

## China's Two Li's: Frontrunners in the Race to Succeed Hu Jintao

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Several rising stars in the new generation of Chinese leaders will likely bound into the political limelight at the upcoming 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Although Hu Jintao is almost certain to hold the top leadership post in the Party for a second term, the race to succeed him will kick into high gear in the next five years. This article focuses on two frontrunners in the race, 52-year-old Party secretary of Liaoning Province Li Keqiang and 57-year-old Party secretary of Jiangsu Province Li Yuanchao, known collectively as “China’s two Li’s.” This article presents their biographical backgrounds, career paths, patron-client ties with Hu, strengths and weaknesses as contenders for the post of top leader, and their likely policy priorities.

Of all the issues surrounding China’s upcoming 17th Party Congress, probably the most intriguing one centers on the selection of a candidate or candidates to succeed Hu Jintao.<sup>1</sup> The question on everyone’s mind is: “After Hu, Who?” Other personnel and ideological matters, though also important, may not rate very highly in the news. No analyst seems to have any doubts that Hu Jintao will be easily “reelected” for his second term as the secretary-general of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The all-powerful Standing Committee of the new Politburo will consist largely of leaders in their 60s, most of whom will be holdovers from the current Politburo. On the ideological and policy fronts, the Party platform is expected to reinforce Hu’s vision for “building a harmonious society” based on the much-touted “scientific development concept.”

### Two Options for Choosing Hu’s Successor

Largely because of the current Chinese obsession with age in elite recruitment, the next heir apparent is likely to be chosen from among the so-called fifth generation of leaders, that is, those who today are in their 50s—about 10 years younger than Hu Jintao.<sup>2</sup> The youngest current Politburo Standing Committee member, Li Changchun, is only two years younger than Hu, and the youngest current Politburo member, Liu Yunshan, is only five years younger than Hu. The CCP’s norm of promoting leaders in batches, within somewhat narrow age brackets, suggests that Hu’s designated successor will most likely be a new face in the 2007 Politburo. The new Politburo will likely have several first-timers who are in their 60s; the possible candidates include Liu Yandong (director of the CCP United Front Work Department), Ma Kai (minister of the National Development and Reform Commission), Li Rongrong (minister of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission),

Zhang Gaoli (Tianjin Party secretary), Du Qinglin (Sichuan Party secretary), and Meng Jianzhu (Jiangxi Party secretary). Several current Politburo members may enter the Politburo Standing Committee, for example, Yu Zhengsheng (Hubei Party secretary), Hui Liangyu (vice premier), Zhou Yongkang (minister of Public Security), and Zhang Dejiang (Guangdong Party secretary). But none of them will be considered as a candidate to succeed Hu largely due to their age.

What is unclear at present is whether or not the 17th Central Committee will identify a designated successor—the “core” leader of the fifth generation. Hu Jintao was chosen in this way from among those in his generation 15 years ago. After being so designated, Hu served on the Politburo Standing Committee for 10 years before finally becoming general-secretary of the CCP in 2002. His 10 years on the Standing Committee not only allowed him to gain leadership experience in the country’s highest political institution, but also placed him as the first among equals in the fourth generation in line to succeed Jiang Zemin. Based on this political precedent, it seems likely that the Chinese political establishment will identify Hu’s designated successor at the 17th Party Congress. With an adequate preparatory period at the center of power, such an heir apparent will be able to smoothly take over the top leadership when Hu completes his second term as CCP general-secretary at the 18th Party Congress in 2012.

There is, however, another option for China’s upcoming political succession. Hu and other top leaders may select two or more rising stars from the fifth generation to become members of the Politburo Standing Committee, thus forming a succession team in line for the top posts in the Party and the state. Over the next five years, these potential successors will increase their national stature, acquire more political capital by competing with one another, have opportunities to win further endorsement from Hu and other top leaders, become more familiar to the Chinese public, and burnish their foreign policy credentials. Under this ‘multiple successor’ model, the leadership would then determine Hu’s successor through some sort of election within the Central Committee at the next Party Congress in 2012.

The critical issue, therefore, is not only *who* will emerge as the successor to Hu Jintao, but also *which option* the Chinese authorities will choose for the next leadership succession. Both options involve serious political risks. If Chinese leaders choose to adopt the first model of one appointed successor, the designated successor may fail to win the support of the broader political establishment, with the potential resulting backlash possibly causing a political succession crisis. Up to the present, the leadership credentials and performance records of top contenders in the fifth generation are not profoundly different. It is difficult to decide, for example, which provincial Party secretary is more qualified than his peers in other provinces.<sup>3</sup> Also worth noting is that Chinese public opinion, in recent years, has grown quite critical of the traditional method of the top leader or leaders appointing the heir apparent with no oversight or input. To designate one core leader would also seem to contradict the top leaders’ recent rhetoric about the promotion of collective leadership and the importance of building inner-Party democracy.

On the other hand, the multiple successors option of two or more candidates who compete to distinguish themselves over the next five years would likely leave the door open

for factional lobbying, with the potential for a serious split emerging within the CCP leadership. The Chinese political system has never tried such open competition, and especially at the highest level of leadership. The resistance to adopting such a method for designating a successor would likely be extremely strong from the conservative wing of the Party. Hu Jintao now faces a serious dilemma. Any failure to make a peaceful and institutionalized power transition will severely undermine his political legacy.

## Hu's Two Favored Candidates: "Liaoning Li" and "Jiangsu Li"

The good news for Hu Jintao is that, regardless of what mechanism the top leaders use to select his possible successor, his own protégés are well poised to ascend to top leadership posts in the future. Based on current Chinese political norms, there are four basic criteria that a candidate for the post of CCP secretary-general should meet. The person should:

- 1) be in his or her 50s;
- 2) currently serve on the Central Committee as either a full or alternate member;
- 3) have served as provincial Party secretary; *and*
- 4) have cross-provincial and/or central government leadership experience.<sup>4</sup>

A total of 14 leaders meet these criteria, and eight of those advanced their careers through the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL), which was Hu Jintao's power base in the 1980s. These qualified leaders include the Liaoning Party secretary, Li Keqiang; Jiangsu Party secretary Li Yuanchao; Chongqing Party secretary Wang Yang; Guangxi Party secretary Liu Qibao; Shanxi Party secretary Zhang Baoshun; Tibet Party secretary Zhang Qingli; Qinghai Party secretary Qiang Wei; and Vice Minister of State Ethnic Affairs Yang Chuantang.<sup>5</sup> These eight leaders worked at the national or provincial levels of the CCYL leadership in the mid-1980s when Hu was in charge of the organization, and thus they all have had close patron-client ties with Hu for over two decades. The six leaders without a CCYL background are the Shaanxi Party secretary, Zhao Leji; Shanghai Party secretary Xi Jinping; Hunan Party secretary Zhang Chunxian; Fujian Party secretary Lu Zhongong; Beijing mayor Wang Qishan; and the executive vice president of the Central Party School, Su Rong.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, these promising leaders in the fifth generation do not rank equally in their race for the top leadership.<sup>7</sup> Some have a better chance than others of being selected as Hu's successor, for various reasons. Two leaders, Li Keqiang ("Liaoning Li") and Li Yuanchao ("Jiangsu Li"), are widely considered to be the frontrunners in the race. Although Hu Jintao has never explicitly expressed his preference, these two Li's are widely seen as Hu's two favored candidates.<sup>8</sup> Both worked as members of the Secretariat of the CCYL Central Committee in the mid-1980s when Hu was the first secretary. Both studied law and economics, and both hold Ph.D. degrees. They were actually classmates in the graduate program at Beijing University. In 1991, the two Li's, along with Li Yining (a well-known economist at Beijing University) and Meng Xiaosu (then personal secretary to Vice Premier Wan Li and currently chairman of the China State Housing & Real Estate Development Group Corporation), coauthored a book on strategies for China's economic prosperity.<sup>9</sup>

Their ties to Hu Jintao have directly helped advance their political careers. Li Keqiang began working at the CCYL Central Committee at the end of 1982, exactly the same time that Hu Jintao became secretary of the CCYL. Li Keqiang worked closely with Hu, assisting him in convening the Sixth National Conference of the All-China Youth Federation in August 1983. Three months later, after being nominated by Hu, Li was promoted to alternate member of the CCYL Secretariat. When Hu was made first secretary of the CCYL in 1985, Li became a full member of the Secretariat.

Each of Li Keqiang's major promotions in the past 15 years has paralleled the growing power of Hu Jintao. Soon after Hu became a member of the Politburo Standing Committee in 1992, Li became first secretary of the CCYL. A few months after Hu assumed the post of vice president of the PRC in March 1998, Li became governor of Henan—the most populous province in the PRC, with a population of 98 million people. When Hu became secretary-general of the CCP in 2002, Li was promoted to Party secretary of Henan. After Hu consolidated his power in the national leadership in 2004, Li was transferred to Liaoning to serve as the Party boss of the province. The Liaoning Party secretary post is a key assignment due to the province's history as China's most important industrial base. Henan and Liaoning are the two provinces that have greatly benefited from Hu Jintao's two new developmental priorities—"the rise of central China" (*zhongyuan jueqi*) and "the northeastern rejuvenation" (*dongbei zhenxing*). Leadership experience in running two of China's major provinces (one is the leading agricultural province and the other is the center of China's heavy industrial manufacturing) has placed Li Keqiang in an advantageous position to compete for a top national leadership post.

Li Yuanchao also worked directly under Hu Jintao in the CCYL Secretariat for two years in the early 1980s. When Hu moved to Guizhou Province to serve as Party secretary in 1985, Li Yuanchao continued to serve on the Secretariat of the CCYL, including the time during which the Tiananmen student movement of 1989 took place. In 1990, Li Yuanchao was demoted from a vice-minister level position in the CCYL to become bureau director of International Publicity of the CCP Central Committee. During the following decade, Li Yuanchao was not regarded as a rising star because he worked in the areas of China's international public relations and cultural exchanges, areas that do not normally breed future top political leaders. In the 1990s, he spent much of his time pursuing on-the-job postgraduate studies in economics and law. Li was a part-time doctoral student at the Central Party School, which was then headed by Hu Jintao.

It is widely believed that, because of Hu's strong endorsement, Li Yuanchao finally moved onto the "fast track" in his career advancement.<sup>10</sup> A major turning point in Li's political career occurred in 2000 when, at age 50, he was appointed deputy Party secretary of Jiangsu Province. One year later, Li also assumed the post of Party secretary of Nanjing, Jiangsu's capital city. This post gave him a good opportunity to become full Party secretary of the province when the position became vacant. This appointment also gave him the opportunity to show his ability and achievements in running the capital city of the province. Chinese journalists later called this arrangement "the Li Yuanchao model."<sup>11</sup> In December 2002, one month after Hu became secretary-general of the CCP, Li was appointed as Jiangsu

Party secretary. Although Li is only an alternate member on the 16th Central Committee, he runs Jiangsu, which is not only one of China's most populous provinces (with a population of 76 million), but also one of the richest provinces in the country. In 2004, when Li was criticized for several crises that occurred in Jiangsu, especially the unauthorized construction of the \$1.3 billion Tieben Iron and Steel Plant in Changzhou City, Hu spent seven days in Jiangsu, exhibiting solidarity with his longtime CCYL colleague. It should also be noted that Li Yuanchao presently serves on the small leading group on personnel matters for the 17th Party Congress, which is headed by Vice President Zeng Qinghong. The main role of this group is to choose candidates for the full members and alternates of the 17th Central Committee. This leading group consists mainly of fourth-generation leaders, and Li is one of the two leaders in their 50s who serve on this powerful ad hoc group.<sup>12</sup>

As the brief sketches above make clear, the two Li's are similar in several respects. Yet, each has his own idiosyncratic characteristics that distinguish him from the other. A more detailed analysis of their family backgrounds, formative experiences, personalities, leadership styles and skills, and policy priorities is essential for understanding where they may wish to take China, should they be designated as China's top leaders. Their personal traits may have strong implications for China's political trajectory.

## Biography of Li Keqiang

Li Keqiang was born in Dingyuan County, Anhui Province, in July 1955. Dingyuan County is located in central Anhui, about 60 miles from the capital city of the province, Hefei. In its long history, Dingyuan has produced many national leaders and famous military generals. In the Ming Dynasty, for example, Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the dynasty, began his revolt in Dingyuan; and General Qi Jiguang, the national hero who led the war against Japanese pirates along China's coastal areas during the mid-16th century, was a native of Dingyuan.

Li Keqiang's father was a low-ranking government official. The Cultural Revolution took place while Li was a fifth-grade student in elementary school. As it was for all of his peers in the same generation, the curriculum at Li's middle school was filled with Mao's ideological indoctrination and political campaigns instead of academic training. In March 1974, at the age of 19, Li was sent to nearby Fengyang County as a "sent-down youth" (*chadui zhishi qingnian*) to do manual labor in the countryside. In the 1970s, Fengyang was one of the poorest counties in Anhui Province, which had one of the highest rates of poverty in the nation. Li worked as a farmer for two and a half years in the Dongling Production Brigade of the Damiao Commune. He joined the CCP in May 1976, and served as Party secretary of the brigade branch committee from November 1976 to March 1978. The four-year-long rural work experience during Li's formative years was instrumental in fostering some important personal traits such as endurance and adaptability to hardship, ability to communicate with uneducated farmers, and a deep understanding of rural poverty.

After the Cultural Revolution ended, Li Keqiang was among the first group of students who entered college in the spring of 1978 by passing college entrance examinations.

A total of 11.6 million people, ranging in age from their late teens to their early 30s, registered for the exams, but only about 401,000 were accepted (an admission rate of only 3 percent).<sup>13</sup> These are the students of the famous “Class of 1982.”<sup>14</sup> This class of students was known for its diverse family backgrounds because the college admission process was no longer based on political loyalty, ideological purity, or possession of a revolutionary or proletarian class background.

Equally important, the post-Cultural Revolution years were an exciting period in which young Chinese people were extremely enthusiastic about absorbing Western liberal ideas. Li Keqiang was enrolled in the Department of Law at Beijing University, one of the most prestigious universities in the country. Academic and interdisciplinary study groups were very popular on the campus, which had a long tradition of liberal arts education. Li Keqiang was an active participant in various lectures and debates organized by these groups.<sup>15</sup> Li studied under Professor Gong Ruixiang, a British-educated expert on Western political and administrative systems. Li was particularly interested in the subjects of foreign constitutional laws and comparative governments.<sup>16</sup> He also published articles on legal development, scientific management, rural economic reform, poverty alleviation, and other sociopolitical and economic issues of the day. Some of Li Keqiang’s classmates at the Law Department now hold important leadership positions in China’s legal system. Among them are the president of East China University of Political Science and Law, the president of Yantai University, the director of the legal department of the Beijing Summer Olympics Organization Committee, the director of the Rule of Law Department of the Ministry of Justice, the legal director of Microsoft in China, and professors in China’s leading universities.<sup>17</sup> For example, Wang Shaoguang, a distinguished scholar in political science who taught at Yale University for many years and now teaches at the University of Hong Kong, was a classmate of Li’s.

Some of Li Keqiang’s classmates at the university later became leading Chinese political dissidents, independent scholars, religious leaders, and human-rights activists. Four notable examples include Hu Ping, Zhang Wei, Fang Zhiming, and Wang Juntao. Hu Ping was the author of “On Freedom of Speech,” one of the first and most comprehensive papers on the democratic movement in the PRC, which shaped intellectual discourse during the Democracy Wall Movement in Beijing in 1979. He later attended a Ph.D. program in political science at Harvard University and served as chairman of the Chinese Alliance for Democracy (1988–1991). Hu is currently chief editor of the overseas dissident journal *Beijing Spring*. Zhang Wei was a rising political star in the Chinese leadership in the 1980s and served as the head of the Tianjin Special Economic Zone. In 1985, *Time* magazine identified the 33-year-old Zhang Wei as “one of the youngest of the heirs apparent,” probably next only to then 42-year-old Hu Jintao.<sup>18</sup> Zhang quit his promising political career in the CCP after the 1989 Tiananmen movement and went abroad to obtain a master’s degree in public administration at Harvard University and a Ph.D. in economics at Oxford University. Zhang is now an instructor of economics at the University of Cambridge. Fang Zhiming was one of the writers of the controversial and influential 1988 television miniseries “River Elegy,” which urged the Chinese to discard their inward-looking, ethnocentric, traditional agrarian culture and to embrace the “blue ocean”—the symbolic representation of Western civilization and cosmopolitan values. Feng later emigrated to the United States after

the 1989 Tiananmen movement and became a priest and a founder of the China Soul for Christ Foundation. Wang Juntao, a longtime political activist, was jailed twice in China for his political activities, and labeled one of the “black hands behind the black hands” of the student movement at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Released from prison in 1996, he enrolled in a Ph.D. degree program at Columbia University in 1997, and recently completed his doctorate. Wang is currently the chairman of the California-based Chinese Constitutionalist Association.

In the early 1980s, Li Keqiang and his above-mentioned classmates at Beijing University were all enthusiastically engaged in local and school elections. In 1980, for example, Hu Ping was elected as a delegate of the people’s congress at a county level in what was later called the “first free local election” in the PRC. Zhang Wei was the first elected president of the Student Union (*xueshenghui*) of Beijing University after the Cultural Revolution. At the nomination of Wang Juntao, Li Keqiang was elected head of the Executive Committee of the Student Assembly (*changdaihui*), which provided supervision and checked on the work of the Student Union.<sup>19</sup> A fair and open election was a central political issue at Beijing University in the early 1980s. Some conservative Party leaders at this time wanted to crack down on elections on campus. According to Wang Juntao, Li Keqiang was supportive of open elections.<sup>20</sup>

After graduation in 1982, Li Keqiang was appointed secretary of the CCYL Committee at Beijing University. Li’s unconventional and more liberal views received a great deal of criticism from many other CCYL officials in Beijing. As a result, Li failed to be elected as a delegate to the 11th National Congress of the CCYL in 1982. According to Wang Juntao, Li was then considering a study abroad program. But, after the interference of Wang Zhaohua, the vice director of the CCP Organization Department, Li was allowed to attend the congress as a nonvoting delegate and was subsequently elected by the congress as a member of the Standing Committee of the CCYL. Li’s career might have been completely different if he had chosen to study overseas at that time. Li would probably have become another Zhang Wei. In fact, Li Keqiang and Zhang Wei had the same patron in the early 1980s. In 1982, Hu Qili, then a member of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee, visited top universities in Beijing to recruit recent graduates for high administrative positions. At Beijing University, Hu Qili chose Zhang Wei and Li Keqiang, both of whom previously served as heads of the student organizations at the university. Zhang Wei was soon promoted to the post of secretary of the Tianjin CCYL Committee, and was subsequently appointed head of the Tianjin Economic Zone. Li Keqiang was promoted to be deputy head of the Department of School Affairs of the CCYL Central Committee.

While Zhang Wei, like his mentor Hu Qili, later resigned his leadership post to protest against the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, Li not only survived the crisis, but also further advanced his political career. Li was actually in charge of college affairs for the CCYL Central Committee in 1989 when the student movement took place. This major event jeopardized the careers of many people on both sides of the conflict, including some of Li’s friends, classmates, and colleagues. Wu Jiexiang, a well-known dissident intellectual who was also a classmate of Li’s at Beijing University, was amazed by Li Keqiang’s capacity for political survival.<sup>21</sup> This does not necessarily mean that Li is a political opportunist who is

concerned only about his own career and well-being. Those who have known Li, including those who later became political dissidents in exile, often describe Li as “sharp, intelligent, thoughtful, and open-minded.”<sup>22</sup> Li Keqiang has never been seen as a leader whose career advancement has been based on the brutal crackdown of the student movement. No senior leaders at the CCYL Secretariat were purged because of their sympathetic views toward the 1989 student movement. It was widely noted that Li Keqiang took the political stance of “controlling the student movement, but not conducting political persecution of the participants.”<sup>23</sup>

In the early 1990s, Li Keqiang spent a great deal of time pursuing a part-time graduate program in economics at Beijing University. In 1991, in addition to collaborating on a book with Li Yuanchao and others, Li Keqiang published an article entitled “On the Ternary Structure of the Chinese Economy” in *China’s Social Sciences*, a leading academic journal in the field of China studies in the country.<sup>24</sup> The article won the prestigious Sun Yefang Award as the best economic essay of the year. In 1994, Li received a Ph.D. degree from Beijing University. With his undergraduate degree in law and Ph.D. in economics, Li seems to have all of the educational credentials that are strongly valued for new leaders in present-day China.

Li Keqiang has long been considered politically ambitious, and he has tried very hard to avoid making political enemies. For example, when Li was the head of the Department of School Affairs of the CCYL Central Committee, the head of another department often competed with him for promotions. When Li was promoted to be first secretary of the CCYL, his competitor thought that Li would use his power to seek revenge against him. But, on the contrary, Li assigned that official a new apartment and made an effort to promote him to the vice-ministerial level of leadership. They later became good friends.<sup>25</sup> Li Keqiang was known for his personal touch with his junior colleagues and he often gave them small gifts and held birthday celebrations for them. Those who worked with Li Keqiang at the CCYL office have observed that Li has two distinct personality traits: one is that he never loses his temper and the other is that he hardly ever says anything negative about any of his associates or colleagues.<sup>26</sup>

Li is also noted for his keen interest in forming political ties with senior leaders. When he served as secretary of the CCYL Committee at Beijing University, he often spent a great deal of time playing tennis. Some analysts have suggested that the reason Li became such an avid tennis aficionado was that a number of political heavyweights who were in charge of the CCYL leadership at the time, such as Hu Qili and Li Ruihuan, were also fond of playing tennis.<sup>27</sup> Both Hu Qili and Li Ruihuan later served as members of the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP. Li Keqiang also established very close working relations with Song Defu and Hu Jintao. Song was Li Keqiang’s predecessor at the Secretariat of the CCYL Central Committee and he later served as the minister of personnel, vice director of the CCP Organization Department, and later Party secretary of Fujian Province. Before he died in September 2007, Song’s final position was as deputy head of the Coordinating Group of Human Resources of the CCP Central Committee. In the 1990s, Song played a crucial role in personnel matters in the Chinese leadership and promoted many young leaders with CCYL backgrounds to important positions.



The Chinese public is well aware of Li Keqiang's close patron-client ties with Hu Jintao, and this is widely seen as the most compelling explanation for Li's rapid promotions over the past two decades (see Table 1). Some foreign analysts have described Li as "a 13-year-younger carbon copy of Hu Jintao," and indeed there are several important similarities between Hu and Li.<sup>28</sup> Both come from humble family backgrounds, both are natives of Anhui, both were student leaders in their college years, both advanced their political careers primarily from the CCYL, both served as provincial Party secretaries at a relatively young age, both worked in the functional area of the Party rather than in government administration, both were long considered to be candidates for top national leadership posts, both have the reputation of turning potential rivals into political allies, both are reported to have photographic memories, both have low-profile personalities, and both are known for generally not losing their tempers under difficult circumstances.

**Table 1**  
*Career Highlights of Li Keqiang*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Career Development</i>
1974	19	Started working as a "sent-down youth" (manual laborer in countryside) in Fengyang County, Anhui Province
1976	21	Joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); served as the Party secretary in a production brigade branch in Fengyang County
1982	27	Appointed secretary of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) Committee at Beijing University; director of the Department of School Affairs of the CCYL Central Committee; secretary-general of the All-China Students' Union
1983	28	Alternate secretary of the Secretariat of the CCYL Central Committee; vice chairman of the All-China Students' Union
1985	30	Secretary of the Secretariat of the CCYL Central Committee
1993	38	First secretary of the CCYL Central Committee; member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC)
1997	42	Elected as a full member of the Central Committee of the CCP
1998	43	Vice governor of Henan Province
1999	44	Governor and deputy Party secretary of Henan Province
2002	47	Party secretary of Henan Province
2004	49	Party secretary of Liaoning Province

Li Keqiang's political career thus far, however, has not been as smooth as that of Hu Jintao. Whereas Hu often received strong endorsements (and a large number of votes) from the Chinese political establishment, Li lost a few elections early in his career. As mentioned earlier, in 1982, in the election of Beijing delegates to the 11th National Conference of the CCYL, Li failed to become a delegate despite the fact that he was secretary of the CCYL Committee of Beijing University. In the election to the Central Committee of the 14th Party

Congress, Li was on the ballot as an alternate member, but was among the small number of candidates who failed to be elected.<sup>29</sup> It was widely speculated at the time that Li was nominated but not selected for a seat on the 16th Politburo due to his lack of accomplishments in Henan Province.<sup>30</sup>

Neither Hu nor Li can claim many breakthrough successes during their tenures as provincial Party secretaries. Nevertheless, under the leadership of Li Keqiang, Henan made some significant economic progress, based on statistics, if not in the public perception. Between June 1998 and December 2004, Li spent a total of six and a half years in Henan, as acting governor, governor and Party secretary. During that period, Henan's GDP ranking within the country advanced from 28th to 18th.<sup>31</sup> The total industrial revenue of the province increased sevenfold from 1997 to 2004. The grain yield and food and meat processing in Henan Province were all ranked number one in the country in terms of total output.<sup>32</sup> In his farewell address to officials in Henan at the end of 2004, Li Keqiang stated humbly, "the decisions that I made in Henan were not always right and some might not be appropriate in the future, thus you should feel free to correct them."<sup>33</sup> Not surprisingly, Li received a standing ovation from his colleagues on this occasion.

Since Li's arrival in Liaoning in December 2004, the province has become a national leader in GDP growth and foreign trade. In 2006, Liaoning had a 13.8 percent GDP growth, the highest growth rate since 1994.<sup>34</sup> In the first half of 2007, for example, Liaoning's foreign exports increased by 35 percent, which is much higher than the national average of 23 percent. Liaoning Province is currently ranked ninth in the country in total exports.<sup>35</sup>

However, Li Keqiang's provincial leadership accomplishments have, until now, been overshadowed by one disaster after another. In April 1999, two months after he was appointed governor of Henan, a fire at a furniture factory in Nanyang took the lives of 19 people. In March 2000, a fire in a movie theater in Jiaozuo killed 74 people. Nine months later, another fire in a dance club in Luoyang killed 309 people, which was the second deadliest fire in PRC history. Some people in Henan gave Li the nickname "the governor with three fires."<sup>36</sup> In addition, during his tenure as Henan's governor and Party secretary, the province has been notorious for its "AIDS villages," coal mine explosions, and the widespread counterfeiting of various sorts of goods.<sup>37</sup> Li's bad luck seemed not to end after he moved to Liaoning in December 2004. Within two months after he was appointed Liaoning Party secretary, a gas explosion ripped through the Sunjiawan coal mine in the province, killing 214 miners.

All these terrible incidents have apparently caused some delay in Li Keqiang's further promotion.<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note that most of Li's critics have attributed these tragic incidents in Henan and Liaoning to Li's "bad luck" rather than his lack of leadership ability. But the public perception of the "bad luck" that was associated with Li's career moves in the past decade could be an important factor that might affect his chances in the race for the top leadership post. A well-known French anecdote may be relevant here. When asked what qualities he was looking for in his generals, Napoleon replied, "just one—that they be lucky." It is unclear to what extent Hu Jintao will pick his successor based on public perceptions, but his hesitancy to give a clear endorsement to Li Keqiang may be because of this concern. To

select Li Keqiang as the only possible successor in his generation would likely cause far more controversy and criticism today than was the case 15 years ago when Hu was selected by such a method. At any rate, at present, Hu has not decided to make Li Keqiang the only choice for his successor; and the other Li has an almost equal chance of being designated as the next top leader.

## Biography of Li Yuanchao

Li Yuanchao was born in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, in November 1950. Li's father, Li Gancheng, a native of Jiangsu's Lianshui County, was a veteran Communist official who was serving as deputy Party secretary of Changzhou when Li Yuanchao was born. Li Gancheng was born in 1909, studied at Shanghai Construction University, joined the CCYL in 1929, and became a CCP member in 1930. Prior to the founding of the PRC in 1949, Li Gancheng served as Party secretary of Shuqian County in Jiangsu Province, moved on to be CCYL secretary of Henan Province, and finally became director of the Organization Department of the CCP Committee in Huaihai Prefecture in Jiangsu. Li Yuanchao's mother Lü Jiying was also a revolutionary veteran. She was married twice, and her first husband, Li Chaoshi, was a general in the Red Army who was arrested and executed by Nationalist troops in 1931. Li Yuanchao's wife is a music instructor and has taught at the Shanghai Music Conservatory for many years.

In 1953, at the age of three, Li Yuanchao moved to Shanghai with his family. His father served as deputy director of the Construction Commission of the Shanghai Municipal Government, then director of the Transportation Commission of the Shanghai Municipal Government, and later as vice mayor of Shanghai from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s. During the Cultural Revolution, Li Gancheng was purged, along with other senior leaders in Shanghai such as Party Secretary Chen Pixian and Mayor Cao Diqu. The Li family suffered a great deal in the early years of the Cultural Revolution. In the early 1980s, Li Gancheng was appointed vice chairman of the Shanghai People's Political Consultative Conference and served as an advisor to the CCP Municipal Committee of Shanghai. Li Gancheng died in 1993.

Li Yuanchao thus grew up in Shanghai, and as a teenager, he witnessed the red terror of the Cultural Revolution, including the political persecution of his parents. In 1968, at the age of 18, Li Yuanchao was sent to Dafeng County in Jiangsu Province, where he worked as a manual laborer for four years. In November 1972, as a "student selected from among the workers, farmers and soldiers," he returned to Shanghai and enrolled in the math department of Shanghai Normal University. He taught mathematics at Nanchang Middle School and the Technical School of the Luwan District, both in Shanghai, between 1974 and 1978. In 1978, Li joined the CCP, and in the same year he entered Fudan University to major in mathematics as a student of the "Class of 1982."

While a student at Fudan University, Li served as deputy secretary and secretary of the CCYL branch in the math department. After graduation in 1982, Li remained at Fudan as an instructor in the department of management. Meanwhile, he also served as deputy

secretary of the CCYL Committee at Fudan University. Chen Pixian, former Party secretary of Shanghai and a longtime colleague of Li's father, played an important role in Li Yuanchao's early political career. As part of the CCP's effort in the spring of 1983 to recruit young and well-educated elites to the ministerial and provincial leadership, Chen, then a member of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee, recommended Li to Hu Yaobang, then secretary-general of the Party. Hu Yaobang decided to appoint Li to the CCYL Secretariat, but Li was then only a grassroots CCYL official at Fudan University. In order to enhance Li's qualifications for promotion, Chen asked his friends in the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee to appoint Li to the post of deputy secretary of the CCYL Shanghai Committee. One month later, Li was promoted to full secretary, and six months later, at the end of 1983, Li was promoted to become secretary of the CCYL Central Committee, a position at the rank of vice minister.<sup>39</sup>

Li Yuanchao's biographical background is unusual. Despite beginning his political career in Shanghai, he has not been associated with the so-called Shanghai Gang. This can be explained by the fact that Li Yuanchao left Shanghai in 1983, two years before Jiang Zemin and Zeng Qinghong arrived in the city as top municipal officials. It should be noted that Li's father, Li Gancheng, and Zeng Qinghong's father, Zeng Shan, both served as municipal leaders of Shanghai after the Communist victory in 1949, although Zeng Shan was more senior than Li Gancheng. Even though Li Yuanchao is a princeling, he advanced his career primarily from the CCYL. During the reform era, many princelings have taken positions in business firms or local governments in coastal cities, which provide more opportunities for financial profits and/or political careers.<sup>40</sup> Also, only recently have the rising stars in the younger generation of the CCP leadership served on the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which has long been considered a ceremonial position for retired leaders or non-CCP celebrities. However, in 1988, at the age of 38, Li Yuanchao became a member of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC and remained as a member of the CPPCC from 1993 to 2003.

Like Li Keqiang, Li Yuanchao also worked at the Secretariat of the CCYL during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Li Yuanchao has long been known for his liberal views and his protection of CCYL officials who were targeted for their sympathy toward the 1989 Tiananmen student demonstration. Soon after the 1989 Tiananmen movement, a group of CCYL officials, including Li's longtime colleague from Shanghai, Chen Haiyan—then director of the Department of Youth Affairs of the CCYL Central Committee—were forced to leave the CCYL Central Committee. Some were subjected to political persecution. It has been reported that Li tried to protect them.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps because Li did not closely follow the Party line during the Tiananmen incident and thereafter, his own political career advancement slowed down in the 1990s (see Table 2). He worked in the Information Office of the State Council and later served as vice minister of Culture. Also similar to Li Keqiang, Li Yuanchao spent a great deal of time in postgraduate study, on a part-time basis, during the early 1990s. He received a master's degree in economic management from Beijing University in 1990 and a Ph.D. in law from the Central Party School in 1995.

Although both Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao are articulate public speakers, Li Yuanchao is more spontaneous and much bolder in expressing new ideas than Li Keqiang.

This may also reflect their different personalities and leadership styles. The official Chinese media have characterized Li Yuanchao as an “independent-minded” and “unconventional” leader (*bu anfen de guanyuan*).<sup>42</sup> A feature article published in the *First Financial and Economic Daily*, a leading economic newspaper in China, described Li Yuanchao as a leader known for his “foresight and forward-looking ideas for China’s governance” (*qianzhanxing de zhizheng silu*).<sup>43</sup>

**Table 2**  
*Career Highlights of Li Yuanchao*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Career Development</i>
1968	18	Began working as a farmer in Dafeng County, Jiangsu Province
1974	24	Taught at the Nanchang Middle School in Shanghai
1975	25	Taught at the Technical School in the Luwan District in Shanghai
1978	28	Joined the CCP
1982	32	Taught in the Management Department at Fudan University, and was appointed deputy secretary of the CCYL Committee at the university
1983	33	Appointed deputy secretary and secretary of the CCYL Municipal Committee in Shanghai (1983) and secretary of the Secretariat of the CCYL Central Committee (1983–90)
1988	38	Elected Member of the Standing Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)
1990	40	Director of the First Bureau of International Publicity of the CCP Central Committee
1993	43	Deputy director of the International Publicity Office of the CCP Central Committee, and deputy director of the Information Office of the State Council
1996	46	Vice minister of Culture
2000	50	Deputy Party secretary of Jiangsu Province
2001	51	Party secretary of Nanjing City
2002	52	Party secretary of Jiangsu Province, and elected Alternate Member of the Central Committee of the CCP

To a great extent, Li Yuanchao’s leadership in Nanjing and Jiangsu in the past few years can be perceived as a showcase for the coming-of-age of those Hu Jintao’s protégés who advanced their careers from the CCYL, a group collectively known as the *tuanpai* leaders. Interestingly enough, *tuanpai* leaders have dominated the leadership in both Nanjing municipality and Jiangsu Province. In Nanjing, for example, when Li was Party secretary, the mayor was Luo Zhijun (former director of the Enterprise Department of the CCYL Central Committee) and the deputy Party secretary was Miao Helin (former secretary of the Hubei CCYL). Luo succeeded Li as Party secretary of the city in 2003. At present, 5 of the 13 members of the Standing Committee of the CCP Jiangsu Provincial Committee are also *tuanpai* leaders.

Since Li Yuanchao assumed the post of Party secretary of Jiangsu at the end of 2002, the province has been the frontier of the country's political and administrative reforms. Li has arguably been tougher and more outspoken on issues regarding official corruption, government accountability, and the election of local leaders than any other provincial chief. In 2004, for example, several high-profile leaders in Jiangsu were arrested on corruption charges. The most noticeable figures included the head of the Organization Department of the Jiangsu CCP Committee, the head of Jiangsu's Anti-Corruption Bureau, and the chairman of the Jiangsu State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission. Local newspapers have often referred to Li Yuanchao as a leader with an "iron-fisted approach to dealing with corrupt officials" (*tiewan zhili*).<sup>44</sup>

Li Yuanchao has initiated the concept of "service-oriented government" (*fuwuxing zhengfu*). He has also adopted measures encouraging public evaluation of leading officials in governmental institutions. Usually more than 10,000 citizens are asked to publicly evaluate local leaders, and the people in Jiangsu called it "ten thousand people evaluating officials" (*wanren yizheng*). In 2002, for example, five heads of departments in the Nanjing municipal government who received poor evaluations were either demoted or fired. They included the heads of the Environmental and City Planning Bureau and the Real Estate Bureau.

In both Nanjing and Jiangsu, Li has routinely implemented intra-Party elections of top local leaders. All 34 members of the Nanjing Municipal Committee of the CCP, for example, voted to select four district heads from among eight candidates. Similarly, all members of the Jiangsu Provincial Committee of the CCP voted on deputy bureau-level leaders of the province. The purpose is to reduce the power of the Party chief (*diyibashou*) in decision-making bodies. Because of Li's initiatives, the posts of the secretary and four deputy secretaries of Nanjing CCYL Committee were chosen through an open election in 2002. A total of 143 applicants ran for these five positions and 18 of them became finalists. These finalists presented their plans and platforms in front of a group of some 200 CCYL officials and representatives in the city who then chose the winners.<sup>45</sup> According to some Hong Kong journalists, under the leadership of Li Yuanchao, Jiangsu has moved far ahead of its fellow provinces in introducing political reform measures, including the first adoption of a law to empower the news media to monitor public bodies and officials.<sup>46</sup>

The measures described above are generally in line with the populist approach to governance favored by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. It has been widely noted that the now-widespread practice by top officials at all levels of leadership spending the Chinese Spring Festival Eve with people from poor and less-privileged social groups was started by Li Yuanchao in 2002 when he was serving as Party secretary of Nanjing.<sup>47</sup> For many years until 2002, it was common to find Party officials being wined and dined by rich entrepreneurs during the Spring Festival, an image that served to weaken the ties between the Party and the groups within Chinese society that it claims to represent. Some of these political experiments adopted in Jiangsu by Li Yuanchao may herald substantial future political reforms. This observation highlights not only the importance of the individual rising stars' idiosyncratic characteristics, but also the need to assess their prospects in the race for the top leadership and their likely policy platforms for the future.

## Political Prospects and Policy Platforms of the Two Li's: An Initial Assessment

The two Li's are, of course, not the only contenders in the race to succeed Hu Jintao. At a time when the era of strongman politics has come to an end and when public opinion has become increasingly important, the rules for choosing a top leader in China have profoundly changed. Understandably, Hu Jintao and other current senior leaders will likely search for China's future top leader from a relatively large pool of candidates. Many unexpected events can happen between the 17th Party Congress in 2007 and the 18th Party Congress in 2012, and some "dark horses" may emerge and change the course of the upcoming political succession.

Two possible dark horses are 52-year-old Wang Yang, the Chongqing Party secretary, and Zhao Leji, the 50-year-old Party secretary of Shaanxi. Wang has a humble family background, his father having died when Wang Yang was still a young boy. As the eldest child in the family, Wang began to work at the age of 17 to help his mother support the family. Like the two Li's, Wang accelerated his political career through the CCYL and became a protégé of Hu Jintao in the early 1980s. Wang has had broad administrative experience in municipal, provincial, and national government. In the central government, he served as vice minister of the NDRC and deputy secretary-general of the State Council, where he was in charge of daily administration. He is currently running Chongqing, the wartime capital of China during World War II and the most populous municipality in the country, which is also the center of the current phase of China's economic development.

Zhao Leji, the son of a military war correspondent during the Communist revolution, is one of the youngest provincial leaders in the country, having served as governor of Qinghai at the age of 42 and as provincial Party secretary of Qinghai at the age of 46. Zhao is among the very few leaders in the fifth generation who have served as a provincial Party secretary in more than two provinces (Qinghai and Shaanxi).<sup>48</sup> Unlike the two Li's or Wang, Zhao does not have a strong factional identity. This seemingly unfavorable factor may turn out to be his advantage in the race to succeed Hu Jintao, since it may make him an acceptable compromise candidate if the two largest factions in the top leadership cannot agree on a candidate who is aligned with one faction or another. In the past, not being tightly bound into a factional alliance has proven to be an asset to other top leaders; Premier Wen Jiabao, for example, does not have a strong factional affiliation. One may reasonably argue that as the leading contenders for leadership positions in the fifth generation move into the highest levels of authority, patron-client ties that previously enabled them to advance may suddenly become a liability. Therefore, one should assess the prospects of possible political successors from a variety of aspects such as a candidate's abilities, personality, credentials, achievements, policy platforms, and—last, but not least—luck.

However, political networks and family backgrounds, especially *tuanpai* and princeling backgrounds, remain—and will likely continue to remain for at least the next decade—among the most important factors for achieving elite promotion in the country. This is the primary reason the two Li's are in good standing in the race. Li Keqiang served in the CCYL central leadership for 16 years (from 1982 to 1998), including five years as first

secretary. Now that the CCYL has become Hu Jintao's most important power base; and given that a large number of new members in the CCP Central Committee that formed after the 17th Party Congress are expected to be Li's former colleagues in the CCYL leadership, Li Keqiang may enjoy a particular advantage in the race to succeed Hu. If Li Keqiang does succeed Hu as China's top leader, he will inherit this large and fairly cohesive political network. Li has several other advantages, including his experience of having the longest tenure as a full member of the Central Committee among his age cohorts and serving as provincial Party secretary in two of the country's most important provinces. Yet his lack of achievements as a provincial chief, combined with public perceptions about his "bad luck," may undermine his chance to become the top leader. The praise by some Chinese political dissidents who were his classmates at Beijing University may also do him more harm than good.

Li Yuanchao's career development has clearly benefited both from his princeling family background and his patron-client ties with Hu Jintao beginning at the CCYL in the early 1980s. The fact that his parents were Communist revolutionary veterans and his mother's first husband was a martyr in China's civil war may enhance his chance in the race for the top leadership, as such a background has often been seen by the CCP leadership as a sign of political reliability. Several top leaders in the third and fourth generations, notably including Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and Zeng Qinghong, had similar family backgrounds.

Also important is the fact that Li Yuanchao has been recognized by many as one of the most capable leaders of the fifth generation. With an undergraduate degree in mathematics, a master's degree in economics, and a doctoral degree in law, Li has the strongest possible educational credentials. Li also has experience overseas as a visiting scholar at Harvard's Kennedy School, where he spent time in 2002, and he has learned to speak English. In contrast to Li Keqiang, whose record as provincial Party secretary in Henan and Liaoning was poor or undistinguished, Li Yuanchao can probably claim credit for many of the achievements in Jiangsu that occurred during his tenure there. Jiangsu's GDP growth has been ranked among the top three in China's 31 provincial-level administrations in the past few years, and the urban-rural income ratio in Jiangsu in 2006 was 1:2.15, the lowest in the country (the national figure, by contrast, was 1:3.23).<sup>49</sup> The rank in terms of the total number of Jiangsu's petitioners to Beijing for various grievances dropped from 5th a few years ago to 23rd in 2006.<sup>50</sup> The annual occurrence of serious criminal cases is one per 10,000 people, the lowest in the country and "lower even than Japan," as Li Yuanchao reportedly bragged to the British newspaper the *Financial Times*.<sup>51</sup>

In particular, Jiangsu's leaders pay greater attention than their peers in many other provinces do to integrating migrant workers into the urban environment and their new workplaces. Jiangsu currently hosts approximately 12 million migrant workers from outside the province, equal to roughly 16 percent of the province's population of 76 million people.<sup>52</sup> In 2006, the provincial government ordered all of Jiangsu's labor markets to organize regular free training classes for migrant workers. The province also set a goal to have all of its migrant workers trained at vocational training schools by 2011. In Nanjing, about 20,000 migrant workers participated in these training programs in 2006. Li Yuanchao told the Chinese media "only through professional training can migrant workers truly improve their



competitiveness and then increase their incomes.”<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, the provincial government made efforts to improve migrant workers’ living conditions and offer compulsory education to their children.

While all these achievements on the social and economic fronts, combined with his tougher stance on official corruption and government accountability, add up to a great degree of political capital for Li Yuanchao, he has three main disadvantages in the race. First, Li is currently still only an alternate member of the Central Committee (CC), thus making it a three-step jump (alternate CC member, full CC member, and Politburo member) if Li were to be appointed a member of the Politburo Standing Committee. This sort of jump previously happened in the case of Zhu Rongji, who was promoted from an alternate member of the 13th Central Committee to a member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the 14th Central Committee, but this single example illustrates how unusual such a promotion would be. Second, Li Keqiang has advanced his political career exclusively through work in rich coastal areas such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Jiangsu. He has no leadership experience in the inland regions, which are the focus of China’s developmental policies today. Third, while Li’s outspoken remarks about the need for government accountability and his tough position on official corruption may be well received by the Chinese public and some top leaders, they make many people in the Chinese political establishment nervous and may therefore prevent Li from advancing to the top leadership post.

It may be premature to discuss the possible policy platforms of Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao. Yet, one can reasonably argue that we can gain insights based on these leaders’ biographical backgrounds. For scholars, the questions of how an individual’s educational and social backgrounds affect his or her outlook, and how that outlook further influences his or her behavior and policy choices, are theoretically tempting but analytically perplexing. It is even more difficult to conduct research on the values and policy preferences of political leaders in China because many may reiterate only the Party line. Rising political stars may be even more cautious in expressing their policy positions on some sensitive issues. For most of the PRC’s history, differences and conflicts in views, values, and policy preferences among leaders have usually been unknown to the public until the political winner announces the defeat of his or her rivals.

In recent years, however, many provincial leaders have participated in media interviews and live radio call-in programs. The increasing transparency of individual leaders’ views is related to the fact that both China’s strategic interests in a changing world and domestic policy options in socioeconomic development have been thoughtfully discussed among public intellectuals and policymakers. Both Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao have seemed to link themselves to a certain set of priorities in both domestic and foreign policies, although the latter has been more outspoken and bolder than the former in outlining his visions about the next phase of China’s development.

Li Keqiang has identified the tasks of building low-income housing and increasing employment as “priority projects” (*diyì gongcheng*).<sup>54</sup> In 2006, according to Liaoning provincial government statistics, approximately 12 million square meters of shantytowns were demolished, and 19 million square meters of new apartments were constructed,

benefiting 1.2 million people, or 345,000 families in the province.<sup>55</sup> Li's emphasis on employment has also been well known since he arrived in Liaoning. In 2007, for example, he promised, "if all the members of a family were jobless, the government would offer them employment within twenty days."<sup>56</sup>

Because of his leadership experience in both Henan and Liaoning, Li has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Hu-Wen leadership's populist policy initiatives for more-balanced regional development. He will most likely accelerate the development of the northeast if he becomes the top leader. Also, due to the need to attract foreign investment from Japan to the northeast region, Li may be strongly interested in improving relations with Tokyo. Leaders of three northeastern provinces (Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang) recently pushed for the establishment of an East Asia free trade zone, including China's northeast, Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN. This probably explains why Li has frequently met with Japanese leaders and why the Japanese media have a generally favorable view of Li Keqiang.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast, Li Yuanchao seems to have a much stronger affinity for Western countries, especially the United States, than any of the other top contenders in the fifth generation. He has visited a number of Western countries in recent years. In May 2006 he gave a speech to a breakfast meeting in New York City organized by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Asia Society. In the same month, Li also gave a commencement address at SUNY Albany's business school. In March 2007 Li offered an "icebreaker lecture" at the House of Commons in Great Britain. Li has been favorably treated in the Western media thus far. The foreign contacts of rising stars, as evident in the case of the two Li's, may also complicate the Chinese leadership's decision making in the selection of Hu Jintao's successor.

More importantly, Li Yuanchao has already distinguished himself from his peers with his forward-thinking approach regarding two issue areas. The first is on environmental protection. In his 2002 interview with Jeffrey Soule, the American Planning Association's representative in China and Southeast Asia, Li expressed great interest in pursuing sustainable development, especially what he called "forming an ecological urban system where city and nature are embraced."<sup>58</sup> He urged his colleagues to protect "ecological open spaces" and to prevent Nanjing from losing its distinctive character. In 2007, in the wake of a massive algae bloom caused by water pollution in Lake Tai, he urged that the provincial government use the strictest policy measures to clean the lake, even at the cost of a 15 percent drop in the annual GDP growth rate. In the aftermath of Li's remarks, the Jiangsu provincial government decided to close 2,150 small chemical factories in the province by the end of 2008 and ordered that the city and county governments in the region reallocate 10 to 20 percent of their revenue streams toward the environmental protection of Lake Tai.<sup>59</sup> Li's views about the importance of environmental protection differ profoundly from those of his peers, many of whom have often explicitly placed economic growth ahead of environmental concerns.<sup>60</sup>

The second area that Li Yuanchao has already put his personal stamp on is issues that relate to China's political reforms. In addition to the aforementioned tougher stance against

official corruption, Li Yuanchao is one of the very few provincial leaders to explicitly call for political reform. In 2005, Li criticized the mentality of some leaders who are “obsessed with stability” (*taiping guan*) and who refuse to try new political experiments.<sup>61</sup> Li believes that this mentality, though seemingly safe, is, in fact, quite dangerous because, in seeking to avoid changes now, officials may lose good opportunities to effectively prevent more serious crises from developing later. According to Li, Chinese leaders are not lacking in wisdom or ideas, but need more courage and “guts” to pursue bolder reforms. Only time will tell whether Li Yuanchao’s iron-fisted approach to promoting government accountability will help advance or jeopardize his own political career, what Li hopes to accomplish through his “bolder” reforms, and whether he will have an opportunity to play a larger role in the national leadership in the next decade.

## Concluding Thoughts

This comparative assessment of Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao shows that they are similar in some aspects and different in others, and that each of the two men has different strengths and weaknesses. It is unclear whom Hu Jintao and the Chinese political establishment will choose as the country’s future top leader and how the succession process will unfold in the next five years. To a great extent, it depends on what kind of top leader will be best for the country at this moment in China’s history.

The competition between Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao is, of course, not necessarily a zero-sum game. If Li Keqiang were to succeed Hu Jintao as the secretary-general of the CCP in 2012, Li Yuanchao might be selected as the successor to Wen Jiabao as premier of the State Council. The two men might therefore complement each other. It would not be the first time in the history of the CCP that there has been a two-man succession team. In the early 1980s, Deng seemed to designate Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang as just such a team of dual successors. Although that model failed, with neither Hu Yaobang nor Zhao Ziyang succeeding Deng, it is not at all clear that the model itself, as opposed to the individuals who composed it, has been discredited in the eyes of the top leadership.

This model may hold continuing relevance for the two Li’s in the future. Indeed, since both Chinese society and Chinese elite politics have changed profoundly over the past two decades, it may well be the case that what did not work well yesterday may work very well tomorrow. The future career trajectories of Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao are likely to be relevant not only insofar as they tell us something concrete about who will be Hu Jintao’s successor, but also because they will serve as bellwethers signaling whether or not China is ready for a more open, competitive, and institutionalized political system.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The author is indebted to Yinsheng Li for his research assistance. The author also thanks Sally Carman, Christina Culver, and Scott Harold for suggesting ways in which to clarify the article.

<sup>2</sup> The youngest current Standing Committee member, Li Changchun, is only two years younger than Hu, and the youngest current Politburo member, Liu Yunshan, is only five years younger than Hu. The CCP's norm of promoting leaders in batches, within somewhat narrow age brackets, suggests that Hu's designated successor will most likely be a new face in the 2007 Politburo.

<sup>3</sup> Li Junru, vice president of the Central Party School, made a similar observation. According to him, in contrast, 15 years ago Hu Jintao was the only leader in his age cohort who had served as provincial Party secretary in two provinces (Guizhou and Tibet). His competitors had served as provincial Party secretary in only one province. This is based on the author's interview with Li Junru in Beijing on 27 June 2007.

<sup>4</sup> The provincial leadership experience has often been an important stepping-stone for membership in the Politburo in recent years. For example, of the 24 people serving on the Politburo of the 16th Central Committee, 10 (42 percent) held provincial leadership posts when they were selected, and twenty (83 percent) have served as provincial leaders (deputy Party secretaries and vice governors, or above) in the past, with 16 (67 percent) having served as provincial chiefs (Party secretary or governor). For further discussion, see Cheng Li, "A Landslide Victory for Provincial Leaders," *China Leadership Monitor* 3 (Winter 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Yang served as Party secretary of Tibet in 2004–2006.

<sup>6</sup> Wang served as Hainan Party secretary prior to his appointment as mayor of Beijing in 2003. Su served as Qinghai Party secretary.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the recent slave labor scandal in Shanxi Province has jeopardized the political career of Zhang Baoshun, Party secretary of Shanxi. The fact that Yang Chuantang, former Party secretary of Tibet, suffered a stroke in November 2005 has also moved his name off the list of the contenders for the top leadership.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Jonathan Ansfield, "Beijing prepares for battle" *Newsweek*, 3 October 2006 (<http://bulletin.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=149212>). Also see *Mingbao*, 26 July 2007 (<http://www.peacehall.com/news/gb/china/2007/07/200707260911.shtml>).

<sup>9</sup> Li Yining, Meng Xiaosu, Li Yuanchao, and Li Keqiang, *Zouxiang fanrong de zhanlue xuanze* [Strategic Choices on the Path to Prosperity]. Beijing: Jingji ribao chubanshe, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Some reporters observed that Li Yuanchao did not make any real advances in his political career between the early 1980s and 2000. But between 2000 and 2004, Li was appointed to a higher position each year. See <http://news.boxun.com/news/gb/china/2004/07/200407250539.shtml>.

<sup>11</sup> Two other CCYL protégés of Hu Jintao followed suit. In the past few years, Yuan Chunqing served consecutively as deputy Party secretary of Shaanxi and Party secretary of Xi'an, and now he is governor of Shanxi. Jiang Daming served consecutively as deputy Party secretary of Shandong and Party secretary of Jinan, and now he is governor of Shandong.

<sup>12</sup> The other fifth-generation leader who serves in the leading small group is Yu Youjun, former governor of Shanxi and designated minister of culture.

<sup>13</sup> Due to the large number of applicants, a few months after the first exams, the Chinese government offered the exams a second time. In March and October of 1978, two classes were enrolled in several hundred universities in China. See *Zhongguo shibao* [China Times], 15 May 2006. See also ([www.chinesenewsnet.com](http://www.chinesenewsnet.com) [May 15, 2006]).

<sup>14</sup> This is based on the year of their graduation. They are sometimes also called the "Class of 1977" and the "Class of 1978," depending on the year in which they took the exams.

<sup>15</sup> <http://news.boxun.com/news/gb/pubvp/2005/03/200503272355.shtml>; 27 March 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Zhao Lei, "Beida falüxi: 'Huangpu yiqi na banren'" [The "graduates of the first class of the Huangpu Academy": The students of the first post-Cultural Revolution Class at the Law Department of Beijing University]. *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern Weekly), 7 June 2007.

<sup>17</sup> For more details about Li's classmates, see *ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> "A Successor Generation," *Time*, 23 September 1985. See also <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,959912-1,00.html>.

<sup>19</sup> This is based on Wang Juntao, "Beida fengyun jiuyou dianping" [Comments on a few distinguished alumni of Beijing University]. See <http://www.blogchina.com>. 25 December 2005.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> See Wu Jiexiang, *Jiaoli shiliuda—weilai Zhongguo kongzhiquan* [The Struggle for the 16th Party Congress: In Quest of the Power to Shape China's Future] (Hong Kong: Mirror Books, 2002), p. 201.

<sup>22</sup> Wang, “Beida fengyun jiuyou dianping.”

<sup>23</sup> Ai Yanghua and Chen Xiaoming, *Tuanhui zhaoyao Zhongguo: Zhonggong zhengtan de mingxing he heima* [China in the Light of the CCYL Emblem: Rising Stars and Dark Horses in Chinese Politics] (Hong Kong: Mirror Books, 2007), p. 220.

<sup>24</sup> Li Keqiang, “Lun woguo jingji de sanyuan jiegou” [On the Ternary Structure of the Chinese Economy], *Zhongguo shehui kexue* (China’s Social Sciences), no. 3 (May 1991).

<sup>25</sup> This is based on Qiu Ping, *Zhonggong diwudai* [The Fifth Generation of CCP Leaders] (Hong Kong: Xiafeier Publishing Company Limited, 2005), p. 102.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

<sup>27</sup> Chen Xiaoming, “Li Keqiang zheng chengwei diwudai lingpaozhe” [Li Keqiang: The Frontrunner of the Fifth Generation], 11 December 2006,

<http://www.chubun.com/modules/article/view.article.php/c95/28925>.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Harmsen, “Mining Disaster Bad Luck for Rising Political Star.” *The Standard*, 21 February 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Zong Hairan, *Disidai* [The Fourth Generation] (Hong Kong: Mirror Books, 2002), p. 424.

<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that during the first four years of his work in Henan, Li did not bring his wife and family with him to Zhengzhou, the capital of the province, but left them in Beijing. See Yang Zhongxu and Wang Gang, “Diyiwei boshi shengzhang Li Keqiang” [The First Ph.D. Governor: Li Keqiang], *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan* (China Newsweek), 24 March 2005. Also see <http://cul.sina.com.cn>.

<sup>31</sup> Yu Zeyuan, “Zhongguo zhengzhi mingxing Li Keqiang shuaidiao Henan qiongmaozi” [China’s Political Rising Star Li Keqiang Erases the Image of a Poor Henan Province], *Lianhe zaobao* (United Morning News), 10 June 2006. Also see

[http://www3.chinesenewsnet.com/gb/MainNews/Forums/BackStage/2007\\_6\\_10\\_0\\_11\\_42\\_172.html](http://www3.chinesenewsnet.com/gb/MainNews/Forums/BackStage/2007_6_10_0_11_42_172.html).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> See *Zhongguo shizheng luntan* (China News Forum), 15 September 2007,

[http://blog.people.com.cn/blog/log/showlog.jspe?log\\_id=1181519491989296&site\\_id=18755](http://blog.people.com.cn/blog/log/showlog.jspe?log_id=1181519491989296&site_id=18755).

<sup>34</sup> Ma Changbo, “Li Keqiang: Zhizhengzhe minsheng weizhong” [Li Keqiang: Those in Power Should Place a Priority on the People’s Livelihood], *Nanfang zhoumo*, 15 March 2007.

<sup>35</sup> See [http://www.lnxxw.gov.cn/document\\_show.asp?show\\_id=6877](http://www.lnxxw.gov.cn/document_show.asp?show_id=6877).

<sup>36</sup> This nickname is based on the Chinese saying: “A new leader comes with three fires,” which means that a new leader should establish his reputation by accomplishing three tasks soon after the appointment. But Li Keqiang, instead, “brought with him” three real fires in the province soon after his arrival. Cao Min, “Cong Li Keqiang shengqian kan Zhonggong tuanpai de yongren biao zhun” [The promotion of Li Keqiang and the criteria of selecting CCYL leaders], 15 December 2005,

<http://news.boxun.com/news/gb/pubvp/2005/12/200512151246.shtml>.

<sup>37</sup> Li Keqiang was, of course, not responsible for the spread of the AIDS virus in the province caused by the poor standards for blood transmission, because this problem occurred before his arrival in Henan. However, human rights groups often criticized Li for his cover-up of the extent of AIDS problems in the province.

<sup>38</sup> It has been speculated several times in the past two years that Li Keqiang would be promoted to the national leadership in Beijing.

<sup>39</sup> This is based on Ding, *Hu Jintao yu gongqingtuan jieban qun* [Hu Jintao and the Successors of Chinese Communist Youth League] (Hong Kong: Celebrities Press, 2005), pp. 275–77.

<sup>40</sup> There are, of course, a few exceptions. In the 11th Secretariat of the CCYL Central Committee in the early 1980s, for example, four of the eleven members were princelings, including Li Yuanchao. The others were Liu Yandong, Chen Haosu (former Foreign Minister Chen Yi’s son) and He Guangwei (son of revolutionary veteran He Changong). However, according to Ding Wang’s study, no princeling at the ministerial or vice-ministerial level of leadership has served in the national leadership of the CCYL since 1983. See Ding, *Hu Jintao yu gongqingtuan jieban qun*, p. 262. One exception is Zhang Qingli, currently Party secretary of Tibet, who served as deputy director of the Department of Worker and Peasant Affairs of the CCYL Central Committee from 1983 to 1986. Zhang’s uncle is Zhang Wannian, former vice chairman of the Central Military Commission.

<sup>41</sup> Ding, *Hu Jintao yu gongqingtuan jieban qun*, p. 278.

<sup>42</sup> See Bai Hongyi and Li Xin, “Li Yuanchao: Zai feichang shike” [Li Yuanchao: At the Special Moment]. The article originally appeared in *Shengzhou* (Wonderland). Also see <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/news/2005/2005-01-18/26/529931.shtml>, 18 January 2005.

- <sup>43</sup> Quan Qiumei, “Li Yuanchao de xin Nanjing” [Li Yuanchao’s New Nanjing], *Diyi caijing ribao* (The First Financial and Economic Daily), 15 November 2005. Also see <http://business.sohu.com/20051115/n240721209.shtml>.
- <sup>44</sup> See [http://www.china.com.cn/news/txt/2007-08/09/content\\_8655343.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/news/txt/2007-08/09/content_8655343.htm).
- <sup>45</sup> See <http://chinesenewsnet.com>, 25 May 2002.
- <sup>46</sup> For more discussion on this, see Wong Kwok Wah, “China’s Rising Star,” *Asia Times Online*, 3 February, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/HB04Ad01.html>.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, and also see *Wenhui Bao* (Hong Kong), 19 February 2007.
- <sup>48</sup> The other two are Li Keqiang (Henan and Liaoning) and Xi Jinping (Zhejiang and Shanghai).
- <sup>49</sup> Sun Chuanwei, “Li Yuanchao jiangcheng Hu Jintao jiebanren?” [Will Li Yuanchao Be Hu Jintao’s Successor?], *Lianhe zaobao* (United Morning News), 24 February 2005, <http://www.peacehall.com/news/gb/china/2005/02/200502250558.shtml>.
- <sup>50</sup> Liu Junling, “Interview with Jiangsu Party Secretary Li Yuanchao,” 2 June 2006, <http://www.lianghui.org.cn/chinese/zhuanti/fmkjs/1227943.htm>.
- <sup>51</sup> Richard McGregor and Mure Dickie, “China’s Political Rising Star: Li Yuanchao” *Financial Times* (Chinese online version), 15 March 2007, [http://www.ftchinese.com/sc/story.jsp?id=001010085&pos=TOP10\\_HOMEPAGE&pa1=9#ContinueReading](http://www.ftchinese.com/sc/story.jsp?id=001010085&pos=TOP10_HOMEPAGE&pa1=9#ContinueReading).
- <sup>52</sup> “Jiangsu chief Li Yuanchao vows social campaign,” *China Daily*, 15 March 2007, <http://chinaelections.org/en/readnews.asp?newsid=%7B2443304A-9BC6-4994-A407-4A6D86A8F7C5%7D>.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> Bai Yanzhang, “Cong Li Keqiang zhua yihao gongcheng shuoqi” [The Priority Projects Proposed by Li Keqiang], *Renmin ribao* (People’s Daily), 21 February 2006. Also see <http://www.hnsc.com.cn/news/2006/03/03/91090.htm>.
- <sup>55</sup> Zhu Zhe, “Li Keqiang: Shantytowns Under Renovation,” *China Daily*, 6 March 2007. Also see [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-03/06/content\\_890488.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-03/06/content_890488.htm).
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> The regional interests Li has expressed may become even more crucial because more provinces and cities in the country have been engaging in foreign economic cooperation. For example, see the Japanese media’s favorable coverage of Li Keqiang: [http://www1.chinesenewsnet.com/gb/MainNews/SinoNews/Mainland/2007\\_9\\_18\\_18\\_10\\_17\\_39.html](http://www1.chinesenewsnet.com/gb/MainNews/SinoNews/Mainland/2007_9_18_18_10_17_39.html).
- <sup>58</sup> Jeffrey Soule, “Forward Thinking in Nanjing: An Interview with Jiangsu Party Secretary Li Yuanchao,” <http://www1.worldbank.org/devoutreach/fall02/textonly.asp?id=224>.
- <sup>59</sup> “Wei ji chuli zhong de dangzheng shouzhang Li Yuanchao: tiawan fengge” [Party and Government Leader Li Yuanchao Confronting Crisis: An Iron-fisted Style], see [http://www.china.com.cn/news/txt/2007-08/09/content\\_8655343.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/news/txt/2007-08/09/content_8655343.htm).
- <sup>60</sup> Beijing’s mayor, Wang Qishan, is a prominent example of an official who has explicitly prioritized economic growth over environmental protection.
- <sup>61</sup> See <http://www.xinhuanet.com>, 11 August 2005.