

## China's communist princelings

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The seventeenth national congress of the Chinese Communist Party on 15-19 October 2007 [1] is attracting high levels of interest from the foreign media. According to some reports, more than 1,000 foreign journalists have already applied to cover [2] the event. Many of these reporters have been contacting me for explanations of the issues involved, and one prominent subject has been the rising political stars who may soon be promoted [3] to positions of greater power. It seems to me that there is a lot of misunderstanding of the competition between the so-called "princelings" and their putative different factions, so this column attempts to clarify this by providing a brief analysis of this question.

### A taste of reality

The term "princeling" does not, as commonly supposed, simply refer to the children of senior officials. In fact, it refers specifically to the children of those revolutionaries who played important roles in the Communist Party's seizure of power in 1949. After [4] that date, most of these revolutionaries took up senior positions within the party or the machinery of state. Those who had worked in local party or government organisations were appointed to politburo-level positions such as ministers or provincial party secretaries at the eighth party congress in 1956. Those who had served in the army were made generals or marshals at the first distribution of military ranks in 1955. This group consisted of roughly 2,000 people. They had a similar status to the founders of new empires in ancient times, and became the people's republic's single-generation aristocracy (they would not be able to pass on their titles to their children).

The children of this group were mostly born between the late 1940s and early 1950s. There are two key characteristics of the way they were brought up. First, they did have a certain special status and attended schools for the children of senior officials, or at least the best local schools. But second, and in contrast, the education they received was a strict, traditional revolutionary education. They were told that they must not see themselves as special, but encouraged to pursue lives of austerity and study in order to prepare for their future as the "inheritors of communism".

In school at least, they were not given special treatment, and their thoughts were strictly controlled. At set times, they were sent to the countryside to do hard labour. In the years of famine, they too went hungry in their school dormitories. Apart from the educational syllabus, their upbringing was in many ways similar to the children of aristocratic families in Britain at elite schools like Eton. Unlike pupils at Eton, however, the princelings were not being groomed for positions as the future leaders of the

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country. Most of China's leaders at the time were in the prime of their lives, and the question of succession was not yet pressing. What was needed, however, were skilled people to work towards the development of the economy. Therefore, the vast majority of the princelings were educated with the aim of becoming the country's future scientists and engineers. Among the children of the Chinese aristocracy, those who had any genuine interest or ambition in the field of politics were extremely few.

## **The choice of politics**

However, changes in politics are hard to predict. One political movement after another, culminating in the cultural revolution, led to the disintegration of the original group of Chinese leaders. Parents who had once been respected officials overnight became "counter-revolutionaries" or "people in power taking the capitalist road". It could be argued that the senior leaders and their children were more affected than any other group by the power struggles within the party [5]. The young princelings began to realise that their fates were inextricably linked to the state of national politics. From then on, their interest in politics and political ambitions began to grow.

By the end of the cultural revolution [6] in 1976, the older generation of party leaders had entered into old age, and questions of succession began to seem more pressing. The party began the project of looking for and fostering successors that continues to this day. There were two main criteria for choosing successors - youth and education. Also important was behaviour during the cultural revolution. Family background was not considered an important factor, and therefore large numbers of young people from poor and agricultural backgrounds were brought into politics. The sons and daughters of senior officials did not receive any preferential treatment, and only a very few entered the political world [7].

It is important to remember that all this took place at the beginning of the period of reform and opening up, when the Chinese economy was beginning to liven up. Compared to those from more ordinary backgrounds, the children of the revolutionaries had a higher awareness of the risks of a life in politics. They saw that with their experience and contacts throughout society, business was a quicker route to success. Large numbers resigned from their public-sector jobs and went into business. Many have become extremely wealthy, or enjoy positions at the top of large national companies which control much of the country's resources. Only a tiny minority remain in politics, but these few possess genuine political talents, and are preparing to realise their political ambitions.

## **A generation's journey**

Only four of the leading revolutionaries' children have devoted their lives to politics and hope to reach the top. They are Liu Yuan, Xi Jinping, Bo Xilai and Yu Zhengsheng. Their fathers, Liu Shaoqi, Xi Zhongxun, Bo Yibo and Huang Jing respectively, were all party elders. Currently, Yu Zhengsheng [8] enjoys the highest political position of the four. He is party secretary of Hubei province and a member of the politburo. He has considerable talent, but at 62 is too old to compete seriously for a position in the next generation of top leaders.

Liu Yuan, Xi Jinping [9] and Bo Xilai [10] all have startlingly similar political CVs. They are all around 50 years old, and all of them had fathers who lost their political positions. As a result, at around the age of 16 or 17 they were all relegated to the bottom levels of society, working as farmers or workers. This means that they all have an understanding of the realities of the lives of the poor. After the death of Mao, the fathers of all three were politically rehabilitated. Liu Shaoqi [11] had already died, but Xi's and Bo's fathers resumed senior positions. All three sons were then able to attend university. After graduation, their political experience and contacts began to

work for them and all took up jobs in the central government, or as the secretaries of important figures in the leadership.

Surprisingly, at the start of 1980, all three then resigned from their enviable positions and left Beijing to take up grassroots positions in the provinces [12]. Only those with high aspirations and perceptiveness would have been able to take such a decision. Maybe they understood themselves, or maybe they were advised by their fathers, that in order to be qualified for roles as future leaders of the country, it was vital to have experience at all levels of government. Only the political training [13] gained in these positions would give them the necessary experience and ability to manage whole departments or areas, and provide opportunities to accumulate the political successes needed to rise to the top.

Of the three, Liu Yuan was the first to come to prominence. After graduating in 1982, he served as the party secretary of a collective farm in Henan province. Within six years he had been promoted to vice-governor of the province. His successes made him popular with the Henan public, but a chance event brought an end to his political career and he transferred to the military. Although he is now a lieutenant-colonel, he will not be able to make any further progress in politics.

In comparison, the progress of Xi Jinping and Bo Xilai has been relatively steady. They started out as vice-heads of counties and advanced gradually up the ranks over a period of twenty years before becoming province- or ministerial-level officials and joining the politburo. They have the necessary records of success and comprehensive experience to become top national leaders [13]. They have also avoided making any mistakes large enough for political opponents to exploit. This is highly unusual.

### **The burden of privilege**

It may come as a surprise to learn that the main obstacle to success for these two is in fact their "aristocratic" backgrounds. In Chinese, "princeling" is a derogatory term, which is used to satirise those who have ridden to success on the coat-tails of their parents. In elections at party conferences, their status as the sons of revolutionaries will be enough to lose them a significant number of votes. For example, Deng Pufang, the son of Deng Xiaoping [14], is a province-level official and has done much to further the cause of disabled people in China. However, in elections at the thirteenth party congress, he not only failed to get into the politburo, but the number of votes cast also put him at last on the list of alternate members. This is a reflection of the anger of the Chinese public at official corruption.

In fact, similar political dynasties [15] exist in many countries. The current president of the United States could, for example, be called a princeling. According to my knowledge, the heirs to China's political dynasties do actually have many distinct advantages over officials who have risen to the top from ordinary backgrounds.

A look through the records of officials who have been found guilty of corruption shows that the vast majority come from poor backgrounds. The experience of poverty early in life means that these officials find it hard to resist the temptation of money. However, the princelings who are involved in politics have always been materially well-off, and their education has taught them to pursue more spiritual aims. Therefore they are less susceptible to corruption. In addition, those princelings who went into business became rich long ago, and do not need to use political power for their own personal gain.

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Another point to consider is that one of the special rights of senior officials [16] is a monopoly on information. Much information that is inaccessible to the rest of society, such as many western books and films, can be found in the homes of top officials. The children of the "aristocracy" have been influenced from an early age by this kind of "subversive" material. Many were rebellious in their youth, and sneered at the rigid thinking of their parents. They have a far greater understanding of the world at large than many of their contemporaries, including of the disputes between communist countries. And from looking at the mixed political fortunes of their parents, this group has a deeper understanding of the ways of politics.

In addition to all this, because of their experience and contacts among the very highest [17] political circles, even if the princelings run into political setbacks, as long as they don't break the law, they will still retain their social standing and have many options open to them. The result is that the princelings can afford to take more independent stances and have more of a personal style than most other officials. They dare to say and do what other officials cannot. This vigour has resulted in Bo Xilai being praised in the foreign media as an excellent "name card" for China, and "similar in style to former mayor of New York, Edward Koch".

At present, the only two princelings who have any prospects of entering the top levels of leadership are Xi Jinping and Bo Xilai. The challenge they face is how to extricate themselves from the burden of being princelings and earn genuine authority and votes [18]. If they do manage to rise to power at the time of the eighteenth party congress in 2012, there is hope that China will see even more dramatic changes.

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