

## THE CASE FOR LI YUANCHAO AS PREMIER

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The Central Committee met over the weekend of October 15, 2011 to determine how the upcoming succession during the 18th Party Congress in 2012 should occur the current candidate to succeed Hu Jintao is Xi Jinping with Li Keqiang, one of the Vice-Premiers is believed to succeed Wen Jiabao as the Premier at the 12<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress in 2013.

There has been less focus by the media and China Watchers on who will succeed Wen Jiabao as Premier. While Li Keqiang is considered to be the front-runner and is the current 'senior' Vice Premier, I contend that Li Yuanchao, former party boss of Jiangsu Province and current head of the Organizations Department, still has an equally suitable candidate for the position of Premier. Mainland Chi-

nese news sources have described Li as one of China's most 'unconventional leader', 'independent minded', and known for strong 'forward thinking' concerning how China should be governed. Li Yuanchao has the most hands on experience amongst the elites in implementing policies for the problem areas that the CCP need to manage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. During his reign as Jiangsu Party Boss he improved Party relations with the people, curbed corruption, implemented inner-party democracy on a provincial level, improved the conditions of migrant workers, and brought greater government attention to the dangers of environmental pollution.

Nothing is ever certain in Chinese politics. One of the more recent examples of what China Watchers thought was a certain event that did not go as pre- ▶

dicted was the failure of Xi Jinping to be promoted to Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) during the Fourth Plenum of the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in September of 2009. Though the Party gave no reason as to why he was passed over for promotion it left analysts wondering that perhaps there was infighting amongst the elites and that Xi could be experiencing a fall from grace. Eventually Xi was promoted to the Vice-Chairman position of the CMC at the Fifth Plenum of the 17<sup>th</sup> CPC in 2010. It should be noted that a military leadership position is not a required position for one to become Party Secretary. China Watchers inferred the importance of this position because Hu Jintao held this position before he was made Party Secretary and it was believed that Xi would follow Hu's path. The Party's failure to promote Xi's only highlights the unpredictability of accurately forecasting elite level politics and how 'certainties' can be wrong.

In May and June 2010 there were widespread worker strikes and migrant unrest throughout several provinces. Premier Wen Jiabao highlighted

that the Party must work to ensure better treatment and more resources need to be given to migrant workers. Wen also commented that the government must do more to curb environmental pollution and incorporate green development into China's 'rise'. This shows the prescience of Li Yuanchao's policies in Jiangsu Province as he sought to widely improve the lives of migrant workers and spur greater environmental reform since 2002. Li's policies seem to have taken greater notice by higher Party officials otherwise he would have never been promoted to the Organizations Department during the last Party Congress.

It is standard procedure for the state media not to speculate about the upcoming succession or reveal information about the inner workings of the Politburo. This is done to prevent outsiders from seeing any public displays of internal fighting. While China analysts have more information at their disposal today the CCP still remains determined to keep outsiders always uncertain about what happens behind the closed doors of the Politburo.

### Li Yuanchao - The Dark Horse

Li Yuanchao was born in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province in 1950. His father was Li Gangcheng, a veteran Communist official, while his mother was Lu Jiying, was a revolutionary veteran, whose first husband, Li Chaoshi, was a general in the Red Army who was executed by the Kuomintang (KMT) in 1931. By birth Li Yuanchao should be considered apart of 'princeling' faction, which is comprised of elites who are descended



from important Party officials but since Li's career was advanced through the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) this puts him a member of 'populist' faction. The populists are elites that rose from more humble backgrounds and have ties to the CCYL and Hu Jitao, who previously ran the CCYL in the 1980s.

Like a majority of today's elites within China Li Yuanchao was sent to work as a laborer during the Cultural Revolution. After the revolution he received a Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics from Fudan University in Shanghai in 1982, a Master's Degree in Economic Management from Beijing University in 1990, and a PhD in Law from the Central Party School in 1995. Li's political career started in 1983 when his first patron, Chen Pixian, the former Party Secretary of Shanghai, recommended him to Hu Yaobang to serve as CCYL Secretary in Fudan University. By the end of 1983 Li was made Vice Minister of the CCYL Central Committee.

During Li's tenure as Deputy Party Secretary of Jiangsu Province in 2000 and Party Secretary of Jiangsu Province in 2002 he implemented a variety of political and administrative reforms such as 'service-orientated government', *fuwuxing zhengfu*, in which the public evaluated government leaders and those who received the lowest evaluations were either demoted or fired. His reforms improved Jiangsu standing from the 5th most petitioned province to 23rd in 2006.

In 2002 Li called for a greater focus on sustainable development that balances growth of urban areas with environmental protection. In 2007 rapid algae growth caused by pollution threatened Lake Tai, Li ordered it to be cleaned under the strictest guidelines, which cost Nanjing's GDP to drop 15% that year. The Jiangsu Provincial Government closed 2,150 chemical factories by 2008 and allocated between 10%-20% of the city and county revenues towards environmental protection.

China's leaders are aware that China's economic rise is threatened by worsening environmental pollution. A Chinese governmental report that was released in February 2010 showed that the water pollution throughout China in 2007 was more than two times greater than what officials originally had originally reported. China's leaders have begun stressing the importance of sustainable development and now China is one of the world's leaders in the development of green technology.

Li Yuanchao is one of the few provincial leaders to make explicit calls to change how the government

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stands on protecting stability throughout the country. In 2005, he commented that some leaders were too 'concerned with stability', *taiping guan*, and that the government's policies were making minor incidents into major ones. Li stated that China's leaders lacked the courage to pursue bolder reforms. Widespread social unrest and riots in Tibet and Xinjiang show that Li Yuanchao's criticisms of the Party's approach to social stability were justified, though the CCP's response after the 4th Plenum was to reassert the status quo on ethnic minorities and make it illegal to discuss independence or separatism from the PRC.

Yu Jianrong, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who is regarded as the leading expert on the problems of peasants and migrant workers, has reported to the central leadership that rural prob-

lems need to be urgently addressed if the Party wishes to prevent social unrest on an unprecedented scale. Li Yuanchao has an advantage over other candidates in that he has extensive experience in improving the migrant situation. Jiangsu Province has over twelve million migrant workers, or 16% of the Province's population of 76 million people. In 2006 the Jiangsu Provincial Government began to set up free vocational training schools and by 2011 all migrant workers are to be trained in other skill areas, and migrant children will be allowed access to education, which was not normally allowed within Chinese law.

Li's has the experience in handling a wide range of the problems China will need to tackle if it is to sustain its economic growth. Though he is not considered a front-runner to succeed Wen Jiabao in the estimations of most China Watchers, his overall practical experience is precisely what the 'fifth generation' leadership need for the CCP maintain its power throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012 and the 12<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress in 2013 are going to be major tests for the CCP's ability to secure an orderly political succession. While Li Yuanchao may not be the front-runner in the race for the position as Premier but China Watchers should not ignore his chances for success. Li Yuanchao's past success in lessening corruption, improving the accountability of the government to the people, addressing environmental pollution, and migrant worker issues are all challenges that need to be addressed and his current position of head of the powerful Organizations Department shows that the elites within the CCP have tremendous faith in his abilities.

If China wants to continue its rise throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century it will have to address growing economic and social inequalities, ethnic tension, and

endemic corruption. Whoever is appointed within the 'fifth generation' leadership at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and 12<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress will have to meet the challenges needed to keep China's economic rise secure.

**Notes:**

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1. This article is an abridged version of my Master Thesis in International Relations for Flinders University titled, "The CCP Leadership Succession After Hu Jintao in 2012." This article originally appeared in *The Diplomat* as "The Case for Li Yuanchao" on Nov 30, 2011, <http://the-diplomat.com/china-power/2011/11/30/the-case-for-li-yuanchao/>
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