

## China's unspoken question: who will succeed Xi Jinping?

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The Chinese leader enjoys complete domination of party and state. But to maintain stability, he also needs to signal there is a succession process

Edward White in Shanghai and Joe Leahy in Beijing 14 HOURS AGO

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Donald Trump's inauguration last month marked the latest peaceful transition of power in the US, a feat the country has navigated, with only a few hitches, for more than two centuries.

In China, by contrast, the topic of leadership change is off-limits.

Xi Jinping, China's most powerful leader since Mao, has given no signs about who will succeed him. After more than a decade of political purges and centralisation of power, Xi faces no direct challenge to his authority and has [signalled](#) his intention to rule indefinitely.

However, even in such a controlled environment, the issue of political succession is never far from the surface.

As Xi enters the midpoint of his third five-year term in power, the question of who will succeed the 71-year-old who has led the ruling Communist party since late 2012 is becoming more urgent — both within China and abroad. Rarely mentioned in public, it is a subject that permeates every discussion about China's future.

While he dominates the party and has sidelined any immediate rivals, Xi, the princeling son of a revolutionary hero, still has to manage a delicate balance. To maintain the stability of the system, he needs to signal that there is a succession process that will eventually kick in — and which could be activated if something were to happen to him. But if he reveals too much, he risks becoming a lame duck, or worse.

The succession “is absolutely existential, and it is a dilemma that every single Chinese leader, including Xi Jinping, fixates and obsesses over”, says Joseph Torigian, an expert in Chinese and Russian elite politics and author of an upcoming biography of Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun. “It relates to whether or not they will be safe, their legacy will be safe, and whether the regime itself survives.”

Ever since October 1 1949, when Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China in Tiananmen Square, Torigian says the party's "central dilemma" has been succession politics.

Li Cheng, one of the world's top scholars on Chinese elite politics, believes there are signs that Xi's preparations for succession are under way and the leader will make his plan clearer as he begins a fourth term. He cautions against ruling out seemingly meek senior leaders who have not yet revealed their personal ambitions.



A man in Yan'an city walks past portraits of Xi Jinping and his predecessors. Xi has departed from the collective leadership of the post-Deng Xiaoping era, meaning he has no clear deputy © Jade Gao/AFP/Getty Images

"People say that Xi Jinping is surrounded by yes men, that's largely true," says Li, founding director of the Centre on Contemporary China and the World, at the University of Hong Kong. "But also, we should remember Xi Jinping, 13 years ago, himself was a 'yes man'."

Since Mao there have only been five other men to hold both of the country's two most important positions — leader of the Communist party and chair of the party's central military commission: Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi.

The question of succession will become ever more pressing as Xi heads towards a likely fourth term as party leader, from 2027 to 2032, at which time he would be 79.

The sudden death in late 2023 of former Chinese premier and second-ranked party leader Li Keqiang, who was two years younger than Xi, threw into sharp focus how "anyone can die, any time", says a foreign diplomat in Beijing, who asked not to be named.

And yet, as interviews with analysts, diplomats and other officials over the past six months reveal, there are few public hints about the potential candidates.

With access to people close to Xi increasingly restricted, leadership analysis includes methods common to Soviet-era Kremlinology.

**With regards to elite politics, the Xi era has been much more stable than many previous eras of modern Chinese history. But it is also unsustainable**

This involves studying the dynamics within the party's top leadership group, the seven-member politburo standing committee, and Xi's history of promotions. Scholars pore over photos, videos, speeches and party documents to see who is travelling with Xi, and who appears to be in or out of favour.

They also read the party's constitutional documents and study historical precedent, to identify which senior cadres close to Xi might be most influential in the longer term or if Xi

suddenly had to step down.

These channels point to possible future leaders among cadres who have contributed to Xi's strategic goals of achieving technological supremacy and self-reliance, as well as a more disparate group in their fifties and early sixties.

Another diplomat in Beijing adds that official party rhetoric signalled Xi planned to stay indefinitely and was preparing the nation for difficult times: "They are girding themselves for a 15-year struggle."

However, the concern is that if the succession question remains unresolved, the party, and China, could easily enter one of its periodic episodes of political chaos, jeopardising not only Xi's legacy, but the party itself.

"With regards to elite politics at the very top, the Xi Jinping era has been much more stable than many previous eras of modern Chinese history," says Torigian. "But it is also unsustainable because he is mortal."

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**One of the defining hallmarks** of the Xi era has been the total decimation of his political rivals and their factions. Xi used the perception that the party was beset with endemic graft to conduct a years-long ["tigers and flies"](#) anti-corruption campaign.

This also gave perfect cover for the purges of rivals — mostly people from Beijing's security apparatus or officials loyal to former leader Jiang Zemin — removing any opposition and the chance another faction could come to power.



Xi at the National People's Congress in Beijing in 2008, when he was a member of the Communist party's top leadership group, the politburo standing committee, and four years before he became party leader © Getty Images





President Xi at the NPC in 2024. Of the current standing committee, in place until late 2027, no one is considered a serious contender to be anointed successor by Xi © Qilai Shen/Bloomberg

In addition to more than a decade of corruption purges, Xi has expertly centralised power using the party appointment system, enforcing, when it suits him, conventions of retirement ages and term limits.

Of the current standing committee, in place until late 2027, none is considered a serious contender to be anointed successor by Xi.

Assuming an unofficial retirement age is adhered to at the next party congress, most of the current top leadership will be forced to stand down in 2027.

Xi has also departed from the so-called two line or collective leadership of his predecessors in the post-Deng era, in which power was shared by the president and a powerful premier. His predecessor Hu ruled with Wen Jiabao as his deputy, and before that Jiang ruled with Zhu Rongji, China's great reformist premier. This means there is no clear deputy.

## **Xi knew that he would have to do something drastic to remove these people and consolidate his power**

The Chinese president has learned from his friend Vladimir Putin not to allow someone to occupy a “number two” position, says Alfred Wu, a professor at the National University of Singapore. “In Russian politics, Putin is always just number one.”

Alex Payette, chief executive of the Cercius Group, a consultancy that specialises in elite Chinese politics, says Xi probably decided years ago he needed to systematically eradicate opposition forces if he was to avoid being “strong armed” by his predecessors and their loyalists.

“He knew that he would have to do something drastic to remove these people and consolidate his power,” Payette says. “But by doing so, he has no choice but to continuously push forward . . . Once you start, you can’t go back.”

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**If Xi had a health emergency** or was otherwise suddenly forced to withdraw, diplomats and analysts say the party’s formal strictures relating to succession would be tested during an inevitable power struggle.

Under this scenario, the current members of the standing committee would suddenly become more influential in deciding the succession.

“I think we would enter something a little similar to what you saw happening in the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin,” says Frank Pieke, visiting research professor at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

Some analysts, including Pieke, believe one of the key figures in deciding the new leader would be Cai Qi, who could play the role of kingmaker.

# In the wings

## Some of the next generation of potential contenders

**Yin Li**

Age: 62

Beijing party secretary  
height of China's border  
he was elevated from  
chief of Fujian province  
health expert who studied  
at Harvard and in the  
steer China through

*Swipe left to see more* >

The 69-year-old is a former Beijing party chief and is technically the fifth-ranked party leader. He is considered one of Xi's closest allies and is director of the General Office of the Central Committee — essentially Xi's chief of staff — the most senior party member to hold that role since Mao. He is also frequently mentioned in state media as travelling with Xi and attending his meetings, illustrating his importance.

“People are afraid of him. It would be very important for any successor to strike a deal at least initially with him,” Pieke adds.

Neil Thomas, a fellow on Chinese politics with the Asia Society, a US think-tank, points out that the appointment of a new party leader “following the party's own rules” would potentially only require a contender to secure support of the majority of the 376-member central committee, including more than half of the full 24-member politburo.

He says that in such circumstances Cai, for example, could argue for a “generous interpretation” of Article 23 of the party charter which allows the central secretariat to call a politburo meeting that then convenes a plenum to select a leader.

### **Any successor would need to at least gain the acceptance if not win the support of the PLA leadership**

“That kind of manoeuvre is only imaginable in the case of an extremely contested and unstable succession,” he says, adding that any incoming leader would “prefer to prove their authority and protect the image of party” with a show of unanimous support from the central committee.

Other diplomats and experts spoken to by the FT noted that if Xi was forced to step down unexpectedly, the People’s Liberation Army would become pivotal.

Zhang Youxia, Xi’s deputy in the powerful Central Military Commission, would potentially be another key figure. Zhang and Xi’s fathers were comrades and revolutionary leaders during the Chinese civil war, making the 74-year-old a trusted confidant after years of purges of high-ranking officials in the military. However, he has faced political scrutiny following allegations of corruption in the military leadership.

“The party commands the gun, but any successor would need to at least gain the acceptance if not win the support of the PLA leadership,” says Thomas. “If there is a succession crisis, Zhang Youxia could try to throw his weight behind a Xi loyalist who is willing to turn down the political heat on the military.”

At China’s last major leadership meeting in late 2022, all politburo members aged 68 and above were forced into retirement, with exceptions made for three men: Zhang, veteran diplomat Wang Yi, and Xi himself.

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**The scholars and diplomats** trying to predict China’s next leader are studying a younger generation of party officials, who seem to be mostly a group of men in their fifties or early sixties.

Under Xi, for the first time since the 1990s, no women were appointed to the politburo, the 24-member leadership body, at the last party congress and no woman has ever been appointed to the exclusive standing committee. Academics say this stems from a lack of encouragement of women to assume local political positions, reducing their chances of rising to the top.

The traditional routes to power remain promotions to senior government and party roles, including in leading Chinese cities and provinces.



Candidates in this category include Beijing party boss Yin Li, who is 62, and Chen Wenqing, 65, a former intelligence officer who now oversees China's legal system.

Yin and Chen are examples of leaders who have worked with Xi for years and are regularly in state media and permitted to meet foreign officials in China and abroad — noteworthy signs for experts assessing who Xi might elevate in the future. They are also, according to some experts, just two members of a loose group of Xi loyalists with links to Fujian, where Xi spent a large section of his career.



Visitors view a portrait of Xi at a museum in Beijing. Some diplomats and experts spoken have noted that if Xi was forced to step down unexpectedly, the People's Liberation Army would become pivotal © Bloomberg

Observers of the party's politics also focus on rising cadres whose careers reflect Xi's policy priorities of ensuring China's technological independence and military strength in competition with the western world, and also managing China's crippling local government debt.

Wu Guoguang, who worked as an adviser to the former Chinese premier Zhao Ziyang and is now with the Asia Society, says Xi has a record of installing in leadership roles men with expertise in technology, finance and defence.

Across China there are now more than 20 deputy provincial governors with deep backgrounds in technology and science, including from the country's top research institutions, especially Tsinghua University, where Xi studied.

They include the vice-governor of Anhui province Zhang Hongwen, Chen Jining, the party boss in Shanghai, and Beijing mayor Yin Yong.

Wu says that when looking at a medium-term succession scenario, politicians such as Zhang, who was born in 1975, would become particularly important. “Those who were born in the 1970s, they could be really important players for generational change of the national leadership in the next 10 years,” he says.

Ultimately, Payette of Cercius believes that Xi suffers from a “prisoner’s dilemma”, balancing the choice of a successor for the party with his own security in later life, and his legacy beyond that.

“We have seen the exact same thing in the 70s. Once Mao died, people who pretended to be friendly immediately turned their backs on each other in an instant,” Payette adds.

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**Despite the immense importance** of the succession question, Xi barely mentions the subject.

In February 2022, Xi repeated his remarks on succession originally made in 2014: “To evaluate whether a country’s political system is democratic and effective, the main criterion is whether its leadership can be replaced in an orderly and lawful manner.”

However, few people are more familiar with the high-stakes manoeuvrings during some of the most tense leadership battles in the party’s history than Xi himself.

His father, Xi Zhongxun, was viewed as a chief implementer for Mao’s right-hand man Zhou Enlai in the 1950s, and three decades later played a similar role in the 1980s for Deng’s key adviser Hu Yaobang.

## All the Emperor’s men



**Visual story:** How Xi Jinping became China’s unrivalled leader — and how he plans to expand his power base

Some outside observers view Deng’s era as a model for Xi to follow, given their positive perception of China’s economic reforms and cultural liberalisation in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, this was also a period of dysfunction in the party. Under Deng’s leadership, the party conducted ruthless campaigns to “eliminate spiritual pollution” and “bourgeois liberalisation” through high-level purges. It also faced mass student and labour protests culminating in the Tiananmen massacre in 1989.

Given the first-hand lessons from Xi's father, Torigian believes, the Chinese leader knows the risks of both paths: handing over power to a successor too early, or, like paramount leaders Deng and Mao, holding on until his last breath.

“Ironically, the story of Xi Jinping illustrates why Xi Jinping is probably so worried about succession politics,” he says. “Because it is so hard to guess what the person who comes after you is going to do.”

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