

Zhao Leji 赵乐际

Born 1957



Current Positions

- Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (2017–present)
- Member of the Politburo Standing Committee (2017–present)
- Director of the Central Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee (2012–present)
- Deputy Head of the Central Leading Group for Party Building Work (2012–present)
- Deputy Head of the Central Leading Group for Inspection Work (2012–present)
- Member of the Politburo (2012–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (2002–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Zhao Leji was born on March 8, 1957, in Xining City, Qinghai Province. His ancestral home is Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, and his parents served as cadres who moved from Xi'an to support frontier work in economically disadvantaged Qinghai. Zhao joined the CCP in 1975. He was a “sent-down youth” at an agricultural commune in Qinghai’s Guide County during the Cultural Revolution (1974–75).ⁱ He received an undergraduate degree in philosophy from Peking University in Beijing (1977–80) and was part of the last class comprised of the so-called “worker-peasant-soldier students.” Zhao also attended the graduate program in currency and banking at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (1996–98) and the graduate program in politics at the Central Party School (2002–05), both via part-time studies.

In the Department of Commerce of the Qinghai provincial government, Zhao served as a communications officer (1975–77) and as a clerk in the political division (1980–82). Between 1980 and 1983, he served in various roles within the Qinghai Provincial Commerce School, namely instructor, Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) secretary, and deputy head of the dean’s office. Zhao continued to advance his career in Qinghai, where he served as deputy party secretary of the political division and CCYL secretary of the Commerce Department (1983–84). He then was general manager and party secretary of the Electronic and Chemical Corporation of Qinghai (1984–86) before serving as deputy director and deputy party secretary (1986–91) and then director and party secretary (1986–93) of the Department of Commerce in the Qinghai provincial government. Next, he was promoted to assistant governor (1993–94) and then vice-governor (1994–97) of Qinghai Province. Finally, he served as party secretary of Xining City (1997–99), governor of Qinghai (2000–03), and party secretary of Qinghai (2003–07). Zhao was only 42 years old when he first took the post of Qinghai governor in 2000, becoming the youngest governor in the country. When he was promoted to party secretary, he became the country’s youngest provincial party secretary. After Qinghai, Zhao was transferred to Shaanxi Province, where he served as party secretary (2007–12). He was first elected to the Central Committee as a full member at the 16th Party Congress in 2002.

Family and Patron-Client Ties

Like Xi Jinping, Zhao Leji has a strong “Shaanxi connection.” His father was a native of Xi’an and served as a department-level official. According to some unverified sources, Xi Jinping’s father, Xi Zhongxun, was close friends with Zhao Leji’s father.ⁱⁱ As a native of Shaanxi, Zhao speaks with a strong regional accent. Some analysts have characterized him as the “spokesperson” of Xi Jinping’s Shaanxi

Gang.ⁱⁱⁱ Zhao served as Shaanxi party secretary from 2007 to 2012 before moving to Beijing to head the Central Organization Department. His brother, Zhao Leqin, also served as a leader in Shaanxi for more than two decades, holding posts such as party secretary of Shanyang County, deputy director of the Department of Transportation in the Shaanxi provincial government, and mayor of Hanzhong. Zhao Leqin was transferred from Shaanxi to Guangxi a few months after his brother was appointed provincial party secretary of Shaanxi. In January 2013, he was appointed party secretary of Guilin City, Guangxi. Zhao Leqin is a delegate to the 19th Party Congress.

The Central Organization Department makes appointments for 4,000 senior positions in the party, government, military, state-owned enterprises, and other key institutions.^{iv} As head of that department, Zhao Leji has helped promote many of Xi Jinping's protégés and like-minded officials to important posts.

Political Prospects and Policy Preferences

Zhao has been seen as a rising star in the Chinese provincial leadership for more than a decade. Having served as provincial party secretary in both Qinghai and Shaanxi in the Hu Jintao era and, now, having overseen personnel appointments during Xi's first term, Zhao was expected to obtain a seat on the 19th Politburo Standing Committee. In addition, he was appointed to the key role of secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. It should be noted that Zhao is seven years younger than Li Zhanshu. Therefore, he can serve in the Politburo Standing Committee for this term and the subsequent term, whereas Li Zhanshu's age limits him to a single term. Based on his previous work experience, Zhao is well positioned on the policy front to carry out several of Xi's long-standing objectives: the alleviation of poverty and the strict enforcement of regulations on party officials.

Compiled by Cheng Li and the staff of the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings

Notes:

ⁱ "Sent-down youth" (插队知青) refers to young, educated urbanites who left their home cities to serve as manual laborers in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.

ⁱⁱ Unverified sources have stated that Zhao Leji's father was Zhao Shoushan, who served as Shaanxi governor in the 1950s. But Zhao Shoushan, who was born in 1894, seems too old to have been Zhao Leji's father. Zhao Shoushan's close relationship with Xi Zhongxun, however, is well documented. Li Jingning, "Xi Zhongxun and Zhao Shoushan" [Xi Zhongxun he Zhao Shoushan], *Glory World [Yanhuang shijie]*, No. 3, 2012; also see <http://news.ifeng.com/history/zhongguoxiandaishi/detail201301/23/215133950.shtml>. According to another unverified source, Zhao's father used to be president of the Shaanxi Education Publishing House. See Xiang Jiangyu, *Xi Jinping's Team* [习近平的团队] (New York: Mirror Books, 2013), p. 235.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 230. See also Yang Qingxi and Xia Fei, *Provincial chiefs go to Beijing for the 18th Party Congress* [18大诸侯进京] (New York: Mirror Books, 2010).

^{iv} For instance, Zhao Leji has aggressively promoted members of the Shaanxi Gang to important leadership posts. See Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2016), pp. 316–19.