

From Strongman to Consensus Rule

by **Cary Huang**

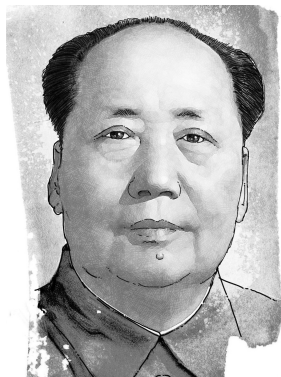
China's Communist Party may have long since moved on from its violent legacy of bloody purges and ruthless power grabs that punctuated the early decades of the People's Republic. But the level of intrigue and infighting that permeated the months leading up to and during the 18th Communist Party Congress in November 2012 showed that in China the transfer of power is just as contentious as ever. As a sign of the uncertainties bedevilling the handing over to the so-called fifth generation of Chinese leaders, not even the date of the congress of the world's largest political party — in charge of the globe's most populous nation and its second largest economy — was made public until a mere six weeks before the opening.

The era when China was effectively run according to dictates or whims of strongmen such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping has long since passed. Nowadays the Communist Party of China strives to project an image of “consensus-building” among a “collective leadership”.

However, whatever the effort to provide a smoothly scripted process, the bitter feuding that was clearly apparent in the run-up to the 18th party congress may well have been just as intense as any that occurred at previous such junctures, at least since the 1966–76 Cultural Revolution.

Tensions were bound to run high at the latest conclave, particularly as almost 60 per cent of the 205 members of the Central Committee were being replaced, 14 of 25 members of the Politburo were relinquishing office and seven out of nine members of the inner sanctum of power, the Politburo Standing Committee, would retire. Only twice previously in the history of the Chinese Communist Party had so many leadership positions become available at the same time at a party congress.

Before the death of the last strongman, Deng, in 1997, decisions were taken by leaders within a very small circle, often indeed by a sole individual. The top figures, Mao before his death in 1976, and to a lesser extent Deng in the 1980s and 1990s, could more or less choose to stay in power until they died no matter what capacity they held, appoint anyone they favoured to any powerful position, and depose anyone whom they disliked or deemed incompetent.



Mao Zedong

In the post-1949 period, Mao loomed almost monolithically large, steering China through revolution and governance — often equally disastrously — implementing drastic land reforms, launching the Great Leap Forward that led to horrific famine, and unleashing the infamous Cultural Revolution.

During his reign, Mao ousted his anointed successor, Liu Shaoqi, after launching the Cultural Revolution. Liu died in squalor in prison. His second anointed successor, Lin Biao, died in a plane crash in 1971

after fleeing a failed court coup. Following the purge of the Gang of Four led by Mao's widow Jiang Qing in 1976 and the rise of Deng, ruthless Communist Party power struggles continued in an almost forgotten chapter of China's history.

In the post-Mao period, Deng heralded the “second revolution”, establishing his credentials as a reformer *par excellence* through reforms and open doors — de-collectivisation of agriculture, recognition of private entrepreneurship, creating Special Economic Zones and easing up on the micro-management of people's everyday lives. Deng served as “paramount leader”— even without any formal party or state position — until his death.

Deng also wrested control of China from a third anointed Mao successor, Hua Guofeng, and then proceeded to depose his own two chosen protégés, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, after both expressed sympathy with students demanding democracy. Zhao's ousting came just prior to the bloody military crackdown on student-led demonstrations in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.



Deng Xiaoping

Deng's departure marked the end of an era of the one-man dominance, the most important change in the communist-ruled nation's political landscape. In the post-Deng era, however, decisions to choose incoming leaders are all made behind closed doors in secret Communist Party gatherings. And any hint of uncertainty can spark an explosion of speculation, virtually ensuring that no leadership transition unfolds without drama.

And drama there was aplenty in the months preceding the 18th party congress, with the spectacular fall from grace of Communist Party aristocrat and Politburo member Bo Xilai, party chief in the huge Chongqing municipality.

Professor Steve Tsang, director of the University of Nottingham's China Policy Institute, said the changes in the political arena since 1997 were meant to institutionalise the succession process and make it much more predictable and therefore stable, including long spells of apprenticeship for those earmarked for the top political and management posts.

"There has always been scope for balancing or horse trading for membership in the rest of the Politburo Standing Committee, but Bo's efforts to force his way into the Standing Committee by his maverick approach in Chongqing changed the dynamics," Tsang said.

Starting from the 1980s, Deng attempted to establish a set of rules to govern elite interactions and power succession. He re-institutionalised the party congress, and introduced age and term limits for leading government cadres. As time passed, some implicit and explicit rules seemed to have been established. In fact, rules such as age and term limits now effectively rule out the possibility of top leaders staying in power for too long, resulting in a much more predictable elite turnover. For instance, at the 16th party congress in 2002, the number four leader, Li Ruihuan, retired aged 68 after having served two terms. Since then, 67 has become the oldest age for anyone to start a new term in the Politburo and its elite Standing Committee. At the 17th party congress in 2007, all Politburo members aged 68 or above retired, and the same rule applied at the 18th party congress.

"The age limit has therefore greatly curbed the rise of charismatic leaders and figures with sultanistic tendencies. It is also now a critical criterion when the Party identifies future leaders," said Zhengxu Wang, a senior fellow and deputy director of the University of Nottingham's China Policy Institute. Thus the process to groom top leaders has been planned and prepared for years ahead. A number of promising leaders are identified early on and appointed to ministerial or provincial leadership positions in their early and mid-50s before they are

eventually “elected” to become a member of the top decision-making Politburo and the Standing Committee.

For example, newly-promoted top leaders Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang were elevated to the Standing Committee at the 17th party congress in 2007 at the ages of 54 and 52, respectively.

Despite intense factional fighting to promote their members into top positions at the 18th party congress, no one would have doubted that Xi and Li had been assured of their top positions. Xi and Li were referred to as the incoming Xi–Li administration even before they were installed as number one and number two, respectively, at the conclave.

Before his death, Deng ruled there should be a core of the collective leadership in the Communist Party hierarchy. He said that Mao was the core of the first generation of leadership while he himself was that of the second generation. When Deng selected Jiang Zemin to succeed him as the core of the third generation, Jiang was at first regarded as a transitional leader, but amazed everyone when his protégés gained a majority in the Politburo and Standing Committee when he retired. While he was alive, Deng also picked Hu Jintao to succeed Jiang to become the core of the fourth-generation leadership.

The power handover from Jiang to Hu was a milestone in Chinese politics, since the change occurred without a major political crisis. It was an unprecedented peaceful transition of power.

However, the Jiang–Hu handover was pre-dictated by Deng. Nowadays, no figure has the same clout as Mao and Deng. So the Hu–Xi power transition was still the first test for a power transition without the presence of an all-powerful strongman.

Despite the intense internal fighting, the latest party congress did make progress in terms of institutionalising the power succession. It also featured for the first time overt campaigning more akin to American democracy than Chinese communism.

However, Cheng Li, of the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said that like many other things happening in China, changes in the Chinese leadership were a paradox of hope and fear. “The growing pluralistic thinking in Chinese society and increasing diversity among political elites not only make consensus-building in the leadership very difficult, but also cause serious concerns about leadership unity and elite cohesion.” Indeed, the larger implications of the latest power transition suggested there was still little transparency or very small room for intra-party democracy. It also showed that the last major communist-ruled nation refused to accept any Western concept of democracy and constitutional rule, despite its devolving into a rule-by-consensus system.