi in the Tsinghua University administration (Thomas 2021).

Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao, the second youngest minister after Lu Hao, may also be promoted in the future. Foreign trade continues to be strategically vital despite the COVID-19 pandemic and US-China trade row. Moreover, Wang was governor of Shanghai's Huangpu District in 2007 when Xi himself was Shanghai party secretary. Both Lu Hao and Wang Wentao, the two youngest ministers on the State Council, served as governor of Heilongjiang province in the Northeast before being transferred to Beijing. This may reflect the State Council's focus on the development of this stagnating region, as is seen in the 2021–25 revitalisation plan for the Northeast approved by the State Council in September 2021. Moreover, Premier Li Keqiang worked as party secretary of Liaoning province in the Northeast before he became executive vice-premier in 2008.

Huai Jinpeng, a software expert born in 1962, became minister of education in August 2021. A typical technocrat, Huai served as president of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Beihang University), and as vice-minister of industry and information technology. Beihang University is one of the "seven sons of national defence", public research universities that collaborate closely with the People's Liberation Army. Huai's appointment reflects the intention to reform the education system to better serve the goal of science and technology self-reliance in both the military and civilian realms.

Another important official in promoting China's industry and technology capacity is Minister of Industry and Information Technology Xiao Yaqing, who was born in 1959 and graduated from the Materials Department of Central South University. Xiao, a professorial senior engineer, has been working at the State Council since 2009 in important posts like deputy secretary-general of the State Council, director of the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), and director of the State Administration for Market Regulation.

Ministerial-level officials working in CPC Central Committee agencies may also have a chance to be promoted to higher national leadership positions. Jiang Jinqun, director of the Central Policy Research Office, may have a good chance of joining the Politburo or the CPC Central Secretariat. The Central Secretariat, which is mainly responsible for carrying out routine operations of the Politburo, is empowered by the Politburo to make day-to-day decisions and act as a coordinator among the hierarchies of the Party, the State Council and the military. A Secretariat member may wield more actual power than a Politburo member. Jiang's predecessor, Wang Huning, had held the directorship of the Central Policy Research Office between 2002 and 2020 and served three paramount leaders, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. For 18 years, Wang had been the chief adviser to the top leaders, and since 2017, he has been a Politburo Standing Committee member.

## **Military Reshuffle**

In July and September 2021, Xi promoted two batches of senior military officers to the rank of general. Some of these newly-promoted generals may join the elite Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2022, which is chaired by Xi himself. To many observers' surprise, Xi promoted Wang Haijiang to head the military's Western Theatre Command bordering India in September, only two months after Xi had appointed Xu Qiling in that job. The Western Theatre Command leadership has undergone several changes since the retirement in December 2020 of the long-serving General Zhao Zongqi who had headed the command since its inception. General Wang has particular expertise in the Western Theatre, having earlier served as Commander of the Tibet military region, which also borders India, and previously as deputy commander of the southern Xinjiang military region, the military region that has been directly engaged with India in the border crisis that began in the summer of 2020.

Commander of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force Chang Dingqiu, born in 1967, is now the youngest full general in the PLA. In 2014, he became

the youngest officer at corps level when he was promoted to chief of staff of the air force in the former Shenyang Military Region. Later on Chang became the deputy commander of the newly-formed Southern Theatre Command, making him the youngest PLA officer of his rank. Along with Wang Haijiang, Liu Zhenli and other newly-promoted generals, Chang is now a strong contender for Central Military Commission membership in 2022. In addition, Zhong Shaojun, a long-time political aide of Xi in the PLA, is another formidable candidate for joining the CMC. Zhong, born in 1968, served on Xi's staff since Xi's time in Zhejiang province, followed Xi to Shanghai and then Beijing. A lieutenant general, Zhong currently serves as director of Xi's office and as director of the General Office of the CMC.

Air Force General Xu Qiliang and Army General Zhang Youxia, two vice-chairmen of the CMC, are more than 70 years old and therefore are expected to retire after 2022. They are expected to be replaced by other incumbent members in the CMC, among whom Admiral Miao Hua, born in 1955, and Discipline Inspection Commissioner of the Central Military Commission Zhang Shengmin, born in 1958, seem most eligible for such a promotion due to their age.

## **The Politburo and its Standing Committee**

Up to now, no heir apparent for CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping can be identified. Such a void has sent a signal to the outside world that Xi may seek a third term after 2022. If the informal retirement age criterion of 68 is observed at the 20th Party Congress, with Xi an exception, Li Zhanshu and Han Zheng will leave the apex Politburo Standing Committee, while Wang Chen, Liu He, Xu Qiliang, Sun Chunlan, Yang Jiechi, Yang Xiaodu, Zhang Youxia, Chen Xi and Guo Shengkun will leave the Politburo (Appendix 3). Nevertheless, age has never been the only criterion in China's elite politics, with other important yardsticks including length of incumbency, performance and loyalty to the paramount leader.

Li Keqiang (born in 1955) has been China's premier for two terms, and a Politburo Standing Committee member for three terms since 2007, while Wang Yang has also acted as a Politburo member for three terms since 2007. Li has indicated that his premiership will end by March 2023. It is still not clear whether Li or Wang will serve a fourth term on the Politburo, but past experience indicates that such a chance is slim (Appendix 4).

Wang Huning may also leave the Politburo Standing Committee, as he was replaced in 2020 in the position of director of the CPC Central Policy Research Office by Jiang Jinqun. Zhao Leji, the youngest Standing Committee member,

and member in charge of the unrelenting anti-corruption campaign, may stay on the Standing Committee after 2022. Zhao has a strong connection with Shaanxi province, Xi's ancestral home province. Zhao served as Shaanxi party secretary from 2007 to 2012 before moving to Beijing to head the Central Organization Department, where he cemented his position through loyalty to Xi in his first term. Zhao played a key role in consolidating Xi's power by filling the vacancies left by a legion of cadres caught up in the anti-corruption campaign.

In the Politburo, Ding Xuexiang, Chen Min'er, Hu Chunhua, Cai Qi, Li Qiang, Li Xi, Li Hongzhong, Chen Quanguo and Huang Kunming, at the next Party Congress, will all be younger than 68. Thus some of them will very likely make it on to the Standing Committee (Appendix 4). Among them, Ding Xuexiang, Hu Chunhua and Chen Min'er, born in the 1960s, are frontrunners due to their relatively young age, while Li Qiang, Cai Qi and Huang Kunming, ex-Zhejiang officials who have forged a close relationship with Xi, are also competitive. However, the long zero-COVID lockdown in Shanghai that infuriated residents and caused severe economic damage in April and May 2022 may complicate Li Qiang's path to the top echelon.

## Conclusion

Amid what Xi called “changes unseen in 100 years”, the CPC's power succession and elite politics are facing uncertainties ahead of the 20th Party Congress. Past experience and existing informal rules may not necessarily guide future reshuffles, but in general, the CPC has institutionalised its power transition through establishing a set of criteria for promotion that include loyalty, performance, age and qualifications. The consistency of the application of these criteria helps to avoid a disruptive power struggle. If past practice holds, a majority of the Politburo and its Standing Committee members at the next Party Congress should have work experience as provincial leaders. Proximity to Xi does not necessarily hold more explanatory power for personnel shifts in Chinese elite politics than do technocratic backgrounds, age or performance.

## References

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## Appendix 1: List of provincial leaders (May 2022)

Provincial Units	Party Secretary	Mayor/Governor
Anhui	Zheng Shanjie (郑栅洁) (1961)	Wang Qingxian (王清宪) (1963)
Beijing	Cai Qi (蔡奇) (1955)	Chen Jining (陈吉宁) (1964)
Chongqing	Chen Min'er (陈敏尔) (1960)	Hu Henghua (胡衡华) (1963)
Fujian	Yin Li (尹力) (1962)	Zhao Long (赵龙) (1967)
Gansu	Yin Hong (尹弘) (1963)	Ren Zhenhe (任振鹤) (1964)
Guangdong	Li Xi (李希) (1956)	Wang Weizhong (王伟中)(1962)
Guangxi	Liu Ning (刘宁) (1962)	Lan Tianli (蓝天立) (1962)
Guizhou	Shen Yiqin (谌贻琴) (1959)	Li Bingjun (李炳军) (1963)
Hainan	Shen Xiaoming (沈晓明) (1963)	Feng Fei (冯飞) (1962)
Hebei	Ni Yuefeng (倪岳峰) (1964)	Wang Zhengpu (王正谱) (1963)
Heilongjiang	Xu Qin (许勤) (1961)	Hu Changsheng (胡昌升) (1963)
Henan	Lou Yangsheng (楼阳生) (1959)	Wang Kai (王凯) (1962)
Hubei	Wang Menghui (王蒙徽) (1960)	Wang Zhonglin (王忠林) (1962)
Hunan	Zhang Qingwei (张庆伟) (1961)	Mao Weiming (毛伟明) (1961)
Inner Mongolia	Sun Shaocheng (孙绍骋) (1960)	Wang Lixia (王莉霞) (1964)
Jiangsu	Wu Zhenglong (吴政隆) (1964)	Xu Kunlin (许昆林) (1965)
Jiangxi	Yi Lianhong (易炼红) (1959)	Ye Jianchun (叶建春) (1965)
Jilin	Jing Junhai (景俊海)(1960)	Han Jun (韩俊) (1963)
Liaoning	Zhang Guoqing (张国清) (1964)	Li Lecheng (李乐成) (1965)
Ningxia	Liang Yanshun (梁言顺) (1962)	Xian Hui (咸辉) (1958)
Qinghai	Xin Changxing (信长星) (1963)	Xin Changxing (信长星) (1963)
Shaanxi (陕西)	Liu Guozhong (刘国中)(1962)	Zhao Yide (赵一德) (1965)
Shanxi (山西)	Lin Wu (林武) (1962)	Lan Fo'an (蓝佛安) (1962)
Shandong	Li Ganjie (李干杰) (1964)	Zhou Naixiang (周乃翔) (1961)
Shanghai	Li Qiang (李强) (1959)	Gong Zheng (龚正) (1960)
Sichuan	Wang Xiaohui (王晓晖) (1962)	Huang Qiang (黄强) (1963)
Tianjin	Li Hongzhong (李鸿忠) (1956)	
Tibet	Wang Junzheng (王君正) (1963)	Che Dalha (齐扎拉) (1958)
Xinjiang	Ma Xingrui (马兴瑞) (1959)	Shohrat Zakir (雪克来提·扎克尔) (1953)
Yunnan	Wang Ning (王宁) (1961)	Wang Yubo (王子波) (1963)
Zhejiang	Yuan Jiajun (袁家军) (1962)	Wang Hao (王浩) (1963)

Numbers in parentheses indicate year of birth.



**Appendix 2: List of ministers in the state council (May 2022)**

<b>Position</b>	<b>Current Holder</b>
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Wang Yi (王毅) (1953)
Minister of National Defence	Wei Fenghe (魏凤和) (1954)
Minister in charge of the National Development and Reform Commission	He Lifeng (何立峰) (1955)
Minister of Education	Huai Jinpeng (怀进鹏) (1962)
Minister of Science and Technology	Wang Zhigang (王志刚) (1957)
Minister of Industry and Information Technology	Xiao Yaqing (肖亚庆) (1959)
Minister in charge of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission	Chen Xiaojiang (陈小江) (1962)
Minister of Public Security	Zhao Kezhi (赵克志) (1953)
Minister of State Security	Chen Wenqing (陈文清) (1960)
Minister of Civil Affairs	Tang Dengjie (唐登杰) (1964)
Minister of Justice	Tang Yijun (唐一军) (1961)
Minister of Finance	Liu Kun (刘昆) (1956)
Minister of Human Resources and Social Security	Zhang Jinan (张纪南) (1957)
Minister of Ecology and Environment	Huang Runqiu (黄润秋) (1963)
Minister of Natural Resources	Lu Hao (陆昊) (1967)
Minister of Housing and Urban-rural Construction	Wang Menghui (王蒙徽) (1960)
Minister of Transport	Li Xiaopeng (李小鹏) (1959)
Minister of Water Resources	Li Guoying (李国英) (1963)
Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs	Tang Renjian (唐仁健) (1962)
Minister of Commerce	Wang Wentao (王文涛) (1964)
Minister of Culture and Tourism	Hu Heping (胡和平) (1962)
National Health Commission	Ma Xiaowei (马晓伟) (1959)
Governor of the People's Bank of China	Yi Gang (易纲) (1958)
Auditor-General of the National Audit Office	Hou Kai (侯凯) (1962)
Minister of Veterans Affairs	Sun Shaopin (孙绍聘) (1960)
Minister of Emergency Management	Huang Ming (黄明) (1957)

Numbers in parentheses indicate year of birth.

Source: Compiled by the author.

### Appendix 3 Ages and Positions of the Politburo and Its Standing Committee Members (2017–22)

#### *Politburo Standing Committee*

Name	Age	Position
1. Xi Jinping	69	CPC general secretary, CMC chairman, China's president
2. Li Keqiang	67	Premier
3. Li Zhanshu	72	Chairman of the National People's Congress
4. Wang Yang	67	Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
5. Wang Huning	67	Secretary of the CPC Central Secretariat
6. Zhao Leji	65	Secretary of the Central Disciplinary Inspection Commission
7. Han Zheng	68	Executive Vice Premier

#### *Other Politburo Members*

Name	Age	Position(s)
1. Ding Xuexiang	60	Chief of the General Office of CPC Central Committee
2. Wang Chen	71	Vice chairman of the National People's Congress
3. Cai Qi	66	Beijing party secretary
4. Liu He	70	Vice premier
5. Xu Qiliang	72	CMC vice chairman
6. Sun Chunlan	72	Vice premier
7. Li Xi	66	Party secretary of Guangdong Province
8. Li Qiang	63	Party secretary of Shanghai Municipality
9. Li Hongzhong	66	Party secretary of Tianjin Municipality
10. Yang Jiechi	72	Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs
11. Yang Xiaodu	69	Director of the National Supervisory Commission
12. Zhang Youxia	72	CMC vice chairman
13. Chen Xi	69	Director of the CPC Central Organisation Department
14. Chen Quanguo	66	Party secretary of Xinjiang Autonomous Region
15. Chen Min'er	62	Party secretary of Chongqing Municipality
16. Hu Chunhua	59	Vice premier
17. Guo Shengkun	68	Secretary of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission
18. Huang Kunming	65	Director of the CPC Central Propaganda Department

*Source:* Compiled by the author.

## **Appendix 4: Top Candidates for the Politburo and Its Standing Committee at the 20th Party Congress**

### *Politburo Standing Committee*

1. Xi Jinping
2. Wang Huning
3. Zhao Leji
4. Ding Xuexiang
5. Hu Chunhua
6. Huang Kunmin
7. Cai Qi
8. Chen Min'er
9. Li Xi

### *Other Politburo Members*

- |                  |                    |
|------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Ma Xingrui    | 11. Lu Hao         |
| 2. Li Qiang      | 12. Xiao Yaqing    |
| 3. Li Hongzhong  | 13. Wang Wentao    |
| 4. Zhang Qingwei | 14. Wang Xiaohong  |
| 5. Zhang Guoqing | 15. Chen Xiaojiang |
| 6. Yuan Jiajun   | 16. Hou Kai        |
| 7. Yin Li        | 17. Jiang Jinqun   |
| 8. Shen Xiaoming | 18. He Lifeng      |
| 9. Shen Yiqin    | 19. Miao Hua       |
| 10. Zhou Qiang   | 20. Zhang Shengmin |

*Source:* Projected by the author.