

## China's Youth League faction: incubus of power?

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In the previous column in this series I talked briefly about the so-called "princelings" of the Chinese Communist Party in the context of its seventeenth [congress](#) [1] on 15-19 October 2007 (see "[China's communist princelings](#) [1]", 17 October 2007). This time I'm going to take a look at the party's Youth League faction.

The Chinese Communist Youth League and the Chinese Communist Party are the twin brothers of the Chinese revolution, both being born at around the same time. The Socialist Youth League, as it was called then, was established in Shanghai in 1920. Although it had few members, it was a nationwide organisation, and held its first national conference in Guangzhou in 1922. [Chen Duxiu](#) [2], at the time the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, spoke at the conference. It was agreed there that the league should join and become a branch of Young Communist International - this meant that, like the party, which was a separate organisation, the league was under the control of the Comintern.

Over the years, the league changed its name a number of times, but it was always treated as an equal by the party, and was not under party leadership. Senior league leaders were often also leaders of the party, and the terms "league member" and "party member" carried the same status and political implications. It was only decided that the league should be re-established under party leadership at the start of 1949, when it was no longer in any doubt that the party would succeed in seizing power. In April that year, the "New Democratic Youth League" held its first national conference (it only changed its name to the [Communist Youth League](#) [3] in 1957). The Youth League had now become a second-rank political organisation - "the party's assistant and reserve force".

### The arc of progress

Between 1949 and the start of the cultural revolution in 1966, Youth League leaders often moved into senior positions in party or government departments, but there was never any talk of a "Youth League faction". This was because at the time, league leaders and their counterparts in party and government departments all had similar revolutionary credentials. The only real difference between them was in job title. For example, Hu Yaobang, who had served for an extended period as first secretary of the Youth League, went on in the 1960s to become party secretary of Hunan province, and first secretary of Shaanxi province. He had been in the Red Army and taken part in the [long march](#) [4] - no one was going to question his credentials.

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Among Li Datong's recent articles in **openDemocracy**:

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["Beijing \*baozi\* and public trust](#) [3]" (25 July 2007)

The Youth League was disbanded during the cultural revolution, and only re-established in 1978. By this time, issues of political succession were starting to emerge, and the role of the Youth League as the "party's reserve force" started to take on real meaning. In 1982, Wang Zhaoguo, deputy foreman of a car factory, caught the eye of Deng Xiaoping [5], and was suddenly promoted to the position of first secretary of the Youth League. This move from Deng said a lot about the way new leaders were to be chosen. Most of the Youth League secretaries who went on to important positions in the politburo [6] or as provincial party secretaries, including Hu Jintao, entered the Youth League at about the same time as Wang Zhaoguo [7], or shortly after. They are all products of the 1980s system of selecting leaders as it manifested itself within the Youth League. However, apart from Wang and Hu Jintao, who each served for a couple of years as first secretary of the Youth League and went on to positions in central government departments or as provincial party secretaries, Youth League leaders have not generally gone on to achieve much else in their careers.

Why is this? The reason lies in the declining importance of the league itself. For a long time, the Youth League's main responsibility was to promote revolutionary values in society, and particularly among young people. Before the cultural revolution, the party selected a group of "advanced people" who would serve as models for the rest of the population to emulate. The most famous of these was Lei Feng [8]. All these people were located and promoted by the Youth League, which thereby had a profound influence on the political state of the nation. The league in this period was at the height of its powers.

However, from 1978 onwards, the party changed its political direction and introduced the reform policies. It began to place more value on organisations and individual leaders who could contribute to economic development - the Achilles' heel of Youth League cadres. As the party's control over ideology gradually weakened, so the importance of the league as an ideological tool diminished. It was a decline from which the league would never recover.

### **An institutional pulse**

In today's China, the Youth League has no political importance. It has become a purely bureaucratic department focusing on youth issues. However, the league is still tied in with the system of official grades of seniority. Therefore, when officials are picked out for rapid promotion, they are often moved from their original position into the Youth League, where they are quickly promoted, before being moved out again into yet higher positions in party or government departments. The Youth League has largely become a fast-track for officials who are being quickly moved up through the ranks.

Another reason for the decline in political status of the Youth League is that its senior leaders are often too young. When Hu Yaobang was leader of the Youth League, he could talk on an even footing with party officials of the same rank, as someone who was of similar age and experience. Nowadays, Youth League officials are too callow to be treated with respect by leaders of other departments. Their rank may be the same, but they would not dare to oppose their colleagues in more important departments. Another disadvantage of youth is a lack of practical experience of work and policy-making. Officials from the Youth League are often looked down upon as only having experience of home-life, school-life, and life in a government department.

Li Keqiang [9], promoted at the seventeenth party congress to the standing committee of the politburo, is a good example. In 1993 he was first secretary of the Youth League, but didn't manage to get enough votes to serve on the politburo chosen at the fourteenth party congress. This was a public humiliation, and demonstrates the lack of trust in Youth League officials. Li was moved into a position on the standing committee of the national people's congress instead.

This all shows that as late as the fourteenth party congress, there was no such thing as a Youth League faction, or any sign that one would emerge.

A number of different understandings of the Youth League faction are expressed in the foreign media. Of these, the most erroneous is that all officials who have served in the Youth League are part of this faction. In fact, only those who have served as one of the secretaries of the Youth League can be considered part of the group. Each department and province has its own Youth League secretary, who is appointed by the head of department or province. Those who serve as Youth League secretaries at this level usually move on to important roles in other party or government departments. Only when the time comes to reshuffle the central Youth League leadership do a tiny minority of these department- or province-level secretaries have any hope of being promoted to the central Youth League secretariat. Usually, the top position is reserved for young officials without much experience who have been earmarked for greater things by the party central organisation department.

### **The path of promotion**

Before Hu Jintao [10] became general-secretary of the party, there were in fact many other senior party leaders who had previously served as secretary of the Youth League. Hu Yaobang was once chairman and general-secretary of the party. Hu Qili and Li Ruihuan were both on the politburo standing committee, and many more served as provincial party secretaries or heads of party and government departments. It needs to be emphasised that Hu Yaobang, with his senior position and popularity both inside and outside the party, was in a good position to establish a Youth League faction.

However, Hu Yaobang [11] recruited from many different areas. He was extremely careful to avoid the creation of cliques and factions that would result from only promoting close friends. In his time at the top of the party, Hu Yaobang never once promoted a friend from the Youth League. Although it was rumoured that he had a hand in the appointments of Hu Qili and Wang Zhaoguo, evidence later emerged that it was Deng Xiaoping who nominated them for promotion. Hu Yaobang's recruitment policy meant that there was never any talk inside or outside the party of a Youth League faction. In contrast, the "princelings" were already widely discussed.

At the seventeenth party congress, three of those who served in the secretariat of the Youth League with Hu Jintao were promoted [12] to the politburo. One of them, Li Keqiang, was promoted to the standing committee of the politburo, and before long may be made a vice-premier. Another, Li Yuanchao, was appointed to the politburo and secretariat of the party central committee. He was also made head of the central organisation department, which is the main body inspecting and managing party officials at the level of deputy department or province head.

Liu Yandong [13] was appointed to the politburo, and may go on to a position in the government overseeing education. In addition, on the eve of the congress, a number of former Youth League secretaries were given positions as party secretaries or governors of provinces. These collective

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promotions have to be seen as influenced by Hu Jintao. It seems that now a Youth League faction truly has emerged.

## **A political generation**

It is interesting that the three former Youth League secretaries who were promoted to the politburo have all suffered career setbacks in the past. Li Keqiang suffered humiliation in 1993 (as mentioned above); Liu Yandong and Li Yuanchao [14] were both moved out of positions in Youth League central following the 1989 Tiananmen democracy movement [15]. According to party tradition, the first secretary of the Youth League is usually also on the politburo, and will go on to serve as party secretary of a province or department.

The permanent secretary (second-in-command) of the Youth League will usually be moved to a position as provincial governor or permanent deputy head of a party or government department. However, after Liu Yandong left her position as permanent secretary, she was given a bureau-level position as secretary-general of the party's united front work department. Li Yuanchao took up the role of head of bureau at the state council information office. Neither of these are important positions, and amount to demotions.

The main reason for these demotions was that during the 1989 democracy movement, the Youth League published a declaration of sympathy with the students and called for their patriotism to be recognised and protected. The declaration also said the problems should be solved through dialogue and discussions. This was precisely the stance of Zhao Ziyang [16]. The demotions of Liu Yandong and Li Yuanchao were a punishment for the Youth League's actions. Their careers only got back on track once Deng Xiaoping went on his "southern tour [17]" in February 1992. It was at the fourteenth party congress soon after that Hu Jintao was appointed by Deng to the standing committee of the politburo. He was also appointed as head of the organisation department, which gave him the power he needed to foster trusted friends from his time at the Youth League.

The question is, do these recently-promoted ex-Youth League officials have what it takes to be successful in their new positions? Or are they only there because of their relationships with Hu? My own opinion is that they are probably the best choices available at the moment. There are four reasons for this:

- \* they have all worked at the grassroots level, which will have given them a realistic view of Chinese society
- \* they all have good academic track-records up to university level, in particular in the arts and social sciences. This education was received post-reform, so they have avoided the heavily party-influenced education of the previous generation of leaders. They can also counter the ignorance and bias of those who were educated as engineers, who were dominant in the leadership
- \* they are not as purely pragmatic as the younger members of the Youth League faction such as Zhou Qiang [18] and Zhao Yong; they have retained a certain amount of idealism, and have their own hopes for China's development, and if they get the chance, will try to put in place their more spiritual ideas
- \* they have all accumulated experience of working in leadership positions at the provincial level, and therefore understand the rules of economic construction and party politics. They are the representatives of a special generation of leaders who matured in the more enlightened 1980s.

## The sources of change

So, will the Youth League faction now become the main breeding-ground for future party leaders? I don't think so. In fact, what the recent glut of promotions of ex-Youth League secretaries shows, is the lack of good personal relationships between Hu Jintao and others at top levels of party leadership. This is in contrast to one of his predecessors, Hu Yaobang. Hu Yaobang [19] had served as head of the organisation department during the Yan'an period in the 1930s. He therefore knew most senior officials, and had cultivated friendships with many of them. This is the reason why he was able to be so wide-ranging in his recruitment later on.

Hu Jintao, on the other hand, in his positions as secretary of the Youth League and leader of some peripheral provinces, had no way of getting to know senior officials from across the country. In his ten years on the politburo standing committee and the organisation department, Hu Jintao had to be extremely careful who he promoted because of the dominance of then-general-secretary Jiang Zemin [20]. Once Hu Jintao eventually came to power, it was already only two or three years until the seventeenth party congress, and in order to set himself up with a stable majority of supporters at the highest levels of government, he had no choice but to rapidly promote trusted former colleagues from the Youth League. In the future, it is unlikely that we will see a repeat of Youth League domination of the highest levels of politics [21].

The final question is, after promotions of both princelings and Youth League members at the seventeenth party congress, will there emerge a fierce battle for power between the two factions? It seems to me that the two groups share far more similarities than differences. I have reason to believe that neither of these groups is planning to maintain the current system of dictatorship. After the eighteenth party congress in 2012, when power will be transferred to them, they hope to introduce limited democratic reforms. Global trends and the evolution of civilisation cannot but influence this younger generation of leaders, and there will be more than one Chiang Ching-kuo [22] figure among them.

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[19] <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/11/14/news/yaobang.php>

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