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VOICES

BRIEFING FROM THE CCP 17TH PARTY CONGRESS

Tony Wan

Stanford University

The 17th Party Congress, held in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, is a momentous event for the political leadership that has taken place approximately every five years since 1969. It sums up the achievements of previous years and outlines broad objectives for the coming ones. Previous congresses have set the course for dramatic changes in political currents with significant socioeconomic implications, such as the onset of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the subsequent arrest of the Gang of Four, and the rehabilitation of reform-minded leaders such as Deng Xiaoping. Since the 15th Party Congress, the emphasis has been shifted to address the social consequences of rapid and sometimes uncontrolled economic growth, on issues such as the corporate restructuring of state-owned enterprises. At stake is the Chinese Communist Party's commitment to the socialist ideology that it was founded upon.

Most intriguing for party members and observers alike is whether or not the Communist leadership underwent any dramatic shuffling that would signal the rise or fall of important personnel. But compared to that of the 16th Party Congress in which there was a dramatic turnover in leadership, the personnel reshuffling in the 17th Party Congress can be considered somewhat tame. On the final day, the congress elected a new Central Committee of 204 members that reappointed Hu Jintao as the Chairman and Wen

Jiabao as the State Council premier. Analysts point to the rise of Xi Jinping, and to some extent, Li Keqiang, into the Politburo Standing Committee as the most significant outcome of the political shuffling. They are considered to be the current choice of successors to Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, respectively. Xi Jinping's accession to the Politburo Standing Committee without prior service is taken as evidence that "the Party leadership is using the precedent of Hu Jintao's preparation to succeed Jiang Zemin as the pathway for Xi's succession to Hu himself."¹

Xi Jinping is considered by some as a "princeling" with reliable communist bloodlines from his father Xi Zhongxun, a prominent veteran with ties to Deng Xiaoping. He also possesses extensive academic and bureaucratic qualifications. In addition to a law degree, he has also earned a degree in chemical engineering from Qinghua University and engaged in postgraduate studies in Marxist theory. He has extensive government experience in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai, as well as military experience in the Central Military Commission Central Office.

Li Keqiang had previously been considered the likely successor to Hu Jintao. He earned a PhD in economics from Beijing University, and despite doubts over the "authenticity" of this degree (it was granted from a part-time executive "night school" program) he has been accredited with developing,

in 1991, a groundbreaking theory about China's economy. The Li Keqiang-Wen Jiabao team may help push forward Hu Jintao's plans for extended economic development, and according to Barry Naughton, "the premier and the executive vice-premier are both clear reformists and attuned to further reform...we now have a dynamic duo of reformist leaders who can share responsibility and drive forward an ambitious agenda."²

Though both these leaders possess significant academic qualifications, their different work experience and background are worth nothing. Li Keqiang built his career from humble origins, and climbed the ranks through political work in Henan and Liaoning. He also served as a member of the Secretariat in the Communist Youth League, which happens to be Hu Jintao's political power base. On the other hand, the "princeling" Xi Jinping oversaw significant economic growth during his time in Zhejiang, and was later appointed Party Chief of Shanghai. According to Cheng Li, Li presents himself as more of a populist leader, while Xi is seen as representing the interests of entrepreneurs and the middle class.³ It will be interesting in the coming years to see how these contrasting political experiences affect policymaking agendas.

The most significant amendment to the Party Constitution in the 17th Congress was the adoption of Hu Jintao's "scientific development concept," which has been pushed since 2003 and aims to address increasing social instability stemming from perceived excesses of economic development. It signaled Hu's determination to pursue a more balanced economic approach, specifically focused on curbing the excessive consumption of limited natural resources, damage to the environment, and

the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Also significant was a reference to the need to "boost democracy at intra-Party and government sphere and expand democracy," and to facilitate a more balanced growth and increased wealth in poorer western regions that have so far been left out of the picture.⁴

Hu's continued emphasis on reforms, development, and economic growth is significant, for it comes at a time that has witnessed the emergence of what some have called the "New Left," who critique privatization and "Westernization" as a major cause of current social inequalities and the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. New Left critics, some of whom are retired, but still influential, senior cadres, argue that reforms have "gone badly off track," and that shady practices in the restructuring process of state-owned enterprises, such as asset stripping and manager buyouts, have threatened to compromise the government's claim to a stable, harmonious society.

Interestingly, Joseph Fewsmith has suggested that Hu's concept of a harmonious society is now being used by the 'New Left' to criticize reform and opening up.⁵ On the other side of the New Left are those who believe that social inequalities exist because reforms have not been thorough and complete. They warn that any attempt to pause reform for the sake of balancing economic disparity would have dire consequences for the future. In light of this debate, Hu's "scientific development concept" and support for ongoing "reform and opening up" are considered by some analysts as his support for the latter argument. Indeed, it has been argued that China's booming economy and increasing revenues can provide a stronger fiscal base

that can provide urgently needed fiscal resources to impoverished areas. But the issue remains of how the present and future leadership will navigate complex political currents and balance center and local interests to ensure that this redistribution of

wealth will occur. In essence, for a government whose legitimacy largely rests on economic growth and permitting individuals to amass wealth, how will the leadership get the rich to offset the expenses of the poor?



ENDNOTES

- 1 Alice Miller, "China's New Party Leadership." *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 23, p. 6
- 2 Barry Naughton, "China's Economic Leadership after the 17th Party Congress." *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 23, p.7
- 3 Cheng Li, "China's 17th Party Congress Outcome." 10/22/07 <<http://www.brookings.edu/multimedia/video/2007/1022li.aspx>>
- 4 Xinhua, "CPC publishes changes in party constitution" 10/25/07 <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/26/content_6208031.htm>
- 5 Joseph Fewsmith, "The 17th Party Congress: Informal Politics and Formal Institutions." *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 23, p.5

TONY WAN

Tony Wan is second-year M.A. student in East Asian Studies at Stanford University. He received a B.A. in History with Honors from University of California, San Diego. He is an avid photographer, and pursues a wide range of academic interests, from frontier and ethnicity issues in late-imperial and early-modern China to contemporary state-society relations in the post-Mao era. He is currently researching changes in minority education in Xinjiang during the Republican era.