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China

Modernisation by a pre-modern bureaucracy? – The 19th Congress of the CPC

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV513 - October 2017 -
Publication date: Wednesday 25 October 2017

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An Interview with Au Loong Yu

What is the significance of the 19th Congress of the CPC?

Headlines have focused on the way the Congress shows that Xi Jinping is further consolidating his power; but another important point is how it represents a total regression to aristocratic politics.

In Xi's report there is a section which reads, "to strengthen party building within the army, hence we shall promote education on the theme of "passing on the red genes, taking up the responsibility to strengthen the army". This refers to the legacy of the party; it was the party that founded the People's Liberation Army (PLA), not the other way round, and this legacy must be reasserted again and again. But the choice of the words "red genes" is also in line with an even more noticeable change recently. Less than three months ago, the party school newspaper published an article hailing Xi Jinping as the "nucleus of the party centre", and reminded readers of Xi's "in-born genes" and "red blood line" as he is the son of an old party cadre, Xi Zhongxun. [1]

From Mao's period until the 1980's, the CPC always avoided giving the public the impression that the children of the founding fathers of the PRC were making use of their family background to advance privileges, even if they were. Most people know that their children enjoy endless privileges but this rarely enters the public sphere. Even when it does, the term used is a neutral word *gaoganzidi*, or "children of high ranking cadres", which suggests no connection to the "red blood line", and hence is a very broad term.

Soon after the 1989 democratic movement was followed by the collapse of the USSR, certain aging top leaders concluded that if the CPC wants to avoid the fate of its Russian counterpart, one way to do this was to pass power to their children. At the same time some of the children of old cadres started to circulate documents among themselves calling for the party to take direct ownership of state property. All these campaigns were carried out in secrecy.

This was also the time when outsiders, mainly those who fled to the west after the 1989 crackdown, began to give a different name to these "children of high ranking cadres": *taizidang*, or "Princelings", which carries a derogative tone and therefore never appears in China's media.

When the issue began to emerge in China's media, it was neither "*gaoganzidi*" nor "*taizidang*", but "*hongerdai*", or "second red generation", which is a positive label. This term is radically different from *gaoganzidi* since it explicitly points to the red blood line and is therefore much narrower than the term *gaoganzidi*. It practically excludes all those cadres whose parents were not old cadres.

The term started to emerge in the Chinese media during the term of Hu Jintao. But it was probably Bo Xilai, the former Chongqing chief, and son of another old cadre, who was brought down by Hu Jintao in 2012, who made the issue of "second red generation" even more visible, because of his high profile and his promotion of "singing red songs". Public acknowledgment of the existence and power of the "red second generation" by the media continues even after Bo's downfall in 2012, and has been picked up by Xi Jinping's cronies, although sometimes it is dressed in different terms such as "red blood line".

The fact that the CPC's top leader now has to stress his "red blood line" is in line with the general trend within the party of the "second red generation", with all the political and economic power that they have accumulated in the

past thirty years, now increasingly demanding a more secure position. This layer is far from homogenous; it is beset with differences in politics from liberals to die hard nationalists or even fascists; making full use of their “red blood line” is a common point for all those who are politically active.

Xi is no exception and now in order to consolidate his position as the “core leader” of the party he is using it to the full. This also means a certain break with the past, when the CPC was still talking about “the separation of the party from the government”, “political reform is necessary”, “upholding collective leadership”, “democracy as a universal value”, “lay low over foreign policy”, etc. etc.

We now have a top leader who comes from the “second red generation” and who also loudly proclaims the ascendancy of this “second red generation” to absolute power, while displaying open contempt for “western style” democracy and “collective leadership”. This is a total regression to aristocracy. A rupture in the CPC line has occurred.

But doesn't the fall of Bo Xilai also show that the second red generation is heavily involved in a dog eat dog fight amongst itself?

It does. Actually we have come to an interesting point in this regression. There are now two levels of political struggle going on.

Firstly, the second red generation is trying to rob more power from those bureaucrats whose parents are not old leading cadres. Secondly, amongst the second red generation most of them want more power, but Xi wants absolute power, hence there is tension.

As the history of Imperial China shows, the absolute power of the emperor necessarily contradicts the power of the nobles. Absolute autocracy comes into conflict with aristocracy. The final solution for the emperor was the almost total destruction of the nobles as a class, and this is what mainly differentiates Imperial China's trajectory from European experiences.

The reason that Xi Jinping is so power hungry, leading him to defeat both the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao cliques and to gain all the power through this, is precisely because he began from a much weaker position than his predecessors when he began to rise to power. For the first time in CPC history the candidates for the top leader were chosen by Xi's peers rather than by old leaders such as Deng Xiaoping or Chen Yun who enjoyed undisputed authority (although the retired leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao do play a role here, their authority does not match Deng or Chen's).

No wonder he was challenged by Bo Xilai, although secretly. Lucky for him, he had someone who did the job for him. Months before Xi succeeded to power he found himself in the middle of a fierce dog eat dog fight between Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin. This proved beneficial as he could use their fight as leverage to promote his own power, and eventually sent one Standing Committee member and three Politburo members – who are either cronies of Jiang or Hu – to jail.

This proves that Xi is a capable politician, if one remembers that he started from a much weaker position with no blessing from old cadres. But in order to stay in power beyond his two terms in office, if we are to believe wide spread rumours, he must constantly keep the aristocratic trend in check, and destroy those who even dare to challenge him, or else his autocracy will be undermined by the aristocracy. Recently, a credible Hong Kong newspaper, reported about how just and strict Xi is: he simply ignores requests for promotion from his old “second red generation” friends. [2] Another report also described the same thing: that someone from the “second red generation” requested

permission to set up a special association for the “second red generation”, but this was rejected by Xi. [3]

Xi also needs carrots as well as sticks. Besides keeping the second red generation in check he also needs their support to fight off other forces within the bureaucracy. Hence he needs to strike a deal with that generation and allow them to share some clearly defined power. There are rumours that Xi’s anti-corruption campaign mainly targets bureaucrats from humble backgrounds and rarely touches the second red generation. If this is correct then it is a good example of a de facto deal between the two sides.

There are other forces within the bureaucracy. Just how many factions do the CPC have right now? And what political positions do they represent?

I am not sure we should use the word “factions” for the inner party fight. I prefer to use “cliques”. According to conventional wisdom, there is the Shanghai clique and the communist youth clique, with Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao as their leaders respectively. It is not clear if there are substantial political differences. Xi’s success lies on the partial destruction of some main cadres from both cliques, consolidating his own clique in the process. But careful examination of the words and deeds of these top leaders could still lead us to certain hints as to the answers to the question of whether the inner party fights carries political differences with it. There are people within the party, for instance the former premier Wen Jiabao, who were upset with the “red blood line” trend, and who spoke of the need for “universal human rights”.

The ascendancy of the “red blood line” obviously alarms those with humble backgrounds, and makes the division between the two different components of the bureaucracy even more visible. Independently from the question of the cliques and the kind of politics they represent, there are two kinds of cadres. One is the “red blood” bureaucrats, who have come to power because of their parents. The second come from more humble backgrounds and only succeed in climbing up the ladder through good examination results, hard work and luck. It is not accidental that many from the second component also come from the Communist Youth League, itself considered by the party as the preparatory school for leadership.

Hu Jintao came to power through this channel. With the growing ambition of the second red generation, the bureaucrats from a humble background feel threatened. Xi used Hu to beat off Bo Xilai’s attack, and after this succeeded Xi began to turn to dealing with the so called “tuanpai”, or the Youth League clique by accusing the League of incompetence and cutting half of its budget. This is an unmistakable sign of the conflict between the two kinds of bureaucrats.

It does not yet necessarily imply real political differences, but it does mean that the rift within the bureaucracy is widening as a result of its regression to autocracy and aristocracy simultaneously. Perhaps it is not accidental that Wen Jiabao, who had made dissenting voices, also came from a humble background and worked his way up through his own hard work. People like him definitely have more to lose if the “red blood line” criterion comes first in choosing top leaders. These differences may play out even more visibly in the future if a political crisis erupts.

This is not new. In the history of Imperial China the tension between those bureaucrats who had noble backgrounds or who were descendants of gongchen (meritorious statesman; a person who has rendered outstanding service to the emperor) or were well established mandarins, and those from humbler backgrounds always existed. Sometimes this partially defined factional fights, for instance during the Tang Dynasty.

This is also the problem of bureaucracy when it enjoys supreme power: there is an innate tendency for the bureaucracy to regress into an aristocracy. But precisely because of this it always provokes a reformist response; a response of countering the first tendency by upholding meritocracy, to ensure that the bureaucracy is able to

reproduce itself through examinations and recruitment which are open to all, including people from humble backgrounds.

Most of the time the two kinds of bureaucrats can work together despite all the bureaucratic red tape and dysfunction, but when social and political crisis set in, the tension between them might become sharper and begin to have a bearing on political differences.

But how does this side of the story affect the future development of the CPC when all the power is concentrated in Xi's hands?

The moral of the story of Chinese history is that even if Xi can concentrate all the power in his hands indefinitely, which means successfully breaking the precedent of a fixed term of ten years, there is still an unsolvable problem. Behind the regression to aristocracy and the general degeneration of the bureaucracy etc. lies the general trend of the bureaucracy appropriating an ever larger share of surplus products produced by working people. The plundering of the country by the CPC has gone so far that today China's continuous growth heavily relies on debt. When the straw breaks the camel's back, it will lead to a time of crisis.

If we look at the history of the Imperial dynasty, it was always in a bad shape long before any uprising from below. It was already much weakened by its own centrifugal forces driven by general corruption, loss of discipline and the plundering of both public wealth and people's wealth. These were also the moments when the more sensible mandarins became more aware of the need for the bureaucrats collectively to stamp out corruption and put a limit on the plundering of social wealth. This started a vicious circle of reform and counter-reform and along with it the sharpening of inner struggles within the bureaucracy.

In some senses, we are arriving at a similar situation today. Xi Jinping's efforts to stamp out corruption should be seen as similar to reforms in the past, although the accusation that his campaign's purpose is chiefly to get rid of his opponents may still valid. Xi may have temporary success in terms of his anti-corruption campaign, but in the longer run he is undermining state machinery by creating great insecurity among mandarins. The fact that most mandarins and lesser officials are trying to transfer their families and their wealth overseas is just one visible sign of growing centrifugal forces within the CPC.

Surely Xi has a lot more modern tools to control the bureaucracy and to mould it to his taste. Yet he lacks one very important tool in comparison to the emperors of Imperial China. While the emperor, the ultimate arbitrator of the bureaucracy, did not worry about the legitimacy of passing on his throne to his heirs, Xi does not possess the legitimacy to be a life-long dictator, let alone put a crown on his head.

If the great Chairman Mao needed to fight (and what a big fight it was) to achieve this, then one can hardly imagine a scenario where a lesser figure like Xi can just sit there and achieve the same result. All other cliques at both the level of the "second red generation" and the regular bureaucrats will try to resist Xi's attempt to become an emperor without a crown.

In other words, Xi's concentration of power in his own hands indefinitely will only result in further inner party fights in the future. Regardless of whether he wins or loses, what can be sure is that there cannot be long term peace within the party, even if the fight is temporarily over, and an apparently harmonious party leadership is on display during the congress where all former top leaders attend.

What if Xi is content with the previous arrangement, namely a ten year term for the top leader plus the privilege of recommending his successors, and steps down in 2022? [\[4\]](#)

This also means that Xi has to obligate himself to collective leadership as well. We cannot of course exclude the possibility that Xi will opt for this choice, but this will bring the risk that Xi may meet the same fate as his predecessors Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao, whose influence was eroded once they stepped down and even faced the possibility of becoming targets for retaliation. Given what Xi has done to other cliques, and that the question of “why him?” will continuously be raised by his peers among the second red generation, the choice to stick with the old rule may not be that attractive to Xi. Either choice is not a real solution.

We should remind ourselves that in March 2016, when Xi already had the upper hand, some party members were still able to get a letter calling for him to resign posted on the internet . Even though it was deleted later, no major retaliation has ever been reported. [5]

To sum up, I think the main contradiction of the CPC is this: it crazily promotes modernization but in itself it is a bureaucracy deeply rooted in a pre-modern political culture, so that in the 21st century it is still incapable of introducing a stable regime for succession to power which is acceptable to all significant mandarins.

The Soviet CP had more or less achieved this after the death of Stalin. This failure of the CPC has its origin in its medieval political culture, formed and shaped since it abandoned the cities and became a rural guerrilla force in the late 1920s. There was certainly a very strong element of Stalinism in addition to its medieval Chinese influence, but this was definitely no cure for the CPC’s authoritarianism and the cult of personality around Mao, but only reinforced the latter. The CPC has certainly copied modern practices from its western counterparts as well , something which must not be overlooked, but instead of replacing old practices these modern elements seem to have adapted to the old practices well. There was once a larger moderate liberal voice within the CPC, but Xi’s rise to power precisely represents the demise of this voice.

In the end we arrive at a scenario where even if the CPC can impose “totalitarian” rule over the population and the prospect for a rebellion from below still looks dim, a break in the system may happen somewhere else. The CPC’s very inability to solve its succession crisis implies an unstable regime, and it may prove that its own pre-modern political culture increasingly comes into conflict with and is also increasingly unable to deal with a rapidly urbanized and modernized population that have higher expectations than their parents. There is going to be a long contest between an old China and a new China.

22nd October, 2017

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[1] Xi Jinping zongshuji de chengzhang zhlu (The Growing Up of General Secretary Xi Jinping <http://www.studytimes.cn/zydx/GCFT/...>)

[2] Ming Pao, Hong Kong, 16th October, 2017.

[3] Xi Jinping and Red Second Generation http://news.dwnews.com/china/big5/news/2017-10-17/60017814_all.html

[4] According to a rumour there has been an agreement since Deng Xiaoping that no women are allowed on the Standing Committee of the Politburo, after the experiences of the Cultural Revolution when one woman, Jiang Qing, leader of the gang of four, took the lead in persecuting

old cadres. Anyway since then no female has ever been admitted to the highest body of the party, hence this successor must be a “he”.

[5] Ming Pao, 13th March, 2016.