

Xi Jinping's Inner Circle

(Part 3: Political Protégés from the Provinces)

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Throughout the reform era, top Chinese leaders have usually risen to their positions after gaining substantial experience as provincial-level leaders. Top leaders have also drawn from the pool of provincial leaders in building their factional inner circles and regional power bases. Having advanced his political career primarily through county, municipal and provincial leadership positions in four important province-level administrations over 25 years, Xi Jinping has some advantages in this regard. Xi's broad provincial leadership experience has helped him to cultivate a web of mentor-protégé ties. This installment in the series focuses on the personal and political bonds Xi established during his tenure in various localities and analyzes how these protégés are now positioned as supporters in Xi's effort to consolidate his power and carry out his policy agenda.

No administrative experience in present-day China has served as a better stepping-stone to top national posts than province-level leadership.¹ Top Chinese leaders have usually worked as provincial chiefs (party secretary or governor/mayor) before moving to Beijing to serve on the national decision-making bodies in Zhongnanhai or before being anointed “heir apparent.” For example, Jiang Zemin was promoted to general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1989 from the post of party secretary of Shanghai, and Hu Jintao served as party secretary in both Guizhou and Tibet before being promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) in 1992.

In the current Politburo, 19 out of 25 members (76 percent) have served as provincial chiefs among China’s 31 province-level administrations (which include 22 provinces, five autonomous administrative regions of ethnic minorities, and four large cities directly under the central administration). Six of the seven members (86 percent) of the PSC served as provincial chiefs before ascending to the supreme decision-making body. The sole exception is propaganda czar Liu Yunshan, although he did serve as deputy party secretary of Neimenggu early in his career. Chairman of the National People’s Congress (NPC) Zhang Dejiang served as provincial chief in four provincial administrations (Jilin, Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Chongqing) before becoming the third highest ranking leader at the 18th National Party Congress in 2012. The fact that China’s top leaders have substantial province-level leadership experience speaks to the importance of this path to the pinnacle of power.

National Leaders’ Provincial Connections

Since national leaders are usually chosen from among provincial chiefs, the political connections and mentor-protégé ties formed at the provincial level are often the

foundation of factional politics in China. From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, the so-called Shanghai Gang—the powerful network of national and regional leaders from Shanghai—dominated CCP leadership.² The Shanghai Gang included officials who worked under Jiang Zemin when he was a top municipal leader in the city (or were recommended by Jiang for positions in Shanghai's municipal leadership) and who later moved to Beijing.

In 1989, soon after Deng Xiaoping promoted Jiang from party secretary of Shanghai to general secretary of the CCP, Jiang appointed some of his protégés from Shanghai to important national leadership positions. Jiang cultivated a web of personal ties based on Shanghai connections. Zeng Qinghong, Jiang's chief of staff in Shanghai, moved with Jiang to Beijing in 1989. Two of Jiang's deputies in Shanghai, Wu Bangguo and Huang Ju, were soon promoted to be Politburo members as part of Jiang's effort to consolidate his power in Beijing. Another Jiang deputy in Shanghai, Mayor Zhu Rongji, also joined him in Beijing and later served as premier of the State Council. All four of them later served on the PSC. In 2002, the members of the Shanghai Gang occupied one-fifth of the seats in the Politburo and one-third on the PSC. In the current Politburo, Jiang's protégés from Shanghai still occupy six seats (24 percent), including two out of seven PSC seats (28.6 percent).³

Table 1 (next page) displays the provincial leadership experience of the current members of the Politburo. Of the 25 members, only five (military leaders Fan Changlong and Xu Qiliang, and civilian leaders Ma Kai, Wang Huning and Liu Yandong) lack provincial leadership experience. A majority of them (85 percent) have had leadership experience in more than two province-level administrations. In addition to Zhang Dejiang, three other Politburo members have had leadership experience in four provinces: Hu Chunhua (Tibet executive deputy party secretary, Hebei governor, Neimenggu party secretary, and Guangdong party secretary); Li Zhanshu (standing member of the Hebei provincial party committee, Shaanxi deputy party secretary, Heilongjiang governor, and Guizhou party secretary); and Guo Jinlong (Sichuan deputy party secretary, Tibet party secretary, Anhui party secretary, and Beijing mayor and party secretary). Eight members, including PSC members Xi Jinping, Yu Zhengsheng, Wang Qishan and Zhang Gaoli, have served in the top leadership in three provinces. Guangdong has had the greatest number of current leaders move through its ranks, with five members of the Politburo (Zhang Dejiang, Wang Qishan, Zhang Gaoli, Hu Chunhua, and Wang Yang) previously or currently serving in the province.⁴ Shanghai has had the second largest number. Four Politburo members (Xi Jinping, Yu Zhengsheng, Meng Jianzhu, and Han Zheng) have served or are currently serving as party secretary of the city.

These informal networks of former colleagues have also been the target of anti-corruption efforts. Two ongoing major political purges are primarily based on mentor-protégé ties that originated in provincial leadership. The first case centers on former PSC member and former public security czar Zhou Yongkang. Zhou was party secretary of Sichuan Province in 1999–2002 before he moved to Beijing to serve concurrently as minister of public security and a member of the Politburo. Zhou had three prominent protégés in

Table 1*Experience as Provincial Leaders among Members of the 2012 Politburo*

Member:	Area of provincial experience																				Total						
	Guangdong	Shanghai	Tianjin	Chongqing	Shaanxi	Beijing	Shandong	Zhejiang	Fujian	Jilin	Liaoning	Neimenggu	Sichuan	Anhui	Hebei	Tibet	Henan	Hubei	Hainan	Jiangsu	Guangxi	Xinjiang	Hunan	Jiangxi	Qinghai	Heilongjiang	Guizhou
Zhang Dejiang	x			x				x	x																	4	
Xi Jinping		x						x	x																	3	
Yu Zhengsheng		x				x												x								3	
Wang Qishan	x				x													x								3	
Zhang Gaoli	x	x				x																				3	
Li Keqiang								x								x										2	
Liu Yunshan										x																1	
Hu Chunhua	x										x				x	x										4	
Li Zhanshu			x									x			x								x	x		4	
Guo Jinlong				x								x	x			x										4	
Wang Yang	x		x									x														3	
Sun Chunlan (f)		x						x	x																	3	
Sun Zhengcai			x	x				x																		3	
Li Jianguo		x	x	x	x																					3	
Zhang Chunxian																		x	x							2	
Liu Qibao										x							x									2	
Meng Jianzhu	x																			x							2
Zhao Leji				x																x							2
Li Yuanchao																	x										1
Han Zheng	x																										1
Total:	5	4	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	53		

NOTE AND SOURCE: Provincial experience is defined as service as vice governor, deputy party secretary, party standing committee member, or above. Politburo Standing Committee members are shaded in gray. Research by Cheng Li, Brookings Institution, 2013.

Sichuan—Li Chongxi (former deputy party secretary and secretary of the discipline inspection commission of Sichuan), Guo Yongxiang (former vice chair of the Sichuan provincial people's congress and former vice governor) and Li Chuncheng (former deputy party secretary of Sichuan and former party secretary of Chengdu city).

These protégés advanced their political careers significantly in Sichuan when Zhou was in charge of the province, and they continued to serve as Zhou's "agents" in the region after his departure to Beijing. Their main roles were to promote their patron's business interests and maintain the province as his political power base (政治地盤 *zhengzhi dipan*).⁵ The first two protégés also successively served as Zhou's chief of staff (secretary general of the provincial party committee) in Sichuan. As a result of Zhou's strong support, Li Chuncheng obtained an alternate seat on the 18th Central Committee. Now each of these three protégés has been arrested on criminal charges, along with their once-untouchable mentor Zhou.

The second case relates to the recent collapse of the so-called Shanxi Gang (山西帮). This past summer brought drastic changes to the leadership of Shanxi Province: five out of 13 members of the provincial standing committee of Shanxi were purged, including Jin Daoming (deputy party secretary), Du Shanzue (vice governor), Chen Chuanping (Taiyuan party secretary), Nie Chunyu (secretary general of the provincial party committee), and Bai Yun (director of the provincial united front work department). Provincial party secretary Yuan Chunqing was recently transferred to Beijing to take a more ceremonial position, and his political career appears to be in jeopardy.

Other important leaders who were born in Shanxi or who previously worked in the provincial leadership, such as Liu Tienan (former vice minister of the National Development and Reform Commission and former director of the National Energy Bureau), Shen Weichen (former Taiyuan party secretary), Ren Runhou (former vice governor), and Ling Zhengce (former director of the provincial reform and development commission) have also been arrested on corruption charges. Twelve bureau and department-level leaders in Shanxi, including the deputy secretary of the provincial discipline inspection commission, Yang Shenlin, were also purged.

Until recently, some of these leaders were considered rising stars in the country. Yuan Chunqing, who previously served as secretary general of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and governor of Shaanxi, was often seen as a strong candidate for the next Politburo. Shen Weichen advanced his career in Shanxi but also served thereafter as deputy director of the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP and party secretary of the China Association for Science. Chen Chuping was one of the very few sixth generation leaders who served on both the 17th and 18th Central Committees of the CCP.

According to several Chinese journalists in Beijing, some of these leaders with strong ties to Shanxi Province, along with a few prominent rich entrepreneurs in the province, formed an informal association called the "Xishan Club" (*xishanhui* 西山会) and held regular meetings in Beijing.⁶ It is believed that the club's main patron was Ling Jihua,

once a rising star of the fifth generation leadership who served as director of the General Office of the Central Committee in the Hu Jintao administration.

Ling lost his chance at a seat in the Politburo or even on the PSC as a result of a dramatic Ferrari crash in Beijing on March 18, 2012, three days after Chinese authorities fired Bo Xilai as Chongqing party secretary. Ling's son, the driver, was killed immediately. The crash also critically injured two young female passengers, who were completely naked when the incident occurred. One of the girls died several days after the accident, and the other died at the hospital months later, under mysterious circumstances. Ling is believed to have not only managed to hide his son's death from the leadership, but also asked then CEO of the China National Petroleum Corporation Jiang Jiemin (a protégé of Zhou Yongkang who has now also been purged on corruption charges) to pay a large sum of money to the families of the two girls in exchange for their silence. Ling even ordered the Central Guard Bureau, China's secret service corps that manages the security of top leaders, to "handle" – or cover up – the incident.⁷ Some have speculated that Ling attempted to make a deal with then public security czar Zhou Yongkang, who was involved in the Bo Xilai scandal.⁸ The deal was simple: Zhou would help Ling cover up the car crash incident, and in return Ling would refrain from investigating Zhou's involvement in the Bo case.

The recent arrest of his brother Ling Zhengce suggests that the CCDI has now begun to investigate Ling Jihua, who now serves as director of the Central United Front Work Department of the CCP. Many analysts in both China and abroad believe that rampant corruption in Shanxi, especially that tied to coal mining, was largely the result of Ling Jihua's protection of wrongdoers.⁹ Regardless of Ling's political fate, the unexpected car accident, the notorious corruption involving a large number of leaders in the province and factional political dealings of the CCP leadership have combined to destroy the Shanxi Gang. However, not all prominent leaders with Shanxi origins are part of the Shanxi Gang. In fact, anti-corruption czar Wang Qishan and PSC member Liu Yunshan, who recently traveled to Shanxi to announce the change of the top leadership of the province, are both natives of Shanxi. Both have played crucial roles in undermining the power of Ling Jihua and directing the ongoing investigation of Shanxi Gang corruption.

The above examples underscore a political reality: due to the growing importance of political power and economic interest in province-level administrations, heavyweight politicians often find it essential to maintain strong ties with their geographical power base in order to consolidate their power and influence in Beijing. They often leverage that power base by promoting their protégés in provincial administration to the national leadership, and consequently ambitious national leaders have often been associated with particular provinces. Provincial leaders, in turn, heavily depend on their patrons in Beijing for advancement of their political careers.

Xi Jinping's Broad Provincial Leadership Experience

Xi Jinping advanced his career largely through local and provincial administration and spent 25 years (some of the most defining periods in his adult life) as an official in county, municipal and provincial levels of leadership in three important provinces

(Hebei, Fujian and Zhejiang) and China's most cosmopolitan city, Shanghai. Also, as discussed in the first installment of this series, Xi Jinping has solid political ties to Shaanxi Province, where his father, legendary revolutionary veteran Xi Zhongxun, was born and spent his early career and where Xi Jinping himself spent his formative years as a “sent-down youth.” Xi’s broad work experience in various parts of the country—the northwest, north, southeast, and east—and his close personal contacts developed in these provinces during these years have ostensibly helped him build a broad, impressive power base.

In a Politburo study session on June 29, 2014, Xi Jinping adopted the term “new normal” (新常态), arguing that China should adjust its economic policies to keep abreast of new domestic and global financial and economic circumstances.¹⁰ Xi’s associates very quickly expanded the application of this term by emphasizing the CCP’s need to adjust to the “political new normal.”¹¹ It is not entirely clear what the “political new normal” entails from Xi’s perspective, but some party strategists who are close to Xi seem to place great weight on promoting the modernization of state governance (治理能力现代化) in terms of institutional development and recruiting officials who have solid, “step-by-step” (一步一个脚印) local leadership experiences.¹²

Official social media websites that are primarily engaged in promoting Xi Jinping’s leadership style and policies have recently listed Xi’s protégés and confidants and praised their credentials. Those named include Executive Deputy Director of the Central Organization Department Chen Xi, Director of the Central Financial and Economic Work Leading Group Liu He, Executive Vice President of the Central Party School He Yiting, Deputy Director of the Central Propaganda Department Huang Kunming, and new Jilin Party Secretary Bayanqolu.¹³ With the exceptions of Huang Kunming and Bayanqolu, the three other prominent confidants have not had much provincial or local leadership experience. However, many of Xi’s protégés have indeed advanced their careers through provincial and local administration under Xi’s leadership.

Table 2 (next page) presents the chronology of Xi’s tenure in local/provincial leadership and the names of his protégés in those places. Xi’s years in the local/provincial leadership were not evenly divided: he spent three years in Hebei, 17 years in Fujian, five years in Zhejiang, and less than a year in Shanghai. Table 3 (page 8) provides biographical information and the current leadership positions of seventeen leaders – Xi’s protégés – who developed their personal and political association with Xi at the local and provincial leadership. All except one were born after 1950, and thus most of them can serve at least one more five-year term after the next political succession in 2017. Three of them belong to the sixth generation of leadership, and thus are seen as political rising stars. Guizhou Governor Chen Min’er and Deputy Director of the General Office of the Central Committee Ding Xuexiang are viewed as especially likely leaders in waiting.

Except for Fang Xinghai, who is a bureau level official, all of Xi’s other protégés rank at the vice governor/vice minister level or above. Ten are members of the 18th Central Committee (one Politburo member, five full members, and four alternate members). One leader, Yang Xiaodu, serves on the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the

CCP as one of the eight deputy secretaries. They were all appointed to their current positions after 2012. Five leaders obtained their current leadership posts in 2013 and the other eight were appointed this year, reflecting the ongoing strong trend of promotion of Xi's protégés. It is worthwhile to trace how Xi and these protégés have developed personal and political ties through the local and provincial leadership during various phases of Xi's career.

Table 2

Xi Jinping's Close Associates from His Tenure as a Local/Provincial Leader

Period/ age	Life & career experiences	Personal & political associations	Main associates & protégés
1982–85/ 29–32	County leader in Zhengding county, Hebei	Hebei connection	Li Zhanshu (栗战书), Yang Zhenwu (杨振武)
1985–2002/ 32–49	Leader in Xiamen, Ningde, Fuzhou, Fujian	Fujian connection	Zhao Keshi (赵克石), Cai Yingting (蔡英挺), He Lifeng (何立峰), Cai Qi (蔡奇), Huang Kunming (黄坤明)
2002–07/ 49–54	Governor and party secretary of Zhejiang	Zhejiang connection	Chen Min'er (陈敏尔), Li Qiang (李强), Xia Baolong (夏宝龙), Bayanqolu (巴音朝鲁), Zhong Shan (钟山), Ying Yong (应勇), Lou Yangsheng (楼阳生)
2007/54	Party secretary of Shanghai	Shanghai Gang	Ding Xuexiang (丁薛祥), Yang Xiaodu (杨晓渡), Fang Xinghai (方星海)

SOURCE: Some of the data are based on Wu Ming [吴鸣], 中国新领袖: 习近平传 (*China's New Leader: Biography of Xi Jinping*, Hong Kong: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2010), pp. 572–573. Tabulated and expanded by Cheng Li.

The Hebei Connection

In March 1982, at the age of 29, Xi Jinping left the position of *mishu* (personal assistant) to Minister of Defense Geng Biao and arrived in Zhengding county, Shijiazhuang prefecture in Hebei Province, where he served as deputy party secretary of the county. This career move was unusual for princelings like Xi at that time, because most were more interested in working in the offices of the national leadership in Beijing or were employed by major SOEs. Today, however, serving as a county-head has become a more popular choice for the new generation of princelings. For example, Deng Xiaoping's grandson Deng Zhuodi, who was born in the United States and is a graduate of Duke University's law school, was made deputy head of Pingguo county in Guangxi's Baise prefecture in 2013, at the age of 28.¹⁴ Another example is Hu Jintao's son Hu Haifeng, a Tsinghua University graduate and former general manager of the Nuctech Co., who became deputy mayor of the prefecture-level city Jiaxing in Zhejiang Province in 2013.¹⁵ Both Deng Zhuodi and Hu Haifeng may have been inspired by Xi's career move three decades earlier.

Table 3*Xi Jinping's Protégés During His Tenure as a Local/Provincial Leader*

Province/ City	Name	Birth year	Birthplace	Previous position under Xi Jinping in province	Current position	Tenure since	CC status
Hebei	Li Zhanshu	1950	Hebei	Colleague of Xi in Hebei (party secretary of Wuji county)	Director of the General Office, CC.	2012	Politburo Member
	Yang Zhenwu	1955	Hebei	<i>People's Daily</i> reporter in Hebei who wrote feature stories about Xi	President, <i>People's Daily</i>	2014	None
	Zhao Keshi	1947	Hebei	Stationed in Fujian when Xi was a municipal and provincial leader	CMC member, director of General Logistics Dept.	2012	Full Member
Fujian	Cai Yingting	1954	Fujian	Stationed in Fujian when Xi was a municipal and provincial leader	Commander of Nanjing Military Region	2012	Full Member
	He Lifeng	1955	Guangdong	Deputy Director of the Office of Xiamen Municipal Government, Fuzhou Party Secretary	Deputy director of the NDRC	2014	Alternate Member
	Cai Qi	1955	Fujian	Deputy Director of the office of the Fujian Provincial Party Committee and Secretary of Shanming city	Deputy director of the Office of the National Security Committee	2014	None
	Huang Kunming	1956	Fujian	Mayor of Longyan city	Deputy director of CCP Propaganda Dept.	2013	Alternate Member
	Chen Min'er	1960	Zhejiang	Director of the Propaganda Department and Vice Governor	Guizhou governor	2013	Full Member
Zhejiang	Li Qiang	1959	Zhejiang	Secretary General of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee	Zhejiang governor	2013	Alternate Member
	Xia Baolong	1952	Tianjin	Deputy Party Secretary	Zhejiang party secretary	2012	Full Member
	Bayanqolu	1955	Neimonggu	Vice Governor and Party Secretary of Ningbo city	Jilin party secretary	2014	Full Member
	Zhong Shan	1955	Zhejiang	Zhejiang Vice Governor	Trade negotiator, vice minister and deputy party secretary of commerce	2014	None
	Ying Yong	1957	Zhejiang	Deputy Secretary of Provincial Discipline Inspection Commission	Shanghai deputy party secretary	2014	None
Shanghai	Lou Yangsheng	1959	Zhejiang	Party Secretary of Lishui city	Shanxi Deputy Party Secretary	2014	None
	Ding Xuexiang	1962	Jiangsu	Secretary General of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee	Deputy director of the General Office of the CC	2013	Alternate Member
	Yang Xiaodu	1953	Shanghai	Secretary of Discipline Inspection Commission in the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee	Deputy secretary of Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the CCP	2014	CCDI Member
	Fang Xinghai	1964	Zhejiang	Deputy Secretary of the Financial Affairs Committee of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee	Bureau head of the Office of the Central Economic and Financial Leading Group	2013	None

NOTES & SOURCE: CC = Central Committee; CCDI = Central Commission for Discipline Inspection; CCP = Chinese Communist Party; CMC = Central Military Commission; Dept. = Department; NDRC = National Development and Reform Commission; PLA = People's Liberation Army; PSC = Politburo Standing Committee. Cheng Li's research, Brookings Institution.

Xi's political career (从政) began in Zhengding where he spent his first year as deputy party secretary and then two years as party secretary of the county. Xi recently stated that these three years were so important to him that he would call Zhengding county his second home (第二故乡).¹⁶ Xi explained that his leadership experience in Zhengding taught him "what politics means."¹⁷ In his words, "Politics is to mobilize all possible positive forces and to unite all people who can be united."¹⁸ As a young princeling surrounded by many colleagues who joined the CCP in the late 1930s, Xi made great effort to show respect and humbleness to these "older comrades" (老同志). Xi seemed to benefit greatly from his cultivation of heavyweight veteran leaders. Xi's good working relationship with "old comrades" was reported in the party organ newspapers in Shijiazhuang and Beijing respectively in 1984–85 and served to accelerate his promotion.¹⁹

The most important "Hebei connection" for Xi is his friendship with Li Zhanshu. Li, now his chief of staff, worked in Wuji, a nearby county in the same Shijiazhuang prefecture, as party secretary during the same period (1983–85). In 1982, when Xi began to work in Zhengding, Li worked in the general office of the Shijiazhuang prefecture party committee as a division head. It has been reported that Xi and Li met often and became good friends during that period.²⁰ As discussed in the first installation of this series, Li Zhanshu later worked in Shaanxi for five years, serving as director of the Organization Department, Xi'an party secretary and Shaanxi deputy party secretary. Li is often seen as an important leader of the "Shaanxi Gang" (discussed in *CLM* 43).

In 2011, a year before the political succession of 18th National Party Congress, Xi spent four days traveling in Guizhou where Li served as provincial party secretary. Li escorted Xi throughout the entire visit, and it was speculated by some analysts that they discussed many important issues regarding Xi's upcoming succession to the top leadership post.²¹ It might be surprising to many that in September 2012, two months before the 18th National Party Congress, Li Zhanshu was appointed as director of the very important General Office of the CCP Central Committee, replacing Hu Jintao's confidant Ling Jihua. Given their long-time personal ties and trust, this appointment should be seen as a logical, ideal choice for Xi. Li Zhanshu's veteran communist family background, his "dual identity" (双重身份) in terms of his early leadership experience serving as secretary of the Hebei provincial committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League, his broad provincial administrative experiences in different parts of the country, and most importantly, his strong personal bonds with Xi, has made him a very powerful figure in Chinese politics today. He will be a leading candidate for the PSC in 2017.

Xi's years in Zhengding also helped him to develop his leadership style and tactics – such as aggressively promoting his friends and using the media to favorably influence his public image – which he has continued to rely on as a top national leader. In 1982, soon after he arrived in Zhengding, Xi appointed a new friend, a local writer named Jia Dashan, to be chief of the Culture Bureau of Zhengding county, even though Jia was not even a member of the CCP.²² More remarkably, Xi decided that the Culture Bureau would not establish a CCP branch in order to make sure that Jia could effectively run the bureau. Jia later served as vice chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference

(CPPCC) of Zhengding county and vice chairman of the Hebei Provincial Writers Association. He died of cancer in 1997, and Xi and his wife visited Jia a few times during his final days. Xi also wrote an article commemorating Jia, and their friendship has been widely reported in the Chinese media.²³

Yang Zhenwu, the newly appointed president of *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, is another important protégé of Xi from his Zhengding years. Yang was a *People's Daily*'s reporter stationed in Hebei Province and first met Xi in Zhengding in the early 1980s. It was reported that Yang wrote some feature stories about Xi as a very effective local leader.²⁴ Yang's career promotions seemed to parallel Xi's own consolidation of power. After Xi became a PSC member in 2007, Yang was appointed standing committee member and director of the Propaganda Department of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee. In April 2003 he was promoted to be editor-in-chief of the *People's Daily*, and one year later, he was made president of the newspaper, becoming Xi's point man on propaganda and media, especially in domestic affairs.

It should be noted that Xi was not always successful in cultivating good relationships with "old comrades." During Xi's tenure in Zhengding, the first party secretary of Hebei Province Gao Yang was reported to have serious reservations about the "helicopter-like" career advancement of princelings and thus blocked the further promotion of Xi to be a candidate for vice governor and a member of the provincial standing committee.²⁵ Gao Yang also served as president of the Central Party School in the late 1980s, the post that Xi Jinping later held from 2007 to 2012. When Gao died in 2009, overseas media reported that Xi did not organize the typical commemoration ceremony for his predecessor—possibly due to their clash in Hebei Province.²⁶

The Fujian Connection

Because of its geographic proximity to Taiwan, Fujian Province has always placed strong emphasis on national security and military affairs. With his previous experience as a mishu to the minister of defense, Xi Jinping was understandably very much interested in military development in the regions that he served. In fact, during his tenure in Fujian Province, Xi concurrently took a number of military positions while serving primarily as a civilian leader. These positions included party first secretary of the Ningde military sub-district, (1988–90), party first secretary of the Fuzhou military sub-district (1990–93), party first secretary of the Fujian military district (1993–96), first political commissar of the artillery reserve division in Fujian Province (1996–2002), director of the National Defense Mobilization Committee of Fujian Province (1999–2002), and deputy director of the Nanjing Military Region Defense Mobilization Committee (1999–2002). Through his work in these positions, Xi cultivated important relationships with military officers who were stationed in the province.

Two prominent military officers with whom Xi built strong personal ties in Fujian were Zhao Keshi and Cai Yingting. General Zhao currently serves as a member of the CMC and director of the PLA General Logistics Department; and General Cai is Commander of the Nanjing Military Region. Both of them are now among the highest-ranking officers in the PLA. Zhao and Cai both served in the 31st Group Army for many years and largely

advanced their military careers in the Nanjing Military Region, in which each later served as deputy chief of staff, chief of staff and then commander. Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai—where Xi served as a top leader over 22 years—all belong to the Nanjing Military Region. Xi and these two prominent PLA officers had close contact for many years before they moved to Beijing.

The headquarters of the 31st Group Army are actually located in Tongan county, near Xiamen city, where Xi Jinping held office in Fujian Province as vice mayor of the city in 1985–88. Zhao spent nine years in Fujian Province, serving twice in senior positions of the 31st Group Army—chief of staff from 1994–99 and commander from 2000–04. Xi frequently visited the 31st Group Army during and after his leadership tenure in Fujian, and Chinese official media reported that Xi visited the unit for the 13th time in August 2014.²⁷

Cai Yingting was born in Jinjiang county, Fujian Province in 1954 and joined the PLA in 1970 at the age of 16. Cai’s family background is unclear, but the fact that he served as a mishu to CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Wannian suggests that he may be a princeling. It was reported in overseas media that Cai formed a close relationship with Xi in Fujian, not only during the time of his service in the province, but also when he escorted Zhang Wannian to visit.²⁸ According to some overseas analysts, Cai was the first military officer that Xi promoted after he became chairman of the CMC in 2012.²⁹ Cai is now a leading candidate to become chief of staff of the PLA and a member of the next CMC.

While in Fujian, Xi also developed friendships with several civilian leaders who have often been described by the media as Xi’s trusted protégés. Xi has now placed them in very important leadership positions in various functional areas. Xi and He Lifeng have developed mentor-protégé ties over almost three decades. He Lifeng, who was recently appointed vice minister of the National Development and Reform Commission, first met Xi in Xiamen in 1985 when he was the newly appointed deputy director of the General Office of the municipal government and Xi was newly-appointed vice mayor. He later served as deputy director and then director of the Finance Bureau of the Xiamen municipal government, reporting directly to Xi, who was in charge of finance in the municipal government. He also followed Xi’s leadership career moves, serving as Fuzhou party secretary and standing member of the provincial party committee when Xi served as provincial deputy party secretary and governor of Fujian. In 2009, about a year and half after Xi became vice president of the PRC and PSC member, He was appointed to be deputy party secretary of Tianjin. One year after Xi became president, He was appointed vice minister of the NDRC. In the coming years, He will likely play a role of greater importance in the economic leadership of the country.

Like He Lifeng, Cai Qi also worked in the General Office of the Fujian provincial government when Xi arrived there in 1985. In addition, Cai worked directly under Xi ten years later, in the mid-1990s, when Cai served as deputy director of the General Office of the Fujian provincial party committee, where Xi served as deputy party secretary. Cai Qi also worked with Xi in Zhejiang Province in 2002–2007, serving as party secretary and mayor of several counties and cities, including Hangzhou, while Xi was Zhejiang party

secretary. Cai later served as standing member and director of the Organization Department of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee. It is unusual that Cai served only four months (from November 2013 to March 2014) as executive vice governor of Zhejiang. Although Cai's new position has not been officially announced, it has been widely reported in Chinese media that Cai now serves as deputy director of the newly established National Security Committee.³⁰

Another important protégé Xi cultivated during his tenure in Fujian is Huang Kunming. Huang was born in Shanghang county, Fujian Province, in 1956. Like Cai Qi, Huang worked with Xi in both Fujian and Zhejiang. After serving as mayor and deputy party secretary in Longyan city, Huang was transferred to Wuzhou city in Zhejiang, where he served as mayor from 1998–2003, a couple of years before Xi's arrival in Zhejiang as provincial party secretary. Huang later served as party secretary of Jiaxing city, director of the Propaganda Department of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee, and party secretary of Hangzhou city. In November 2013, on the eve of the Third Plenum of the 18th CCP Central Committee, Huang was appointed deputy director of the Propaganda Department of the CCP. He Lifeng, Cai Qi and Huang Kunming are now well positioned in these important functional areas, in a way that allows Xi to exert influence and more effectively implement his policy initiatives.

Although Xi spent 17 years serving in various leadership positions in Fujian, ten of these years were at the prefecture (Ningde) and municipal (Xiamen and Fuzhou) levels of administration.³¹ He served as deputy party secretary of Fujian from 1996–2002 and concurrently as governor from 2000–2002. He had to work under the leadership of several provincial party secretaries (Jia Qinglin, 1993–96, Chen Mingyi 1996–2000, and Song Defu, 2000–04). Therefore, Xi's power and influence in the province had some limitations. It was also widely reported that he had some serious personal and political tension with some other top leaders in the province, especially Deputy Party Secretary Lu Zhangong.³² Lu sometimes even publicly criticized Xi for his leadership style and policy initiatives.³³ Each made efforts to block the advancement of the other's protégés.³⁴ Lu Zhangong was considered a strong candidate for the 18th Politburo, but ultimately he was not selected. Instead he ended up with a more ceremonial position: vice chair of the CPPCC. According to some Chinese analysts, Lu's outspoken criticism of Xi undermined his chance for promotion.³⁵

The Zhejiang Connection

If Xi had difficulties promoting his friends during his tenure in Fujian, he apparently had far more power as No. 1 leader (第一把手) when he served as provincial party secretary in Zhejiang. Table 3 lists seven of his protégés in Zhejiang. Chen Min'er was born in Zhiji county, Zhejiang Province in 1960 and advanced his career in Zhejiang until 2012, when he was appointed to his current position as deputy party secretary and governor of Guizhou. During the five years (2002–07) when Xi was party boss of the province, Chen served as director of the Propaganda Department and standing member of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee. It was widely believed that Chen Min'er provided much support for Xi's weekly columns published in the provincial party newspaper *Zhejiang Daily* during these years.³⁶ Chen also served as executive vice governor of Zhejiang. As a

full member of the 18th Central Committee born in the 1960s, Chen will likely receive strong support from Xi for further promotion.

Zhejiang Governor Li Qiang worked directly under Xi from 2004–2007 as chief of staff of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee, while Xi was party secretary. Li was born in Rui'an county, Zhejiang Province in 1959. He has spent his entire career in his native province, serving consecutively as director of the Industry and Commerce Bureau of Zhejiang Province, party secretary of Wenzhou, and secretary of the Politics and Law Committee of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee. It is expected that Li will move to another province to become a provincial party secretary or move to Beijing where he will work directly for his former boss.

The relationship between Xi and current Zhejiang Party Secretary Xia Baolong is not entirely clear. Xia, a native of Tianjin who advanced his early career there, was transferred to Zhejiang in 2003, a year after Xi became Zhejiang party secretary. Xia served as deputy provincial party secretary under Xi for three years. Xia later also concurrently served as governor of Zhejiang for a year before being promoted to his current position in December 2012. A conservative leader known for his campaign to demolish a large number of Christian churches in the province, Xia is rumored to be moving to Xinjiang, where he will replace the current party secretary and Politburo member Zhang Chunxian, thus securing a seat in the next Politburo.³⁷

The newly appointed Jilin Party Secretary Bayanqolu is the only ethnic minority leader who currently serves as a provincial party secretary in China. A Mongolian, Bayanqolu was born in Otog Front Banner in 1955 and advanced his early career by serving in local leadership in his native autonomous region. He is often regarded as a so-called tuanpai leader (团派) – an official who advanced through the leadership of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) – as he served as deputy secretary (1991–92) and secretary (1992–93) of the Neimenggu CCYL Committee and a member (1993–98) and executive secretary (1998–2001) of the CCYL Secretariat. It should be noted that Premier Li Keqiang served as the secretary of the CCYL in 1993–98. Bayanqolu was transferred to Zhejiang in 2001, one year before Xi's arrival there. In Zhejiang, Bayanqolu served as vice governor (2001–03), standing member of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee and secretary of Ningbo city (2003–10). He was transferred to Jilin where he served as deputy party secretary (2010–14) and concurrently governor (2013–14). In August 2014, he was promoted to be Jilin party secretary. Bayanqolu was an alternate member of the 17th Central Committee and is a full member of the 18th Central Committee. As an ethnic minority leader with broad leadership experience and aided by his close working relationship with both Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, he will be a leading candidate for the next Politburo in 2017.

Xi's other three protégés from his Zhejiang years were also promoted to important positions in 2014. New trade negotiator and Vice Minister of Commerce Zhong Shan was vice governor of Zhejiang from 2003–08. He assisted Xi in the functional area of foreign trade in Zhejiang. New Shanghai Deputy Party Secretary Ying Yong served as director of the Supervision Department of the Zhejiang municipal government (2003–06) and

president of the Zhejiang Higher People's Court (2005–07). Ying played a key role in advancing Xi's anti-corruption efforts in Zhejiang. New Shanxi Deputy Party Secretary Lou Yangsheng, who was selected for his current position in the wake of major corruption scandals in Shanxi, served as party secretary of Lishui city, Zhejiang Province when Xi was provincial secretary. Zhong Shan, Ying Yong and Lou Yunshan were all born in Zhejiang and worked closely with Xi during his tenure there, and their recent appointments to these important positions apparently reflect Xi's confidence in them and his determination to have his own people handle some crucial challenges.

The Shanghai Connection

Xi spent only eight months in Shanghai as party secretary of the city, from March to October 2007, which apparently did not give him much time to cultivate solid personal ties. While in office, he had to rely on the leadership team that was largely formed by his own mentors Jiang Zemin and Zeng Qinghong. Yet these eight months gave Xi a chance to find some very talented and capable Shanghai leaders to include on his own team in Shanghai and in the future when he would become a top national leader. Apparently, Xi was particularly impressed by Ding Xuexiang, then director of the General Office and deputy chief of staff of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, for his administrative skills, political counsel, low profile and humble personality. Within two months, Xi promoted Ding to be chief of staff and standing member of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee.

Ding was born in Nantong, Jiangsu Province in 1962, studied engineering at the Northeast Heavy Machinery Institute (now called Yanshan University) in Qiqihar city, Heilongjiang in 1978–1982, and joined the CCP in 1982. After graduation, Ding began to work in Shanghai where he served as a research fellow (1982–84), deputy director (1984–88) and director (1988–92) of the General Office of the Shanghai Research Institute of Materials. He became deputy director of the Institute in 1994 and two years later became director. He served as deputy director of the Shanghai Municipal Science and Technology Commission in 1999–2001 and deputy party secretary and head of Shanghai's Zhabei district in 2001–04. Under the leadership of then Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Liangyu, Ding took the important position of deputy director of the Organization Department of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee and concurrently served as director of the Personnel Bureau of the Shanghai Municipal Government (2004–06). He remained in Shanghai assisting Xi's successor Yu Zhengsheng in 2007–2012. Soon after Xi became CCP general secretary, Ding moved to Beijing in 2013, where he serves as deputy director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and concurrently director of the Office of the PRC President, becoming Xi's principal *mishu*. Ding is expected to succeed Li Zhanshu sometime in the near future, and will be a leading candidate for membership in the next Politburo or Secretariat.

New Deputy Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the CCP Yang Xiaodu is another Shanghai leader who impressed Xi during his brief tenure there.³⁸ A native of Shanghai, Yang was born in 1953. He was a sent-down youth in Anhui when he was 17–21 years old. In 1974, he returned to Shanghai as a “worker-peasant-soldier student” (工农兵学员) studying pharmacy at the Shanghai College of

Traditional Medicine. After working as an intern in two hospitals in Shanghai, Yang went to Tibet, where he worked as a doctor and official in Nagqu region in 1977. He worked in Tibet for 25 years and advanced his political career, and became vice governor of Tibet in 1998–2001. He was transferred back to Shanghai to become vice mayor in 2001–2006 and served as a standing member and director of the United Front Work Department of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee in 2006–12. He was made secretary of the Shanghai Discipline Inspection Commission in 2012. In early 2014, at the recommendation of both Xi Jinping and Wang Qishan in a special meeting of the CCDI, the Chinese leadership appointed Yang deputy secretary of this increasingly powerful Commission.

While in Shanghai, Xi Jinping became quite interested in the financial development of the city known as China’s “head of the dragon.” He came to know Fang Xinghai, then deputy secretary of the Financial Affairs Committee of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee and director of the Shanghai Financial Services Office. Fang was born into a low-ranking PLA officer’s family in Leqing county, Wenzhou city in Zhejiang Province in 1964. As a result of the job changes of his parents, Fang moved to Shanghai at the age of 14. He attended Tsinghua University’s School of Economic Management from 1981–86, majoring in Information Systems Management.³⁹ He pursued graduate-level education at Stanford University from 1986 to 1993 under the guidance of Joseph Stiglitz, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in economics in 2001. After receiving his doctoral degree in economics in 1993, Fang worked in the prestigious young professionals program at the World Bank for several years (1993–98). He returned to China in 1998 and served as director of the coordination department of the China Construction Bank (1998–2000), secretary general of the Galaxy Securities Regulatory Commission (2000–01) and vice president of the Shanghai Stock Exchange (2001–05) before working in the Shanghai municipal government. Fang has a close relationship with Xi and often sends him memos on financial development in China and the world.⁴⁰ Soon after Xi became general secretary of the CCP, Fang was transferred to Beijing where he currently serves as bureau chief of the General Office of the Central Economic and Financial Leading Group. There, he directly supports Liu He, another close friend of Xi, in his efforts to develop China’s financial and economic blueprint.

All of these leaders who developed their personal and political ties with Xi during his tenure at the local or provincial level now have become trusted members of Xi’s team. Their functional areas are quite diverse and include party organization and operation, propaganda and media, military affairs and state security, economic management and financial reforms, supervision and party discipline, and provincial leadership. They will likely play an even more important role as Xi consolidates his power; in turn their future career advancement will be an indicator of the status and possible political development of Xi’s leadership.

Many of the leaders discussed in this installment—for example Li Zhanshu, Ding Xuexiang, He Lifeng, Li Qiang, and Cai Qi—all currently serve or have previously worked as an office director, chief of staff, or *mishu*. The growing role of *mishu* in Chinese political socialization and networking deserves great attention. The fourth and

final installment of this series will focus on the importance of the *mishu* connection in the formation of Xi's inner circle and its political implications.

Notes

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¹ For more detailed discussion of the dominance of leaders with provincial administrative backgrounds in the top national leadership, see Cheng Li, "A Pivotal Stepping-Stone: Local Leaders' Representation on the 17th Central Committee," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 23 (Winter 2008).

² See Cheng Li, "The 'Shanghai Gang': Force for Stability or Cause for Conflict?" *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 1–18.

³ They are Xi Jinping, Yu Zhengsheng, Wang Huning, Xu Qiliang, Meng Jianzhu, and Han Zheng. Although Li Yuanchao also advanced in Shanghai during his early career, his rise to the national leadership was not attributed to Jiang's recommendation. Thus Li is not considered to be a member of the Shanghai Gang.

⁴ None of them are natives of Guangdong. In fact, of the 205 full members of the 18th Central Committee, none was born in Guangdong.

⁵ In terms of economic interests, Zhou's son Zhou Bing and business gurus Liu Han and Wu Bing were all involved in corruption and other economic wrongdoings in Sichuan province. Zhongguo Jingcha Wang (China Police Network), July 30, 2014, see <http://daan.cpd.com.cn/n157194/c24263222/content.html>.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the "Xishan Club," see Cao Guoxing 曹国星, "罗昌平《打铁记》揭秘山西籍高官同乡会组织'西山会'" (Luo Changping's *To Fight Against Liu Tienan Reveals the Secret Xishan Club Organized by High-ranking Officials with Shanxi Origins*), RFI, October 15, 2013, <http://www.chinese.rfi.fr/中国/20131015-罗昌平《打铁记》揭秘山西籍高官同乡会组织'西山会。'>

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the incident, see Cheng Li, "Rule of the Princelings," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, no. 8 (Winter, 2013): 38–39; and Ian Johnson, "China Faces New Scandal Over Crash of a Ferrari," *New York Times*, September 4, 2012, p. A4.

⁸ "周永康插手法拉利车祸" (Zhou Yongkang intervened in Ferrari crash), *Mirror Monthly* (明镜月刊), December 20, 2013.

⁹ Suo Fei 索菲, "Ling Jihua awaits three kinds of rulings" (令计划等待三种下场判决), RFI, September 7, 2014, <http://www.chinese.rfi.fr/中国/20140907-令計劃等待三種下場判決>.

¹⁰ Zhou Rui 周锐 "习近平强调适应新常态 政治局布局深化改革" (Xin Jinping emphasizes adaptation to new normal and the Politburo lays out deepening reform), China News Net (中国新闻网), July 30, 2014, see <http://finance.chinanews.com/cj/2014/07-30/6442912.shtml>. For the original use of the English term "new normal," which has been mainly used by economists, see Catherine Rampell, "The 'New Normal' is Actually Pretty Old," *New York Times*, January 11, 2011.

¹¹ Gu Lijuan 顾利娟 and Nie Xinbo 聂新波, "习近平如何构建‘政治新常态’" (How Xi Jinping builds "the new political normal"), *Renminwang*, September 5, 2014, <http://renwu.people.com.cn/n/2014/0905/c357069-25609606.html>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Song Shengnan 宋胜男 and Wang Dong 王栋, “解读习近平如何构建‘政治新常态’” (Interpreting how Xi Jinping can build a ‘political new normal’) 学习小组 (The Learning from Xi Small Group), September 5, 2014, <http://opinion.haiwainet.cn/n/2014/0905/c353596-21048007.html>.

¹⁴ China News Net (中国新闻网), June 24, 2014, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2014/06-24/6312987.shtml>.

¹⁵ *Jiaxing Daily* (嘉兴日报), May 24, 2013, p. 1.

¹⁶ Yong Huaqi 雍华齐, “习近平忆正定岁月” (Xi Jinping’s recollections of his years in Zhengding), in Wu Ming 吴鸣, 中国新领袖:习近平传 (*China’s New Leader: A Biography of Xi Jinping*), new enlarged edition (Hong Kong: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2010), p. 605.

¹⁷ Op. cit., p. 602.

¹⁸ Yong Huaqi, “习近平忆正定岁月.”

¹⁹ Wu, *China’s New Leader*, p. 137.

²⁰ Xiang Jiangyu 相江宇, 习近平班底 (*Xi Jinping’s Confidants*), New York: The Mirror Books, 2011); p. 204.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Wu, *China’s New Leader*, pp. 135–136.

²³ Xi Jinping 习近平, “忆大山” (In commemoration of Jia Dashan), *Guangming Daily* (光明日报), January 13, 2014, p.1. Also see <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2014/01-13/5726676.shtml>, accessed January 15, 2014. The piece originally appeared in *Contemporary People* (当代人), no. 7 (1998).

²⁴ 看中国 (*China Watch*), see <http://m.secretchina.com/node/496409>, accessed on September 10, 2014.

²⁵ Liang Jian 梁剑, 习近平新传 (*New Biography of Xi Jinping*), New York: Mirror Books, 2012), pp. 142–147.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Phoenix Net (凤凰网), August 1, 2014, see <http://i.ifeng.com/video/zixun/jingxuan/news?vt=5&aid=87061375&mid=9X2jwR&all=1&p=2>.

²⁸ *Qingdao Daily* (星岛日报), November 2, 2012, also see <http://news.singtao.ca/calgary/2012-11-02/china1351843867d4175398.html>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Wu Yu 吴雨, “习近平亲信蔡奇将调任国安委?” (Will Xi’s Confidant Cai Qi be Transferred to the National Security Committee?), Deutsche Welle Website, March 28, 2014, <http://www.dw.de/习近平亲信蔡奇将调任国安委/a-17527436>.

³¹ For a detailed discussion of Xi’s career development in Fujian, see Phoenix Net, (凤凰网), July 31, 2014, see <http://xm.ifeng.com/xiamenzhuanti/xjpzfj/#a2>.

³² Wu, *China’s New Leader*, p. 264.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Based on the author’s interviews with local officials and entrepreneurs in Fujian, June and July 2014.

³⁵ *Eastern Daily* (东方日报), March 17, 2013, also see

http://orientaldaily.on.cc/cnt/news/20130317/00184_002.html.

³⁶ Apollo News Network (阿波罗新闻网), December 19, 2012, see

<http://tw.aboluowang.com/2012/1219/274159.html#sthash.Gnmg1CE1.dpbs>.

³⁷ Tom Phillips, “Christians Form Human Shield Around Church in China’s ‘Jerusalem,’” *The Daily Beast*, April 6, 2014; also see <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/04/06/christians-form-human-shield-around-church-in-china-s-jerusalem.html>.

³⁸ Xi praised Yang for his broad leadership experience and his good work on ethnic affairs in the press conference on the Shanghai municipal party committee in 2012. *Qingdao ribao*, November 20, 2013, see <https://hk.news.yahoo.com/楊曉渡晉升中紀委副書記-214705496.html>.

³⁹ For Fang’s early career, see Sun Tao 孙弢, “果敢方星海” (Bold Fang Xinghai), *Financial World* (金融世界), August 2012; also see http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_695557320101d583.html.

⁴⁰ George Chen and Daniel Ren, “Shanghai booster Fang Xinghai lands Beijing financial advisory role,” *South China Morning Post*, June 18, 2013.