

Zhao Leji 赵乐际

Born 1957



Current Positions

- Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) (2017–present)
- Member of the 19th Politburo Standing Committee (2017–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Deepening Pilot Reform of the National Surveillance System (2017–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Inspection Work (2017–present)
- Deputy Head of the Central Leading Group for Party Building Work (2012–present)
- Member of the Politburo (2012–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (2002–present)
- Member of the CCDI (2017–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 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1975. He was a “sent-down youth” at an agricultural commune in Qinghai’s Guide County during the Cultural Revolution (1974–75).¹ He received an undergraduate degree in philosophy from Peking University in Beijing (1977–80) and was part of the last class comprised of “worker-peasant-soldier students.” Zhao also attended two graduate programs via part-time studies: one in currency and banking at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (1996–98) and the other in politics at the Central Party School (2002–05).

Zhao joined the Qinghai provincial government’s Department of Commerce first as a communications officer (1975–77) and then as a clerk in the political division (1980–82). Between 1980 and 1983, he held various positions within the Qinghai Provincial Commerce School, including instructor, secretary of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL), and deputy head of the dean’s office. Zhao continued to advance his career in Qinghai, returning to the Department of Commerce as deputy party secretary of the political division and as CCYL secretary (1983–84). He then was general manager and party secretary of the Electronic and Chemical Corporation of Qinghai (1984–86) before serving in the Qinghai provincial government’s Department of Commerce as deputy director and deputy party secretary (1986–91) and then director and party secretary (1991–94). 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) and concurrently as deputy party secretary and governor of Qinghai (2000–03), becoming the youngest governor in the country at the age of 42. He then served as party secretary of Qinghai (2003–07).

After Qinghai, Zhao was transferred to Shaanxi Province, where he served as party secretary (2007–12). He then served as director of the Central Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee (2012–17). 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, Zhao Ximin, was a native of Xi’an who studied in the Soviet Union and, like his son, worked in Qinghai for many years. Zhao Ximin served as vice-president and deputy editor of *Qinghai Daily*, president of Shaanxi People’s

Education Publishing House, and deputy head of Haixi Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.² According to unverified sources, Xi Jinping’s father, Xi Zhongxun, was a close friend of Zhao Leji’s grandfather’s brother, Zhao Shoushan, who was chairman of Qinghai and governor of Shaanxi in the early years of the PRC.³ 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.”⁴ Moreover, Zhao served as Shaanxi party secretary from 2007 to 2012.

Zhao left Shaanxi for Beijing in order to lead the Central Organization Department, which makes appointments for 4,000 senior positions in the party, government, military, state-owned enterprises, and other key institutions.⁵ As head of that department, Zhao Leji helped promote many of Xi Jinping’s protégés and like-minded officials to important posts during Xi’s first term.

Zhao Leji has three siblings. His younger 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 became Shaanxi’s provincial party secretary. In January 2013, he was appointed party secretary of Guilin City, Guangxi. Zhao Leqin was also a delegate to the 19th Party Congress. Zhao Leqin is currently vice chairman of Qinghai’s provincial people’s congress (2018–present).

Policy Preferences and Political Prospects

Based on his previous work experience, Zhao Leji is well positioned on the policy front to carry out several of Xi’s long-standing objectives: poverty alleviation, strict enforcement of regulations on party officials, and establishment of a national supervision system.

Zhao has been a rising star in Chinese leadership for two decades: during the Hu Jintao era, Zhao served as a provincial party secretary in Qinghai and Shaanxi. Zhao’s tenure in Qinghai was marked by rapid economic growth and a tripling of the province’s GDP. Zhao is believed to take a soft approach to ethnic minority issues and has taken on environmentally conscious investment projects. During Xi’s first term, Zhao oversaw key personnel appointments. Now in charge of party discipline and supervision, Zhao has played a central role in Xi’s second term. The youngest member of the Politburo Standing Committee, Zhao will likely serve another five-year term. However, his dearth of leadership experience in foreign affairs and the State Council may undermine his chances of becoming the next premier or a successor to Xi Jinping. Nevertheless, he may serve as chairman of the National People’s Congress (NPC) or chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in 2023.

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

Notes:

¹ “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.

² See Xiang Jianguo, *Xi Jinping’s Team* [习近平的团队] (New York: Mirror Books, 2013), p. 235.

³ Zhao Shoushan’s close relationship with Xi Zhongxun 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://www.todayonhistory.com/people/201611/19508.html>.

⁴ *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).

⁵ 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: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), pp. 316–19.