China’s 2012 Party Leadership Transition

Key Faces to Watch

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Introduction

Predicting China’s next round of party leadership appointments is not always an easy game to play, particularly this year, as our colleague Melanie Hart details in her new paper, “China’s Real Leadership Question.” Her analysis demonstrates why knowing who may or may not make it into the remaining seats on China’s ruling Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party is not as important at this point in time as is predicting whether the new Standing Committee as a whole will meet the serious economic and political challenges facing their nation in the coming decade.

The top two positions were settled months ago, and are highly unlikely to change. Current Vice President Xi Jinping is slated to become party general secretary while Vice Premier Li Keqiang is slated to become premier, the highest positions in the party and the government, respectively.

The rest of the Standing Committee is much less certain. The Chinese political system thrives on predictability and we can make fairly accurate guesses about who will be promoted into these posts based on the positions, seniority, and factional affiliations of the current candidates. This year, however, the ongoing scandal surrounding former Communist Party high-flier Bo Xilai—who ran one of China’s biggest municipalities in central China before a rapid downfall—is adding an additional element of uncertainty. Bo’s now definitely out of the running for a seat on the Standing Committee, but his downfall makes predicting who will fill some of the seven to nine available seats difficult.

To disrupt expectations at this point in the game would suggest that it is not business as usual within the party, and that is not a message Beijing wants to send. We can make a confident prediction about four likely members of the Standing Committee—Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, Li Yuanchao, and Wang Qishan—but determining who will fill the remaining three to five seats is more difficult. The most likely candidates are divided between the Hu Jintao faction of Communist Youth League members and the Jiang Zemin faction of so-called princelings, individuals with family times to China’s revolutionary elite.
Below is a list of the 10 most likely candidates to fill the Standing Committee heading into the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership transition this fall.

Xi Jinping

**Current position:** Vice president, China People’s Government; vice chairman, Central Military Commission; member, Politburo Standing Committee  
**Age:** 59  
**Factional ties:** Princeling (son of Xi Zhongxun, former vice premier); considered to be a Jiang Zemin protégé

The son of a high-ranking People’s Liberation Army general, Xi Jinping worked on a farm in rural Shanxi province for six years, until the age of 22, after his father was imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution. Xi managed to leave the farm, join the party and graduate from the prestigious Tsinghua University with a degree in chemical engineering. After graduation, Xi worked in administrative roles for the People’s Liberation Army. After serving in increasingly senior party and army roles in Hebei, Fujian, and Zhejiang provinces, Xi was promoted to the Standing Committee, became party secretary of Shanghai, and took on a series of new titles that suggested he would succeed Hu Jintao as China’s next party general secretary and People’s Government president.¹

Xi’s family ties place him closer to the Jiang Zemin faction, which implies that his approach to economic development will be more market-friendly and focused on protecting wealth than some of his Hu Jintao-affiliated peers.² But Xi has been relatively opaque about how he would act economically or politically, which has contributed to his positive standing among both factions and enabled his rise to the general secretary.

Most recently, in 2008 Xi was appointed to vice president of the Chinese People’s government. Since then he has traveled to Latin America, Europe, Asia, and America on diplomatic missions.³ Xi is married to a famous Chinese folk singer, Pei Liyuan, and their daughter is currently studying at Harvard University.

Xi Jinping will almost certainly be appointed to party general secretary this fall, China’s highest leadership post.
Li Keqiang

**Current position:** Executive vice premier, China’s State Council (the national cabinet); member, Politburo Standing Committee

**Age:** 57

**Factional ties:** Tuanpai (Youth League) member; considered to be a Hu Jintao protégé

After working in rural Anhui for four years after graduating from high school, Li joined the party and was accepted to Peking University in the “Class of 1977.” That year China re-opened many of its universities after nearly a decade of closure during the Cultural Revolution and 5.7 million students competed for only 273,000 university spots. In the early 1980s Li worked in the Communist Youth League’s 11-person governing body directly under Hu Jintao and alongside future Politburo members Liu Yandong and Li Yuanchao. Hu Jintao nominated Li for promotion in the league several times and he succeeded Hu as the head of the league in 1993.

Following his time with the Communist Youth League, Li was sent to Henan province to gain more provincial experience. Given Li’s close ties to President Hu and his work in Henan, as premier he may focus on income equality issues such as the provision of better social services. Li will not be able to determine policy programs on his own, however, and will instead require consensus with Xi Jinping and other leaders.

Li’s stint as party secretary and provincial government leader in China’s coastal Henan province was haunted by a serious AIDS crisis caused by unscrupulous blood plasma buyers. Li’s provincial government covered up the crisis and prevented journalists from visiting sick villagers. Hu Jintao unsuccessfully lobbied for Li to succeed him as China’s next party general secretary, but managed to get his protégé the premiership.

Li Keqiang will almost certainly be named the next premier of China, the nation’s second-highest post.
Li Yuanchao

**Current position:** Director, Chinese Communist Party Organization Department; member, Politburo  
**Age:** 61  
**Factional ties:** Tuanpai (Youth League) member; considered to be a Hu Jintao protégé

The son of prominent party officials purged in the Cultural Revolution, Li worked on a rural Jiangsu farm for four years after graduating from high school. After studying mathematics at a teacher’s college, Li taught middle school for several years before attending Nanjing’s Fudan University. In school he joined the Communist Youth League and rose through its ranks after graduation. Li served on the 11-member Communist Youth League Secretariat with Li Keqiang and Liu Yandong and directly under Hu Jintao in the early 1980s.8

Li served in several party posts in Jiangsu province before being appointed its provincial party secretary in 2003. During his time in office, he won praise for attempts to fight a dangerous algae bloom in a major lake caused by pollution.9 Li has been supportive of President Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao’s macroeconomic policies and a strong advocate for domestic political reforms.10

In 2007 he was promoted to director of the CCP Central Organization Department, a crucial position that has put him in control of designing and tweaking the rules for promotions and advancement within the party, which was previously held by Deng Xiaoping.

Li Yuanchao will almost certainly be promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee.

Wang Qishan

**Current position:** Vice premier, China’s State Council; member, Politburo  
**Age:** 64  
**Factional ties:** Princeling (son-in-law of Yao Yilin, former Standing Committee member); considered to be a Jiang Zemin protégé

After studying history at Shanxi’s Northwest University and working in a local museum for nearly a decade, Wang joined the Chinese Academy of Social Science, a government-sponsored think tank, as an analyst, and then worked in the government’s Rural Development Research Center. In the late 1980s Wang embarked on a stunningly
successful career in finance, taking top roles in several Chinese banks,\textsuperscript{11} helping them transition to modern financial practices and guiding them through loan restructuring. As the head of the China Construction Bank, Wang helped create China’s first joint-venture investment bank, a partnership with the Wall Street firm Morgan Stanley.\textsuperscript{12}

After 1997 he rejoined the government, helping Guangdong province through a severe financial crisis as its provincial party secretary. Wang worked with Henry Paulson, then the chairman of Goldman Sachs Group Inc., to help restructure an important Guangdong firm’s financial obligations.\textsuperscript{13} After serving as Hainan’s Party Secretary from 2002 to 2003, Wang became the mayor of Beijing in the midst of the SARS crisis. In a major reversal from initial government efforts to downplay the severity of the epidemic, Wang enforced a quarantine and collaborated with the World Health Organization to tackle the crisis.\textsuperscript{14}

Wang also planned and managed the 2008 Beijing Olympics as chairman of the Beijing Olympic Committee. Since joining the Standing Committee in 2007 as a vice premier, he has overseen China’s financial system and traveled widely abroad to negotiate with the United States. He reportedly gets along very well with Western leaders\textsuperscript{15} and many see him as a capable and open-minded reformer.

Wang Qishan will almost certainly be promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee. Given his prior performance record, it is likely that he will use that position to promote liberalization of the Chinese financial system and greater foreign investment in the economy.\textsuperscript{16} His ability to do so, however, would depend on internal political dynamics.

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**Wang Yang**

**Current position:** Party secretary, Guangdong; member, Politburo

**Age:** 57

**Factional ties:** Tuanpai (Youth League) member; considered to be a Hu Jintao protégé

After working in an Anhui food processing factory for four years, Wang joined the party and became political instructor in a local party school. Beginning in 1981 Wang took several positions in Anhui’s branch of the Communist Youth League, becoming the provincial organization’s deputy secretary in 1984. Wang served in several positions in Anhui’s local and provincial governments in the 1980s and 90s. In 1999 Wang joined the national government as the head of the National Development and Reform Commission, a planning body with extensive authority over the Chinese economy.

In 2005 Wang was appointed Chongqing’s party secretary and presided over strong
economic growth in the province. His successor, Bo Xilai, later accused him of tolerating organized crime, in part due to an intense political rivalry between the two men. In 2007 Wang moved to serve as the party secretary of China’s economic engine, Guangdong Province, where he pushed free market reforms and resisted government stimulus efforts in 2009. Wang stressed limited government, openness, and business-friendly practices, leading some to label his philosophy “The Guangdong Model,” in contrast to Bo Xilai’s more centralized, populist, and more opaque “Chongqing Model.”

In late 2011 Wang offered concessions to protesting villagers in Wukan, a Guangdong village, who had been protesting against illegal tax hikes and despotic rule by their village chief. After Wang intervened, the villagers were allowed to choose a new village chief and even allowed them to elect one of the protest’s leaders in his place. Wang’s handling of the Wukan protests should be viewed through the public relations sensitivities and intense international media attention he faced at the time as opposed to a push for greater political reform.

Wang Yang is a strong contender to receive a Politburo Standing Committee position.

Zhang Dejiang

Current position: Party secretary, Chongqing; vice premier; member, Politburo
Age: 65
Factional ties: Princeling by (son of Zhang Zhiyi, former PLA major general); apparent Jiang Zemin protégé

The son of a People’s Liberation Army major general, Zhang worked on a farm in rural Jilin for two years during the Cultural Revolution after graduating from high school. In 1971 he joined the party and was promoted to secretary of his county’s propaganda department. After graduating from Yanbian University with a degree in Korean studies, Zhang moved to North Korea for two years to study the language. After serving as Yanbian University’s vice president and in local and provincial Jilin government, Zhang became the province’s party secretary in 1995.

In 1998 he was appointed party secretary of Zhejiang, a rich and economically important province in southeastern China. In 2007 he joined the Standing Committee and has worked on industrial, telecommunications, energy, and transportation issues.

The party has often deployed Zhang to fix major crises. He headed the disaster relief response and investigation to the July 2011 Wenzhou high-speed rail crash that killed 40
and injured 200 more. Zhang was sent to Western China to replace scandal-ridden Bo Xilai as the party secretary of Chongqing in March 2012.\textsuperscript{20}

Zhang Dejiang is a strong contender to receive a Politburo Standing Committee position. Based on his past policy positions, Zhang would likely support a state-centric model of economic growth.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Liu Yunshan}

\textbf{Current position:} Director, Chinese Communist Party propaganda department; member, Politburo  
\textbf{Age:} 65  
\textbf{Known patronage ties:} Tuanpai (Youth League) member

After working as a Xinhua reporter and rising through Inner Mongolia’s propaganda department, Liu joined the national political scene in 1993, becoming the deputy head of the Central Committee’s propaganda department, the party agency in charge of media censorship.\textsuperscript{22} Along the way, Liu served in the Communist Youth League branch in Inner Mongolia’s deputy secretary, but never advanced further in the organization.

As a top official in the propaganda department, Liu helped oversee the creation of China’s Great Firewall, the world’s most extensive Internet-blocking campaign, as well as censorship of the press and television media.\textsuperscript{23} And according to a report by The New York Times, Liu coordinated the campaign that eventually drove Google out of China in 2010.\textsuperscript{24}

Liu’s experience developing the Great Firewall might imply he’s a political hardliner, but there is little disagreement at the upper echelons of the party about the need for strict media censorship. In early 2012, 16 retired party officials in Yunnan province circulated a petition calling on Liu to step down and accusing him and Zhou Yongkang, China’s top security official, of supporting Bo Xilai and using repressive tactics to block reforms.\textsuperscript{25}

Liu Yunshan could receive one of the remaining Politburo Standing Committee positions.
Zhang Gaoli

**Current position:** Party secretary, Tianjin; member, Politburo  
**Age:** 65  
**Known patronage ties:** Apparent Jiang Zemin protégé

After graduating from Xiamen University with a degree in statistics, Zhang worked in one of China’s biggest oil refineries as a party officer and manager. During his seven years at the company, he joined the party and the Communist Youth League, rising through both organizations and the refinery’s management. In his political career, Zhang served as the deputy governor of Guangdong and was appointed the party secretary of Shenzhen, China’s flagship export-processing zone. Zhang is often described as one of Jiang Zemin’s protégés in part because of his time in Shenzhen, one of the southern coastal regions often associated with Jiang Zemin loyalists.

In 2000 Zhang joined the Central Committee and left Guangdong to serve in top party roles in Shandong province before moving to become the party secretary of Tianjin, a major Chinese port city. Zhang’s Tianjin government has been accused of covering up a June 2012 mall fire. Initial reports suggested that only 10 people died, but rumors began circulating online that many more lost their lives. Those rumors have been repeatedly denied by the Tianjin and national government, and have generally been disproven as more details have emerged.

Zhang Gaoli could receive one of the remaining Politburo Standing Committee positions.

Yu Zhengsheng

**Current position:** Party secretary, Shanghai; member, Politburo  
**Age:** 67  
**Known patronage ties:** Princeling (related to Yu Dawei, former defense minister; marriage ties to Mao Zedong); apparent Jiang Zemin protégé

The son of an early party member, Yu became close friends with Deng Xiaoping’s son, Deng Pufang, and married the daughter of another People’s Liberation Army and Chinese Communist Party veteran. After serving in several party and management roles in a radio factory, he left to work in government planning and oversight of the electronics industry. Yu succeeded Xi Jinping as Shanghai party secretary in 2007 following Xi’s promotion to the Standing Committee, a position that in recent years is often given to influential members of the Jiang Zemin faction.
Yu’s brother, a senior Chinese intelligence official, defected to the United States in 1985 and exposed Larry Wu-Tai Chin, a Chinese spy in the CIA active for almost three decades.30 Yu’s high-level connections salvaged his political career, but he remains a controversial figure within the party and his family’s past may prevent him from receiving a seat on the Standing Committee.

Nevertheless, Yu Zhengsheng could still receive one of the remaining Politburo Standing Committee positions.

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**Liu Yandong**

**Current position:** State councilor; member, Politburo  
**Age:** 66  
**Factional ties:** Princeling by birth (daughter of Liu Ruilong, former vice minister of agriculture; family ties to Jiang Zemin); professional ties to Hu Jintao and the tuanpai (Youth League faction)

The daughter of a prominent official in the early days of communist rule, Liu grew up alongside several future party leaders, including Zeng Qinghong, a powerful associate of former President Jiang Zemin.31 She attended Tsinghua University, studied chemical engineering, and began working in a chemical plant after graduation. After filling party posts in a series of chemical plants and joining Beijing’s municipal government, Liu worked with Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao under Hu Jintao in the Communist Youth League’s governing body in the early 1980s.32

In 1991 she moved to the national government’s United Front Work Department, which handles Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, as well as relations with overseas Chinese and elites outside the party. She is currently the director of the United Front Work Department and a state councilor. Her portfolio includes China’s education and cultural policies. Liu has traveled abroad to tout the opening of Confucius Institutes and people-to-people exchanges with the United States and Great Britain.33

Liu is closely connected to Hu Jintao professionally, but has family and personal ties to Jiang Zemin, and remains the highest-ranking woman in the party. Liu in many ways transcends the distinction between “princelings” aligned with Jiang Zemin and Communist Youth League members aligned with Hu Jintao. Before Bo Xilai’s fall from favor, few considered Liu as a promising candidate for the Standing Committee, but after Bo Xilai’s fall significantly more attention has been paid to her possible promotion.

Liu Yandong is a potential dark horse who could be pulled into the Standing Committee.
Endnotes


6 Li, “China’s Top Future Leaders (Part 1).”


10 Li, “China’s Top Future Leaders (Part 1).”


16 Li, “China’s Top Future Leaders (Part 1).”


21 Li, “China’s Top Future Leaders (Part 1).”


