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A Showdown and a Face-off

By Dr. Shizhong Chen

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Taking a Stand in Sitting

On the evening of September 29, 2014, a concert celebrating the 65th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule of mainland China was held in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. The current leaders of the CCP, all seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee, headed by China's president Xi Jinping, attended the concert. This type of celebration takes place every year. It is mandatory that the reigning leaders of the CCP attend, so there is nothing unusual about that.

What is intriguing is that a few, a select few, former leaders also came to the concert: Jiang Zemin, former head of the CCP, and Li Peng, Wu Bangguo, Li Lanqing, Zeng Qinghong, and He Guoqiang. With the exception of Li Peng, all these retired leaders are known to be loyalists of Jiang.

What is more eye-catching is how their seats were arranged. Jiang sat on Xi's left. To Xi's right were current Politburo Standing Committee members Li Keqiang, Yu Zhengsheng, and Wang Qishan. The remainder of the current Politburo Standing Committee members, Zhang Dejiang, Liu Yunshan, and Zhang Gaoli sat on Jiang's left.

Those who understand how seats are strictly arranged in top political circles in Beijing know that the above arrangement could not possibly have been nonchalant. Everyone in Beijing knows that Zhang, Liu, and Zhang are members of Jiang's faction and that they are fiercely challenging Xi's agenda, which Li, Yu, and Wang support. In particular, Wang is the CCP's Discipline Committee Czar who is responsible for taking down no less than three hundred high-ranking officials in Jiang's faction in the past year. If these top leaders cared to be civil or subtle about their differences, they could easily have rearranged their seats. They did not. They did not leave anything to the imagination. They did not bother to hide their sentiments.

Despite this major disharmony, Chinese media were quick to report the event as a show of unity. Knowing how the media in China are controlled, they were probably told to make this point. These reports, nonetheless, had to add a footnote to that rendering: Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang's immediate predecessors, did not show up. Neither did Zhu Rongji, Qiao Shi, and Li Ruihuan, three other must-have former leaders for this kind of ceremonial event. So if it was a show of unity, it was only for Xi and Jiang, the heads of two major factions in the CCP. Hu, the head of the third major faction, was either excluded from the show of unity, or did not care to come to show unity.

As if to highlight their absence from the concert's "unity show," most former top leaders did show up the following night at the cocktail party for the 65th anniversary of the CCP's rule of China. This would have been more fitting for the portrayal of unity, but the media did not make that point. Perhaps the media felt it was redundant; perhaps the unity show of all leaders was a non-issue; or, perhaps, a stern statement that Xi made in his speech at the cocktail party, "All malignant tumors that breed on the healthy body of the [Communist] Party must be resolutely removed," did not quite fit the media's taste for depicting unity.

A Coup and a Cleansing

It is now common knowledge that a political cleansing of high-level officials has been going on in China in the form of an anti-corruption campaign. Few, however, have realized or noted that only two other infightings in the history of the CCP match this one in scale: one by Mao Zedong to start and the other by Deng Xiaoping to resolve the Great Cultural Revolution. Those were mega cleansings.

So far, Jiang's faction has been almost the exclusive target of the anticorruption campaign and has sustained devastating losses. The casualties included Bo Xilai, once the heir apparent of Jiang's faction, Zhou Yongkang, the most vocal member of Jiang's faction, and Xu Caihou, Jiang's plenipotentiary in the military. If Jiang's faction does nothing about this, it may as well disband.

Jiang's faction only has itself to blame, however. It is common knowledge now that Bo, Zhou, Xu and a collection of Jiang loyalists had plotted a coup against Xi. [1][2] Wang Lijun, Bo's right-hand man, escaped to the US Consulate in Chengdu on February 6, 2012, and disclosed the plot to the U.S. authorities. [3] Xi's camp, therefore, has every reason to tidy things up, and hence the cleansing spearheaded by Wang Qishan.

As sweeping as the campaign has been, Wang continues to describe it as a life-and-death struggle, and Xi fully supports Wang, as evidenced by Xi's speech at the cocktail party. For Wang and Xi to be so open in carrying on and crying out for the anticorruption campaign, the majority of the CCP's power holders must have endorsed it and justified it to their power base Yet it has obviously run into life-and-death resistance.

Who is responsible for this resistance?

The Issue of Political Legacy

Those who are familiar with the political landscape in Beijing know that there are three major camps of power holders in the CCP, represented by three successive heads of the CCP: Jiang's faction, the Communist Youth League cadres represented by Hu Jintao, and the princelings represented by Xi. Jiang was the head of the CCP from 1989 to 2002, Hu Jintao from 2002 to 2012, and Xi from then on.

Jiang never felt comfortable about Hu succeeding him in power, for Hu was appointed by Deng Xiaoping. Instead of a clean succession, Jiang lingered on as the head of the CCP's Military Committee from 2002 to 2005, expanded the Politburo Standing Committee to nine members and installed seven of his loyalists to surround Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.

The issue that dissatisfied Jiang the most about Hu was his unwillingness to pick up the baton of Jiang's persecution of Falun Gong. This brings us to the key of keys to understand the dynamics of power struggles inside the CCP – the issue of the CCP leader's political legacy.

So what is a “political legacy issue”? A practical definition is: a political maneuver for which the leader feared others would fault him. Yes, it is quite twisted, but some American politicians have actually come into contact with one such political legacy issue without realizing it.

In the past years, many U.S. Congressional members and State Department diplomats have brought up the issue of China's persecution of Falun Gong to their Chinese counterparts. Almost all of them were startled and puzzled by the fierce response they received: while other thorny issues could nonetheless be discussed, the issue of the persecution of Falun Gong could not even be mentioned. That is the hallmark of a political legacy issue - untouchable. To those who have some general understanding

of the CCP's history, within the CCP, cutthroat infighting is the norm rather than the exception. The fiercest and most irrational fights, however, are reserved for the defense of political legacies.

Throughout the entire history of the CCP, there have been only three leaders who were in the position of having a political legacy issue: Mao Zedong and his Great Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping and the June 4th Massacre, and Jiang Zemin and his persecution of Falun Gong. It is precisely because they knew their questionable decisions would define their legacies that they were at their fiercest when smothering any challenge to their respective issues.

Mao once said that two events, the rule of China and the launch of the Great Cultural Revolution would define him. He was not concerned with the former, but spent his last ten years defending the later. To protect his political legacy, he deposed two of his right-hand men, Marshall Lin Biao and Deng Xiaoping, only because he suspected that those two would render an unfavorable evaluation of the Great Cultural Revolution after his death. His fear did come true, vindicating his fear. Deng Xiaoping likewise deposed his own right-hand men, the brothers Yang Shankun and Yang Baibing, for his suspicion that they had second thoughts about the June 4th Massacre.

Preserving Jiang's Political Legacy

Jiang Zemin did not need to be suspicious. Hu Jintao was never enthusiastic about the persecution of Falun Gong; on record, Hu was verbally supportive of the persecution only once. This threatened Jiang's political legacy. Jiang could not easily remove Hu, however. Hu was not Jiang's right-hand man. Hu has his own power base; it was Deng Xiaoping who picked him to succeed Jiang. Jiang could only insert his loyalists into the Politburo Standing Committee to carry on the persecution so as to protect his political legacy.

Jiang's hope was to follow Deng's example to pick his own man to succeed Hu. He did. His pick was Bo Xilai, who actively implemented the persecution of Falun Gong first in Dalian, where he was the mayor and later in Liaoning, where he was the governor. In 2004, Bo was promoted to the Minister of Commerce and given a spot on the central stage of national level politics ahead of all other young leaders.

Bo's position required him to travel overseas frequently. His active persecution of Falun Gong earned him a dozen lawsuits, filed by Falun Gong practitioners in the countries that he visited. Functionally and reputation-wise, he was no longer fit to be the Minister of Commerce. He was removed from that position by Wen Jiabao and assigned to Chongqing city by Hu Jintao, losing the precious spot on the central stage of national level politics.

This was devastating to Jiang. He had to pick someone else or he would forfeit that opportunity to Hu Jintao by default. There was not another suitable candidate among his loyalists and he would never pick someone from Hu's Youth League camp. Jiang had no choice but to adopt someone from the princeling camp. That was Xi Jinping. Xi was promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee in Hu Jintao's second term and positioned as the heir apparent.

Unfortunately for Jiang, Xi distanced himself even further from the persecution of Falun Gong. Xi ascended the power ladder completely independent of Jiang. All this could only make the Jiang faction uncomfortable and insecure. Bo Xilai, Zhou Yongkang, Xu Caihou, and a collection of Jiang loyalists hence plotted a coup to replace Xi.

“Siege Wei to Rescue Zhao”

The same media that depicted the concert event as a show of unity have also been

selling the story that, since Jiang picked Xi, he also supports Xi. The most convincing way for Jiang to show that would be to declare that Xi is his heir and those who have plotted against Xi are all traitors to himself. That did not happen, however, or Xi would not be speaking about a life-and-death struggle. [4] [5] That could not happen, for it would require Jiang to let go of the issue of his political legacy, that is, the persecution of Falun Gong. As of this writing, the persecution of Falun Gong is still ongoing in China.

Until the day when relevant information is declassified, we will not know how Xi became the head of the CCP. All available information indicates, however, that Hu's support of Xi is sincere and comprehensive. Unlike Jiang's lingering many-year hold on power, well into Hu's term, Hu relinquished all his positions at the end of his terms. Hu's power transition to Xi was immediate and clean.

In addition, Hu undid Jiang's expansion of the Politburo Standing Committee, reducing it back to seven members, at the expense of Hu's two most important associates, Wang Yang and Li Yuanchao, who were widely expected to make the Politburo Standing Committee. Meanwhile, Liu Yunshan and Zhang Gaoli's Politburo Standing Committee memberships were somewhat of a surprise and perceived as a sign of the Jiang faction's strength. Chances are, Xi is crystal clear about who his genuine supporters are.

If Jiang is not supportive of Xi, common sense would say that the Jiang faction must have been doing something in response to the anticorruption campaign, but what? The lack of transparency forms a strong contrast to the Xi camp's openness in carrying on the anticorruption campaign.

The most visible resistance to Xi's direction and his programs, not just the anticorruption campaign, has so far come from the media, the control of which falls under Liu Yunshan, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee who is in charge

of Party propaganda and ideology. For example, on October 11, one *Red Flag Manuscript* article, “The Rule of Law and People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” claimed that “If the rule of law is used to replace the people’s democratic dictatorship, we will then fall into the trap of ‘universal values’ and the rule of law could turn nasty.” [6] This directly contradicts Xi’s advocacy of “rule of law.” Being the official and flagship publication of Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee, messages like this make it confusing for outsiders to read Xi, to say the least.

Liu is a loyalist in Jiang Zemin’s faction. Since Liu controls the Party “voice,” outsiders may find it difficult to discern the source of the various messages and their subtle differences. This is not new and is a built-in feature of a regime that controls the media. Before the Great Cultural Revolution, Mao was frustrated because Liu Shaoqi, Mao’s heir apparent, controlled the media and Mao’s voice could not be heard in Beijing. Mao therefore went to Shanghai, where the local leaders were loyal to him, to use the media there as his podium. Deng Xiaoping faced a similar situation when his agenda could not be publicized in Beijing, which was under Jiang Zemin’s control. Deng had to take a tour to southern China to talk about and re-energize his reform and opening up policy.

Outside of the media’s resistance, there have been many incidents for which no one has claimed credit. These incidents cannot be categorized as resistance per se, but have the general effect of undermining Xi’s credibility.

For example, in January 2014, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists reported that close relatives of a list of China’s top leaders owned secret companies in offshore tax havens. The list included Xi Jinping, Wen Jiabao, Li Peng, Hu Jintao, and Deng Xiaoping. [7] Another *New York Times* article in June 2014 reported about the personal wealth of Xi Jinping’s older sister and brother-in-law. [8] These reports did not mention any name from Jiang’s faction. In the face of the

ongoing anti-corruption campaign, which has taken down many of Jiang's loyalists, the implication, that it borders on blackmail, is obvious.

Another example is the recent diplomatic blunder at the Sino-Indian border. Xi visited India with the expectation of announcing a large investment package to trump Japan, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi had visited earlier. Mumbai's Chinese general consul had suggested a figure of "over 100 billion dollars." Just one hour before the banquet, Modi was informed that one thousand Chinese soldiers had crossed the border into India at Ladakh, causing an embarrassing moment for Xi. The incursion hijacked the visit, which, of course, did not produce the results Xi expected. [9]

Other events include the so-called terrorist attack in Kunming and several major fires in Northeastern China.

These pesky incidents all took a page from the second stratagem of the "Thirty-Six Stratagems" – "Siege Wei to Rescue Zhao" – "when the enemy is too strong to attack directly, attack something he holds dear," a roundabout tactic to warn and deter Xi. Obviously, these incidents cannot be justified, so no one has claimed responsibility for them.

It is not the intention of this writing to prove that these incidents are the doings of the Jiang faction. While that would require more official information, it is a fact that the Jiang faction has not had any justifiable issue to use in undermining Xi or the Xi camp's anticorruption campaign.

Heads I Win Tails You Lose

This changed in August 2014 when Zhang Dejiang, whose mandate in the Politburo Standing Committee includes overseeing the legislature and Hong Kong and Macau

affairs, took back the CCP's promise of granting true universal suffrage in Hong Kong in 2017, thus provoking strong resentment in Hong Kong. Hong Kong citizens wanted a say in the nominations without Beijing vetting the candidates. They gathered in protest, which was immediately labeled as a threat to the CCP, an issue that the Jiang faction turned into a no win situation for Xi.

That is why Leung Chun-ying, a Jiang loyalist, has been so enthusiastic about using excess force and tear gas to irritate and provoke the citizens of Hong Kong. Once the situation escalates to where it is beyond mediation, Xi, who ultimately represents the central government, would be forced to choose between making a concession and cracking down. Xi could then be accused of mishandling the situation, either being too soft or too heavy-handed. Heads I win, tails you lose.

These are not just hypothetical schemes. Both scenarios have been acted out in the history of the CCP and both were connected to the two political legacies mentioned above.

On May 25, 1966, seven faculty members from Beijing University put up a large poster, or "big-character-poster" [10], criticizing their Party bosses. From the perspective of the CCP, this action could easily be viewed as a challenge to the Party's authority and, if not smothered, an example for others to emulate. To prevent things from getting out of hand, with the endorsement of Mao, who (deliberately) stayed away from Beijing, Liu Shaoqi, then the number two person in China, sent many "working groups" to colleges in Beijing to put out the fire and, in the process, persecuted over 10,000 students and 2,000 faculty members. On August 5, 1966, Mao wrote his own large poster, accusing Liu of "persecuting the revolutionary faction." That formally launched the Great Cultural Revolution and doomed Liu.

The opposite scenario played out in 1989. On April 6, Hu Yaobang, a former head of the CCP, who Deng Xiaoping had deposed, passed away. Beijing students

spontaneously held a series of memorial activities for him, which became known to the world as the 1989 Beijing Student Movement. Zhao Ziyang, then CCP Party General Secretary, tried to take a soft approach to work with the students. He was soon pushed aside and Deng ordered the military to massacre the students on June 4, 1989. Zhao was taken down for failing to deal resolutely with the student movement.

The chilling part of that history is that Liu and Zhao could have swapped their ways of handling the students and the end results would have been the same. In Liu's case, Kang Sheng, Mao's loyalist, created the large poster issue on May 25, 1966. In Zhao's case, a *People's Daily* editorial on April 26, 1989, accused the students of plotting to undermine the CCP's leadership. Liu and Zhao each had to deal with a protest, but their fates were sealed when others plotted or provoked the protests to get them in trouble.

To anyone with normal intelligence, this is a reckless game. Liu and Zhao each had indeed tried to argue and justify their actions. Their arguments would have saved them in any other political system, but alas, this is the CCP.

Sieging the Palace

Zhang Dejiang is no Mao and no Deng, however, and Leung is but a small pawn. Xi seems to have recognize that Zhang's rescission of the central government's promise of granting true universal suffrage in Hong Kong in 2017 is what provoked the protest, and had the decency to reiterate to Hong Kong business community representatives and at the PRC's National Day party, days after the "occupy central" took place on Sep 28, that the policy of "one country two systems" will always remain. If Hong Kong citizens are just objecting to the rescission of a promise, they cannot be accused of challenging the CCP. Taking that out of the equation, Xi seems to have avoided having to make a choice between a concession and a crackdown.

The concert appearance of Jiang with his remaining main loyalists at this sensitive moment, therefore, cannot be further away from a show of unity. Rather, it is a game in the name of unity. On the surface it is unity. However, it is a forced unity, or just a show of unity. The presence of Li Peng, who had announced the curfew in Beijing in 1989 and therefore represents the face of brutality, signifies strongly what Jiang wanted, a June 4th type of massacre. In Chinese political language, this type of face-off is called “sieging the palace” or forcing the emperor to abdicate. No wonder Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao wanted no part of it.

Having understood the forces around the Hong Kong issue and what they want, we can then rationally analyze the potential outcome of the Umbrella Movement. In particular, Xi seems to have so far avoided the trap of Hong Kong challenging the CCP and thus has stayed clear of being forced to make the choices that the Jiang faction has offered. He seems to have taken the route of diffusing the situation. Hopefully, with the CCP being taken out of the equation, decency and reason will prevail.

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Endnotes:

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<http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/just-how-secure-is-xi-jinping-really/>.

[2] *Epoch Times*, “Jiang Zemin at Bay in Shanghai,” August 19, 2014.

<http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/889938-jiang-zemin-at-bay-in-shanghai/>.

[3] *The Washington Free Beacon*, “China Probes Police Official After Obama Administration Rejected Asylum Request,” February 10, 2012.

<http://freebeacon.com/national-security/china-probes-police-official-after-obama-administration-rejected-asylum-request/>.

[4] *ChinaScope Online*, “Hong Kong Magazine: Xi Jinping Has Survived Six

Assassination Attempts,” August 30, 2014.

<http://chinascope.org/main/content/view/6596/106/>.

[5] *Chinascope Online*, “Xi Jinping: Willing to Give up Personal Life to Fight Corruption,” October 31, 2014.

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[6] *Red Flag Manuscript*, “The Rule of Law and People’s Democratic Dictatorship (依法治国与坚持人民民主专政),” October 11, 2014.

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[7] *The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)*, “China's elite linked to secret offshore entities,” January 21, 2014.

<http://www.icij.org/blog/2014/01/chinas-elite-linked-secret-offshore-entities>.

[8] *New York Times Online*, “As China’s Leader Fights Graft, His Relatives Shed Assets,” June 17, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/18/world/asia/chinas-president-xi-jinping-investments.html>.

[9] *Forbes.com*, “Who Sabotaged Chinese President Xi Jinping's India Visit?” September 23, 2014.

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/ericmeyer/2014/09/23/who-sabotaged-xi-jinpings-india-visit/>.

[10] Big-character poster (大字报): It is handwritten, wall-mounted poster with large-sized Chinese characters, used as a means of protest, propaganda, and popular communication. A key trigger in the Cultural Revolution was the publication of a big-character poster on May 25, 1966, by Nie Yuanzi (聂元梓) and others at Beijing University, claiming that the university was controlled by bourgeois anti-revolutionaries. The poster came to the attention of Mao Zedong, who had it broadcast nationally and published in *People's Daily*. Big-character posters were soon ubiquitous, used for everything from sophisticated debate to satirical entertainment to rabid denunciation; being attacked in a big-character poster was enough to end one's career.