

The 2012-2013 leadership change in China and the evolution of China's succession system

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(This is an initial draft.)

Abstract

China's 2012-2013 transition of power is by now complete and it has been established that China's ruling CCP changes its leadership every 10 years. The previous 2002-2003 change of leadership from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao was considered the first smooth and regular transition of power in the history of the PRC. While largely following an established pattern, the recent leadership change, however, has illustrated a few differences in procedure that are politically quite significant. The succession system has been improved and better consolidated. The influence of the retired leaders, especially Jiang Zemin, appears to be significantly weakened, and Xi Jinping, the new leader, appears to be in a stronger position than Hu Jintao when Hu took over the leadership in 2003, due partly to the changes that occurred in the current succession process. This paper will analyze the gradual consolidation of a formally established procedure for China's top leadership succession, featured by fixed five-year term of office for a maximum two consecutive terms and the choice of a successor through a gradually broadening elite consensus. I will compare the recent leadership change with the previous one, analyze the changes and discuss their political implications.

Key words

China, political development, transition of power, succession system, fixed term of office, political reform.

Xi Jinping's ascendance to power

At the 17th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held in October 2007, Xi Jinping became a member of the powerful Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). In the subsequent 11th National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2008, he became vice-president of the People Republic of China (PRC), indicating that he was chosen to be successor to President Hu Jintao. During a CCP Central Committee meeting held in October 2010, Xi was promoted to the position of vice-chairman of the CCP's Central Military Commission (CMC), another clear indication that he was chosen to be the next leader of the PRC. The transition of power officially took place in two steps: At the party's 18th national congress in November 2012, Xi became the general secretary of the CCP and the chairman of the CMC. At the 12th National People's Congress held in March 2013, he was elected president of the PRC and chairman of the PRC's Central Military Commission.

Xi's ascendance to power was apparently similar to Hu Jintao's ascendance to power ten year's earlier, but also showed some important differences, which indicated consolidation of an established procedure for China's top leadership succession, featured by fixed five-year terms of office for maximum two consecutive terms and the choice of a successor through elite consensus and elections within top level party and state institutions. Even though it is an aspect of China's much discredited political reform and the consolidation of this system of succession may in the short term contribute to "authoritarian durability", this is on the whole a positive development because, in important ways, it may also prepare China for an eventual and relatively smooth transition to a Chinese-style democracy, thus contributing to China's long-term political stability.

Scholarly discussions

A wide-spread mentality among Western scholars on contemporary Chinese politics, described by Gunter Schubert as “established wisdom” and by Li Cheng as “deep-rooted cynicism”, is to view Chinese regime as a historical anachronism and to discredit regime-initiated political reform measures, which are generally considered too limited to be significant and have only resulted in minor changes to the overall political system of the Leninist party-state. In addition, the reform measures aim at strengthening the one party rule rather than taking steps towards developing a Western style democracy, whereas the legitimacy of the regime arguable has already been lost and cannot really be regained through limited reforms.¹ A few scholars, however, have noticed China’s “authoritarian durability” and consider it a challenge to the Western idea of social and economic modernization leading to political democratization. For example, Andrew Nathan’s analysis of the measures taken by China’s leadership to reform its political system concluded that such measures had contributed to the institutionalization of the authoritarian system, thus making it stable and resilient. He warned that, rather than a transition to democracy, we might be seeing the consolidation of authoritarianism, making it “a viable regime form even under conditions of advanced modernization and integration with the global economy.”² Bruce Gilley agreed that “creeping democracy” is unlikely to occur in China but disagreed with Nathan’s idea of authoritarian resilience resulting from institutionalization. He regarded China’s political reform measures that were supposed to develop a limited degree of democracy as very superficial and ineffective, and argued that “the logic of concentrated power” made it difficult for the authoritarian state to become institutionalized and consequently cursed China into the cycles of institutional consolidation and breakdown. He concluded that the Chinese state was essentially maintained by coercive power and that a democratic breakthrough was more likely to occur during the phase of institutional breakdown, like what happened in 1989.³

A few Western scholars, however, have expressed positive opinions on China's political reforms. For example, Suzanne Ogden observed the emergence of "inklings of democracy" out of China's political reform process. She concluded that China is actually democratizing in its own way, according to its own needs, and at its own relatively comfortable pace.⁴ John Thornton noticed that China's top leaders had repeatedly promoted a kind of Chinese-style democracy, and that some significant developments had occurred in implementing some competitive elections both at lower levels of government and within the ruling Chinese Communist Party. He also pointed out that progress had been made in China's judicial system, which began to provide ordinary citizens with legal recourse against government officials, and that commercialization of the press had resulted in a degree of press freedom.⁵ Gunter Schubert argued that the measures of political reform had made the Chinese government "more open and more accountable, even more democratic," and had enhanced the legitimacy of the ruling regime.⁶ A basic view taken in this paper is that the transition from authoritarianism to democracy is both a continuum involving many steps, which may seem small and yet significant, and a general trend in any modernizing societies, including China, which is not necessarily stuck with authoritarianism. The institutionalization of the leadership succession system is one of such small steps, which is significant in itself and, in combination with other small steps, indicates China's gradual decline of authoritarianism and transition towards democracy.

In his classical account, Samuel Huntington pointed out that modernizing societies needed to develop strong government institutions to maintain social order before they were able to exercise democratic control of government. In other words, democratization requires political stability and the institutionalization of government organizations and procedures is the foundation of political stability.⁷ Cases of democratization that have occurred in East Asia, Eastern Europe and are now occurring in the Arab world suggest that the degree of

institutionalization is related to the degree of smoothness of political transition: whether it is chaotic and violent or relatively peaceful and orderly. Kenneth Lieberthal held that the lack of institutionalization of major government organizations had been a persistent problem in China from the Mao Zedong era to the Deng Xiaoping era.⁸ The current political system in China, though authoritarian, does contain what Suzanne Ogden refers to as the “inklings of democracy.” The institutionalization of the democratic elements within the system could eventually pave the way for a relatively smooth transition to democracy.

Evolution of the succession system from Mao to Hu

Huntington suggests that the degree of institutionalization is strongly related to the “generational age” of an organization: how many times it has gone through an orderly leadership change.⁹ Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, China’s political leadership has gone through five rounds of successions, four of which are inter-generational successions. The transition from the 3rd to the 4th generation of leadership, which occurred in 2002-2003, was the first peaceful and orderly transition, and generally regarded as indicating the beginning of the system’s institutionalization. The recent transition to the 5th generation of leadership is likely to further consolidate the leadership succession system, making it not only peaceful and orderly, but more regular and in accordance with an established procedure and timetable.

Table 1: PRC’s top leaders and their tenures

Name	tenure	How the tenure ends
Mao Zedong (G1)*	1949—1976	Died in office
Liu Shaoqi	1959—66	Served as state president until the outbreak of the cultural revolution, when he was purged.
Hua Guofeng	1976—1981	Became a figurehead but completed one 5-year term
Deng Xiaoping (G2)*	1979—around the mid-1990s	Became <i>de facto</i> leader of China without holding top party or state title and officially retired in 1989 but

		continued to hold real power for a few years.
Hu Yaobang	1980—86	A figurehead leader and Deng’s protégé, demoted in the middle of his second term.
Zhao Ziyang	1987—89	A figurehead leader and Deng’s protégé, ousted as a result of the 1989 social unrests, and placed under house arrest.
Jiang Zeming (G3)*	1989—2002	Largely a regular retirement but remained politically influential behind the scene.
Hu Jintao (G4)*	2003—(2012)	Full retirement in March 2013.

*The officially recognized four generations of top leaders.

Mao was largely a personal dictator who failed to set up a succession system. His twenty-seven years of rule was marked by political turbulence and succession crises. Three attempts were made to designate someone to be his successor. All eventually ended in failure. In 1959, amid catastrophic failures of his effort to accelerate China’s economic development through a mass mobilization known as the “Great Leap Forward,” he chose Liu Shaoqi to replace himself as president of the PRC, while he himself continued to be chairman of the ruling CCP and its CMC. This was generally viewed as his first attempt to designate someone as his successor. Seven years later, however, Mao launched the “cultural revolution” and named Liu his number one political enemy. Liu was purged from the leadership, imprisoned in 1967 and died in prison two years later. Mao then called a CCP national congress in 1969, during which Lin Biao, a vice-chairman of the CMC and the minister of defense, was officially designated the successor to Mao. Lin quickly lost Mao’s favour when he wanted to become the president of China, a title that Mao wanted to abolish. In desperation, Lin allegedly tried to assassinate Mao in 1971 and plot was discovered and failed. Lin fled the country in a military airplane, which crashed in Mongolia and killed everyone on board. A few months before Mao’s death, he chose Hua Guofeng to succeed him by making him vice chairman of the CCP and of the CMC, and the premier of the State Council—China’s central cabinet government.

After the death of Mao in 1976, Hua took over Mao's position as the chairman of the CCP and of the CMC, while keeping his position as Chinese premier. However, Hua's position as the top leader was soon challenged by a resurgent Deng Xiaoping, who had been previously purged by Mao. At a top level showdown between the two rival factions in 1978, Hua was totally defeated and saw all of his key supporters in the CCP's Politburo removed from office. In 1980, Deng restored the office of the CCP's general secretary, a position he once held but was abolished by Mao after he was purged, and named his key protégé Hu Yaobang the party's general secretary, effectively making the party chairman Hua Guofeng a figurehead leader of the ruling party. In the same year, the State Council premier's position was taken from Hua and given to Zhao Ziyang, another key protégé of Deng Xiaoping. Deng was generous enough to allow Hua to retire in 1981 after completing his five-term as chairman of the CCP and of the CMC. After that, Deng took over the title of the CMC chairman, and in 1982 abolished the office of the CCP chairman. (Hu Yaobang was the CCP chairman briefly after Hua's retirement.)

Deng was, from 1979 to the mid-1990s, the generally recognized top leader of China, even though he preferred not to hold the title of the CCP's general secretary or of the state president. He held the position of the CMC chairman until 1989, which was probably necessary for leadership stability. During his informal tenure as the leader of China, Deng made strenuous effort to establish the five-year term of office. In 1982, he changed the CCP's party constitution to set up five-year term of office for the party's Central Committee and the leading bodies elected by the Central Committee—the Politburo, its Standing Committee and the party's general secretary. In the same year, China's state constitution was amended to limit the term of office for the top state and government positions, including the head of state, the head of government and the chair of the National People's Congress (NPC), to a maximum two consecutive five-year terms. The new constitution restored the office of the state president, which in the 1980s was

largely a ceremonial position held by senior politicians in close association with Deng. As part of his effort, Deng allowed Hua Guofeng to complete his five-year term as party leader and to enjoy a normal retirement, even though Hua was a defeated rival. When he was urged to assume the position of the party leader, Deng refused by saying that he was too old.¹⁰ Deng's decision to not hold top party or state title himself could be seen as part of his strategy for starting a transition from life-long tenure to fixed term of office in leadership succession, and for setting up age limit to top leadership positions.

Putting the five-year term of office into practice, however, was not easy when the political situation was unstable during the first decade after Deng came to power and launched market oriented economic reforms. Elderly members of the top power elite continued to have strong influence after their retirement and sometimes challenged Deng's policies, if not his position. Protests by university students intensified the rivalry within the CCP leadership. Deng's two key protégés left office in disgrace. Hu Yaobang was ousted before the end of his first five-year term and was replaced by Zhao Ziyang, who managed to stay in office for only two years before he was forced out and placed under house arrest. Jiang Zemin was picked by a consensus of a few elderly politicians to succeed Zhao as the CCP's general secretary after the Tiananmen incident in 1989. In spite of the fact that Deng subsequently resigned from the CMC position and let Jiang take over as the CMC chairman, Jiang was a weak leader overshadowed by Deng, who continued to hold supreme power. In 1992, when Jiang was about to start his first 5-year term, Deng designated Hu Jintao as the future successor to Jiang. This could be seen as his last ditch effort to ensure the establishment of the leadership succession system and, in hindsight, could have been a crucial measure to prevent Jiang from overstaying his term of office. In 1993, Jiang assumed the position of the state president, while Deng, now nearly 90 years old, gradually withdrew himself from public life.

Jiang Zemin's first term of office officially started in 1993, while the three years from 1989 to 1992 was regarded as completing the unfinished term of his disgraced predecessor. When he took over the office of the president in 1993, he became the first person since Mao Zedong to hold simultaneously the top titles of the ruling party, the state and the military. His tenure was not without turbulences caused by factional rivalry within the leadership. He managed to remove a few rivals, notably the party boss of Beijing Chen Xitong who was arrested on corruption charge and the NPC chairman Qiao Shi who stepped down after serving one 5-year term, and consolidated his power. Jiang was, however, confined in his choice of a successor by Deng Xiaoping's choice of Hu Jintao. He allegedly tried to replace Hu with Zeng Qinghong, a close aid to himself, but failed,¹¹ since his position among the top power elite was not as strong as Deng Xiaoping used to be. He was more like the first among equals in a collective leadership that made key decisions through consensus, and the consensus among the leading elite was that Hu Jintao would succeed him when he completed his second term in 2002. An informal rule established at the end of Jiang's first term, which was used to remove Qiao Shi after Qiao completed one term as the NPC chairman, was that no senior leaders should be more than 70 years old entering into the second 5-year term of office.¹² Premier Zhu Rongji stepped down with Jiang Zemin in 2002 after finishing one five-year term partly because of the age limit. Another informal rule on age limit set up by Jiang Zemin was that anyone older than 67 would not be chosen as a member of the PSC at the beginning of a 5-year term. These rules on age limits have been largely followed since then.

In spite of such progress made in limiting the term and the age of top leaders, the idea of maximum two consecutive terms was not quite firmly established during the Jiang Zemin era. Jiang himself was over 70 when he set up that age limit for other PSC members. He served as the party leader for 13 years and as CMC chairman for 15 years, while Li Peng served one term as

the NPC chairman after two terms as the State Council premier. Even though the two-term limit so far does not formally apply to the party's general secretary and the CMC chairman, and the constitution does not say if a person cannot serve in one top position after serving two terms in another, such practices could jeopardize the principle of maximum two consecutive terms for top leaders. Russian president Putin's switch from president to prime minister back to president comes to mind.

The succession from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao in 2002/2003 is considered the first peaceful and orderly transition of power in the history of the PRC. However, that transition was not a perfect one due to the fact that when Hu took over the party and the state titles, Jiang decided to continue holding the position of the CMC chairman. He didn't retire from the position until September 2004. There is no constitutional limit on the term of office for the CMC chairman. Mao Zedong held the position until his death. Deng Xiaoping held it while letting his protégés hold party and state positions. China's state media reported that Jiang's resignation in 2004 followed the precedent established by Deng Xiaoping in 1989, when Deng stepped down from the CMC position.¹³ The difference between Deng and Jiang was that Deng was a senior military commander during the war years and had deep roots in the Chinese military, whereas Jiang was entirely a civilian. Jiang himself explained that he had wanted to step down from the CMC position when he transferred the party and the state positions to Hu in 2002-2003, but was advised to stay by the CCP's central leadership.¹⁴ There were, however, reports that Jiang's holding on to the CMC position resulted in criticisms among the political elite, and some senior military commanders urged him to step down.¹⁵ What was established by Jiang, apart from the age limits, was the practice of the ruling party leader serving as both the head of state and the leader of the military. Jiang also set the precedent of the top leader resigning from the party and the state positions in quick succession—the CPP congress is always held 4-5 months before the

National People's Congress, which would contribute to limiting the party leader's position to two consecutive 5-year terms as well, even though the CCP constitution provides no such limit.

There are different explanations of the smoothness of the transition from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao. One opinion is that it was due to the higher degree of institutionalization of the system, resulting in increasingly "norm-bound succession politics."¹⁶ The opposite view is that succession politics remained highly personal since Hu was designated by the powerful patriarch Deng Xiaoping as the successor to Jiang as early as 1992, when Jiang was just beginning his first term. The personal nature of the succession politics was also demonstrated by the selection of new PSC members, which was dominated by three top leaders and two retired and yet highly influential former Politburo members, rather than following the formal procedure, which demands that the selection should be made by the Central Committee. Personal and factional loyalty remained to be a big factor in elite promotion.¹⁷ One might argue that Deng's designation of Hu as Jiang's successor could have prevented Jiang from overstaying his term, thus contributing to establishing the fixed term of office, and that, even in Western democracies, formal procedures is largely used to legitimize decisions made by top leaders, which does not necessarily mean personal politics. What is important is that the leaders do follow established procedures in their decision-making.

The transition of power 2012-2013

Hu's tenure, which started in 2003, was generally more stable politically than Jiang's, even though the regime weathered a series of unexpected and even catastrophic events, such as the SARS crisis in 2003, the huge earthquake in 2008, the ethnic riot in Xinjiang in 2009, etc. There was no significant top-level political rivalry as had occurred during Jiang Zemin's tenure, until the Bo Xilai incident during the last year of Hu Jintao's tenure, and Bo's ambition was not

to challenge Hu Jintao or even the successor Xi Jinping, but to get a seat in the next PSC. The process of leadership change from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping was both smooth and thorough, achieving a greater degree of institutionalization and firmly establishing the fixed term of office.

The recent transition of power was similar to what happened ten years earlier in that it took place within the same institutional framework. However, it also had some significant differences from the previous leadership change. The designated successors followed a similar path in their ascendance to power. Hu and Xi were both chosen to be vice-president of the PRC at the beginning of the second-term of their predecessor, and served as vice-president for one 5-year term before becoming president. Serving as vice-president during the current leader's second term became an indication of being designated as the successor. Another indication was their promotion to the position of vice-chairman of the CMC in the middle of the current leader's second term, which was viewed as a necessary confirmation of the status as the designated successor. Hu Jintao was appointed vice chairman of the CMC three years before he took over the party and state leadership. Xi Jinping was appointed vice chairman of the CMC two years before the planned succession. Xi's promotion to CMC vice chairmanship was reportedly delayed by one year at his own request.¹⁸ The exact timing of this appointment may not be significant so long as the designated successor is appointed to the position some time before the scheduled succession.

Meanwhile, several things stood out to make the recent transition of power quite different from ten years earlier. First of all, it was a complete transition. Hu Jintao stepped down from all of his three positions and handed them over to Xi Jinping. Hu apparently learned a lesson from Jiang's negative example and decided, quite wisely, that the best course of action was to step down from the CMC position as well. This may be his most important political legacy. Hu, just like Jiang, was a civilian leader with no military background, and Jiang's example had shown

that, once he retired from the party and state leadership, his CMC position became politically unnecessary and tarnished both his own reputation and an otherwise perfect transition of power. Hu's tenure consequently was much more regular than Jiang's. Although Jiang served two terms as the head of state, he served two and a half terms as the party leader, and 15 years—equivalent to three terms—as chairman of the CMC, including one and a half years after Hu took over the party and state leadership. Hu, on the other hand, retired from all of his official positions after serving exactly two consecutive terms as both the party leader and the head of state. By serving exactly two 5-year terms and stepping down from all three positions, Hu strengthened the practice of having all three positions held by one person, while limiting the terms of office of all three positions to a maximum two consecutive 5-year terms, even though neither the CPP's constitution nor the constitution of the PRC provide such term limits for the party leader and the CMC chairman.

The Second important difference from the previous transition of power was that Xi Jinping was not designated by a powerful leader to succeed Hu Jintao, in contrast to the fact that Deng Xiaoping designated Hu to succeed Jiang. Hu Jintao was promoted to the PSC at the beginning of Jiang's first term in 1992, while during Hu's first term of office from 2003 to 2007, Xi Jinping was not even a Politburo member. He was promoted to the PSC at the beginning of Hu's second term. It appears that, during the Hu era, no single person was able to exert decisive influence over the selection of the next leader. The selection of Xi as successor was largely the result of a broad consensus within what Lieberthal referred to as the top power elite, whose members include the current leadership body and a few influential retired leaders such as Jiang Zemin.¹⁹

The absence of a strong leader like Deng Xiaoping is likely to result in a more open process for the selection of the successor, since no one has the final say in the selection of the

next leader. It was reported that Xi was not only chosen through the consensus of the power elite, but also selected by an “internal poll” (内部选举) that was conducted among senior government officials at or above the ministerial and provincial levels—a group of about 400 people, mostly members or alternative members of the CCP’s Central Committee. Xi was reportedly quite popular among the senior party and government officials.²⁰ China has been practicing this kind of internal polls since the 1990s for the selection of lower levels of government officials. In recent years, such internal elections have also been adopted in the appointment of party chiefs at lower levels of the CCP organizations. The selection of Xi Jinping was the first time such an internal poll was used in choosing a top leader. It is possible that, without the internal poll, Xi’s main competitor Li Keqiang might have been the more likely candidate for succession, since Li, like Hu Jintao himself, rose from the Communist Youth League²¹ (CYL), and was regarded as a close associate of Hu. Li Keqiang was also promoted to the PSC at the beginning of Hu’s second term, and succeeded premier Wen Jiabao in the recent leadership change.

The result of these recent developments is that the fixed five-year term of office for a maximum two consecutive terms is now firmly established and has now become a primary feature of China’s leadership system. It is a constitutional requirement for top state and government positions, but the requirement has been conventionally extended to the leader of the ruling CCP and the head of the Chinese military, since all three positions are held by one person. Although both Jiang and Hu have been re-appointed for a second term, the system provides a chance for leadership change after one five-year term, and so far there have been quite a few examples of a top leader serving one term only: Zhu Rongji was premier for one term. Qiao Shi was NPC chairman for one term. The leadership selection process, as Nathan pointed out, has become essentially a process of compromise and consensus building within the current leadership.²² The current transition process resulted in the emergence of two leaders-in-waiting

during the second term of the current leadership. One was chosen as the successor to the head of state, and the other was chosen to be the successor to the head of government.

Compromise and consensus building is necessary because the leadership in China today is essentially a collective leadership without a strong man. The leadership body also appears to be “twin-headed”: with both the head of state and the head of government playing influential roles in both domestic and foreign affairs. This conventional arrangement results from an evolutionary process that began during the last decade of the Mao era, when premier Zhou Enlai emerged not only as the man who managed the day-to-day government operations, but also as a centre of stability amid the chaos of the cultural revolution. In the final year of Mao’s rule, Zhou’s popularity clearly exceeded that of Mao, as demonstrated by the mass protest movement against Mao’s wife that occurred on April 5, 1976. The position of the State Council premier has also been strengthened by popular premiers such as Zhao Ziyang in the 1980s and Zhu Rongji in the 1990s. Premier Wen Jiabao was also considered the most popular among the top leaders of Hu Jintao regime. The relationship between these two leaders has become essentially a cooperative division of labour, with the head of state presiding over the policy-making and the head of government being both a major voice in policy-making and in charge of the central policy implementation. There also appears to be a degree of competition and balance of power between them, in that they usually come from, and represent, different factional background, similar to president and vice-president of the United States.

Within the political elite, two major factions—the CYL and the “Red Generation II”²³ (RG-II)—seem to have a balance of power with each other. During the past two decades, the two factions seem to hold the top positions by turns, with each holding one of the two top positions. Hu Jintao came from the CYL, while Xi Jinping is an RG-II. A popular perception is that the RG-IIs are more orientated toward business interests and economic liberalization while the CYL

people are more concerned with issues of social justice. However, their difference in policy and ideology may be exaggerated. The two groups may differ in their family backgrounds and career paths, but their ideological orientations are essentially similar. Key members of both groups are essentially technocrats with strong educational background and have served multiple positions as central government ministers and provincial governors.²⁴ Their handling of government policy-making illustrates pragmatism rather than concerns for ideology. One can expect continuity in major domestic and foreign policies when Xi Jinping takes over from Hu Jintao.

Significance of the fixed-term of office

The fixed term of office and institutionalized succession procedure have been viewed by some Western scholars as a measure that further consolidate China's authoritarian one-party rule. However, if the concepts of authoritarianism and democracy are both viewed in relative terms and as part of a continuum of political development, the establishment of the fixed term of office and a procedure for regular change of government leadership can be considered a step that reduces the relative degree of authoritarianism and increases the relative degree of political liberalization.

The fixed term of office has made China very different from communist regimes in Eastern Europe before the collapse of communism there. The former Soviet Union went through six successions, the first three of which could be considered coups within the power elite resulting in top leaders being brutally purged from the leadership. The following three successions occurred only when the top leader died. Similar situation existed in other communist regimes in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, which were often characterized by personal dictatorships, such as Romania, or even dynastic rule, such as North Korea. Vietnam is the only

other case that has adopted fixed terms of office and regular leadership change following established rules.

In both Eastern Europe and East Asia, fixed terms of office for the top leadership were established only with the democratization of the political system. The establishment of fixed terms of office means regular and peaceful change of leadership. Even though, in China, this is accomplished within the framework of one-party rule, it contributes to political and social stability in significant ways. First of all, this marks the end of personal dictatorship and indicates a degree of political liberalization within the ruling party. China today is no longer under a personal dictatorship as it was during Mao era. A personal dictator that rules for a long time is very likely to suffer from succession crisis and be turned into a target of discontent that not only galvanizes social protests, but triggers rebellion within the ruling elite in times of social instability, leading to highly unstable regime change, like what has happened in the Arab world recently. The fixed term of office is a key difference between China's party-state and the personal dictatorships of Arab world. To a large extent, what has happened in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria and Libya is a succession crisis in the context of personal dictatorships.

Secondly, the regular change of leadership allows the Chinese government greater flexibility in policy-making in response to societal demands, thus heading off some of the potential societal grievances. The various factions within China's ruling party and different institutions of the Chinese government represent a broad spectrum of different policy orientations and societal interests. In China today, important societal interests, such as labor, business, environment, intellectual circles, all have their voices within the CCP leadership, and often express themselves as factional or departmental interests within government. Fixed term of office and regular change of leadership allow better accommodation of different views in policy making to meet societal demands. For example, since Hu came into office in 2003, the government has

adopted many measures to expand social programs and to increase welfare of low income people, indicating a policy orientation different from the previous Jiang Zemin regime, which emphasized economic development and largely ignored social welfare issues, resulting in many grievances in society.

Finally, a well-established fixed term of office will make eventual democratization easier and less painful, for a number of reasons. Ability to have regular, peaceful and orderly change of political leadership is often regarded as a hallmark of democracy and a key difference between democracy and authoritarianism. The establishment of fixed term of office for the top leadership can be viewed as a step toward democracy. In China, there is clear indication that the fixed term of office becomes the rule of the game accepted by all. It becomes impossible to change the rule of the game, since whoever attempted to do so would face the collective opposition of the political elite, the dominant view of the intellectual elite, and the mainstream public opinion.

With the established term of office, the risk of politics is significantly reduced. Elite politics is no longer a cut-throat competition or a matter of personal survival. Top leaders are able to retire gracefully rather than be deposed disgracefully, and to enjoy their retirement free of political risks—something Mr. Mubarak of Egypt would be wishing for. In China, many former state and government leaders are now in politically risk-free retirement, writing and publishing their memoirs and traveling around the country on lecture tours that help sell their book.²⁵ Members of the top power elite are now used to the idea of political power being rotated among different individuals according to an established procedure, and of holding leadership position for a limited term and then turning the power over to whoever is chosen collectively to succeed them.

Consequently, the elite politics becomes less personal and more institutionalized. Top leaders are less motivated by keeping personal powers for as long as possible, and are able to focus more of their attention on maintaining the long-term stability of the political system

through accommodation of both different factions within the ruling party and important societal interests. Hence they become increasingly motivated to a gradual and orderly opening of the political process both inside and outside the ruling party. This is indicated by the growing emphasis in recent years on “intra-party democracy.”²⁶

In conclusion, the fixed term of office is an institutional change that both indicates and facilitates a cultural change—a change of values and perspectives among members of China’s political elite and officialdom. In their effort to seek long-term political stability that goes beyond their own limited terms of office, China’s leaders will likely become more receptive of “creeping democratization.”²⁷ The recent Chinese discourse on the idea of “intra-party democracy” can be seen as indication of such development. In spite of their privileged status, many RG-IIIs have voiced their support for a more open and democratic process both within the CCP and for lower levels of government—by upgrading the current “grassroots democracy”. Hu Deping, a son of Hu Yaobang, a former party general secretary that was purged by the conservatives, emerged as a leading voice in favor of democratic reforms. (reference needed here)

¹ Gunter Schubert, “One-Party Rule and the Question of Legitimacy in Contemporary China: preliminary thoughts on setting up a new research agenda,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no.54 (2008): 191-204. Schubert argued that the impact of China’s political reforms on regime legitimacy is not given sufficient scholarly attention. See also Li Cheng, “Intra-party democracy in China: should we take it seriously?” *China Leadership Monitor* 30 (2009): 1-14.

² Andrew Nathan, “Authoritarian resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 6-17.

³ Bruce Gilley, “The limits of authoritarian resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 18-26.

⁴ Suzanne Ogden, *Inklings of Democracy in China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁵ John L. Thornton, “Long Time Coming: The Prospects for Democracy in China.” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (January/February 2008): 2–22.

⁶ GUNTER SCHUBERT, “One-Party Rule and the Question of Legitimacy in Contemporary China: preliminary thoughts on setting up a new research agenda,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no.54 (2008): 193.

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

⁸ Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2nd edition, 2003).

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, 13-14.

¹⁰ “高层领导新老交替已由先例到制度” (High-level leadership succession: the precedent becomes the system), *China News Weekly* Sept. 27, 2004, <http://www.chinanews.com/news/2004/2004-09-27/26/488478.shtml> (accessed April 11, 2011).

¹¹ In May 2001, a year and a half before his retirement, Jiang wrote a poem that ended with the line “ri po yun tao wan li hong” (The sun breaks through thick clouds and sheds redness for thousands of miles). When the poem was published, it was widely speculated that the “tao” in “yun tao” (thick clouds) referred to Hu Jintao, and the “hong” (redness) referred to Zeng Qinghong, for “tao” is the last character of Hu’s name, while “hong” is the last character of Zeng’s name. The “sun” then must be Jiang himself.

¹² See Andrew Nathan, “Authoritarian resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 8.

¹³ “高层领导新老交替已由先例到制度” (High-level leadership succession: the precedent becomes the system), *China News Weekly*, 27 September 2004, <http://www.chinanews.com/news/2004/2004-09-27/26/488478.shtml> (accessed 11 April 2013).

¹⁴ “江泽民请求辞去中共中央军委主席职务的信” (Jiang Zemin’s letter requesting resignation from the position of the CMC chairman), *China News*, 20 September 2004, <http://www.chinanews.com/news/2004/2004-09-20/26/485980.shtml> (accessed 11 April 2013).

¹⁵ Jiang Xun and Lin Fei, “江澤民倉促下台內幕” (The inside story of Jiang Zemin’s hasty resignation), *Asia Weekly* 18, no. 40 (October 3, 2004), http://www.yzzk.com/cfm/Content_Archive.cfm?Channel=ae&Path=223706801/40ae1.cfm (accessed April 25, 2011).

¹⁶ See Andrew Nathan, 7.

¹⁷ Bruce Gilley, “The limits of authoritarian resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 21. Gilley’s article contained some inaccuracies: Xi Jinping was not appointed to the Politburo in 2002 by the leadership of the Jiang Zemin regime. He was appointed in 2007 by the current leadership under Hu Jintao. This has made Xi’s appointment significantly different from Hu’s appointment by Deng Xiaoping in 1992. Also, according to the CCP constitution, the PBSC members are elected by the CCP’s Central Committee, not by the Politburo.

¹⁸ “傳習近平主動要求暫緩出任軍委副職” (It is allegedly that Xi Jinping himself requested not to be appointed CMC vice-chairman), *Central News Agency* Dec. 14, 2009, http://www.taiwannews.com.tw/etn/news_content.php?id=1124208&lang=eng_news&cate_rss=news_PD&pg=7 (accessed April 11, 2011).

¹⁹ Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2nd edition, 2003).

²⁰ Qu Zhaoxiang, “習近平未來施政方向與風格” (Xi Jinping’s policy orientation and political style), *China Times* November 15, 2010, <http://news.chinatimes.com/politics/0,5244,11050201x112010111500194,00.html> (accessed November 15, 2010). The same kind of internal poll was also reportedly used in the nomination of the next Politburo Standing Committee. See “高官在中央黨校票選政治局新人” (Senior officials met at the CCP Central Party School to elect the new Politburo), *Apple Daily*, 15 May 2012, quoted from [creaders.net](http://news.creaders.net), <http://news.creaders.net/headline/newsViewer.php?nid=515836&id=1153047&dcid=16> (accessed 30 May 2012).

²¹ The Chinese Communist Youth League is a large, nationwide organization of young people led by the CCP. The CYL’s membership is even larger than the CCP membership. Most of the high school graduates and college or university students in China are members of the league. While most of the CYL members are not CCP members, the national and provincial leadership bodies of the CYL are made up of relatively young CCP members. In recent decades, the league has served as a training ground and channel of career development for many senior officials in China.

²² Andrew Nathan, “Authoritarian resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 9.

²³ “Red Generation II” (紅二代) refers to those whose parents participated in the communist revolution in China and became senior government officials or military commanders during the Mao era.

²⁴ For example, before becoming a PBSC member in 2007, Xi Jinping had served as governor or party chief of three provinces: Fujian, Zhejiang Province, and Shanghai.

²⁵ In one such lecture and book selling tours, former premier Zhu Rongji visited Beijing’s Tsinghua University recently and delivered sharp criticisms against some social problems in contemporary China. See report by BBC on April 23, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/zhongwen/simp/china/2011/04/110423_zhurongji_qinghua.shtml (accessed on April 24, 2011).

²⁶ See Li Cheng, “Intra-party democracy in China: should we take it seriously?” *China Leadership Monitor* 30 (2009): 1-14.

²⁷ One recent example of such open-mindedness is the adoption of a timetable for full democratization in Hong Kong by China’s National People’s Congress, knowing that Hong Kong’s democratization will have a big impact on the Chinese mainland.