

## Xi Jinping's Inner Circle (Part 4: The *Mishu* Cluster I)

Cheng Li

Mentor-protégé ties play an important role in elite formation in virtually all kinds of political systems. But arguably no country gives more prominent advantage in terms of later political career promotions to those who have previously served as personal assistants to senior leaders than China. This phenomenon of having a large presence of leaders with such experience in Chinese officialdom has led to the romanization of the Chinese term *mishu* (秘书) to refer to this group. At present, more than three-quarters of cabinet ministers and provincial governors have served as *mishu*.<sup>1</sup> Of the current 25 members of the Politburo, 16 (64 percent) have served in such roles, and of the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee, five (71 percent) have *mishu* backgrounds.

Xi Jinping himself served as a *mishu* for the minister of defense for three years in his late 20s, and this experience helped him tremendously later as he advanced in his career, especially in enhancing his credentials in military affairs. Xi's personal assistants, both previous and current, have constituted a major cluster of his inner circle. Because of their very close working relationships with Xi, they are often among his most trusted confidants. It is also important and interesting to note that while the power and influence of Xi's *mishu* cluster in the leadership was growing rapidly, the recent purges of senior leaders, such as Zhou Yongkang, Xu Caihou, and Ling Jihua, all began with the removal or prosecution of their *mishu*. This installment in the series assesses the broad political context of the *mishu* phenomenon in present-day China, providing background for the discussion of the strong bonds between Xi and his *mishu* and their internal diversity, which will be the subject of the next and final installment.

In September 2014, *Mishu Work*, the official magazine run by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), published a long article by its director, Politburo member Li Zhanshu.<sup>2</sup> As a confidant and chief of staff for Xi Jinping, Li highlighted his boss's recent remarks on the work of the General Office, especially Xi's emphasis on "absolute loyalty" (绝对忠诚) to the party, which was characterized as the key requirement for secretarial staff. In the first webpage of the online version of the same article, the word "loyalty" appears as many as 55 times.<sup>3</sup> The author explicitly stated that "absolute loyalty has now been raised to unprecedented heights," and the secretarial staff at the General Office "should act and think in a manner highly consistent in accordance with the order from the Central Committee led by General Secretary Xi Jinping."<sup>4</sup> Although the secretarial staff members are supposed to have loyalty to the party, in reality often their first loyalty is to their boss (首长) rather than to their office or the abstract notion of the party.

In fact, the General Office of the CCP and other important offices in the party, state, and military leadership are now led by Xi's long-time friends and protégés—loyalists of the new party boss in Zhongnanhai. Not only does Xi's close friend for over 30 years, the aforementioned Li Zhanshu, serve as director of the General Office, but Xi's protégé from Shanghai, Ding Xuexiang, also serves concurrently as deputy director of the General Office and director of President Xi Jinping's Office. Zhong Shaojun, who has been Xi's personal assistant for the past 12 years, now serves concurrently as deputy director of the General Office of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and director of CMC Chairman Xi's office with the military rank of senior colonel. Xi's childhood friend Liu He currently serves as office director of the CCP Central Financial Leading Group. Xi's mishu during his tenure in Fujian in the 1990s, Cai Qi, currently serves as executive deputy director of the office of the newly established National Security Committee. Xi's long-time bodyguard (security mishu), Major General Wang Shaojun, was recently promoted to be director of the Bodyguard Bureau of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee. They are all undoubtedly members of Xi's inner circle. Meanwhile, some of Xi's former mishu have been recently appointed to prominent leadership positions. For example, He Lifeng, former deputy office director of the Xiamen Municipal Government in the mid-1980s when Xi was vice mayor of the city, was appointed deputy director and deputy party secretary of the powerful National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in June 2014.

Interestingly, Xi Jinping convened a Politburo meeting at the end of 2014 to discuss the problem of the growing prevalence of “various factions” (团团伙伙) in the leadership.<sup>5</sup> The communiqué released after the Politburo meeting was entitled “The party should not tolerate gangs, cliques and nepotism,” and called for a serious effort on the part of the CCP leadership at various levels to prevent this problem.<sup>6</sup> Seasoned observers of Chinese politics would have no problem understanding the implicit message of this communiqué: factional politics has now become such a serious concern of the leadership that the Politburo deemed it necessary to hold a meeting focusing on this urgent matter. China's official media, such as the Xinhua News Agency, now also use the terms the “mishu clusters” (秘书帮), the “petroleum faction” (石油帮) and the “Shanxi faction” (山西帮) to illustrate the present factional dynamics in Chinese politics.

Xi Jinping apparently confronts a serious dilemma: he needs to appoint his protégés to the most important leadership positions (including the powerful administrative offices that control the agenda) to consolidate his power and push forward his ambitious reform programs; but in doing so he must prevent factional politics from undermining his power while also avoiding backlash from the political establishment for his double standard. Recent purges of senior leaders whose scandals were linked to the operational input of their mishu have raised public concern about the ubiquitous role and tremendous power of mishu in the Chinese political system. A critical review of the mishu phenomenon, and a balanced analysis of Xi's paradoxical measures regarding the essential role of mishu in the consolidation of his power, can be enormously valuable to our understanding of Chinese elite politics.

## The Definition of Mishu and Its Political Prominence

By definition, *mishu* refers to office clerks who deal with paperwork (responding to mail and filing documents), schedule meetings, and assist their bosses in handling their daily routines. Mishu are a diverse group, including a wide range of people who differ significantly from one another in terms of the nature of their work, their functional areas, the length of their experience in their positions, the level of leadership at which they serve, and the responsibilities given to them. Important distinctions should be made between organizational (机关) and personal (个人) mishu; between chiefs of staff or secretaries-general (秘书长) and office directors (办公室主任); between bodyguards (贴身警卫) and civilian secretaries (文职秘书); and between aides with high official status (助理) and office assistants (办事员) who usually do nothing but type and answer phone calls.<sup>7</sup> During the first few decades of the PRC, mishu were often called clerks (干事).

Secretaries-general or chiefs of staff certainly play an important administrative role. The experience of serving as a director of the General Office or secretary-general at the national level of party and government leadership is undoubtedly a stepping-stone for further promotion. Among the 11 leaders who have served (or still serve) as director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee since the founding of the People's Republic of China, all have held the status of "highest-ranking party and state leaders" (党和国家领导人). Seven of them (Yang Shangkun, Wang Dongxing, Yao Yilin, Hu Qili, Qiao Shi, Wen Jiabao, and Zeng Qinghong) later served on the Politburo Standing Committee, and three (Wang Zhaoguo, Wang Gang, and Li Zhanshu) served or currently serve on the Politburo. Only Ling Jihua did not make it to the Politburo, and he was recently purged on corruption charges.

Some of them also later served as top state leaders (Yang Shangkun as PRC president, Qiao Shi as NPC chairman, Wen Jiabao as premier, and Zeng Qinghong as PRC vice president). In the State Council, Xi Jinping's father Xi Zhongxun had served as secretary-general for six years before being promoted to vice premier in 1959. In the recent three decades, all secretaries-general of the State Council have concurrently served as either vice premier or state councilor.

## Top CCP Leaders and Their Mishu Clusters

In PRC history, top leaders' personal secretaries (贴身秘书), also known as chief aides (大秘), and bodyguards often later became high-ranking senior leaders themselves. For example, Mao's political mishu Chen Boda and Hu Qiaomu later served as Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) member and Politburo member, respectively. Wang Dongxing, who served as Mao's bodyguard from 1947 to 1958 and worked as director of the Bodyguard Bureau of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee during the Cultural Revolution, later served as vice chairman of the CCP.

Deng Xiaoping's personal secretary for over three decades, Wang Ruilin later served as deputy director of the PLA General Political Department with the military rank of general, and he was in charge of military personnel appointments throughout most of the 1990s. When Deng was purged for the first time in 1967, he was allowed to bring an

assistant with him to Jiangxi to do manual labor. Deng chose Wang Ruilin, who had served as his mishu since 1952, soon after the founding of the PRC. Both survived the physical hardship and political uncertainty together in Jiangxi. When Deng returned to power in the late 1970s, he served as CMC vice chairman, and Wang became the director of his office.<sup>8</sup> As the most trusted confidant for Deng, Wang later also served as secretary of the Discipline Committee of the CMC (1990–93) and as a member of the CMC (1995–2003). After Deng Xiaoping's return to power in 1978, almost all of his mishu were uniformed PLA officers. They included Zhang Baozhong (lieutenant general), Sun Yong (lieutenant general), Nian Fuchun (lieutenant general), Zhao Jiashun (major general), Chen Menghua (major general), and Wang Fuzhong (major general).

Similarly, Jiang Zemin was always keen to promote his mishu to key positions in both the civilian and military bureaucracies. In 1989, when Jiang, then party secretary of Shanghai, was promoted to be general secretary of the CCP, he brought with him two top aides, Zeng Qinghong and Jia Ting'an. Zeng had previously served as Jiang's chief of staff (secretary-general of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee). Zeng continued to serve as Jiang's top aide in Beijing as deputy director (1989–1993) and director (1993–99) of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee. Zeng played a crucial role in helping Jiang to consolidate power in both Shanghai and Beijing, as will be discussed later.

Jia Ting'an began to serve as a mishu for Jiang when Jiang was first vice minister of the Ministry of the Electronics Industry in the early 1980s. He followed Jiang to Shanghai in 1985 when Jiang was appointed mayor. Three years later, Jia was promoted to be deputy director of the General Office of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, assisting then Shanghai Party Secretary Jiang. When Jiang took the post of general secretary of the party in June 1989, Jia served as director of his office, and in November 1989, Jia began concurrently serving as a mishu to Chairman of the CMC Jiang Zemin. It was believed that Jia did not join the People's Liberation Army until this CMC mishu appointment. In 1994, Jia was promoted to be deputy director of the General Office of the CMC and concurrently director of Jiang Zemin's CMC chairman's office, with the military rank of major general. He was promoted to director of the General Office of the CMC in 2003. One year after Jiang stepped down as the CMC chairman, Jia was granted the military rank of lieutenant general. Since 2007, Jia has served as deputy director of the General Political Department of the PLA. Like Wang Ruilin, Jia Ting'an was also in charge of discipline affairs in the military. Jia was granted the rank of general in 2011.

Jiang's other mishu and bodyguards also were promoted to important leadership positions. For example, Huang Liman, Jiang's mishu during his tenure as minister of the Ministry of Electronics Industry in the early 1980s, later served as party secretary of Shenzhen and chairman of the Guangdong People's Congress. Guo Kailang, Jiang's mishu in the 1990s when he was the general secretary of the party, now serves as director of the Organization Department of the Hunan Provincial Party Committee. Jiang's most trusted confidant is You Xigui, his former bodyguard (who still lives and works with Jiang). It is unclear when they first met. You served as deputy director of the Bodyguard Bureau, in charge of Jiang's security, when Jiang was appointed as party general

secretary in 1989. You was promoted to director of the Bodyguard Bureau in 1994 and deputy director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee in 1997. You was granted the military rank of major general in 1990, lieutenant general in 1997, and general in 2004.

Three mishu—Ye Kedong, Chen Shiju, and Ling Jihua—provided tremendous support to Hu Jintao in his advancement to the top leadership. Ye Kedong, a native of Guangxi who was born in 1953, studied philosophy at Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. After graduation, he worked as a mishu for Hu Jintao at the General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) from 1983 to 1985 when Hu was in charge of the league. He followed Hu Jintao to work in Guizhou and Tibet in the following years.<sup>9</sup> Ye has worked in the field of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao affairs over the past two decades. He currently serves as executive deputy director of the Office of Taiwan Affairs of the Central Committee of the CCP.

Chen Shiju, who was born in Guizhou in 1963, worked as a mishu for Hu Jintao for as many as 27 years. After graduating from Guizhou University in 1985 (and briefly serving as an instructor in the university's philosophy department), Chen Shiju began to work for then Guizhou Party Secretary Hu Jintao. Chen accompanied Hu to Tibet in 1988 when Hu served as Tibet party secretary, and then Hu brought Chen to Beijing in 1992 when Hu was appointed a PSC member. Chen served as director of General Secretary Hu Jintao's office from 2002 to 2012 and was promoted to deputy director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee after Hu's retirement in 2013, and he has continued to serve in that position (with promotion to the rank of full minister in January 2015).

Ling Jihua has long been regarded as one of President Hu's most important aides. They met in the early 1980s while working together at the CCYL Central Committee. Ling advanced his career largely at the CCYL national leadership where he served as deputy head of the Theoretical Research Division of the Propaganda Department of the CCYL Central Committee (1985–88), director of the Office of the CCYL Secretariat (1988–1990), deputy director of the General Office of the CCYL Central Committee and editor in chief of the CCYL magazine (1990–94), and director of the Propaganda Department of the CCYL Central Committee (1994–95). Their shared identity as CCYL officials (known as *tuanpai*) has further consolidated the political bonds between Ling and Hu. In the mid- and late 1990s when Ling served as an official at the Research Division of the General Office of the Central Committee of the CCP, he helped draft speeches and memos for Hu, then a PBS member. In 1999, Hu promoted Ling to deputy director of the General Office and director of Vice President Hu Jintao's office. In 2007, when Hu began his second term, Ling was promoted to the Secretariat and became director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee concurrently. Before the tragic death of his son in a car incident in March 2012 and subsequent exposure of his corruption scandals, Ling was seen as a strong candidate for PBS membership.

It is important to know that all of these mishu who have served top leaders have their own administrative ranks (行政级别), for example: division-level (处级), bureau-level (局级), department-level (厅级), and vice minister-level (副部长级) mishu. Both the

government and central party systems have their own bureaus of mishu (秘书局) under the leadership of the General Office of the State Council and the General Office of the Central Committee of the CCP, respectively. Table 1 (next page) presents the career developments and the current status of the personal secretaries of all nine PBS members at the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee.<sup>10</sup> All of them currently have the rank of vice-minister and vice governor or higher (Zhou Yongkang's mishu Ji Wenlin served as vice governor of Hainan before he was purged in 2014).<sup>11</sup> They were all born after the mid-1950s, and five of them were born in the 1960s. Most of them only received bachelor's degrees (many belonging to the famous 1978 class that entered college after China readopted the entrance examination). Many of them spent most of their professional and political careers as mishu even before serving their powerful PBS bosses. Hu Jintao's mishu Chen Shiju and Wen Jiabao's mishu Qiu Xiaoxiong both began to work for their bosses as early as 1985. Sun Wei (Wu Bangguo's mishu), Tong Guangcheng (Jia Qinglin's mishu), and Ji Wenlin, for example, all worked as mishu soon after their college graduation, and they previously worked as mishu for other bosses.

Some long-time personal secretaries of these PBS members had been appointed to important leadership positions before the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. For example, Ling Yueming began to work as He Guoqiang's mishu when He was vice minister of the Ministry of Chemical Industry in 1991. Ling followed He to Fujian and Chongqing when the latter served as provincial top leader in these two places. Ling remained in Chongqing when He was promoted to director of the Central Organization Department in 2002. Ling is currently a Standing Committee member of the Chongqing Municipal Party Committee.

## Factors Contributing to the Prominent Role of Mishu

The mishu's prominent role in the CCP leadership is certainly not new in Chinese history. In their seminal study of mishu in the Chinese leadership, Wei Li and Lucian W. Pye argue that the ubiquitous role of the mishu reflects Confucian political culture, especially the "intensely personalized element in Chinese politics."<sup>12</sup> This mentor-patron relationship, as Li and Pye characterize it, is based on the fact that bosses "depend on mishu for shelter, comfort and convenience in their lives and work," and mishu depend on bosses "for status, prestige and career advancement" later in their political life.<sup>13</sup>

Although communist veteran leaders usually had no mishu experience themselves, there are two noticeable exceptions. Deng Xiaoping served as secretary-general of the CCP from 1954 to 1956, and former PRC president Yang Shangkun served as director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee from 1958 to 1965. But for the first three decades of the PRC, in general mishu were largely seen as office clerks rather than powerful figures in their own right. When communist veteran leaders (most of them were seen as the first and second generations of CCP leaders) became senile, they tended to rely on their mishu to exert their power and influence "behind the scenes." Some of the mishu of these gerontocratic leaders later served or currently still serve in important positions. Examples include Chen Yun's mishu Xu Yongyue, who served as minister of state security for almost 10 years, Ye Jianying's bodyguard Cao Qing, who was recently

*(text continues on p. 8)*

**Table 1**

*Career Development and Current Status of Personal Secretaries (dami) of the Politburo Standing Committee Members of the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee (as of March 2015)*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Boss</i>	<i>Ist year as mishu</i>	<i>Year born</i>	<i>Birthplace</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Previous position</i>	<i>Current position (status)</i>
Chen Shiju	Hu Jintao	1985	1963	Guizhou	BA, Philosophy, Guizhou University	Director, President Hu Jintao's office	Deputy director, General Office of Central Committee
Sun Wei	Wu Bangguo	1995	1961	Shandong	BS, Geography, Peking University	Director, NPC Chairman Wu Bangguo's office	Executive vice governor, Shandong
Qiu Xiaoxiong	Wen Jiabao	1985	1955	Guangxi	BS, Economics, Peking University; MS, Central South University of Technology	Director, Premier Wen Jiabao's office; Deputy secretary-general, State Council	Deputy director. State Administration of Taxation
Tong Guangcheng	Jia Qinglin	1997?	1953	Jiangxi	Bachelor's	Director, CPPCC Chairman Jia Qinglin's office	Deputy secretary-general, CPPCC
Zhang Jiang	Li Changchun	2002	1956	Liaoning	BA, Philosophy, Renmin University	Director, Li Changchun's office	Vice president, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
Zhong Shaojun	Xi Jinping	2003?	1968	Zhejiang	Master's, Zhejiang University; PhD candidate in Public Policy, Tsinghua University	Head of Research Team of CMC General Office	Deputy Director, President Xi Jinping's office; Deputy director, General Office of CMC
Shi Gang	Li Keqiang	2007?	1958	Anhui	BS, China University of Science & Technology; MS, management, Shanghai Jiaotong University	Deputy director, Research Office of State Council	Director, Premier Li Keqiang's Office
Ji Wenlin	Zhou Yongkang	1998	1966	Neimenggu	BS, Geology, China University of Geosciences	Deputy director, Central Office of Maintaining Social Stability; Director, Zhou Yongkang's office	Hainan Vice Governor (purged)
Liu Mingbo	He Guoqiang	2008	1964	Neimenggu	BA, History	Director, Office of Central Commission for Discipline Inspection	Executive deputy secretary, Anhui Provincial Commission for Discipline Inspection

SOURCE AND NOTE: Wang Xin 王新, "The files of personal secretaries of the retired seven Politburo Standing Committee members of the CCP (中共退休七常委大秘浮沉录), Duowei Newnet, July 5, 2013, <http://china.dwnews.com/news/2013-07-05/59258258.html>; and Chen Yifan, *Zhonggong gaoguan de mishumen* [The Mishu Cluster of the High-ranking Leaders of the Chinese Communist Party]. New York: Mirror Books, 2010, also Cheng Li's database.

appointed to be deputy commander of the Beijing Military Region with the military rank of lieutenant general, and Yang Shangkun's mishu Wang Guanzhong, who currently serves as deputy chief of staff of the General Staff Headquarters with the military rank of lieutenant general.

An important contributing factor to the prominent role of mishu is the fact that in the early years of the reform era, many children of high-ranking officials, known as princelings, often sought to work as an office staff member in important national leadership bodies, in particular serving as mishu to senior leaders who were their fathers' old comrades-in-arms. Examples include Xi Jinping, who served as mishu to Minister of Defense Geng Biao, and Zeng Qinghong, who served as mishu to Yu Qiuli, then chairman of the State Planning Commission. Bo Xilai and Wang Qishan worked as clerks in the General Office and the Rural Research Office of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee respectively early in their careers. The son-in-law of Hu Yaobang, Navy Political Commissar Liu Xiaojiang, served as mishu to Liu Huaqing, then deputy chief of staff of the PLA and later vice chairman of the CMC. These experiences as mishu not only provided valuable opportunities for princelings to become familiar with the work and decision-making process in the national leadership, but it also accelerated their political careers due to these extraordinary credentials.

Ironically, the prominent role of mishu was actually attributed in part to the top leadership's concern for preventing the formation of regionally based factionalism (in both military regions and provincial administrations) in the 1970s and 1980s. To prevent local autonomy and even possible separatist tendencies (山头主义), Mao, Deng, and Jiang all constantly arranged large-scale reshuffles of top provincial leaders and, more importantly, of top officers in China's greater military regions.<sup>14</sup> This policy aimed to weaken the power bases of local leaders. When top regional leaders, both civilian and military elites, moved to new regions, they could not bring too many of their previous subordinates with them. Yet they were often allowed to bring their personal mishu to their new posts.<sup>15</sup> The policy that was supposed to limit factional politics unexpectedly has led to even closer bonds between high-ranking leaders and their aides, contributing to a more powerful role for mishu in the Chinese leadership.

Perhaps the most important contributing factor to the mishu phenomenon is the shift in criteria for elite recruitment from revolutionary credentials, such as participation in the communist revolution and mobilization in socialist campaigns, to two new areas of skills. One is technical and financial expertise and the other entails administrative skills such as political networking and coalition-building—both vertically and horizontally. As for the first, current Minister of Finance Lou Jiwei served as a mishu for Zhu Rongji in the late 1980s when Zhu was mayor of Shanghai, and he continued to assist Zhu on tax reform when Zhu was vice premier and premier. As discussed in the previous installment of this series, Xi Jinping often relies on his aides who received academic degrees at Harvard and Stanford on economic and financial affairs, as is the case with Liu He (office director of the Central Financial Leading Group) and Fang Xinghai (inspector of the Economic Team in the Office of the Central Financial Leading Group). Fang also served as deputy



office director and then director of Financial Affairs in Shanghai when Xi was in charge of the city in 2007.

As for political networking and coalition-building, Jiang Zemin's reliance on Zeng Qinghong, and Xi Jinping's appointment of Li Zhanshu as his chief of staff are both good examples. Zeng is often described as Jiang's "hands, ears, and brain." Zeng began to work in Shanghai in late 1984, a few months before Jiang's arrival. Zeng had strong political connections in the city. His father, Zeng Shan, served as vice mayor soon after the communist victory in 1949. In the early 1980s, three of his father's former junior colleagues—Chen Guodong, Hu Lijiao, and Wang Daohan—held top posts in the city.<sup>16</sup> When Jiang arrived in Shanghai as mayor, Zeng was soon promoted to director of the Organization Department in the city, in charge of personnel affairs. One year later, when Jiang was promoted to party secretary of the city, Zeng became Jiang's chief of staff in the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, and they began their "long-term mutually beneficial cooperation."<sup>17</sup>

When Jiang was appointed to be general secretary of the CCP in June 1989, he brought Zeng with him to Beijing because Zeng was as well connected in the power circles in Beijing as he was in Shanghai, largely due to his extremely influential parents.<sup>18</sup> It has been widely reported that over the past two decades Zeng helped Jiang overcome his political rivals, including the "generals of the Yang family" (Yang Shangkun and Yang Baibing), the Deng children, Chen Xitong (former party chief in Beijing), and Qiao Shi (former head of the NPC).<sup>19</sup> More recently, it was believed that Zeng initiated the move to select Xi as the heir apparent at the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2007.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, it was a very thoughtful decision on the part of Xi Jinping to choose Li Zhanshu as director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee on the eve of the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012. Besides their long-time friendship and similar princeling family backgrounds (as discussed in the first installment of this series), Li's previous two sets of work experience are particularly valuable for Xi. First, Li served as a provincial leader in many parts of the country: in Hebei as secretary general of the provincial party committee, in Shaanxi as deputy party secretary, in Heilongjiang as governor, and in Guizhou as party secretary. These leadership experiences in the northern, northeastern, northwestern, and southwestern regions of the country could bring much-needed broad regional support for Xi's administration. Second, Li is often seen as a *tuanpai* leader, as he served as secretary of the Hebei Provincial CCYL Committee from 1986 to 1990. This background of Xi's new chief of staff could help Xi potentially reconcile the factional tensions in the leadership and contribute to his coalition-building efforts.<sup>21</sup>

## The Prevalent Role of Mishu in Rampant Official Corruption

Xi Jinping's ongoing strong anti-corruption campaign—and subsequent purges of high-ranking officials—represents an interesting pattern wherein *mishu* are often the first to succumb to investigation and arrest. This phenomenon partly reflects the strategy behind Xi's anti-graft investigations, and partly shows the interconnectedness between the prevalent role of *mishu* and rampant official corruption in the Chinese political system. This practice by Chinese authorities is, of course, not new. The purges of senior party

leaders in PRC history have in fact usually involved their mishu. For example, the purge of former CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang in the wake of the Tiananmen crisis in 1989 began with the arrest of his political secretary Bao Tong on the charge of “leaking state secrets.” Bao Tong, a full member of the 13<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CCP, previously served as deputy director of the National Commission for Economic Restructuring, director of the Research Office on Political Reform of the CPC Central Committee, and director of the office of Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. Bao was sentenced to seven years in prison and was placed under house arrest after serving his sentence.

The corruption charges against former Politburo member and Beijing Party Secretary Chen Xitong in the Jiang era began with the arrest of Chen’s mishu Chen Jian two months prior to the fall of Chen Xitong himself. Similarly, under the Hu Jintao leadership, former Politburo member and Shanghai party secretary Chen Liangyu’s mishu, Qin Yu, was first transferred to serve as head of the city’s Baoshan District and then placed under investigation and arrested in 2006, two months prior to the arrest of Chen Liangyu on corruption charges.

As a widely circulated report released in the Chinese official media recently noted, “Each ‘tiger’ [high ranking official sacked on corruption charges] always had a meticulous mishu who helped engage in illegal pursuits.”<sup>22</sup> The report stated that personal secretaries were so powerful because of the backing from their bosses that the Chinese public often refers to these mishu as “No. 2 bosses” (二号首长).<sup>23</sup>

The case of Zhou Yongkang, arguably the largest corruption case in PRC history, involved six of his personal secretaries who worked for him at different periods during his leadership tenure. Table 2 (next page) presents background information of these six mishu. Most of them worked for Zhou for a very long time, often following him as he moved to new leadership positions. Three of them worked under Zhou in the oil industry, starting from over 20 years ago. They all held senior leadership positions (most at the vice governor level) before they were purged.

Guo Yongxiang, for example, began his ties with Zhou when they worked together in the Shengli Oilfield in the late 1980s. Zhou was director and party secretary of the Shengli Oilfield Administration and party secretary of Dongying, Shandong Province, while Guo was director of the Research Office of the Party Committee of the Shengli Oilfield Administration. When Zhou served as general manager and party secretary of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in 1996-1998, Guo was deputy director of the Research Office of the CNPC. Guo moved to Beijing along with his boss in 1998 to serve as director of the Office of the Ministry of Land and Resources when Zhou became the minister. Soon after Zhou became Sichuan Party Secretary in 1999, Guo went to Sichuan to serve as deputy secretary-general and later secretary-general of the Sichuan Provincial Party Committee consecutively, primarily assisting his long-time patron Zhou. Guo was placed under investigation and then arrested on corruption charges in June 2013, six months prior to the announcement of the investigation of Zhou Yongkang.

*(text continues on p. 12)*

**Table 2**  
*Zhou Yongkang's Mishu Cluster*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Birth year</i>	<i>Years as Zhou's mishu</i>	<i>Zhou's Position</i>	<i>Mishu's title</i>	<i>Position before the purge</i>
Li Hualin	1962	1988–1992	Director of Shengli Oilfield Administration and party secretary of Dongying City; deputy general manager of CNPC	Mishu to Zhou	Vice president, CNPC
Shen Dingcheng	1963	1992–97	Deputy general manager and then general manager of CNPC	Mishu to Zhou	Party secretary, Petro China International
Ji Wenlin	1966	1998–2008	Minister of Land and Resources; Sichuan party secretary; minister of Public Security	Mishu; deputy director, Office of the Minister of Public Security	Vice governor, Hainan
Guo Yongxiang	1949	1989–2007	Director of Shengli Oilfield Administration and party secretary of Dongying City; deputy general manager of CNPC; minister of Land and Resources; Sichuan party secretary	Mishu; director, Office of the Minister of Land and Resources; deputy secretary-general; secretary-general of Sichuan Provincial Party Committee	Vice governor, Sichuan; vice chairman, Sichuan People's Congress
Yu Gang	1968	2003–2012	Politburo member; Politburo Standing Committee member	Deputy director, Office of the CCP Politics and Law Committee	Deputy director, Office of the CCP Politics and Law Committee
Tan Hong	1972?	2008–2012	Politburo Standing Committee member	Bodyguard and mishu to Zhou	Division-level staff, Ministry of Public Security

SOURCE AND NOTE: CCP = Chinese Communist Party; CNPC = China National Petroleum Corporation. Wang Huan 王欢 “The Fate of Zhou Yongkang's Five Mishu” (周永康五任秘书的命运), Xinhua News Net, July 2, 2014, <http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/forum.home.news.cn/detail/133324958/1.html>. Cheng Li's database.

Ji Wenlin began to work as a mishu for Zhou Yongkang in 1998 when Zhou was appointed as minister of Land and Resources. He followed Zhou to Sichuan in 2000 and served as a mishu to Zhou with the title of deputy director of the Office of the Sichuan Provincial Party Committee. He continued to play such a role when his boss became minister of Public Security in 2002. Ji was deputy director of the Office of the Ministry of Public Security. Ji also served as deputy director of the Central Office of Maintaining Social Stability and director of the office of Zhou Yongkang when Zhou was in public security in the PBS after 2008. Ji later returned to the Ministry of Land and Resources, where he served as director of the general office in the ministry for two years (2008–2010). He served as mayor of Haikou and vice governor of Hainan before his purge in February 2014.

This cluster of mishu formed a very broad web of personal connections across different regions and functional areas for Zhou. Oil, land, and other resources were very lucrative businesses, and Zhou's control over the security apparatus during the years 2002–2012 gave him and his protégés the opportunity to abuse political power.

The recent major corruption cases involving top military generals have also revealed the heavy involvement of their uniformed mishu with senior military ranks. Four former personal secretaries for Xu Caihou, former vice chairman of the CMC, are all under investigation. They include Major General Zhang Gongxian (former director of the Political Department of the Jinan Military Region), Rear Admiral Li Bin (deputy director of the Political Department of the PLA Navy), Major General Kang Xiaohui (political commissar of the Joint Logistics Department of the Shenyang Military Region), and Major General Qi Changming (deputy chief of staff of the Beijing Military Region).<sup>24</sup> Zhang Gongxian, for example, was born in 1960 and was considered a rising star in the PLA leadership. He served as mishu for Xu Caihou in the mid-1990s when Xu was deputy director of the Central Political Department of the PLA. Later, Zhang served as secretary-general of the General Office of the Central Political Department. Zhang was recently fired and placed under investigation.

From a broader perspective, strong patron-client ties, evident in the prominent role of mishu, have significantly contributed to rampant official corruption and reflect Chinese political norms during the reform era.<sup>25</sup> Understandably, Xi Jinping recently called for the tighter management and party discipline of secretarial staff.<sup>26</sup> But paradoxically, Xi Jinping has to rely on his own mishu cluster in consolidating his power and carrying out his reform agenda. His emphasis on “absolute loyalty” of secretarial staff, as discussed in the beginning of this installment, is often perceived, rightly or wrongly, as his obsession in strengthening mentor-client ties. How Xi Jinping responds to this dilemma will largely depend on what kind of mishu he will rely on and how his team may act differently in search of new and more innovative approaches for state building and governance—the subject of the next and final installment in this series.

---

## Notes

The author thanks Yinsheng Li, Ryan McElveen, and Lucy Xu for their research assistance and helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

<sup>1</sup> James Miles, “The gatekeepers: A string of arrests sparks debate about the role of leaders’ all-powerful assistants,” *The Economist*, May 10, 2014, based on Cheng Li’s database. Also see its online version, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21601870-string-arrests-sparks-debate-about-role-leaders-all-powerful-assistants-gatekeepers>.

<sup>2</sup> Li Zhanshu 栗战书, “Faithfully implement the ‘five adhere to’ and serve as loyal officials with strong principles at the General Office of the CCP Central Committee” (忠实践行“五个坚持,”做党性坚强的中办人), *Mishu Work* (秘书工作), No. 9, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See People’s Net, September 29, 2015, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0929/c164113-25759006.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Wu Mengda 乌梦达 and Chen Hongyi 陈弘毅, “Anti-corruption campaign knocked out ‘various factions and gangs’” (反腐打掉的那些“团团伙伙”), Xinhua News Agency Web, January 3, 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-01/03/c\\_1113856708.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-01/03/c_1113856708.htm).

<sup>6</sup> The Politburo of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (中共中央政治局), “The Party should not tolerate gangs, cliques and nepotism” (党内决不容忍搞团团伙伙、结党营私、拉帮结), Xinhua Net, December 29, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-12/29/c\\_1113818162.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-12/29/c_1113818162.htm).

<sup>7</sup> For a further discussion of the distinctions between various types of mishu, see Wei Li and Lucian W. Pye, “The Ubiquitous Role of the *Mishu* in Chinese Politics,” *China Quarterly*, no. 132 (December 1992), pp. 916–925; and Cheng Li, “The *Mishu* Phenomenon: Patron-Client Ties and Coalition-Building Tactics,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 1–13.

<sup>8</sup> Cheng Li, *China’s Leaders: The New Generation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), p. 149.

<sup>9</sup> Chen Yifan 陈亦凡, *The Mishu Cluster of the High-ranking Leaders of the Chinese Communist Party* (中共高官的秘书们, New York: Mirror Books, 2010), pp. 24–31. But according to some official sources in China, Ye actually worked as Hu’s mishu in Guizhou only for six months and then moved to Beijing where he returned to work in the CCYL Central Committee specializing in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao affairs. See the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council website, March 8, 2015, <http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/gtb/yekedong/>.

<sup>10</sup> This list differs from several widely circulated Chinese lists on the personal secretaries of the PBS members of the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee. For example, Wang Xin’s report included Guo Yongxiang as Zhou Yongkang’s personal secretary and Ling Yueming as He Guoqiang’s personal secretary, which was correct in the sense that both served such roles before Zhou and He became PBS members, but neither of them served as chief aides when they were in the PBS. Wang Xin 王新, “The files of personal secretaries of the retired seven Politburo Standing Committee members of the CCP

(中共退休七常委大秘浮沉录), Duowei Newnet, July 5, 2013, <http://china.dwnews.com/news/2013-07-05/59258258.html>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Both the party general secretary and the premier can have full-minister level rank mishu.

<sup>12</sup> Li and Pye, “The Ubiquitous Role,” p. 915.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 930.

<sup>14</sup> Li Cheng and Lynn White, “The Army in the Succession to Deng Xiaoping: Familiar Fealties and Technocratic Trends,” *Asian Survey* 33, no. 8 (August 1993): pp. 757–786, and Li Cheng and Lynn White, “The Fifteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Full-Fledged Technocratic Leadership with Partial Control by Jiang Zemin,” *Asian Survey* 38, no. 3 (March 1998): pp. 255–56.

<sup>15</sup> For the policy concerning the reshuffling of military officers along with their mishu, see Li and Pye, “The Ubiquitous Role,” p. 925.

<sup>16</sup> Chen was the first party secretary of Shanghai, Hu was the chairman of the Shanghai Municipal People’s Congress, and Wang was mayor.

<sup>17</sup> Xiao Chong 晓冲, *The fourth generation of leaders of the Chinese Communist Party* (中共第四代领导人, Hong Kong: Xiafeier guoji chubangongsi, 1998), p. 23; and also Li, *China’s Leaders*, pp. 161–62.

<sup>18</sup> For more detailed discussion of Zeng’s political connection in Beijing, see Li, *China’s Leaders*, pp. 160–61.

<sup>19</sup> For more on the power struggle between Jiang and his rivals, see Li and White, “The Fifteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party,” pp. 236–39.

<sup>20</sup> “Zeng Qinghong pushes for granting important position to Xi Jinping (曾庆红的大力金刚掌,把习近平推上大位), *Major Event* (大事件), December 2, 2014; also see <http://www.peacehall.com/news/gb/china/2014/12/201412021542.shtml#.VKWYqiiPCfQ>.

<sup>21</sup> For more discussion of Li’s valuable role for the Xi administration, see Xiang Jiangyu 相江宇, *Xi Jinping’s Team* (习近平的团队, New York: Mirror Books, 2013); pp. 197–205.

<sup>22</sup> Zhao Julin 赵菊玲, “The Right and Wrong of ‘No. 2 Bosses’” (“二号首长”的是是非非), East Day Newsnet, March 9, 2015, <http://news.eastday.com/china/jiaodianzt/gaoguanmishu/index.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> *South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> For more discussion on the political culture of the mishu phenomenon, especially the powerful role of *mishuzhang*, see Luo Changping 罗昌平, “Ling Jihua and the power circle of chiefs of staff” (令计划和秘书长的权力场), 21<sup>st</sup> Century Network, December 24, 2014, [http://www.21ccom.net/articles/china/ggzl/20141224118010\\_all.html](http://www.21ccom.net/articles/china/ggzl/20141224118010_all.html).

<sup>26</sup> Wang Ya 王雅, “Xi Jinping addresses the issue of the mishu cluster”

(习近平喊话‘秘书帮’), Duowei Newsnet, October 12, 2014, <http://china.dwnews.com/news/2014-10-12/59612796.html>.