

The Missing Leader

By Nicholas Miller*

W

here is Jiang?

As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was celebrating its 90th anniversary on July 1, 2011 one of the key things that fixated China Watchers was that former Communist Party Secretary and China President Jiang Zemin was not present during the ceremonies. Two of Jiang's former senior cadre members- Premier Li Peng and Zhu Rongji were at the celebration but their boss was mysteriously absent. The Party gave no official reason as to why Jiang was absent from the event or even acknowledged that he was not in attendance. While there were rumors within China that he had died Hong Kong Asia TV Limited News was the first and only Mainland news source to report that Jiang had died. They later retracted and apologized for the story. In addition to the Hong Kong media the Japanese and Korean media announced Jiang's death while Western new sources reported that the possible reason for Jiang not attending the event was ill health because of his age [1]. For China Watchers one of the main sources that were used to monitor the spread-

ing of the rumors about Jiang Zemin was the China's micro-blogging site Weibo, On July 6th, Weibo users stated that the roads of Beijing's premier military hospitals, Hospital 301, were blocked off and a series of black Mercedes-Benzes were seen driving into the hospital. Mercedes-Benz is the vehicle of choice for the elites within the CCP.

There is no evidence that the roads to Hospital 301 were closed or that the roads were closed for Jiang Zemin or that Jiang has even died. The speculation of Jiang's illness or death were only heightened by the government's censoring of twenty words such as "Jiang", which means river, and "301". It was only until July 7th that the state media, Xinhua News, released the first official statement regarding the rumors saying that Jiang Zemin's ill health were just rumors and that he is currently just resting in his home [2]. China Watchers need to take the information gleaned from Weibo carefully as the content is still screened internally to ensure subversive ideas are not disseminated and the messages can be difficult to verify. Despite the uncertainty faced in verifying the accuracy from Weibo it is sometimes one of the few sources that

allow China Watchers a chance to see things that the Party does not want outsiders to see or know.

Traditionally the health of senior or retired Party officials is considered a state secret. When an official does die it usually announced within one to two days of their death. It should be noted that this was not the first time that there has been speculation on Jiang's health. He did not appear at the funeral of former Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua in December 2010, which lead to China Watchers questions whether he had taken ill or died.

Who is Jiang Zemin?

Jiang Zemin was one of the key members of the Third Generation of Chinese leaders, and served as the General Secretary of the CCP from 1989-2002, President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) from 1993-2003, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) from 1989-2002. Jiang rose to prominence in 1989 after Zhao Ziyang, then CPC General Secretary, was purged after his involvement in Tiananmen. Jiang was chosen by Deng Xiaoping to succeed Zhao Ziyang as a compromise between the Party elders and younger leaders to prevent further political fracturing within the CCP. Initially when Jiang took over as President in 1992 China Watchers were uncertain whether he would be able to manage the various factions and his tenure would be similar to Hua Guofeng, who was anointed by Mao to be his successor on his deathbed in 1976 and was eventually ousted by Deng Xiaoping and his allies losing all his major positions by 1981. Jiang's ability to consolidate his power amongst the various factions during the 1990s proved the initial doubts against him wrong.

During Jiang's tenure he weathered the PRC through collapse of the USSR and its satellites throughout Eastern Europe and the hand over of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the PRC. Jiang is credited with carrying out Deng's goal to further spread the economic liberalization throughout the country along a gradual path rather than the shock treatments that occurred in Russia during the 1990s and the development of his own political philosophy, the Three Rep-

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resents, into the Party Constitution. Jiang also instituted the policy of mandatory retirement of Party members once they reach the age of 70, which was to begin with the 14th Party Congress in 1992. Jiang exempted himself from this policy initiative as he turned 71 at the 15th Party Congress and was 76 when he retired in 2002 [3]. Next, he had all the top leadership positions – General Secretary, President, Chair of the Standing Committee of the NPC, and Premier to be limited to a maximum of two terms.

Jiang's core elite faction under him was known as the Shanghai Clique, who were some of the chief power players within Chinese politics in the 1990s. The members of the Shanghai Clique were elites that were advanced through Jiang Zemin. Jiang solidified his position by launching a series of anti-corruption probes to remove his political rivals, such as Beijing Party Boss Chen Xitong in 1995. He promoted his protégés into high-ranking positions such as - Zheng Qinghong to running the General Office of the Central Committee, Yu Xigui to direct the Central Bodyguard Bureau, and Wu Bangguo, the current NPC Chairman, who was previously the Party Secretary of Shanghai to a full membership within the Politburo. These promotions lead to a backlash within the elites who began to block his appointments to various positions.

During the leadership transition between Jiang and Hu in at the 16th Party Congress in 2002 many China analysts wondering how much power Jiang and the



Shanghai Clique would have during the Hu Jintao's tenure as General Secretary as Jiang left power with two thirds of the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee loyal to him and Jiang still retained his position as Chairman of the CMC. It was not until 2008 that Hu was able to dismantle most of the Shanghai Clique's influence throughout the CCP. One area that will need to be watched in the future is when Jiang does die whether it will have any bearing on how the succession of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2012 will turn out. Henry Tang Ying Yen, has strong ties to the Shanghai Clique and is considered the frontrunner to win the election. However, the Hong Kong race is still too uncertain to call it for Henry Tang Ying Yen but it is something China Watchers will have to observe along with the General Secretary elections at the 18th Party Congress in 2012.

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Potential Impact:

Determining leadership succession accurately within China and the possible impact that retired officials could have on the selection and election of new leaders is still an arcane process that relies upon Cold War kremlinological techniques to understand what could be going on within the Great Hall of the People. China Watchers now have sift through message posts on sites like Weibo, state media releases, and analyzing the seating arrangements of elites during major events in order to ascertain whether a particular elite could be rising within the Party or have fallen from grace.

The process of choosing the next leadership is handled behind closed doors and the Party does not

want any event that could destabilize the transition process or show to the outside world that there are any signs of infighting within the elites. Guessing the influence of retired political leaders is difficult but within the current political system top leaders now have to rely upon consensus building amongst a variety of elites and factions rather than a leader being able to designate a successor and the Party going along with this ruling like what happened during the Mao era.

To outsiders it may look like the CCP is overreacting by censoring the Internet searches for Jiang Zemin but their reaction against these rumors stems from the fear that a death of a major political figure could lead to instability throughout the country. While Jiang Zemin's legacy is considered a mix one within China and in the Western world China analysts believe that when Jiang does die that it will be very unlikely that widespread instability will occur. Jiang Zemin's influence has been steadily decreasing after the successful dismantling of the Shanghai Clique by Hu Jintao. While it is far more likely that the rumors are false and Jiang is very much alive when Jiang does pass on he will leave behind the institutional checks and balances that will ensure a smooth transition for the upcoming leadership succession between Hu and Xi Jinping in 2012. **PR**

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- 1) "What will affect the bilateral relations of the previous president Jiang Zemin's death," *Sankei Shimbun*, 07/07/2011; Jamil Anderlini, "CCP birthday gala: where's Jiang Zemin," *Financial Times*, 01/07/2011
- 2) "Jiang Zemin's death 'pure rumor'," Xinhua, 07/07/2011; "China's Jiang 'resting at home' during death rumors," *Reuters*, 13/07/2011.
- 3) J. Fewsmith, *Elite Politics in Contemporary China*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 2001, p. 33.