

Hu's Southern Expedition: Changing Leadership in Guangdong

Cheng Li

Hu Jintao's power base has largely been centered in China's inland provinces rather than in the country's coastal areas. For most of the past decade, Guangdong, one of the wealthiest provinces in the country, was considered the turf of Jiang Zemin and his elitist coalition. China's political landscape is, however, changing rapidly. Nowhere is this more evident than in Guangdong today, where all three of the top leadership posts have recently been transferred into the hands of Hu Jintao's protégés. During the first two months of his tenure as the Party secretary in Guangdong, Wang Yang, Hu's ally, launched a new wave of "thought emancipation," urging local officials to break free of ideological and political taboos. Wang has also claimed that Guangdong should become a new experimental zone for bold political reforms that would be pioneered on behalf of the rest of the country. In a very real sense, Hu Jintao appears to be building his political power by launching a drive to "conquer" the south for the populist coalition so as to reform the nation's politics. The ramifications of Hu's "Southern Expedition," if we can call it such, may therefore go far beyond factional gains or losses.

To those who study factional politics in China, the distribution of power and influence at the provincial level of leadership is a crucial focus of attention. Nowhere has the rise to preeminence of Hu Jintao's protégés in the top provincial posts been more eye-catching than in Guangdong Province.¹ With the recent appointment of Wang Yang, the former Party secretary of Chongqing municipality, as the new provincial Party chief of Guangdong, all three of the province's top leadership positions now belong to the so-called *tuanpai* faction—those officials who advanced their political careers through the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL). These three top Guangdong provincial leaders—Party Secretary Wang Yang, Governor Huang Huahua, and Deputy Party Secretary Liu Yupu (who also serves concurrently as Party Secretary of Shenzhen municipality)—all worked directly under Hu Jintao in the early 1980s when Hu was in charge of the CCYL. They have thus had close patron-client ties for over two decades. In addition, among the 18 highest-ranking leaders in Guangdong (standing members of the Provincial Party Committee and vice governors), 10 (56 percent) have *tuanpai* backgrounds.

Paying Attention To the New Dynamics in Guangdong

This recent change in the leadership of Guangdong is profoundly important for three reasons. First, in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Guangdong has always been a major battleground for the factional contentions of the central government, partly because of the province's economic wealth and partly due to the fact that the top posts of the province are usually pivotal stepping-stones to positions of national leadership.² For most of the reform era, Guangdong was the wealthiest province in the country. Representing about 10 percent of China's gross national product (GNP), Guangdong made significant contributions to the tax revenues of the central government. Top leaders in Beijing who were able to effectively control Guangdong could also significantly enhance their power and influence in the national leadership. Many heavyweight Chinese politicians in the past three decades previously served as top provincial leaders in Guangdong; examples include Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) Ye Jianying, Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Zhao Ziyang, and PRC president Yang Shangkun. Several other officials with leadership experience in Guangdong have served as members of the Politburo, including on its powerful Standing Committee.³

Second, it has been widely noted that Hu Jintao's "sphere of influence" has largely been centered in China's inland provinces rather than the country's coastal areas.⁴ Hu advanced his own political career exclusively in China's inland provinces of Gansu, Guizhou, and Tibet. Since becoming the general secretary of the CCP in 2002, Hu has sought to craft an image of himself as a populist leader who represents the interests of China's vast and economically backward inland provinces. His strategic vision aims to obtain more balanced regional development for the country and his rhetoric about social justice reflects his own political background and regional ties.

During the past decade, Guangdong was largely seen as the turf of Jiang Zemin. The two previous Party secretaries of the province, Li Changchun and Zhang Dejiang, are Jiang protégés.⁵ Furthermore, Zhang Gaoli, Huang Liman, and Li Hongzhong, the three previous Party bosses of Shenzhen municipality (the most important city in the province) also had strong patron-client ties with Jiang. With the recent transfers of Zhang Dejiang and Li Hongzhong out of Guangdong and the retirement of Huang Liman, the leadership of this important coastal province has now been taken over by Hu's protégés. This development may herald a profound change in China's political landscape in the years to come.

Third, as the cradle of China's special economic zones in the early 1980s, Guangdong has often served as a pioneering province for China's economic reforms. Indeed, it was Deng Xiaoping's famous "Southern Journey" to Guangdong in early 1992 that accelerated the market reforms after the political setbacks of the 1989 Tiananmen incident.⁶ During the past decade, however, Guangdong's leadership was often criticized for its political conservatism. From its attempts to cover up the outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003, to the government crackdown on the liberal newspaper *Southern Metropolis Daily* in 2004, to the shootings of the

protesters in Dongzhou in 2005, the Guangdong provincial leadership had apparently turned its back on its former path-breaking, reformist ways.⁷

Since his arrival in Guangdong at the end of 2007, Wang Yang has frequently and publicly proclaimed his desire to change the poor political image of the province. Wang was particularly articulate about his determination to make the province the frontier of China's new wave of "thought emancipation" (*sixiang jiefang*).⁸ It was noted by a Hong Kong newspaper that Wang used the phrase "thought emancipation" four times in his inauguration speech and 22 times in the first provincial Party Committee meeting.⁹ By contrast, Zhang Dejiang, Wang's predecessor, hardly ever used this phrase during his tenure in Guangdong.¹⁰ According to Wang, the principal developmental objective for Guangdong is no longer economic growth, but political development.¹¹

What does the recent leadership change in Guangdong reveal about the status of Hu Jintao's power? What does Wang Yang's "thought emancipation" suggest about the Chinese political environment today? Does Hu's "Southern Expedition" in Guangdong, as reflected in the predominance of his protégés in this formerly trend-setting province, herald the coming of an era of substantial political reforms? A detailed analysis of the recent personnel change and the political discourse in Guangdong sheds valuable light on the political trajectory of Hu Jintao's leadership.

The Arrival of Wang Yang: Dealing with Cantonese Localism

When Wang Yang arrived in Guangdong as the provincial Party secretary in December 2007, he must have felt enormously grateful to his mentor Hu Jintao.¹² The new appointment was the best possible position that this political rising star could achieve at this point in his career. Among the fifth-generation leaders (those aged in their 50s), very few have had administrative credentials broader and more impressive than Wang Yang. At the age of 33, Wang served as mayor of Anhui's Tongling municipality, and at 38, he was appointed vice governor of Anhui, which made him the youngest vice governor in the country at the time.¹³ In his 40s, he served as vice minister of the National Development Reform Commission (NDRC), the country's most powerful supra-ministry, and later served as executive deputy secretary general of the State Council, where he was in charge of daily administration of the Chinese government. These jobs gave him broad administrative experience in municipal, provincial, and national government.

In 2005, Hu Jintao appointed Wang, at the age of 50, to become Chongqing Party secretary, making him the leader of the world's most populous city (31 million people). Leveraging high levels of state investment, Chongqing under Wang's watch transformed itself in short order into the new center of China's inland economic development. One of the few items missing from Wang's political résumé was leadership background in a coastal region. His appointment as Guangdong Party secretary seemed to complete his qualifications as a formidable contender for a top leadership post in the post-Hu Jintao era.

As he assumed his post as Guangdong Party chief, Wang must also have felt blessed for the political environment he was inheriting. The provincial leadership is presently composed of many *tuanpai* officials, including some of his long-time colleagues and friends. Local resistance to an outsider Party chief is quite common in China and has been particularly vigorous in Guangdong. The province has been known for high levels of “Cantonese localism,” largely owing to its strong economic status and distinctive dialect.¹⁴ For instance, Ye Xuanping, son of the late marshal Ye Jianying, built a solid power base in Guangdong when he served as the Party secretary there in the 1980s. The growing economic and cultural autonomy of Guangdong made the central authorities particularly anxious about and attentive to developments in the province. After some negotiation, the central authorities “promoted” Ye to senior vice chair of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in order to undermine the growing Cantonese localism by removing one of its chief advocates.

It was also reported that in preliminary meetings before the 15th Party Congress in 1997, central authorities intended to replace Party secretary Xie Fei, a Cantonese native, with a non-Cantonese Politburo member. Local officials in Guangdong resisted this proposal strongly, insisting that top officials in Guangdong should be Cantonese. Anecdotes suggest that local officials indicated that they were even willing to lose their representation in the Politburo if it meant keeping a native son as Party secretary.¹⁵ As a result of their stand, Xie Fei remained Party secretary of Guangdong, and was also kept on the Politburo. It took almost a year for local officials to accept Li Changchun, a native of Liaoning and a Politburo member, as Xie’s replacement.¹⁶

As a non-Cantonese Party secretary who was transferred into the province from elsewhere, Wang met with some local resistance. For example, at the first meeting of the Provincial Party Congress, held in December 2007 soon after Wang’s arrival in Guangdong, 50 delegates (about 10 percent of the total) did not attend and some of them did not even give an excuse for their absence from this important meeting. In response to these local officials’ disrespectful behavior, Wang ordered the Provincial Party Discipline Inspection Commission to check attendance at future meetings.¹⁷ At the same time, Wang often expressed his personal interest in making an effort to become more “Cantonese.”¹⁸ Wang’s initial actions in Guangdong seemed to indicate that he was applying both hard and soft tactics in establishing his authority in his new post.

Most importantly, the cluster of *tuanpai* officials in the leadership of Guangdong is a deep well of political capital for Wang—the point person for Hu’s “Southern Expedition.” Table 1 offers an overview of the backgrounds of current top Party and government leaders in Guangdong. The first 12 leaders consist of the standing members of the provincial Party Committee. Half of these leaders (six) advanced their careers through the CCYL. Wang Yang and his *tuanpai* colleagues not only occupy three top posts in the province (Party secretary, governor, and deputy Party secretary), but also hold important posts such as Party secretary of Shenzhen, Party secretary of Guangzhou, director of the

Organization Department, and chief of staff of the Provincial Party Committee. The fourth highest ranking leader in the province, secretary of the Provincial Discipline Inspection Commission Zhu Mingguo, though not a *tuanpai* leader, previously worked under Wang Yang in Chongqing as a police chief before being transferred to Guangdong at the end of 2006. Similarly, among the eight top leaders in the Guangdong government (the governor, executive vice governor, and six vice governors), five (63 percent) are *tuanpai* leaders.

Table 1

An Overview of the Backgrounds of Current Top Party and Government Leaders in Guangdong Province

| Name | Position | Birth year | Birthplace | Year apptd. | Promotion pattern | Factional affiliation |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Wang Yang | Party Secretary | 1955 | Anhui | 2007 | transfer from Chongqing | CCYL |
| Huang Huahua | Governor | 1946 | Guangdong | 2003 | always in GD | CCYL |
| Liu Yupu | GD Dep. Secy. & Secy. of Shenzhen | 1949 | Shandong | 2008 | promoted in GD | CCYL |
| Zhu Mingguo | Secretary of Discipline Affairs | 1957 | Hainan | 2006 | transfer from Chongqing | N/A |
| Huang Longyun | Executive Vice Governor | 1951 | Guangdong | 2007 | always in GD | N/A |
| Hu Zejun | Dir. of Organization Dept | 1955 | Chongqing | 2004 | transfer from Beijing | CCYL |
| Zhu Xiaodan | Secretary of Guangzhou | 1953 | Zhejiang | 2006 | always in GD | CCYL |
| Xiao Ziheng | Chief of Staff of PPC | 1953 | Hunan | 2003 | promoted in GD | CCYL |
| Xin Rongguo | Commander of Prov. Mil. District | 1950 | Shandong | 2005 | transfer from Guangxi | N/A |
| Lin Xiong | Director of Propaganda Dept. | 1959 | Hainan | 2006 | promoted in GD | <i>mishu</i> to Wen Jiabao |
| Liang Weifa | Police Chief | 1952 | Guangdong | 2007 | always in GD | N/A |
| Zhou Zhenghong | Director of United Front Work Dept. | 1957 | Guangdong | 2007 | always in GD | N/A |
| Li Ronggen | Vice Governor | 1950 | Guangdong | 2001 | always in GD | N/A |
| Lei Yulan | Vice Governor | 1952 | Guangdong | 2003 | always in GD | CCYL |
| Song Hai | Vice Governor | 1951 | Hebei | 2003 | promoted GD | N/A |
| Tong Xing | Vice Governor | 1951 | Liaoning | 2006 | always in GD | CCYL |
| Lin Musheng | Vice Governor | 1956 | Guangdong | 2006 | always in GD | CCYL |
| Wan Qingliang | Vice Governor | 1964 | Guangdong | 2008 | always in GD | CCYL |

Notes: CCYL = Chinese Communist Youth League; Dep. = Deputy; Dept. = Department; GD = Guangdong; Gov't = Government, PPC = Provincial Party Committee; Prov. Mil. = Provincial Military; Secy. = Secretary.

With the exception of Governor Huang Huahua (aged 62), all the provincial leaders in Guangdong are in their 50s or younger. The youngest is 44-year-old Wan Qingliang, newly appointed to the post of vice governor and a rising star with a CCYL background.

All of these leaders were appointed to their current posts in the last seven years and 11 of them (61 percent) were appointed within the last two years.

Of these 18 Guangdong provincial leaders, nine are native Cantonese, while two others began to work in Guangdong over three decades ago and can be considered locals as well.¹⁹ The remaining seven provincial leaders were transferred from elsewhere in recent years. The native Cantonese leaders can be further divided by the counties in the province in which they were born and/or have worked. They have often formed some regionally based political factions. A recent study identified six region-based “leadership gangs” (*heibang*): the Dongguan Gang, the Huizhou Gang, the Guangzhou Gang, the Meixian (Meizhou) Gang, the Shantou Gang, and the Zhanjiang Gang.²⁰ These local ties play important roles in elite promotions within the province. Indeed, all of these localities are represented in the provincial leadership: Lin Xiong and Tong Xing represent Dongguan, Zhu Xiaodan is a representative of Guangzhou, Xiao Zhiheng stands for Huizhou, Lin Musheng reflects the interests of Shantou, and Zhou Zhenhong speaks on behalf of Zhanjiang. The Meixian Gang is particularly powerful in the provincial government, as its representatives hold three of the top eight leadership posts. They include Governor Huang Huahua, who previously served as deputy Party secretary in Meixian County and as the mayor of Meizhou City in the late 1980s; Executive Vice Governor Huang Longyun, who was born in Meixian; and Vice Governor Wan Qingliang, who worked in Meixian for over a decade and was widely considered as Huang Huahua’s protégé.

It has been quite common for senior leaders to promote their *mishu* (personal assistants) to serve as provincial leaders in Guangdong. Examples include former Shenzhen Party secretary Huang Liman, who served as *mishu* to Jiang in the early 1980s when Jiang was the minister of Electronics Industries; and Li Hongzhong, another former Shenzhen Party secretary who served as a *mishu* to Li Tieying, a former Politburo member and current vice chair of the National People’s Congress (NPC). The current chief of staff of the Guangdong provincial government, Xu Shangwu, was a *mishu* for almost 20 years to Tian Jiyun, a former vice premier. Zhang Dejiang’s *mishu*, 45-year-old Gan Lin, was recently appointed as Party secretary of Zhuhai City.

Among the current high-ranking leaders in Guangdong, director of the Propaganda Department Lin Xiong advanced his political career largely through his *mishu* background. Born in Hainan in 1959, Lin worked as a “sent-down youth” on a collective farm in his native province between 1975 and 1978, and enrolled in the Chinese Department at Zhongshan University from 1978 to 1982. After graduation, he worked as a staff member at the CCP Central Committee, and between 1986 and 1994 he served as a *mishu* to Wen Jiabao. In 1994, Lin was transferred to Guangdong, where he worked as deputy Party secretary of Dongguan, mayor of Maoming, and finally Party secretary of Zhaoqing before assuming his current post.

The examples listed above indicate that top national leaders often seek to have their most promising representatives gain experience by governing this important

province. Factional politics at both the national and local levels have always been dynamic in Guangdong. These factors highlight the remarkable triumph of Hu Jintao's "Southern Expedition," as his protégés, especially *tuanpai* officials, have come to dominate the leadership of the province.

Turning Guangdong into Hu's Turf

One can reasonably argue that not all those who advanced their careers through the ranks of the CCYL are Hu Jintao's protégés; some officials who went through the CCYL may not have established any kind of formal or informal contacts with Hu during their time in the League. In order to trace the ties between Hu and the Guangdong leaders with CCYL backgrounds, table 2 presents both the positions and durations of the CCYL tenure of these 10 high-ranking Guangdong-based *tuanpai* leaders. Five of these officials served at

Table 2

CCYL Leadership Experience of Current Top Party and Government Leaders in Guangdong Province

| Name, current position | CCYL leadership experience | Duration |
|--|--|-----------|
| Wang Yang, Party secretary | Anhui propaganda director, Anhui deputy secretary | 1982–1984 |
| Huang Huahua, governor | Guangdong deputy secretary and secretary | 1982–1985 |
| Liu Yupu, provincial deputy secretary and secretary of Shenzhen | Secretary of Central Organs, standing member of the Central Committee | 1982–1986 |
| Hu Zejun, director of Organization Department | Secretary of Southwestern Institute of Science and Technology, member of the Central Committee | 1985–1988 |
| Zhu Xiaodan, Secretary of Guangzhou | Guangzhou deputy secretary and secretary, member of the All China Youth Federation | 1982–1987 |
| Xiao Zhiheng, chief of staff of provincial committee | Director of Young Workers Dept. of the Central Committee, standing member of the Central Committee | 1990–1996 |
| Lei Yulan, vice governor | Foshan deputy secretary and secretary | 1982–1986 |
| Tong Xing, vice governor | Guangdong deputy secretary | 1985–1990 |
| Lin Musheng, vice governor | Guangdong deputy secretary and secretary | 1988–1995 |
| Wan Qingliang, vice governor | Guangdong secretary, standing member of the Central Committee | 2000–2003 |

the CCYL Central Committee or the All China Youth Federation, four served as either deputy secretary or secretary of the provincial CCYL committee, and one served as secretary of a municipal CCYL committee.

Table 2 also shows that the CCYL leadership experiences of seven of these *tuanpai* officials overlapped at least partially with the period between 1982 and 1985, when Hu Jintao served on the CCYL Secretariat and as chairman of the All China Youth Federation. Shenzhen Party secretary Liu Yupu, for example, served concurrently as secretary of the CCYL Central Organs and as a standing member of the CCYL Central Committee in the early 1980s, directly under Hu Jintao. From 1992 to 2002, Hu Jintao was in charge of the youth affairs at the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee. This was the same period in which the other three Guangdong *tuanpai* leaders served as provincial CCYL secretaries or as standing members of the CCYL Central Committee.

Many of these *tuanpai* leaders also later attended various programs, including month-long, mid-career training or year-long graduate programs at the Central Party School (CPS). Table 3 shows those high-ranking Party and government leaders in Guangdong who attended the CPS. Seven of these 10 listed leaders studied at the CPS during Hu Jintao's tenure as president of the school (1993–2002). Other Guangdong

Table 3

Current Top Party and Government Leaders in Guangdong Province Who Attended the Central Party School

| Name | Position | Program at CPS | Specialization | Year(s) |
|---------------|--|---|---|------------------------|
| Wang Yang | Party secretary | 3-year undergraduate correspondence program | Management | 1989–1992 |
| Huang Huahua | Governor | 2-year graduate program | Party affairs | 1983–1985 |
| Liu Yupu | Provincial dep. secy. & secy. of Shenzhen | 3-year graduate program | World economics | 1995–1998 |
| Zhu Mingguo | Secretary of Discipline Affairs | 3-year graduate program | Party affairs | 1985–1988 |
| Huang Longyun | Executive vice governor | 5-month program | Party affairs | 1994–1995 |
| Zhu Xiaodan | Secretary of Guangzhou | 1-year Young Cadre Class & 2-year graduate program | Party affairs & economic management | 1990–1991 1995–1997 |
| Lin Xiong | Director of Propaganda Dept. | 4-month program | Party affairs | 2001 |
| Lei Yulan | Vice governor | 2-year graduate program | Management | 1984–1986 |
| Tong Xing | Vice governor | 1-year Young Cadre Class | Party affairs | 1989–1990 |
| Lin Musheng | Vice governor | 1-year Young Cadre Class & 3-year graduate program | Party affairs & economic management | 1994–1995 1995–1998 |
| Wan Qingliang | Vice governor | 3-year graduate program | Economic management | 1994–1997 |

Notes: Dep. = Deputy; Dept. = Department; Secy. = Secretary

leaders, lacking CCYL backgrounds—for example, Huang Longyun and Lin Xiong—may also have formed patron-client ties with Hu Jintao through their studies at the CPS. Most of these leaders concentrated on CCP affairs and economic management during their studies at the CPS.

The growing presence of top provincial leaders in Guangdong with backgrounds in the CCYL is particularly significant. In general, these provincial leaders can be recognized as Hu’s followers, not only because of their previous political associations with Hu at the provincial and national levels of leadership in the CCYL, but also due to the fact that their career paths have often been identical to Hu’s. To a great extent, they are the kinds of political allies who can carry out Hu’s new policy initiatives. The rise of *tuanpai* leaders in the provincial leadership and the consolidation of Hu’s power are therefore closely interrelated. This phenomenon is certainly not new, but the ramifications of this, now that Guangdong has been turned into Hu’s turf, probably go far beyond the issues of factional gains and losses. An interesting question is looming large in the minds of many people: Will Guangdong, the previous experimental zone for China’s market reforms, become a showcase for the country’s long-overdue political reforms? The ongoing political discourse about Guangdong’s role as an experimental zone for political reforms seems to be especially relevant.

Guangdong as an Experimental Zone for Political Reforms?

Wang Yang and his like-minded colleagues in Guangdong are not the only ones who talk about “thought emancipation” and the need for bolder political reforms in the country. Top leaders including Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, rising stars of the Fifth Generation such as Li Yuanchao, and members of the country’s prominent think tanks have all expressed the same idea in recent months.²¹ But Guangdong seems to have more intensive and practical discussions of this subject than anywhere else in present-day China. Wang Yang has boldly proclaimed that Guangdong should lead the new wave of “thought emancipation” in order to achieve a “new phase in China’s overall development.”²² It was noted by the Hong Kong media that Wang Yang has talked about “thought emancipation” almost every day since his arrival in Guangdong in December 2007.²³

Some Chinese analysts have labeled this ongoing political discourse in Guangdong China’s “third wave of thought emancipation.”²⁴ The first two waves—the decision to launch the special economic zones in 1980 and the acceleration of China’s market reforms in the wake of Deng’s “Southern Journey” in 1992—in fact also originated in Guangdong. In a sense, Guangdong was an experimental zone for China’s market reforms. The province might similarly serve as an ideal experimental location for China’s political reforms. Guangdong’s proximity to Hong Kong, which is scheduled to have its first direct elections for the post of chief executive in 2017, is an important factor. The province also has a sizable middle class, which is generally a favorable precondition for democratic development. In the city of Shenzhen, for example, about 2 million people belong to the middle class. They are mostly young, well-educated, and increasingly interested in opportunities for political participation.²⁵ During his visit to

Shenzhen in the fall of 2005, Premier Wen Jiabao encouraged local officials to expand the city's experiments to an even broader context, including innovations on social and political fronts.²⁶

It is not clear what specific content the top leaders are referring to when they talk about "thought emancipation" and political reform; these concepts likely mean different things to different leaders. Yet, each of these leaders seems to imply that both major changes and great obstacles should be expected. In a meeting of the provincial Party committee, Wang Yang said that political reforms could be a "bloody road" (*xuelu*), quoting Deng Xiaoping's phrase about the tremendous difficulties that the economic reforms confronted at the outset.²⁷ If the obstacles in the early years of the reform era came from Communist hardliners, the main barrier to political reforms today is likely to come from powerful economic interest groups and corrupt government officials who want to maintain their economic and political privileges. Both economic interest group monopolies and rampant official corruption have caused strong public resentment that has undermined the legitimacy of the CCP rule in recent years.

Wang Yang, Liu Yupu, and other *tuanpai* leaders in Guangdong, like national leaders Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, and Zeng Qinghong, hold the view that unless the CCP keeps abreast of the new sociopolitical developments in the country, and in particular, transforms itself to a more accountable, responsible, and representative governing party, it will be heading toward big trouble. Shenzhen Party secretary Liu Yupu urged his colleagues in a recent official meeting in Shenzhen to develop both the "vision" (*shi*) and "guts" (*dan*) necessary to pursue bolder political reforms. According to Liu, the word "vision" means that one should adopt a broad and long-term perspective about China's future, while the word "guts" means that one should not be afraid of breaking some ideological taboos or crossing into previously "forbidden zones" (*jingqu*).²⁸ In the words of a prominent Chinese scholar, "new thoughts and new ideas should herald new actions."²⁹

During the first two months of his tenure in Guangdong, Wang Yang indeed made many bold statements. In a recent provincial People's Congress meeting in Guangdong, Wang criticized his colleagues in the province for their narrow concentration on economic matters without a broader perspective about the importance of social, political, cultural, and environmental developments in the province. He considered such a narrow focus on economic development to be similar to the obsession with ideological matters of former Party leader Hua Guofeng.³⁰ Wang also stated that Guangdong should not only aim to surpass the four East Asian dragons (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) economically, but should also aim to catch up with them in terms of governance.

This, of course, does not mean that Wang Yang views economic growth in the province as unimportant. In fact, soon after the Spring Festival this year, Wang led a 70-person delegation of Guangdong leaders to visit Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu with the aim of learning about the economic dynamics of the lower Yangtze River region. The delegation included Huang Huahua, Liu Yupu, Xiao Zhiheng, Lin Xiong, three vice governors, and other senior leaders.³¹ Wang has also spent a good deal of time visiting the

various counties in Guangdong to investigate their economic conditions. In his visit to the northern mountain areas of Guangdong, for example, Wang expressed his “astonishment” about the enormous economic disparities within the province.³²

The main worry for Wang Yang and other like-minded leaders in Guangdong, however, is that local officials have become complacent and out of touch with the public, lacking what Wang has called “crisis consciousness” (*youhuan yishi*).³³ One of the proactive measures for connecting with the public is, of course, through the Internet. By the end of 2007, Guangdong had a total of 25 million Internet subscribers, accounting for 15 percent of the country, and companies and individuals that play host to about 300,000 websites. Measured by both the numbers of Internet users and the number of websites hosted, the province ranked number one in the country. On the eve of the 2008 Spring Festival, Wang Yang and Governor Huang Huahua circulated a public letter to Internet users in Guangdong, stating that suggestions and criticisms provided by Internet subscribers should be part of the basis for the provincial government’s public policy decisions.³⁴

Many of Wang Yang’s actions since his arrival to Guangdong are in sharp contrast to those of his predecessor Zhang Dejiang. It is interesting to note that under Zhang, several outspoken journalists and editors were arrested on various charges. For example, Yu Huafeng, deputy editor of *Southern Metropolis Daily*, received a 12-year jail sentence on corruption charges. In February 2008, Yu Huafeng was released from prison, eight years before his jail term expired. It is not clear whether Wang Yang played a direct role in Yu’s early release, but this is an encouraging sign for a more open and more liberal political environment in the province.

Final Thoughts

Why should China pursue bolder political reforms? Are top Chinese leaders such as Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, or local leaders such as Wang Yang and Liu Yupu, sincere when they state that China should adopt a more democratic political system? These are some of the questions on many people’s minds. In his recent interview with the Guangdong-based newspaper *Southern Weekend*, the distinguished professor of sociology at Tsinghua University Sun Liping offered a compelling answer to these questions. He made an interesting comparison between the United States and China:

When President Bush launched the war against Iraq, several million Americans went to the streets to protest against the war, but no one would say that, due to this large public demonstration, the American political system was on the verge of collapse. By contrast, when just several dozen Chinese migrant workers went to the streets to protest their employer’s failure to pay their wages, many observers thought this sort of protest would undermine the political stability of China.³⁵

The contrast between these two cases, according to Sun, reveals serious deficiencies in China's political system, which appears to be unable to properly manage internal tensions and disputes. In response, Sun called for the establishment of a more accountable and legitimate government. Of course, many national and local leaders in China probably do not share Sun's view because of their worldviews or political interests. But it is reasonable to assume that some Chinese leaders may make the same comparison and reach the same conclusions that Professor Sun did.

The recent political discourse about the need for democracy and the official rhetoric about a new wave of "thought emancipation" and political reform seem to echo Sun's argument. Systemic political reforms in China will not be easy. It is not surprising that Wang Yang used the term "bloody road" to characterize any such prospective political transition. It is conceivable that reform-minded top leaders want support from the political establishment and the general public. They also need to form a capable and committed provincial leadership team in some localities such as Guangdong to carry out political experiments. With the rise to prominence of Hu's protégés in the Guangdong leadership, the province that once set the pace for China's economic reforms seems poised to serve as the site of another giant experiment, this time on the political front.

Notes

¹ The author is indebted to Yinseng Li for his research assistance. The author also thanks Christina Culver and Scott W. Harold for suggesting ways in which to clarify the article.

² Historically, the 1911 Nationalist Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen produced many leaders with Guangdong origins. Some attended the famous Whampoa Military Academy in Guangzhou. In addition, a large number of foreign-educated Chinese nationals who later joined the government of the Republic of China also originated in Guangdong. For example, a study of prominent foreign-educated Chinese between 1900 and 1949 showed that 60 percent of them were natives of one of the three coastal provinces of Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu. See Zhang Yuwa, "Returned Chinese Students from America and the Chinese Leadership 1846–1949," *Chinese Studies in History* 35, no. 3 (spring 2002): 81.

³ They include Standing Committee members Tao Zhu and Li Changchun, and Politburo members Wei Guoqing, Xi Zhongxun, Xie Fei, Zhang Gaoli, and Wang Qishan.

⁴ Cheng Li, "Emerging Patterns of Power Sharing: Inland Hu vs. Coastal Zeng?" *Asia Program Report* (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars), no. 105 (September 2002): 28–34.

⁵ According to some China analysts, Zhang Dejiang, for example, made a very favorable impression on Jiang Zemin when Zhang escorted him on a visit to North Korea in 1990. Zhang received his undergraduate education in North Korea in 1978–1980. See Gao Xin, *Lingdao Zhongguo de xinrenwu: Zhongguo shiliujie zhengzhiju weiyuan* (China's New Top Leaders: Biographies of the Members of China's 16th Politburo). Hong Kong: Mirror Books, 2003, vol. 2, pp. 558–559.

⁶ For more discussion on Deng's southern journey, see Zhao Suisheng, "Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour: Elite Politics in Post-Tiananmen China." *Asian Survey* 33, no. 8 (August 1993): 739–756.

⁷ For further discussion of these problems, see Cheng Li, "Think National, Blame Local: Central-Provincial Dynamics in the Hu Era," *China Leadership Monitor* 17 (Winter 2006); and Philip P. Pan, "In China, an Editor Triumphs, and Fails," *Washington Post*, 1 August 2004, p. A01.

⁸ Wang Jianming, "Zhonggong faqi disanci sixiang jiefang yundong" [China launches the third movement of ideological emancipation], <http://www.chinesenewsnet.com>, 14 January 2008.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Pan Xiaotao, “*Xianming nanxia: Wang Yang zai Guangdong suoshou de xiamawei*” (With Hu’s order, Wang comes to the South: Local challenges confronting Wang Yang in Guangdong). *Yazhou shibao* (Asia Times), 8 January 2008.

¹¹ Wang, “*Zhonggong faqi disanzi sixiang jiefang yundong*.”

¹² Hu and Wang have many things in common. Both are natives of Anhui, both come from a humble family background, both lost a parent when they were teenagers, and both advanced their careers through the CCYL. Hu and Wang first knew each other when Hu was in charge of the CCYL Central Committee and Wang was deputy secretary of the Anhui Provincial CCYL Committee in the early 1980s.

¹³ It was reported that when Wang served as mayor of Tongling, Deng Xiaoping once endorsed his creative ideas for economic reforms and leadership capacity. See Pan, “*Xianming nanxia*.”

¹⁴ Ever since the economic reforms began in 1978, Guangdong leaders typically bargained with the national leadership about how much revenue the province should contribute to the national coffers. According to Chen Kaizhi, former deputy chief of staff of the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee, in 1978 top Guangdong officials and central government leaders negotiated in Beijing about the amount of revenue for 25 days. The central government asked for 1.3 billion yuan, but Guangdong was only willing to give 1 billion yuan. In the end, Hua Guofeng, then premier of the State Council, cut a deal for 1.1 billion yuan. See Chen Kaizhi, “*Jiangshu Guangdong gaige kaifang de xinsuan quzhi*” (The stories about the arduous experiences of reforms and opening in Guangdong); and <http://news.sohu.com/20080118/n254729730.shtml>.

¹⁵ *Shijie ribao*, 17 September 1997, p.1; and *South China Morning Post*, 16 September 1997, p. 1.

¹⁶ For a discussion of how Li Changchun dealt with the Guangdong local officials, see Gao Xin, *Xiangfu Guangdong bang* [Taming the Guangdong gang]. Hong Kong: Mingjing chubanshe, 2000. Also see Ding Wang, *Li Changchun yu Guangdong zhengtan—Guangdong jiebanqun, quyu jingji he zuqun wenhua* (Li Changchun and Guangdong political scene: The Guangdong successors, regional economics and the culture of ethnic groups), 2nd edition. (Hong Kong, Celebrities Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Tian Shuangyue and Zhou Jiong, “*Guangdong shengwei quanhui wushi duoming daibiao quexi, Wang Yang paohong huifeng*” [Wang Yang expresses his anger about the absence of 50 delegates for the provincial Party congress], *Nanfang dushibao* (Southern Metropolis Daily), 27 December 2007, p. 1.

¹⁸ See <http://news.sohu.com/20071204/n253792608.shtml>, 4 December 2007.

¹⁹ The two localized officials are Guangzhou Party secretary Zhu Xiaodan and vice governor Tong Xing.

²⁰ See http://9-joy.com/?action_viewnews_itemid_20559.html, 24 November 2007.

²¹ For example, see Cheng Li, “Will China’s ‘Lost Generation’ Find a Path to Democracy?” in Cheng Li, ed., *China’s Changing Political Landscape: Prospects for Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), pp. 113–114; Shi Zhihong, “*Dangde shiqida yu xinqidian shang xinde sixiang jiefang*” (The 17th Party Congress and the New Wave of Thought Emancipation), *Jiefang ribao* (Liberation Daily), 5 January 2008, p. 7; and Chris Buckley, “Elite China Think-tank Issues Political Reform Blueprint,” <http://www.reuters.com>, accessed 18 February 2008.

²² Wang, “*Zhonggong faqi disanzi sixiang jiefang yundong*.”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *Yangcheng wanbao* (Guangzhou Evening News), 19 February 2007.

²⁶ *Renmin ribao* (People’s Daily), 20 September 2005, p. 2.

²⁷ See <http://news.sohu.com/20080219/n255223638.shtml>.

²⁸ *Renmin ribao* (People’s Daily), 17 January 2008, p. 1.

²⁹ Shi Zhihong, “*Dangde shiqida yu xinqidian shang xinde sixiang jiefang*.”

³⁰ *Shijie ribao* (World Journal), 20 January 2008, p. A9.

³¹ *Diyi cajing ribao* (The First Economic and Financial News), 22 February 2008.

³² Pan, “*Xianming nanxia*.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See <http://www.xinhuanet.com>, 5 February 2008.

³⁵ *Nanfang zhousuo* (Southern Weekend), 22 December 2007, p. 1.