

# Xi Jinping's Inner Circle

## (Part 5: The *Mishu* Cluster II)

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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 number 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 on the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee, five (71 percent) members 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 his career, especially by 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. This final installment in the series first shows the continuing large representation of *mishu* in the current national and provincial leadership and then reveals the strong bonds between Xi and his *mishu* as well as their diversity. It concludes with a brief assessment of Xi's consolidation of power in the middle of his first term and his new strategy for elite recruitment for the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.

Numerous China experts have said it before, and they will say it again: the key to understanding Chinese elite politics is to have a profound grasp of the Chinese term *guanxi* (关系). *Guanxi* (pronounced gwan-shee) means relationship or network. If a politician wants to advance his or her career, he or she should have *guanxi* in high places. Intelligence and diligence help in life, but connections are what really count. As the popular saying goes, "It's not what you know; it's who you know."

A top leader's consolidation of power is, therefore, achieved primarily by using *guanxi* to promote as many of his protégés as possible to important positions. Effective networks in China are formed in various ways, for example, through having the same birthplace, identical family backgrounds, shared formative experiences, personal ties based on regional and bureaucratic associations, and through attending the same schools. The previous four installments in this series on Xi Jinping's inner circle show that ever since becoming the general secretary of the CCP in November 2012, the new boss in

Zhongnanhai has significantly benefited from various strong political connections built during his early life and career. They include individuals from the “Shaanxi Gang”; Communist offspring, especially those who grew up in the same military residential “big yards” or “cadre compounds” in Beijing; fellow sent-down youths in Yan’an; alumni from the schools Xi attended, particularly Tsinghua University; and the mentor-protégé relationships he cultivated as a leader in Hebei, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai. This final installment explores the strong political bonds between Xi and his personal assistants and advisors and how these protégés with mishu backgrounds are well positioned to consolidate Xi’s power both at present and in particular during the next leadership turnover in 2017.

## Recent Promotions of Leaders from Xi’s Broad Political Networks

Since March 2014, when the first installment of this series was published, Xi has continued to promote his protégés from the aforementioned important powerbases that he established.<sup>2</sup> Several members of the Shaanxi Gang, for example, were promoted to higher positions. They include the newly appointed Liaoning Party Secretary Li Xi and Anhui Governor Li Jinbin. Both leaders advanced their careers from Shaanxi Province under the leadership of Zhao Leji (Xi’s confidant who served as party secretary of Shaanxi from 2007 to 2012 and currently serves as director of the CCP Central Organization Department). Deputy party secretary of Tianjin Wang Dongfeng (who is the designated mayor of Tianjin) was born in Xi’an, Shaanxi, and spent the first 46 years of his life in the province. In addition, Yao Yinliang, a native of Shaanxi who has lived and worked exclusively in the province, was promoted from party secretary of Yan’an City to executive vice governor of Shaanxi Province in June 2015. Jing Junhai, former director of the Propaganda Department of the Shaanxi Provincial Party Committee (and a member of the Shaanxi Gang), left Shaanxi in June 2015, and is widely believed to be the designated deputy director of the CCP Central Propaganda Department. Jiang Zelin, newly appointed deputy secretary-general of the State Council, also previously served as executive vice governor of Shaanxi under Zhao Leji.

Just as Xi’s confidant Zhao Leji has recently appointed a number of the members of the Shaanxi Gang to key positions, another confidant of Xi, Executive Deputy Director of the CCP Central Organization Department Chen Xi, who previously served as party secretary of Tsinghua University for many years, has also lately promoted a few of his close associates at Tsinghua to critically important leadership posts. The most noticeable examples are: Chen Jining, former president of Tsinghua University, who was appointed minister of Environmental Protection in January 2015; and Hu Heping, former director of the Organization Department of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee (and before that, party secretary of Tsinghua University), who was appointed deputy party secretary of Shaanxi Province in April 2015. Similar to the previous Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao administrations, the powerful Central Organization Department of the CCP, now led by Xi’s confidants Zhao Leji and Chen Xi, has forcefully promoted members of Xi’s political networks to important positions. This seems to echo the implications of the Chinese saying: “To appoint people on their merits without omitting relatives or friends” (举贤不避亲).

In addition to the Shaanxi Gang and Tsinghua connection, a number of leaders in Xi's other networks have also received promotions in the past year. Liu Cigui, new governor of Hainan Province, advanced his career in Fujian Province and developed close ties with Xi when the latter served in the top provincial leadership.<sup>3</sup> Ying Yong, former president of the Zhejiang Provincial Court when Xi was in charge of the province, was appointed deputy party secretary of Shanghai in July 2014.

The three new appointees in the area of public security all served as Xi's colleagues during his years in Fujian or Zhejiang. Wang Xiaohong served as deputy director of the Public Security Bureau of Fuzhou City from 1993 to 1998 when Xi was the municipal party secretary, and was appointed as Henan vice governor in December 2014. Three months later, in March 2015, Wang was further promoted to vice mayor of Beijing and director of the Public Bureau of Beijing. Meng Qingfeng, who worked under Xi Jinping in Zhejiang Province as vice director of the Department of Public Security of the provincial government, was promoted to vice minister in the Ministry of Public Security in June 2015. Wang Ning, former deputy chief of staff of the PLA General Staff Department, previously developed strong political ties with Xi in Zhejiang and Shanghai, and was appointed as commander of the People's Armed Police in December 2014.

Xi's protégés were also appointed to key positions handling propaganda. For example, Shen Haixiong was appointed vice president of Xinhua News Agency in July 2014. Shen was often called by some critics the "imperial reporter" (御用记者). As a Xinhua reporter based in Zhejiang and Shanghai, he wrote extensively to promote Xi's popular image when the latter was in charge of those two places.<sup>4</sup> Xu Lin, former director of the Propaganda Department of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, worked closely with then Shanghai Party Secretary Xi in 2007, and was appointed executive vice director of the State Internet Information Office in June 2015.

It should be noted that Jing Junhai, Chen Jining, Hu Heping, Shen Haixiong, and Xu Lin were all born in the 1960s, and are now considered to be rising stars in the Chinese leadership. One can also reasonably expect that Li Jinbin, Wang Dongfeng, Yao Yinliang, Jing Junhai, Chen Jining, Liu Cigui, Ying Yong, Wang Xiaohong, Meng Qingfeng, and Xu Lin will likely become first-time members of the next Central Committee of the CCP in 2017. Jiang Zelin can return to the Central Committee as a full member (he was an alternate member of the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee).

Among these aforementioned new appointees, Li Xi probably has the best chance of entering the next Politburo. His recent successive promotions have largely been due to his strong ties with Xi Jinping. Li was born in Liangdang County, Gansu Province, in 1956. He worked as a sent-down youth in his native county in 1975–76, and served as a clerk in both the Education and Culture Bureau and the office of the county party committee from 1976 to 1978. He attended Northwestern Normal University in Lanzhou, Gansu, from 1978 to 1982, majoring in Chinese language and literature. After graduation, Li developed his career largely as a mishu, first in the Propaganda Department of the Gansu Provincial Party Committee from 1982 to 1985, then in the office of Gansu Party Secretary Chen Guangyi 1985–1986, and finally in the Department of Organization of the

Gansu Provincial Party Committee from 1986 to 1995. Over the following decade, Li served as a party official at the prefecture, municipality, and province levels of leadership—all in Gansu Province. In 2004, he was transferred to Shaanxi Province where he served as secretary-general (chief of staff) of the Provincial Party Committee from 2004 to 2006. He served concurrently as party secretary of Yan'an Prefecture and a member of the Standing Committee of the Shaanxi Provincial Party Committee 2006–2011, during which he attended a part-time graduate program in economic management at Tsinghua University and received an MBA degree.

In 2011, Li was transferred to Shanghai, where he served first as director of the Organization Department (2011–2013) and then as deputy party secretary (2013–2014). He was appointed Liaoning governor in 2014. Li served only one year as governor before being promoted to party secretary of the province. According to an overseas Chinese media source, Li Xi's native county was where Xi Jinping's father Xi Zhongxun led the revolutionary uprising in 1932—the only military uprising led by the CCP in the northwestern region of the country during the first civil war.<sup>5</sup> As a reporter observed, “Li Xi did an impressive job in highlighting the historical significance of this uprising in the Communist red revolution.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, when Li Xi was party secretary of Yan'an, he made the village where Xi worked as a sent-down youth into a “model village” of the province.<sup>7</sup> Apparently, Li Xi has become an important confidant to Xi.

Probably the most significant promotions of Xi's protégés over the past year are of his current or former mishu. Examples include Huang Kunming, Shu Guozeng, and Song Tao. Each of them now serves as office director or deputy director in powerful central leading groups for various functional areas. Huang Kunming, who was previously a junior colleague of Xi in both Fujian and Zhejiang where Xi served as a top leader, was promoted to serve concurrently as office director of the Central Spiritual Civilization Steering Committee and executive deputy director of the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP in December 2014. He is well positioned to be a candidate for the next Politburo. Shu Guozeng was known as Xi's “facile writer” (笔杆子) in Zhejiang, where he served first as a mishu to Xi and was then promoted to deputy director of the office of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee in 2004 when Xi was provincial party secretary.<sup>8</sup> In November 2014, Shu was promoted from the director of the Development Research Center of the Zhejiang provincial government to deputy office director of the Central Financial Leading Group. Song Tao was born in Fujian and advanced throughout his early career in his native province. He served as vice president of Fujian International Trust and Investment Corporation from 1997 to 2000 when Xi was deputy party secretary and later governor of the province. Song was appointed executive deputy director of the Central Foreign Affairs Office in December 2014.

It is also worth noting that Xi's chief bodyguard for the past seven years, Major General Wang Shaojun, was promoted from executive deputy director of the Bodyguard Bureau of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee to the position of director in March 2015. Wang is now in charge of all security affairs of Zhongnanhai. Before elaborating on the role of the mishu cluster in Xi's inner circle, it is helpful to review the continuing ubiquitous presence of mishu in the current Chinese leadership.

## The Pervasive Presence of Mishu in the Current CCP Leadership

Despite the Chinese public's recognition of the correlation between the pervasive role of mishu in Chinese politics and the rampancy of official corruption (as illustrated in the previous installment of this series), the current CCP leadership has continued to have a very strong representation of leaders with mishu background. Table 1 shows the percentage of leaders with mishu experience in several of the most important leadership positions in 2014. In addition to the aforementioned high percentages of leaders with mishu backgrounds in both the Politburo (64 percent) and Politburo Standing Committee (71.4 percent), 238 members (including both full members and alternate members) of the 18th Central Committee have had experience as mishu (63.3 percent). An even higher proportion of ministerial and provincial leaders have experience as mishu: 77.4 percent among provincial governors and 76 percent among ministers in the State Council. At the provincial leadership level in March 2015, 10 governors (32 percent) of China's 31 provincial-level administrations had previously served as secretary-general (*mishuzhang*, 秘书长) or deputy secretary-general either in the provincial party committee or provincial government.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1**

*Percentage of Leaders in Important Leadership Positions with Mishu Experience (2014)*

<i>Leadership position</i>	<i>Leaders with mishu experience</i>	<i>Total number of leaders</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Politburo Standing Committee member	5	7	71.4
Politburo member	16	25	64.0
Central Committee member	238	376	63.3
Provincial governor	24	31	77.4
State Council minister	19	25	76.0

SOURCE: Cheng Li's database

Some of these prominent leaders have advanced their careers primarily or even exclusively through mishu work. Table 2 (page 7) presents 16 full members of the current central committee of the CCP whose careers have been comprised primarily of service as mishu and/or secretaries-general. They include two Politburo members—Vice Chairman of National People's Congress (NPC) Li Jianguo and Director of the Central Policy Research Office Wang Huning. Li Jianguo has spent most of his adult life (31 years, to be exact) as a mishu and secretary-general mainly in Tianjin. Born in Shandong in 1946, Li attended Shandong University as a Chinese major between 1964 and 1969. He began his career as a clerk in both the cultural-educational department and the propaganda department at the county level of leadership in Tianjin in 1972. In 1978, he started to work as a mishu for the office of the Tianjin party committee. Three years later, at the age of 35, Li met his most important mentor, Li Ruihuan, then a rising political star who had just been appointed Tianjin's top leader.

In the following decade, Li Jianguo primarily served as Li Ruihuan's mishu, holding posts such as deputy office director and then office director of the Tianjin party committee, followed by deputy secretary-general and then secretary-general of the Tianjin party committee. After Li Ruihuan became a member of the Politburo Standing Committee in 1989, Li Jianguo was promoted to member of the Standing Committee and deputy secretary of the Tianjin party committee. In 1997, Li Jianguo was transferred to Shaanxi Province where he served as party secretary for 10 years, during which time he formed a good relationship with the Xi Jinping family, which has its roots in the province. After working briefly as party secretary of Shandong, from 2007 to 2008, Li served concurrently as vice chairman and secretary-general of the NPC from 2008 to 2013. Currently he serves as executive vice chairman of the NPC.

Unlike Li Jianguo, who began his career as a mishu, Wang Huning began his career as an academic, only serving later in his career as a mishu or an advisor. Wang was born in 1955 in Shanghai (his ancestral home is usually cited as Laizhou County, Shandong Province). He studied French in the cadre training class at the Shanghai Normal University from 1972 to 1977 and attended the graduate program in international politics at Fudan University from 1978 to 1981, where he also received a master's degree in law in 1981. Wang was a visiting scholar at the University of Iowa and the University of California at Berkeley from 1988 to 1989. He worked as a cadre in the Publication Bureau of the Shanghai Municipal Government from 1977 to 1978. After receiving his master's degree, he remained at Fudan University where he worked as an instructor, associate professor, and professor during the following decade, and served as chairman of the Department of International Politics from 1989 to 1994, and dean of the law school 1994–95. Wang developed guanxi with Jiang Zemin and Zeng Qinghong, two top leaders in Shanghai in the late 1980s.

In 1995, at the request of both Jiang and Zeng, who then served respectively as general secretary and director of the general office of the CCP Central Committee, Wang moved to Beijing. He consecutively served as head of the Political Affairs Division of the Central Policy Research Office (CPRO) of the CCP Central Committee from 1995 to 1998, deputy director of the CPRO from 1998 to 2002, and director from 2002 to the present. CPRO is primarily a government think tank and Wang acts largely as a personal assistant or chief strategist for the top leaders, first Jiang, then Hu, and now Xi. It is believed that Wang was a principal contributor to the development of Jiang's so-called theory of the three represents at the turn of the century.<sup>10</sup> Wang has played that critically important role of mishu to the party boss for the past two decades.

*(text continues on p. 8)*

**Table 2***Selected civilian members of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee who advanced their careers primarily as mishu and/or secretaries-general*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Current position</i>	<i>CC Status</i>	<i>Main mishu/secretary-general experience</i>	<i>Total years as mishu</i>
Li Jianguo	Executive vice chairman, NPC	Politburo member	Mishu in local administrations, Tianjin 1972–78; mishu in Tianjin Party Committee 1978–1981; mishu to Li Ruihuan, (Tianjin party secretary) 1981–83; office director, deputy secretary-general, and secretary-general, Beijing Party Committee 1983–1992; secretary-general, NPC 2002–2013	31
Wang Huning	Director, Central Policy Research Office	Politburo member	Special assistant to CCP secretary general and PRC president 1995–present	20
Ling Jihua	Former director, United Front Work Department (purged)	Full member	Mishu and office director of Chinese Communist Youth League Central Committee 1979–1983, 1988–1994; mishu, deputy director, and director, General Office of CCP Central Committee 1995–2012	27
Xu Shaoshi	Minister, National Development and Reform Commission	Full member	Mishu and office director, Office of Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resources 1980–1993; mishu in General Office of State Council 1993–2000; deputy secretary-general, State Council 2000–2007	27
Wang Zhengwei	Minister, State Ethnic Affairs Commission	Full member	Mishu in county-level party organization, Ningxia 1976–1984; mishu in Ningxia Party Committee 1984–89; office director in Ningxia Party Committee 1989–1997	21
Lou Jiwei	Minister of Finance	Full member	Mishu to Zhu Rongji (Shanghai mayor and vice premier), 1984–1995; deputy secretary-general, State Council 2007–09	13
Yin Weimin	Minister, Human Resources and Social Security	Full member	Mishu in Office of CCP Organization Department, 1978–2000	13
You Quan	Fujian party secretary	Full member	Mishu in the State Planning Commission and the General Office of State Council, 1987–2001; deputy secretary-general (mishu to Huang Ju, executive vice premier), State Council, 2001–06, 2008–2013	24
Jiang Yikang	Shandong party secretary	Full member	Mishu in office of Jinan Municipal Party Committee 1982–85; mishu and deputy director general of CCP Central Committee, 1985–2002	20
Peng Qinghua	Guangxi party secretary	Full member	Mishu in a grassroots party committee, 1975–79; mishu in CCP Organization Department, 1983–2001	22
Baima Chilin	Chairman, People's Congress in Tibet	Full member	Mishu and secretary-general in Tibet Autonomous Region government, 1986–2000, 2003–05	16
Liu Weiping	Gansu governor	Full member	Mishu in an aerospace factory, 1976–1986; mishu to Wu Guanzheng (Jiangxi governor and party secretary), 1986–1995; secretary-general, Qinghai party Committee, 2003–04	20
Sun Huaishan	Deputy secretary-general, CPPCC	Full member	Mishu and director in the General Office of the Chinese Communist Youth League Central Committee, 1978–1994; mishu and secretary-general, CPPCC, 1994–present	37
Li Wei	Director, Development Research Center of State Council	Full member	Mishu to Zhu Rongji, (Shanghai mayor, vice premier, and premier), 1988–2003	15
Wang Yongqing	Deputy secretary-general, State Council	Full member	Mishu and director in Legal Office of the State Council, 1987–2008; deputy secretary-general, State Council, 2008–present	28
Jiao Huancheng	Deputy secretary-general, State Council	Full member	Mishu to Chen Yonggui (Politburo member), 1973–1982; deputy secretary-general, State Council, 2002–present	22

NOTES AND SOURCE: CCP = Chinese Communist Party; CPPCC = Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference; NPC = National People's Congress. From Cheng Li's database.

*(continued from p. 6)*

Ling Jihua, who was recently purged on corruption charges, had a total of 27 years of experience working as a mishu, which included many years of serving as Hu Jintao's chief of staff. Xu Shaoshi, minister of the National Development and Reform Commission, previously served as mishu for Wen Jiabao, first at the office of the Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resources from 1980 to 1993 when Wen served as vice minister (1983–85) and then as deputy secretary-general at the State Council from 2000 to 2007 when Wen was first vice premier and then premier. Several other mishu-turned-senior leaders (see table 2) previously served as mishu for Politburo Standing Committee members. They include Minister of Finance Lou Jiwei and Director of the Development Research Center of the State Council Li Wei, who were previously both mishu to Premier Zhu Rongji for many years; Fujian Party Secretary You Quan, who served as mishu to Huang Ju, former executive vice premier; and Gansu governor Liu Weiping, who served as mishu to Wu Guanzheng, former Jiangxi governor and party secretary and later secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI).

The longest serving mishu/secretary-general in the current Central Committee is Sun Huaishan, deputy secretary-general of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Sun began to work at the general office of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) as a mishu in 1978 and served as deputy division head, division head, deputy office director, and office director in the general office over the following 16 years. In 1994, he continued his mishu/secretary-general work at the CPPCC, where he served as deputy bureau head in the general office and currently serves as deputy secretary-general. Up until now, he has worked as a mishu/secretary-general for a total of 37 years.

Of the 238 members of the 18th Central Committee with mishu experience, 148 (62.2 percent) have worked at the national and provincial levels of leadership (see chart 1, page 10). This further illustrates how important political networking is for mishu to access high offices. Table 3 (page 10) presents the mishu/secretary-general experiences of 16 members of the current Politburo or Politburo Standing Committee. Among them, two leaders—Director of the Central Propaganda Department Liu Qibao and the aforementioned Li Jianguo—have served as both mishu and secretary-general; 11 served as secretary-general, deputy secretary-general, or office directors (exclusively at the national and provincial levels); and three served only as mishu.

Military officers occupy 66 seats in the 376-member 18th Central Committee of the CCP. Among them, 22 officers have mishu experience, accounting for one-third of this elite group. It is understandable that military elites usually have less mishu work experience than civilian leaders. This is largely because military elites tend to advance step by step in their careers via two distinct tracks: 1) military operation in the posts of commander or chief of staff; and 2) political affairs in the posts of commissar or director of the political department.<sup>11</sup> Yet, in fact a significant number of senior military generals have mishu backgrounds.

*(text continues on p. 10)*



**Table 3***Members of the 18<sup>th</sup> Politburo with Experience as Mishu and/or Secretaries-General*

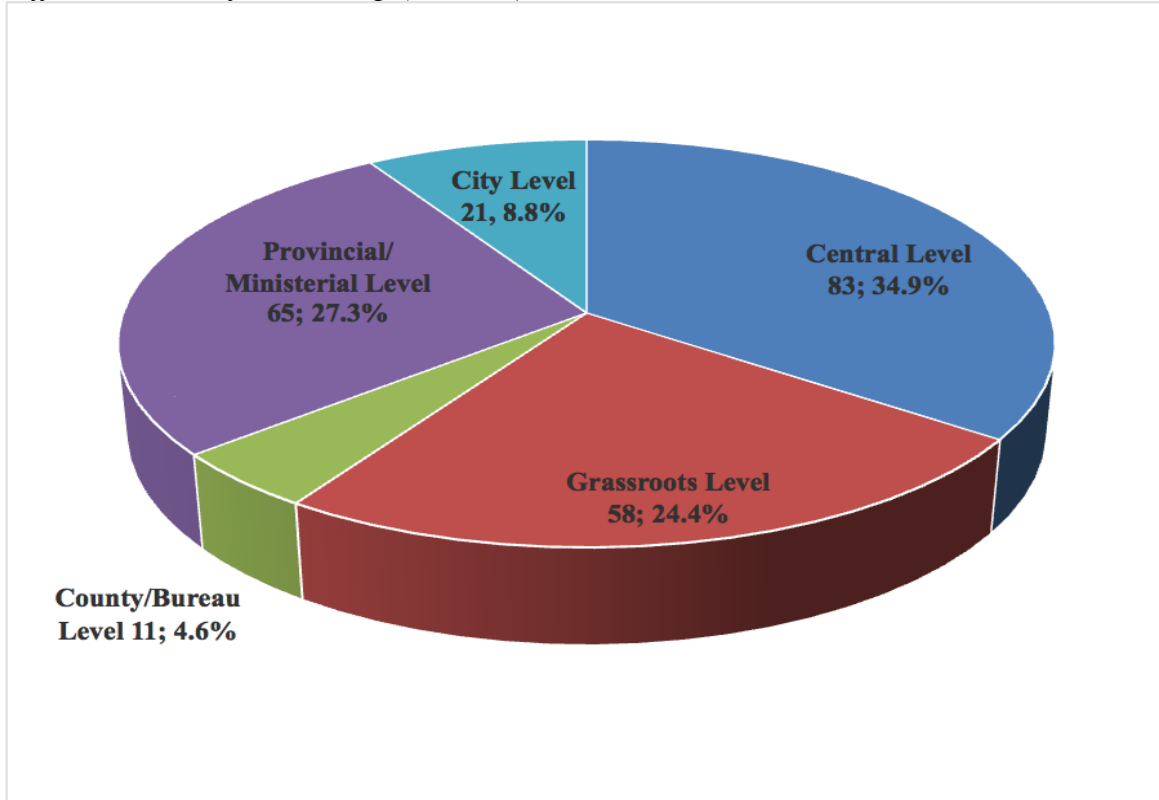
<i>Name</i>	<i>Current position</i>	<i>CC status</i>	<i>Mishu experience</i>	<i>Secretary-general experience</i>
Xi Jinping	CCP secretary-general, PRC president, CMC chairman	PSC member	Mishu to Geng Biao (minister of defense), 1979–1982	
Li Keqiang	Premier	PSC member		Secretary-general, All China Students' Federation, 83
Liu Yunshan	Executive member of the Secretariat	PSC member		Secretary-general, Neimenggu Party Committee, 1987–1991
Wang Qishan	Secretary, CCDI	PSC member		Office director, Rural Reform, State Council Development and Reform Center, 1986–88
Zhang Gaoli	Executive vice premier	PSC member	Mishu in grassroots organization, 1971–74	
Ma Kai	Vice premier	Politburo member		Deputy secretary-general, and secretary-general, State Council, 1998–2003, 2008–2013
Wang Huning	Director, Central Policy Research Office	Politburo member	Special assistant to CCP secretary general and PRC president, 1995–present	
Liu Yandong	Vice premier	Politburo member		Deputy secretary-general, United Front Work Department, 1991–95
Liu Qibao	Director, Department of Propaganda	Politburo member	Mishu in office of Anhui Party Committee, 1977–1980	Deputy secretary-general, State Council, 1994–2000
Sun Zhengcai	Chongqing party secretary	Politburo member		Secretary-general, Beijing Party Committee, 2002–06
Li Jianguo	Vice chairman of NPC	Politburo member	Mishu to Li Ruihuan, (Tianjin party secretary), 1982–87	Office director, deputy secretary-general, and secretary-general, Beijing Party Committee, 1983–1992, secretary-general, NPC 2002–2013
Wang Yang	Vice premier	Politburo member		Deputy secretary-general, State Council, 2003–05
Meng Jianzhu	Secretary, Central Political and Law Commission	Politburo member		Deputy secretary-general, Shanghai Municipal Government, 1992–93
Hu Chunhua	Guangdong party secretary	Politburo member		Secretary-general, Tibet Party Committee, 2001–03
Li Zhanshu	Director, General Office of Central Committee	Politburo member		Secretary-general, Hebei Party Committee, 1993–97; office director, Party General Office, 2002–present
Han Zheng	Shanghai party secretary	Politburo member		Deputy secretary-general, Shanghai Municipal Government, 1995–98

NOTES: CCP = Chinese Communist Party; CCDI = Central Commission for Discipline Inspection; CMC = Central Military Commission; CPPCC = Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference; NPC = National People's Congress; PSC = Politburo Standing Committee.

SOURCE: Cheng Li's database.

**Chart 1**

*Distribution of Members of the 18th Central Committee with Mishu Experience in Different Levels of Leadership (N = 238)*



NOTE: For those who have served as mishu in more than two levels of leadership, only the highest level of leadership is counted. SOURCE: Cheng Li's database.

Table 4 lists 16 senior military leaders in the 18th Central Committee with mishu experience. They include two members of the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC): State Councilor and Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan, who served as mishu to General Han Xianchu (then Commander of Lanzhou Military Region) 1978–1980, and Chief of the General Staff Fang Fenghui, who served as mishu to the party committee of the No. 21 Group Army in the 1980s. All of these military leaders have the ranks of general or lieutenant general. Several of them served as personal assistants or bodyguards to top leaders. For example, former Navy Political Commissar Liu Xiaojiang served as a personal assistant to Liu Huaqing (then deputy chief of staff of the PLA and later vice chairman of the CMC); Deputy Director of the Political Department Jia Ting'an served as a personal assistant to Jiang Zemin for 22 years; Commander of the Nanjing Military Region Cai Yingting served as a personal assistant to Zhang Wannian (vice chairman of the CMC) for seven years; Deputy Chief of Staff of General Staff Headquarters Wang Quanzhong was a personal assistant to Yang Shangkun (then president of the PRC); and Deputy Commander of the Beijing Military Region Cao Qing was a mishu and bodyguard to Ye Jianying (then vice chairman of the CMC) from 1972 to 1981. Most of these mishu turned military officers advanced their careers through the political affairs track in the PLA.

**Table 4**  
*Selected Military Members of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee Who Advanced Careers as Mishu*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Current position</i>	<i>CC status</i>	<i>Military rank</i>	<i>Main mishu experience</i>
Chang Wanquan	State councilor and minister of defense	CMC, full member	General	Mishu to Han Xianchu (then commander of Lanzhou Military Region), 1978–1980
Fang Fenghui	Chief of General Staff	CMC, full member	General	Mishu to Party Committee of No. 21 Group Army, 1980s
Liu Xiaojiang	Navy Political Commissar (until Dec. 2014)	Full member	Admiral	Mishu to Liu Huaqing (then deputy chief of staff of PLA and later vice chairman of CMC, 1980–83)
Jia Ting'an	Deputy director, Political Department	Full member	General	Mishu to Jiang Zemin (then minister of Electronics Industry and mayor of Shanghai) and later chairman of CMC, 1982–2004
Cai Yingting	Commander, Nanjing Military Region	Full member	General	Mishu to Zhang Wannian (vice chairman of CMC), 1995–2002
Wang Quanzhong	Deputy chief of staff, General Staff Headquarters	Full member	Lt. general	Mishu to Yang Shangkun; deputy director and director, General Office of CMC, 1996–2012
Tian Xiusi	Political commissar, Air Force	Full member	General	Head mishu, Political Department, No. 13 Artillery Division, 1981–83
Zhu Fuxi	Political commissar, Chengdu Military Region	Full member	Lt. general	Deputy secretary-general and secretary-general, Political Department, 2003–07
Du Hengyan	Political commissar, Jinan Military Region	Full member	General	Mishu, Commander's Office of Shenyang Military Region, 1979–1988; deputy secretary-general and secretary-general, Political Department of Beijing Military Region, 1989–1996
Zheng Weiping	Political commissar, Nanjing Military Region	Full member	Lt. general	Mishu to Li Jinan, General Office of Political Department, 2001–03
Chu Yimin	Political commissar, Shenyang Military Region	Full member	Lt. general	Mishu, Commander's Office of Lanzhou Military Region (time unknown)
Sun Sijing	Political commissar, Academy of Military Sciences	Full member	General	Mishu, Commander's Office of Jinan Military Region, 1984–1991; mishu and secretary-general, Political Department of PLA General Logistics Department, 1991–99
Wang Hongyao	Political commissar, General Armament Dept.	Full member	General	Mishu to Du Tiehuan, (Political Commissar of Nanjing Military Region)
Cao Qing	Deputy commander, Beijing Military Region	Alternate member	General	Mishu and bodyguard to Ye Jianying (vice chairman, CMC), 1972–1981
Gao Jianguo	Director, Political Department of Shenyang Military Region	Alternate member	Lt. general	Mishu, Party Committee Office of Jinan Military Region (time unknown).
Zhang Ruiqing	Deputy political commissar, Armed Police	Alternate member	Lt. general	Secretary-general, Political Department of Armed Police (time unknown)

NOTES: CMC = Central Military Commission; Dept. = Department; Lt. = Lieutenant; PLA = People's Liberation Army  
 SOURCE: Cheng Li's database.

Some recently promoted senior military officers do not serve on the 18th Central Committee, but previously served as personal assistants to top military leaders.<sup>12</sup> They include Deputy Political Commissar of the PLA Navy Wang Dengping, who was a mishu to former Political Commissar of the General Logistics Department Zhou Keyu; Deputy Political Commissar of the PLA Navy Ding Haichun, who served as a mishu to former Deputy Commander of the PLA Navy Deng Zhaoxiang; Deputy Political Commissar of the PLA Air Force Fang Jianguo, who was a mishu to former Vice Chairman of the CMC Chi Haotian; Deputy Commissar of the Second Artillery Corps Deng Tiansheng, who was a mishu to former Vice Chairman of CMC Zhang Zhen; and Vice President of the Military Academy of Sciences Ren Haiquan, who was a mishu to former Director of the PLA General Political Department Li Desheng.<sup>13</sup>

The strong representation of mishu in both civilian and military leadership in present-day China, even in the wake of the public recognition of the prevalent role of mishu in rampant official corruption and the resulting large scale purges, is remarkable. This observation suggests that mentor-protégé ties based on mishu work will be an enduring phenomenon in Chinese elite politics in the years to come.

### The Status and Growing Power of Xi's Mishu Cluster

It should not be a surprise that the mishu cluster has constituted a major part of Xi Jinping's inner circle. This is largely due to two situational factors. First, Xi has worked in various leadership posts and in a number of geographical regions during his political career. While Jiang Zemin worked in only two cities other than Beijing, namely Changchun and Shanghai, and Hu Jintao worked as a leader in three places, Lanzhou, Guiyang, and Lhasa, Xi served a leadership role in six counties and cities: Zhengding in Hebei; Xiamen, Ningde, and Fuzhou in Fujian; Hangzhou in Zhejiang; and Shanghai. With this case in point, the more rotations in position and localities that a leader has, the greater the number of mishu that will serve the leader.

Second, since he became the top leader in November 2012, Xi has established the National Security Committee and several new central leading groups of which he himself serves as the head. This means that Xi has to rely substantially on office directors and secretaries-general for these new leadership bodies. These office directors and secretaries-general in turn have become trusted confidants (and influential figures) in Xi's inner circle.

Table 5 presents the 19 most important mishu for Xi Jinping, both current and former. All of them began serving in their current leadership positions in the last three years; nine of them actually obtained their current posts in the past year, reflecting Xi's recent aggressiveness in appointing his protégés to high offices. Eight of them serve on the 18th Central Committee, including one Politburo member (Li Zhanshu), three full members (Liu He, He Yiting, and Chen Baosheng), and four alternate members (Ding Xuexiang, Huang Kunming, He Lifeng, and Li Qiang). In addition, Li Shulei currently serves as a member of the CCDI. All of the 19 leaders were born after 1950, and they are therefore qualified to remain in the Central Committee for another term after 2017, and some may  
*(text continues on p. 14)*

**Table 5**  
*Xi Jinping's Current and Former Mishu*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Born</i>	<i>Current position</i>	<i>Tenure since</i>	<i>Previous position</i>	<i>Mishu status</i>	<i>Functional area</i>	<i>Ties to Xi Jinping</i>
Li Zhanshu	1950 Hebei	Director, CCP General Office (Xi's chief of staff); Politburo member	2012	Guizhou party secretary	current	CCP operation	Colleague in Hebei (both served as party secretaries in two nearby counties)
Ding Xuexiang	1962 Jiangsu	Deputy director, CCP General Office (Xi's deputy chief of staff); director, President Xi's office, alternate CCM	2013	Shanghai CCP Standing Committee member	current	CCP operation	Mishu to Xi in Shanghai
Zhong Shaojun	1968 Zhejiang	Deputy director, President Xi's office; head, Research Team of CMC General Office	2013	Head of Political Team of CCP General Office	current	military	Mishu to Xi; deputy director, Zhejiang CCP Provincial Comm. & deputy director, Shanghai CCP Municipal Comm. when Xi was party secretary of the two bodies
Zhu Guofeng	1973 Guangdong	Mishu to President Xi	2013	Deputy bureau-level mishu in Mishu Bureau of CCP General Office	current	foreign affairs	Mishu to Xi in diplomatic affairs
Wang Shaojun	1955 Hebei	Director, Bodyguard Bureau of General Office of CCP Central Committee	2015	EDD, Bodyguard Bureau of General Office of CCP Central Committee	current	military	Chief bodyguard to President Xi
Liu He	1952 Beijing	Office director, Central Financial Leading Group; vice minister, NDRC, full CCM	2013	Deputy Office Director, Central Financial Leading Group	functional	finance	Childhood friend
Huang Kunming	1956 Fujian	Office director, Central Spiritual Civilization Steering Committee, alternate CCM	2014	Deputy Director of the Central Propaganda Department	functional	propaganda	Junior colleague in Fujian and Zhejiang
Cai Qi	1955 Fujian	EDD, Office of National Security Committee	2014	Executive vice governor of Zhejiang	functional	CCP operation	Mishu to Xi in Fujian
Shu Guozeng	1956 Zhejiang	Deputy director, Office of Central Financial Leading Group	2014	Director of Development Research for Zhejiang provincial government	functional	finance	Mishu (deputy office director) to Xi in Zhejiang
Mu Hong	1956 Liaoning	EDD, Office of Central Leading Group of Comprehensive Reforms	2014	Deputy director, NDRC	functional	administration	Extensive travels with Xi when Xi was PRC VP
He Yiting	1951 Shaanxi	Executive vice president, Central Party School, full CC	2013	Executive vice director, Central Policy Research Office	functional	propaganda	Assisted Xi in Central Policy Research Office
Song Tao	1955 Jiangsu	EDD, Office of Central Foreign Affairs	2014	Deputy director, Central Foreign Affairs Office	functional	foreign affairs	VP, Fujian International Trust & Investment Corp. when Xi was in charge of this area in Fujian government
He Lifeng	1955 Fujian	Deputy director, NDRC; alternate CC	2014	Tianjin CPPCC Chair	former	economy	Mishu for Xi in Xiamen; junior colleague in Fujian
Li Qiang	1959 Zhejiang	Zhejiang governor; alternate CC	2013	Secretary, Zhejiang CCP Provincial Committee on Politics & Law	former	provincial leadership	Chief of staff to Xi; then Zhejiang party secretary
Li Shulei	1964 Henan	Director, Propaganda Dept. of Fujian Party Comm.	2014	VP, Central Party School	former	propaganda	Assisted Xi at the Central Party School
Chen Baosheng	1956 Gansu	Party secretary and executive vice president, Chinese Academy of Governance; full CCM	2013	Vice President of the Central Party School	former	administration	Chief of staff to Xi in the Central Party School
Sun Wenyou	1954 Jiangxi	Vice chair, Zhejiang Provincial CPPCC	2014	Party Secretary of Huzhou City, Zhejiang Province	former	provincial leadership	Mishu to Xi in Zhejiang
Chen Jiayuan	1953 Zhejiang	Executive vice chair, Zhejiang CPPCC	2013	Vice Governor of Zhejiang	former	provincial leadership	Mishu to Xi in Zhejiang
Fang Xinghai	1964 Shanghai	Inspector of Economic Team in office of Central Financial Leading Group	2013	Director, Shanghai Municipal Government Office of Financial Services	former	finance	Deputy office director & director of financial affairs, Shanghai, when Xi was in charge of city

NOTES: CCM = Central Committee Member; CCP = Chinese Communist Party; CMC = Central Military Commission; Comm. = Committee; CPPCC = Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference; EDD = Executive deputy director; NDRC = National Development and Reform Commission; VP = vice president.

SOURCE: Cheng Li's database.

*(continued from p. 12)*

have even more important leadership roles to play. Six were born in the 1960s or 1970s; and some, especially Ding Xuexiang and Li Shulei, can be viewed as rising stars. Their current memberships in the Central Committee or the CCDI are largely owed to their close personal ties with Xi.

Several individuals work very closely with Xi on a daily basis, and constitute the core of his inner circle. They include Xi's chief of staff, Director of the CCP General Office Li Zhanshu; Xi's deputy chief of staff, Deputy Director of CCP General Office and concurrent Director of the President's Office Ding Xuexiang; Xi's mishu for military affairs, Deputy Director of President's Office Zhong Shaojun; Xi's mishu for foreign affairs, Zhu Guofeng; and Xi's chief bodyguard, Director of the Bodyguard Bureau of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee Wang Shaojun. These individuals mainly established *guanxi* with Xi early in their careers. In the case of Li Zhanshu, the friendship and political connection tracks back to the mid-1980s (as discussed in the first installment of this series).

Some members of Xi's mishu cluster currently serve as office directors or deputy directors in various functional and very important leading groups, for example, Office Director of the Central Financial Leading Group Liu He, Deputy Director of the Office of the Central Financial Leading Group Shu Guozeng, Office Director of the Central Spiritual Civilization Steering Committee Huang Kunming, Executive Deputy Director of the Office of the National Security Committee Cai Qi, Executive Deputy Director of the Office of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensive Reforms Mu Hong, Executive Deputy Director of the Office of Central Foreign Affairs Song Tao, and Executive Vice President of the Central Party School He Yiting. They are in fact chief advisors and aides to Xi in the crucial areas of finance, economic reforms, foreign affairs, national security, and propaganda and ideology. All of these individuals also had close ties with Xi earlier in their careers.

Seven leaders listed in Table 5 are former mishu to Xi while the latter served as a provincial leader or president of the Central Party School. While Sun Wenyuan and Chen Jiayuan may retire in the next few years, the other five are well positioned for further promotion. He Lifeng, for example, is one of Xi's most trusted confidants, and their mentor-protégé ties can be traced to the mid-1980s when both He and Xi worked in Xiamen. He Lifeng was then a mishu for Xi and served as deputy office director of the Xiamen Municipal Government while Xi was vice mayor of the city, as described in the third installment of the series.

He Lifeng was born in Yongding County, Fujian Province (his ancestral home is usually cited as Xingning County, Guangdong Province). He completed both undergraduate and graduate programs in finance at Xiamen University, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1982, his master's through full-time study in 1984, and his doctorate through part-time studies in 1998. Early in his career, He gained substantial leadership experience in the financial sector, serving as deputy director and director of the Bureau of Finance, director of the Municipal Economic and Trade Commission, and director of the Xiangyu Free

Trade Zone Management Committee, all of which were in Xiamen. He also served as director of the Tianjin Binhai New Economic Development Zone from 2009 to 2013.

Over the past three decades, He Lifeng's career advancement has often followed Xi's. He assisted Xi on financial affairs in Fujian earlier in his career, and was promoted to Fuzhou party secretary and standing member of the provincial party committee when Xi served as provincial deputy party secretary and governor of Fujian. About a year and a half after Xi became vice president of the PRC and a PSC member, He was appointed to be deputy party secretary of Tianjin. One year after Xi became president, He Lifeng was appointed vice minister of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). Most importantly, He Lifeng is now in charge of implementing Xi's new regional economic development strategy known as "One Belt, One Road."<sup>14</sup> This important assignment will give He Lifeng the opportunity to show his capacity in financial and economic matters at the national level of leadership.

It is important to note that most of Xi's protégés in economic and financial affairs have been seen as pro-market economic technocrats. This is understandable because many of them previously worked (along with their boss Xi Jinping) in the frontier of China's economic and financial reforms in regions such as Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai. As some Chinese analysts have observed, when Xi was party secretary of Zhejiang, his protégés outlined and promoted an economic policy that benefited small and medium-sized private firms.<sup>15</sup> As discussed in the third installment of this series, Fang Xinghai, a Stanford-educated financial technocrat who served as deputy office director and director of financial affairs in the Shanghai municipal government under Xi, now plays a crucial role in drafting and implementing the new economic blueprint for the Xi administration. Fang's boss, Liu He, a Harvard graduate and an internationally well-respected liberal economic thinker, is the main drafter of the third plenum of the 18th Central Committee plan on deepening market reforms and the principal designer of the "economic new normal" for China.<sup>16</sup> Also, as detailed in the second installment of this series, Liu has been Xi's chief economic advisor and trusted confidant.

By contrast, Xi's confidants in charge of propaganda and ideological work—namely Huang Kunming, He Yiting, and Li Shulei—are noticeably very conservative. All three have developed mentor-protégé relations with Xi over many years. Huang Kunming began to work under Xi when the latter was a municipal leader in Fujian in the 1980s. He Yiting and Li Shulei are also members of the Shaanxi Gang. He Yiting was born in Shaanxi, and like Xi was a sent-down youth in the province. Li Shulei served as deputy party secretary of Xi'an from 2004 to 2006. The three have often been identified by the Chinese media as Xi Jinping's "brain trust" (文胆).

Huang Kunming is believed to have substantially assisted Xi with the latter's column in *Zhejiang Daily* called "New thought in Zhejiang" (之江新语) between 2003 and 2007 when Xi was Zhejiang party secretary.<sup>17</sup> Xi and Huang frequently exchanged ideas and views during these years and Xi later appointed Huang as director of the Propaganda Department of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee in 2007.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, it was reported that He Yiting drafted the eight regulations on anti-corruption measures in the

first year of Xi's leadership, and Li Shulei drafted Xi's speech at the famous cultural and art work forum held in October 2014, in which Xi emphasized the importance of party control of cultural affairs.<sup>19</sup>

All three attended college in the late 1970s after China resumed college entrance examinations, and studied the humanities and social sciences. Huang was enrolled in the political education program at Fujian Normal University from 1978 to 1982 and later took a part-time graduate program in politics at the Central Party School from 1985 to 1988. Like Li Xi, Huang Kunming also attended the graduate program at Tsinghua University on a part-time basis, from 2005 to 2008, and received his doctoral degree in management. He Yiting attended Beijing Normal University for both his undergraduate and graduate degree in history, from 1979 to 1985. Throughout his career, He has worked exclusively in the functional areas of mishu, mainly responsible for party-building and ideological work. He Yiting worked first as a clerk at the General Office of the CCP Central Committee after graduation, then advanced his career as an official at the Central Policy Research Office and served as executive deputy director of the office from 2009 to 2013, where he primarily worked for then Vice President Xi Jinping. He currently serves as executive vice president of the Central Party School.

Like Huang and He, Li Shulei received his formal education in China, although he did spend a few months attending a short-term program for senior executives at the Harvard Kennedy School in the spring of 1999.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to Huang and He, who began their college education in their 20s due to the Cultural Revolution, Li Shulei attended Peking University at the age of 14, where he earned the nickname "Peking University prodigy" (北大神童).<sup>21</sup> Also unlike Huang and He, who attended part-time graduate programs, Li studied Chinese literature on a full-time basis, attending Peking University for his master's from 1982 to 1984, and his doctorate from 1986 to 1989. Li took a teaching position in the Department of Literature and History of the Central Party School from 1984 to 1986 and then returned to the same department as an assistant professor after receiving his Ph.D. degree in 1989.

Li served consecutively as associate professor from 1991 to 1993, director of the Chinese Literature Division from 1993 to 1996 (during which he was promoted to full professor in 1995), director of the Socialist Culture Division in 1996, deputy director of the Department of Literature and History from 1996 to 1999, director of the same department from 1999 to 2002, and dean of the Training Institute from 2002 to 2008. It is unclear when Li first met Xi Jinping, but it is widely believed that Xi played a direct role in promoting Li to provost and vice president of the Central Party School in 2008 during Xi's tenure as president of the school, which lasted from 2007 to 2012. In 2014, Li was transferred to Fujian Province, where he has served as director of the Propaganda Department of the Provincial Party Committee. His appointment was often seen as an effort to broaden Li's leadership experience for further promotion in the future.

Li Shulei has broad academic interests in history, literature (both classical and modern, Chinese and foreign), poetry, literary criticism, psychology, politics, and international relations. For example, he wrote an article discussing the lessons of the Cuban missile



crisis based on Robert Kennedy's *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*.<sup>22</sup> Over the past two decades, Li has published nine books with a total of 1.5 million words, and over 200 essays and commentaries. His main professional work focuses on reassessing Confucianism in present-day China, cultural development, and the importance of the soft power.<sup>23</sup> These topics and ideas are very much in line with Xi Jinping's notions of the "Chinese dream" and "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."<sup>24</sup> For Xi, China's rise to prominence on the world stage should not lie solely in the economic domain, but ought also to be reflected in the Chinese public's confidence in their cultural values and social ethics.<sup>25</sup>

In his short article entitled "How to Construct an Idol," published in 2011, Li Shulei discussed how Confucius—or more precisely Confucianism—was treated and reassessed in the Tang dynasty and eventually regained its status as the ideological and cultural doctrine of the time.<sup>26</sup> Like Huang Kunming and He Yiting, Li Shulei also has been engaged heavily in advocating Xi's ideas of governance, and to a certain extent in promoting the personality cult of the party boss.

In April 2014, soon after Li moved to Fujian and served as director of the Propaganda Department, the front page of the official newspaper *Fujian Daily* published Li's article on rereading Xi Jinping's poem in memory of Jiao Yulu, a communist hero who was known for his hard work, devotion, and sacrifice to the party.<sup>27</sup> In the article, Li praised Xi's contributions to Fujian in his more than 17 years of work there. Li wrote, "Comrade Xi Jinping has not only left Fujian a wealth of ideas and a strategy for development, but also he has left a treasure of work ethics and spirit."<sup>28</sup> Li also initiated the reprint of the book *Out of Poverty*, which Xi wrote during his tenure as a local leader in Fujian.<sup>29</sup>

Probably the most important individual who has contributed to the promotion of Xi's ideological work is He Yiting. In 2014, He compiled the *Study of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Speeches*, which included major speeches by Xi following the 18th Party Congress in 2012. The book has become a must-read for all levels of Chinese officials. As the leader in charge of the operation of the Central Party School, He Yiting was instrumental in hosting seven classes for ministerial and provincial leaders and two classes for senior officials in political and legal affairs to study Xi's speeches from November 2013 to April 2014.<sup>30</sup> He also played a key role in compiling and publishing other books featuring Xi's thoughts on governance, including *Xi Jinping's Nineteen Lectures at the Central Party School*. According to He, a main task for the Central Party School is to "do a good job translating Xi's work" (翻译好).<sup>31</sup> In another article widely circulated in China, He asserts that "the more frequently one studies General Secretary Xi Jinping's speeches, the more refreshing they become; the more regularly one applies them, the more innovative they turn out" (常学常新常用常新).<sup>32</sup>

As some Chinese analysts have observed, in contrast to Wang Huning, another chief aide for top leaders who is known for his expertise in the study of political science, He Yiting is particularly good at "party building and official public image making."<sup>33</sup> He Yiting is also famous for his strong views on upholding Marxism as an official ideology, the party leadership, and the socialist road. For example, He stated bluntly that the Chinese

Academy of Social Sciences should be the stronghold of Marxism.<sup>34</sup> In his view, all officials “should respect absolutely the authority of the Central Committee of the CCP led by General Secretary Xi Jinping, respond in an unambiguously positive manner to what the Central Committee expresses, firmly implement the Central Committee’s resolutions, and strictly prohibit what the Central Committee bans.”<sup>35</sup> Under He Yiting’s direct instruction, the journal *Seek the Truth*, the official organ of the CCP Central Committee, published an editorial calling for a strong rejection of five fallacious trends, namely “universal values, constitutional democracy, historical Nihilism, neoliberalism, and the cynicism of reform and opening.”<sup>36</sup> The editorial argued that the notion of universal values, with its strong religious component, has always been the “ideological source for Western expansionism and the tool for global domination.”<sup>37</sup>

Based on this analysis, Xi Jinping’s mishu on the ideological and propaganda front (Huang Kunming, He Yiting, and Li Shulei) differ profoundly from his aides for economic and financial matters (Liu He, He Lifeng, and Fang Xinghai). This observation reflects the diversity of Xi’s inner circle in terms of background, expertise, and worldview. Perhaps even more revealingly, this may explain why Xi’s strategy of governance over the past two and half years has often been characterized as economically liberal and politically conservative.<sup>38</sup> Under Xi’s leadership, market reform has accelerated, especially in terms of financial liberalization, service sector dynamics, and the rapid development of small and medium-sized private firms. But at the same time, a large number of Chinese public intellectuals have been dismayed by orders instructing them not to speak about seven sensitive issues: universal values, freedom of the press, civil society, civil rights, past mistakes of the CCP, crony capitalism, and judicial independence. Media censorship has tightened, and participants in human rights activities have encountered increasing political harassment and even arrest.

This contrast is certainly not new in Chinese elite politics. Xi Jinping is not the only Chinese leader in recent decades to have entered office facing high expectations in the realms of political and economic reform. His predecessors Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao all discovered that economic reforms were easier to pursue than political reforms. Nor is this situation unique to China, as bureaucratic politics elsewhere encounter the same phenomenon that “where policy-makers stand largely depends on where they sit.” To a great extent, the diversity of Xi’s mishu cluster broadens his powerbases and gives him more options from which to choose—not only for an effective team but also a diverse policy agenda—for his second term.

## Final Thoughts

The most intriguing question for analysts in Chinese elite studies—and for CCP leaders including Xi Jinping himself as well—is not how to interpret Xi’s past performance, but how to assess his political capital, especially the further consolidation of power for his second term. What will the composition of the CCP leadership look like during Xi’s second term? Who will be on the next Politburo Standing Committee and in the Politburo? Will Xi have enough protégés in the most important positions to carry out his policies, on both the domestic and international fronts? Or even enough protégés to change the rules, regulations, and norms of collective leadership that have developed over

the past two decades? Should Xi be concerned about the possibility that his drastic move to promote his protégés and his bold anti-corruption campaign over the past two and half years may have created many false friends and real enemies? And thus will Xi likely encounter a political backlash?

In addition to appointing his protégés to important positions in preparation for the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping recently made two other important moves. First, during the CCP Central Committee's Work Conference on united front work held in May 2015, Xi Jinping called for recruiting and promoting three elite groups: 1) foreign-educated returnees; 2) representatives of new social media; and 3) businesspeople from the private sector, especially young entrepreneurs.<sup>39</sup> Apparently, Xi is interested in broadening the channel for elite recruitment. Second, in late June 2015, Xi convened a Politburo meeting to issue new regulations about elite turnover. Based on these new regulations, those leaders who have not reached retirement age or term limits may still lose their leadership positions if they are not qualified for other reasons.<sup>40</sup>

Both measures will likely make the upcoming leadership turnover at the 19th Party Congress more dynamic, more substantial, and less predictable. One can expect that many current leaders will retire or be removed. As it has been widely noted, all but two (Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang) of the seven current members of the Politburo Standing Committee are expected to retire. Based on the current norm in retirement age, 14 of the 25 current Politburo members can remain for another five-year term, but due to the new regulations adopted in June, some of these 14 candidates may be disqualified.

This five-part series examining Xi's inner circle indicates that some of Xi's confidants will likely be leading candidates for the next Politburo Standing Committee (namely, Li Zhanshu, Zhao Leji, and Han Zheng) and the next Politburo (Chen Xi, Huang Kunming, Liu He, He Lifeng, Zhang Youxia, Cai Yingting, Ding Xuexiang, Li Xi and He Yiting). But it is highly debatable whether Xi's trusted protégés can truly dominate these two most crucial leadership bodies; and even if they do, what potential political risk and opposition will Xi and his team face? As some Chinese analysts insightfully point out, the top leader often realizes that the candidate pool is too small from which to choose when one needs to do so (人到用时方恨少).<sup>41</sup>

In a broader perspective, given the ongoing tension between Xi's amassing of personal power and the many possible constraints on it (especially the collective leadership that was initiated in the Deng era and which endured under Jiang and Hu), China analysts must determine the characteristics of Xi's leadership and its future trajectory. This task is all the more urgent as China now has more influence on the global economy and regional security than at any other time in modern history. My upcoming book, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership*, will provide an empirically well-grounded assessment of this unfolding drama.<sup>42</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> James Miles, “The gatekeepers: A string of arrests sparks debate about the role of leaders’ all-powerful assistants,” *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> Sun Lan 孙澜, “The growing importance of Xi’s ‘Shaanxi Gang’ in Chinese politics and the sudden emergence of the four dark horses” (政坛“陕军”随习而兴, 四大黑马异军突起), Duowei Newsnet, June 12, 2015, <http://china.dwnews.com/news/2015-06-12/59660181.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ji Beiqun 季北群, “Year-end reshuffling did not go beyond the stereotype, and Xi seems to be stretched in personnel appointments” (年末洗牌未脱窠臼 习近平用人捉襟见肘), Duowei Newsnet, January 1, 2015, <http://china.dwnews.com/news/2015-01-01/59627340.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Xi Jinping’s ‘imperial reporter’ Shen Haixiong appointed the youngest vice president of Xinhua” (习近平御用记者慎海雄履新 升任新华社最年轻副社长), Literature City Network, July 14, 2014, <http://www.wenxuecity.com/news/2014/07/14/3430045.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Chu Wen 楚文, “The political rise of the ‘Shaanxi Gang’: Four heavyweight leaders have entered the core power circle of the Chinese Communist Party” (政坛“陕军”崛起 四大悍将步入中共核心圈), Duowei Newsnet, July 3, 2015, <http://china.dwnews.com/news/2015-07-03/59664886.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Wang Ya 王雅, “‘Princeling’ promotes his protégés: The rise of the Zhejiang Gang” (“天子”用旧部 政坛浙江帮集体上位幕后), Duowei Newsnet, December 22, 2014, <http://china.dwnews.com/news/2014-12-22/59625495.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Cheng Li’s database.

<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the Marxist notion that the Communist Party should be the “vanguard of the working class,” Jiang’s theory claims that the CCP should represent the “developmental needs of the advanced forces of production,” the “forward direction of advanced culture,” and the “fundamental interests of the majority of the Chinese people.”

<sup>11</sup> Cheng Li and Lynn White, “The Army in the Succession to Deng Xiaoping: Familiar Fealties and Technocratic Trends,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 33, no. 8 (August 1993): 757–786; and Cheng Li and Scott Harold, “China’s New Military Elite,” *China Security*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Autumn 2007): 62–89.

<sup>12</sup> “Come to the limelight from behind the scenes: Meeting the generals who previously served as mishu” (从幕后走上台前 盘点那些当过大秘的将军), Duowei Net, <http://china.dwnews.com/photo/2014-07-24/59498370.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “The National Development and Reform Commission designates its deputy director He Lifeng to be in charge of ‘one belt and one road’ work” (发改委明确副主任何立峰主管“一带一路”工作), Beijing Newsnet, January 4, 2015, <http://www.bj-news.com/finacial/fin/2015/0104/262454.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Ma Haoliang 马浩亮, “The new elite cohort of Zhejiang moves to the center stage of CCP politics” (“之江新军” 走向中共政治舞台中心), Dagong Network, December 30, 2014, <http://opinion.dwnews.com/news/2014-12-30/59626834.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Wang Ya, 王雅, “Where are Xi Jinping’s aides now?” (习近平幕僚今何在), Duowei, January 27, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> The articles that appeared in the column were later published as a book. See Xi Jinping, *New thought in Zhejiang* (之江新语). Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Ye Maozhi 叶茂之 and Liu Ziwei 刘子威, “Xi Jinping promoted confidants, quietly but aggressively” (习近平悄悄大举提拔心腹), Mirror Newsnet, May 10, 2014, [http://www.wenxuecity.com/news/2014/05/10/3257474\\_print.html](http://www.wenxuecity.com/news/2014/05/10/3257474_print.html).

<sup>19</sup> “Hong Kong media reveal seven top advisors in Xi’s inner circle” (香港媒体曝习总身边的七位重要智囊), Sina Newsnet, February 3, 2015, <http://club.mil.news.sina.com.cn/thread-701804-1-1.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Shi Bielou 石别楼, “From literature and art to politics: Rereading Li Shulei” (从文艺到政治: 重读李书磊), Shanghai Observer Newsnet, September 24, 2014, <http://web.shobserver.com/news/detail?id=346>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Li Shulei 李书磊, On Robert Kennedy’s *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (解读 罗伯特·肯尼迪《古巴导弹危机及其教训》), *Strategy and Management* (战略与管理), no. 5 (2001).

<sup>23</sup> For example, see Li Shulei 李书磊, “Cultural construction in international competition” (国际竞争中的文化建设), *21st Century Business Herald* (21世纪经济报道), October 31, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Xi Jinping 习近平, *Excerpts on the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese Dream* (关于实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦论述摘编). Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> For more discussion of Xi Jinping’s effort to promote Confucian values, see Evan Osnos, “Confucius Comes Home,” *New Yorker*, January 13, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Li Shulei 李书磊, “How to Construct an idol” (偶像如何构建), *Oriental Outlook Weekly* (瞭望东方周刊), June 21, 2011; also see Confucius Studies website, July 18, 2011, <http://www.rujiagz.com/article/id/4160/>.

<sup>27</sup> Li Shulei 李书磊, “Dedication and courage: Reread Comrade Xi Jinping’s poem in the memory of Jiao Yulu” (肝胆长如洗——再读习近平同志〈念奴娇·追思焦裕禄〉), *Fujian Daily* (福建日报), April 15, 2014, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Xiu Yangfeng 修仰峰, “Li Shulei: Reprinting [Xi Jinping’s book] *Out of Poverty* is of great significance for the development of Fujian” (李书磊: 重印发行《摆脱贫困》对福建发展有重大指导意义), Renmin website, August 19, 2014, <http://fj.people.com.cn/n/2014/0819/c181466-22028755.html>.

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<sup>36</sup> Qiu Shi 秋石, “Consolidate the common ideological basis of the party and the people” (巩固党和人民团结奋斗的共同思想基础), *Seek the Truth* (求是), October 16, 2013, also see [http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201320/201310/t20131012\\_278250.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201320/201310/t20131012_278250.htm).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Cheng Li and Ryan McElveen, “Can Xi’s Governing Strategy Succeed?” *Current History*, vol. 112, no. 755 (September 2013): 203–209.

<sup>39</sup> “Xi urges strengthening of united front,” *China Daily*, May 21, 2015; also see its online version, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/21/content\\_20785494.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/21/content_20785494.htm).

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<sup>41</sup> “Year-end reshuffling did not go beyond stereotypes” (see endnote 3).

<sup>42</sup> Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, forthcoming.