

China Leadership Monitor

CLM Insights Interview:

Joseph Fewsmith, Author of *Rethinking Chinese Politics*

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Joseph Fewsmith. *Rethinking Chinese Politics* / Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2021. 217 pp. ISBN : 9781108831253; 9781108926607.

Your central argument in the book is that the CCP's degree of institutionalization has been exaggerated. Can you briefly elaborate on this argument?

I think the entry point for any discussion of elite politics is the question of institutionalization. Without institutionalization, elite politics, and hence policy, tend to be unstable. I think for a long time, most of the field has believed that Chinese politics were trending toward greater institutionalization and thus toward greater stability. I think this was a misreading of the past, and the lack of institutionalization is increasingly evident.

Consider what political scientist Milan Svobik wrote when Xi Jinping was still heir-apparent: "He will be expected to serve no more than two five-year terms and be accountable to a set of institutions within the Communist Party of China that carefully balance two major political coalitions as well as regional and organizational interests within the Chinese political system." Milan Svobik is not a China specialist, but I think his prediction is well grounded in what China specialists were writing at the time. It is now evident that this prediction was wrong. The two main coalitions that Svobik refers to—the Communist Youth League (CYL), from which Hu Jintao drew many of his supporters, and the so-called "Shanghai gang," from which Jiang Zemin drew many of his supporters — are no longer operative. And it seems increasingly likely that next year Xi Jinping will begin a third term in office. So where did the analysis go wrong? In my opinion, power in China cannot be passed from one leader to another institutionally; it is necessary for each leader to build his own support.

Can you explain your concept of "critical positions" in the CCP regime and the importance of control of these positions?

A simple mind experiment: Imagine that you are dropped into the general secretary's chair after a party congress. You look around the room and see some friendly faces and some not so friendly faces. This scenario is not as fanciful as you might first imagine – it is really not that different from what Jiang Zemin faced in 1989 when, as the "accidental general secretary," he was put in the head chair. If Jiang did not want to follow the paths of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, both of whom were dismissed from office, he had to secure control over the "critical positions," or at least most of them. Critical positions include the military, and the ministries of State Security and Public Security. The head of the General Office is also critical as are the heads of the Propaganda and Organization Departments.

You devote a great deal of attention in the book to shifting coalitions and personnel changes at the top. What determines or shapes political divisions and factional balances of power at the top? How have these factors changed in the post-Mao era?

It is precisely because elite politics are not institutionalized that it takes time – and shifting coalitions – to secure power. When you look at Jiang Zemin’s time in office, it is very clear that he did not emerge as a powerful leader by virtue of being named general secretary. Rather, it was after Jiang had come out in full-throated support of Deng, after Deng’s 1992 “Southern Journey,” that Deng gave full support to Jiang by purging the Yang brothers and their supporters from the military. After the passing of senior party leaders, such as Li Xiannian (in 1992) and Chen Yun (in 1995), Jiang was finally able to secure his power, which he demonstrated by purging Chen Xitong, the powerful party secretary of Beijing, in the spring of 1995.

I think the biggest difference between the revolutionary generation of Mao and Deng and later leaders like Jiang and Hu is that Mao and Deng had skills and connections throughout the system and the later leaders, whose careers were largely “stove-piped” in one organization or one location, tend to have narrower bases of power. Xi is trying to transcend such limited bases of power by ruthlessly purging other networks.

Can you give an example of an event that looks like to have been institutionalization but turns out not to have been?

The first time a retirement rule was put in place at the highest level of the political system was in 1997 when Jiang demanded the resignation of Qiao Shi. This has often been taken as an indication of growing institutionalization. But if one looks at the politics of the situation, it is apparent that politics, not institutionalization, were behind this move. No doubt Qiao was a thorn in Jiang’s side. Qiao had headed the party’s General Office and Organization Department as early as 1983, in 1987 he became a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, and in 1997 he was head of the National People’s Congress. Qiao certainly had good reason to resent being passed over in favor of the less-experienced Jiang and he was less than supportive of Jiang.

But if one looks at the politics of Qiao’s forced retirement, it becomes apparent that purging and political balancing were the driving forces, not institutionalization. Li Peng had served as premier for two terms, and there was a norm of officials stepping down after two terms (a norm that might have been violated if the politics had been different). But if Li Peng had retired, there would have been much speculation, both in China and abroad, that the party was reconsidering the verdict on Tiananmen. Such rumors could have caused political problems. At the time, Li Peng was 69 years old, so by setting the retirement age at 70, Jiang could force the 73-year-old Qiao Shi to retire, opening up the position of chairman of the NPC. Thus, Qiao could be dismissed, and Li could be kept on for another term, albeit in a less-powerful position. The politics behind this move were made evident when, five years later, the retirement age was shifted to 68 – forcing Li Ruihuan to retire.

This is a prime example of institutions not constraining leaders (i.e., institutionalization) and of institutions being manipulated by leaders to constrain others.

Xi's rapid consolidation of power surprised many China watchers. In retrospect, should we have been surprised?

Post-reform Leninism inevitably suffers from a number of pathologies, such as corruption, factionalism, localism, loss of party discipline, decline in ideological belief, and acceptance of foreign standards (so-called "universal values"), including constitutional democracy, freedom of speech, and so forth. The party is more tolerated than it is venerated. These changes provide fertile ground for what the CCP calls "peaceful evolution."

The speed at which Xi was able to consolidate power reflects his ability to play upon the widespread fears that the party's legitimacy really was threatened by such things as the Bo Xilai scandal and fear of the "color revolutions" in Ukraine and elsewhere. Xi has played upon fears that the CCP might follow the CPSU onto the ash heap of history if the party is not reformed. This has meant going after corruption, centralizing power, tightening discipline, and strengthening ideology. Of course, Xi's vigorous campaign against corruption was also an intimidation campaign that silenced any voices that might have existed against his centralization of power.

Xi Jinping has an ambitious project of reinvigorating Leninism. Your research on the party's unsuccessful efforts to "institutionalize" itself might be a cautionary tale here. Despite obvious differences, might Xi achieve nothing more than a largely pro forma, rather than genuine and substantive, reinvigoration of Leninism in a party whose membership seems to be deeply cynical and mostly self-serving?

Presumably the reason Xi has cracked down on corruption, factionalism, ideology, and he has revised the rules governing the party and so forth is because he hopes the CCP will continue in power for a long time. But the irony in his effort to rebuild the party has been his reliance on a cohort of officials whom he has promoted in "helicopter" fashion. You now have two officials serving on the Politburo who have never been on the Central Committee at all and four others who were promoted from alternate membership on the Central Committee to the Politburo. These sorts of personal promotions have not been seen in the reform era (with the exception of Zhu Rongji's promotion in 1994). So, Xi has built his own faction even while denouncing factionalism in general and purging those whom he regards as creating their own factions. One has to think that many will see his efforts as self-serving and will react against Xi and his close followers if and when they have an opportunity. Therefore, unless Xi can institutionalize his changes, they are likely to be swept away. But, as we have seen, the mobilizational nature of a Leninist party makes it difficult to institutionalize the system.

Another irony is that the United States has, however unintentionally, made Xi's task easier. Particularly under former President Trump and Secretary Pompeo, American politicians have been eager to demonize China. American nationalism has made Chinese nationalism seem more natural. The demand to increase China's "discourse power" (*huayuquan*) has become easier. One has to note that part of Xi's effort to reinvigorate the Leninist party in China has involved a cultural as well as an economic "decoupling" from the United States. One might say that there is a certain degree of "self-reliance" (*zili gengsheng*) occurring in both countries. In any event, the American response to the rise of China certainly seems to fit Xi's desire to reinvigorate the

CCP's ideology, reshape the Chinese economy, and use nationalist appeals to reshape its relations with the United States and the world.