
THE
CHINA
QUESTIONS

CRITICAL INSIGHTS INTO
A RISING POWER

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Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

2018

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Printed in the United States of America

First printing

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rudolph, Jennifer M., editor. | Szonyi, Michael, editor. | Fairbank Center for East Asian Research.

Title: The China questions : critical insights into a rising power / edited by Jennifer Rudolph and Michael Szonyi.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 2018. | Includes index. | "In celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University"—Title page verso.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017023762 | ISBN 9780674979406 (cloth : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: China—Forecasting. | China—Politics and government—2002— | China—Foreign relations—21st century. | China—Economic conditions—2000— | Environmental policy—China. | China—Social conditions—2000— | China—Civilization—2002—

Classification: LCC DS779.4 .C463 2018 | DDC 951.06—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017023762>

In celebration of the 60th anniversary of the
Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University

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China, who will encounter enormous difficulty in mobilizing public support without concerted help from lawyers, NGO activists, and journalists who have been repressed. Given no other outlet for expression or redress, “the disadvantaged” in China could develop a more extreme and radical response to their grievances, threatening social stability—precisely what the Xi regime seeks to fortify. However, if discussion of societal problems significantly decreases, public opinion could become dedicated primarily to the expression of nationalism.

6 | WHAT DOES LONGEVITY MEAN FOR LEADERSHIP IN CHINA?

Arunabh Ghosh

BY MANY ACCOUNTS, the 19th People’s Congress in autumn 2017 may mark a historic transformation in how the elite leadership in China is structured. Since the events of the summer of 1989, a system has evolved in China that has allowed the peaceful and smooth transition of power from one generation of leaders to the next. Dubbed “authoritarian resilience” by the political scientist Andrew Nathan in 2003, this system, whose features include limiting the president and prime minister to two five-year terms and enacting a form of expanding collective leadership, now appears under threat. There is concern that China’s current president, Xi Jinping, may break with these sets of formal and informal rules and attempt to continue in the position or, at the very least, attempt to stay influential in elite politics well after 2022, when his second five-year term ends.

That Xi seeks such enduring influence is not surprising. While his immediate predecessor, Hu Jintao, who served as president from 2002 to 2012, has receded from the political limelight, Xi’s patron, Jiang Zemin, together with the most influential leader in the reform era, Deng Xiaoping, continued to exercise power and influence well after stepping down from formal leadership positions. Indeed, Xi’s own promotion to the presidency in the fall of 2012 occurred under the influential gaze and sanction of the octogenarian Jiang. Long since retired, and officially no longer active in politics, Jiang nevertheless

cast a long shadow that was evident in the elevation of several of his protégés to the Politburo Standing Committee in 2002 and 2012. Jiang's predecessor Deng Xiaoping exercised even more far-reaching influence after his official retirement from active politics in the late 1980s. One need only recall that Deng had stepped down from all posts except the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission by November 1987. Yet, it was under his sanction that People's Liberation Army troops entered Tiananmen Square two years later, in June 1989, to disperse protestors. Similarly, it was his Southern Tour in 1992, during which he re-emphasized his pro-reform economic agenda, that reignited Chinese growth. Jiang and Deng are merely the most high-profile examples of the wider phenomenon wherein elder statesmen have continued to exercise influence without formally holding government positions.

Whether Xi upends the existing system of elite succession, chooses to follow Jiang and Deng's example, or simply steps aside, remains to be seen. From a comparative historical perspective, it does, however, draw attention to not only the age of a leader when he or she is in power, but also to their longevity *per se*. Longevity is perhaps less important in political systems where leaders typically withdraw from elite politics when their term limits are reached (such as in the United States) or where parliamentary forms of governance can shift the burden of incumbency rapidly and in frequently unforeseeable directions (think the United Kingdom, India, and the broader world of coalition politics). While the PRC has indeed adopted term limits, the fact that leaders who step down continue to possess decisive and direct influence on future generations means they retain far more influence than is true in countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, or India. For the historian, it also raises an intriguing comparative question: Have China's top leaders lived longer lives than their international counterparts?

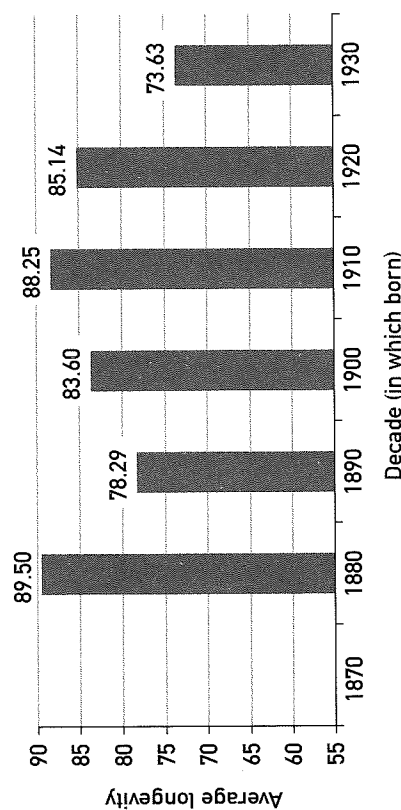


Figure 6.1. Chinese Communist Party leadership longevity by decade of birth

Data collected in 2012 by the *New York Times* on former and current members of the Politburo Standing Committee, as well as the Eight Immortals (Mao Zedong's close associates, who may not have been members of the standing committee but whose influence and contribution over the last sixty-odd years has been just as significant), shows that, over the past six decades, sixty-one people have exercised authority and influence from the pinnacle of political power in the PRC. As of 2012, these leaders had an average age of 79 years and a median age of 78.

In fact, as Figure 6.1 shows, for China's top leadership born from the 1880s to the 1930s, average longevity is in the mid-to-high 80s. The lower average for those born in the 1890s can at least partially be explained by the purges of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), which affected many top leaders as well. Six of the eight leaders born in the 1930s were still alive in 2012, and thus one can expect this average to rise over time. Leaders born in the 1940s have an

average age of 67, including former president Hu Jintao and most of the current Politburo Standing Committee. While the simple average of 79 for the entire group already suggests a long life span, longevity is even higher once we account for younger generations, many of whose members remain living. Indeed, if we exclude the fourteen leaders born after 1940, we would arrive at a figure of 82.

How does the longevity of Chinese leaders compare with that of their peers in the former USSR, the United States, and India? The overall average longevity for leaders born in each decade from the 1870s to the 1930s is, at 82, highest in China and only marginally lower—80—in India. While the common men or women in India and China have lived, and continue to live, shorter lives on average than people in the United States and the former Soviet Union, their leaders do not fit the same pattern. What is additionally striking is that several leaders in both countries lived through periods of intense social and political turmoil, and often experienced tremendous personal physical hardship (incarceration, hunger strikes, long marches, and war, to name a few). Longevity averages 79 for US leaders and 71 for those of the former USSR, whose number is again lower on account of the large number of leaders purged in the 1930s.

The longevity of leaders seems to have no direct relationship with average life expectancy in any of these four countries. For much of the twentieth century, life expectancy in India and China was below 60. According to World Bank data, in 1960, Indian and Chinese life expectancy were 42 and 43, respectively. Both numbers have risen steadily over the last fifty years and are in the neighborhood of 66 and 75, respectively, today. American and Soviet life expectancy were around 70 in 1960. While the American number has experienced a steady increase and is approaching 80 today, the Russian one has stayed level. Life expectancy, in any case, has its limitations when looking at such a select group of individuals as national level leaders,

who typically enjoy access to better health care. What does appear to be true, however, is that national leaders tend to live longer than the people they govern.

How much of an outlier is China? The percentages of leaders who have lived beyond 50, 60, and 70 are roughly comparable across the four countries; however, interesting things start happening in the next two age brackets. As one would expect, a significantly lower percentage of each nation's leaders have lived beyond 80. China enjoys a small lead here, marginally ahead of the United States and India. The gap widens somewhat when we look at the over-90 segment. China pulls away from the others: nearly one-in-five Chinese leaders has lived beyond 90. In comparison, only about one-in-seven leaders in the United States, one-in-nine in India, and one-in-ten for the USSR, has lived past 90.

When looking only at leaders born before 1940 (thereby excluding the current crop of younger leaders), we see that in the PRC well over half (63.8 percent) of those born before 1940 lived beyond 80. This is almost 10 percent higher than next placed United States. Indian and Soviet leaders do not cross the 50 percent mark. The gap is even more telling for the above-90 bracket. Nearly one in four (23.4 percent) PRC leaders lived beyond 90, compared to a little less than one-in-six for the United States, one-in-eight for India, and less than one-in-ten for the Soviet Union.

Chinese leaders do indeed live longer lives than their counterparts in the United States, India, and the former Soviet Union. Put differently, national leaders live longer in the one country where it matters that they live longer: China.

That Chinese leaders live long lives has many implications. Locally, their influence can be felt in the continuity in styles of leadership and in the mentoring of specific, younger leaders. General ideological preferences and policy commitments can therefore persist

for a lot longer than elsewhere. This may also explain the longer-term perspective that leaders can take when engaging in negotiations with leaders from other countries. Longevity also has implications for the hardening of factional boundaries within the Communist Party and for the creation of loyalties that cut across multiple generations and levels of government. In the absence of several strong leaders at the top, the persistence of one faction backed by one long-lived leader can effectively stymie debate and discussion at the highest levels of the state.

At a broader level, longevity also has implications for how well leaders can grasp trends within the population and respond to them effectively. While it is no longer as young a nation as it was a decade ago, China remains younger than most developed countries. About 70 percent of all Chinese are aged 50 or younger; a little less than one-in-five is under 15. And it is the youth that were a major force for change throughout twentieth-century Chinese history. Whether it is the New Culture and May Fourth movements during the 1910s and 1920s, or the Democracy Wall and Tiananmen Square movements during the 1970s and 1980s, it is the young who have been among the most vociferous in their calls for progressive reform. The leadership, increasingly older, has consistently pushed back. Since the reform era, the continued promise and delivery of stunning economic growth has largely overwhelmed this reformist fervor. But indications are that the near double-digit GDP growth of the past fifteen years is no longer sustainable. Under such circumstances, the prospects of an older leadership tied to relatively inflexible policy agendas, increasingly out of touch with the people they putatively serve, does not offer much confidence for political or social stability.

Earlier this year, Andrew Nathan noted that "China's fairly recent ability to renew and upgrade its political leadership over the course of several decades is unique among authoritarian systems."

And yet, if the concerns about Xi are well-founded, it would appear that China is indeed reverting to some kind of authoritarian "norm." Under such circumstances, the fact that its elite leaders tend to live longer has implications not just for China's future economic, social, and political prospects, but for those of the world as well.