

The 20th National Congress, which met in October 2022, reorganized the central leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, with party chief Xi Jinping beginning his third term and overwhelmingly dominating the Politburo and its Standing Committee. As non-Xi factions have virtually disappeared from the top leadership, is CCP factional politics now over? Will CCP elites become “united as a piece of hard steel” with Xi in command? How will the dynamics of leadership politics in the years to follow likely unfold? This essay is an attempt to answer these questions by analyzing the career paths of the new members of the leadership and outlining the emerging landscape of new factions in the party. It argues that, in the years to come, factional competition will be inevitable due to significant political, administrative, and institutional factors within the dictatorial regime. Generational change, in terms of internal elite circulation and power succession, will also fuel power struggles among those sub-Xi factions that are now taking shape.

With the end of the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in late October 2022, there is wide consensus among China watchers that Xi Jinping (习近平) has triumphed in redistributing power and internally circulating the political elites. The major indicators of this triumph include: Xi won a third term as party chief and, concurrently, as supreme commander of the Chinese military, thereby ending the norm of the last decades whereby the party chief would remain in his position for only two terms. The protégés of former party chiefs Jiang Zemin (江泽民) and Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) have been pushed into retirement or semi-retirement, and virtually all of them have been excluded from the Politburo and the Central Secretariat, regardless of whether or not they have reached normal retirement age. Some of Xi’s favorites, by contrast, have retained their seats in the leadership bodies, even if their ages are far beyond the previous ceiling for retirement. And perhaps more important, Xi’s men – yes, literally “men,” as no females are included – have filled all the vacancies on the Politburo, the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), the Central Secretariat, and the Central Military Commission (CMC). Therefore, Xi Jinping has now established absolute domination over the CCP central leadership.

Meanwhile, the Central Committee, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), and, earlier in the process of preparing for the 20th Party Congress, all subnational leaderships

nationwide have been also reorganized with Xi's people dominating.¹ This has roughly completed the internal circulation of high-ranking CCP elites in the Chinese party-state hierarchy as intended by Xi, and any further circulation during the next five years will likely take place within this framework.

That said, some questions remain regarding CCP leadership politics. As all the CCP top leadership bodies generally consist of Xi's men, has factional politics within the CCP now come to an end? Will the dynamics of CCP elite politics become, as Xi himself has stated, "united as a piece of hard steel" with Xi-in-command? With Xi's absolute domination, how will elite politics in the years to follow likely unfold?

This essay is a preliminary effort to answer the above questions. It is preliminary because, by the time of the writing of this essay, the current round of leadership reorganization has not yet been settled with respect to at least two issues. First, the division of labor among members of the new Politburo is still in process. Some of these assignments have not yet been announced, and it will take some time for the corresponding personnel transfers at the provincial level to take place; second, this process will last until several weeks following the sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the National People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which will appoint the new leaders of the PRC state system, scheduled to take place in March of next year, after which another wave of corresponding adjustments of provincial leaders will occur. However, it is not too early to analyze the dynamics of elite politics in the years to follow, as the framework has already been established and new features and signals of CCP leadership politics are emerging.

Below, the essay will first investigate the composition of the new leadership organizations, with a focus on the new faces on the Politburo and the Central Secretariat. It then will discuss how, within the Politburo, new factions or proto-factions have already taken shape. The third section will analyze why the emergence of factional politics will be inevitable after the 20th Party Congress and how the relevant factors will drive the dynamics of CCP leadership politics, especially with respect to possible forthcoming promotions of the younger generation of cadres.

Who Are They? Why Are They? New Faces on the Politburo and the Central Secretariat

The Politburo that was appointed following the 20th Party Congress has some unique features: It consists of 24 members, rather than the 25 members on the previous Politburos (even though there is no party rule on the number of seats on this center of party power). Unlike the norm of previous decades when there was always one female on this body, this time there are no female members. All 24 men are of Han ethnicity, and none of the 55 other ethnic groups in China are represented. This is an old men's club, with an average age of 63.4; the eldest, military leader Zhang Youxia (张又侠), is already 72 years old, and the youngest, Li Ganjie (李干杰), incumbent party secretary of Shandong province, will turn 58 in November.²

¹ For the 2021–22 reshuffling of the provincial leaderships, see the analysis in Guoguang Wu, "Politics and Norms in Leadership Reorganization toward the 20th Party Congress: Preliminary Observations," *China Leadership Monitor*, 71 (Spring 2022). <https://www.prcleader.org/wu-2>.

² See official CCP information regarding the composition of the new leadership at: 中国共产党新闻网, "中国共产党第二十届中央组织结构图."

In terms of the PBSC, the supreme decision-making body of the entire Chinese party-state system, the number of seats remains at 7, all of which are accounted within the 24 Politburo members but who are in their continuous term from the 19th Politburo, with an average age of 65 (Xi Jinping at 69 years old, is the eldest, and Xi's former chief of staff, Ding Xuexiang 丁薛祥 at age 60, is the youngest).

More important for this essay, however, is to explore why these men were able to attain their powerful positions. In the interest of space, we choose to skip over those men who are continuing members of the Politburo and instead to focus on the 13 new members of the Politburo. These persons are not necessarily younger than their incumbent peers, as one new member (Wang Yi 王毅, incumbent Foreign Minister, is already 69). Their average age at 61.7, however, is relatively young, and among them, the 4 who were born in 1964 are the youngest.

These new leaders can all be regarded as "Xi's men." This is a general answer to the question "why them?" However, there are numerous high-ranking CCP cadres who are Xi's confidants but were unable to advance at the party congress. For the answer to the question "why them?" we will need to probe more specifically and deeper. Here we will follow clues in terms of their connections with Xi's life experiences³ and briefly discuss their personal connections with the party chief as well as Xi's connections to the two new members of the Central Secretariat.

Xi made critical career advancements in Fujian province, where he climbed from a lower-mid-level cadre to provincial governor within fourteen years (1985–1999). At least two new members of the Politburo and the Central Secretariat, namely, He Lifeng (何立峰, director of the National Commission on Reform and Development) and Wang Xiaohong (王小洪, minister of Public Security), are Xi's old buddies in Fujian who befriended him when he was still at an early stage of his career, sometimes as an underdog in the complicated interpersonal local relationships.⁴

After staying on in the position of governor in Fujian for a number of years, Xi was transferred to Zhejiang province in 2002, initially as provincial governor but soon thereafter as provincial party secretary. He Weidong (何卫东), the PLA general who has joined the 20th Politburo as a dark horse, became close to Xi when he was stationed in Huzhou city of Zhejiang.⁵ With He

<http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/448511/index.html>, which also contains brief bios of each member. This source of information will not be repeatedly footnoted below.

³ Analysis of Xi's efforts to build up his own powerbase can be found in Guoguang Wu, "The King's Men and Others: Emerging Political Elites under Xi Jinping," *China Leadership Monitor*, 60 (Summer 2019).

https://www.prcleader.org/files/ugd/10535f_da7effdfa8ad40979f17d561cb845a98.pdf

⁴ He Lifeng's and Wang Xiaohong's close relationships with Xi are not a secret, at least to China watchers. See, for example, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/decoding-chinas-20th-party-congress>

⁵ See the following summary of some official and unofficial information about several PLA generals, including He Weidong.

<https://kanuswest.com/categories/POLITICS/4e608fd15e735bf951fa81ea9a7b798f5efa770131519b76845c06988660c5670972ec949f>. The current essay, however, is cautious about citing

Weidong's promotion to CMC vice chairman, joining incumbent CMC vice chairman Zhang Youxia, Xi Jinping's control of the PLA has been further strengthened.

There are various signs that new Politburo members Shi Taifeng (石泰峰) and Li Shulei (李书磊) who had worked under Xi at the Central Party School, indicating that it was at this time that they gained Xi's trust.⁶ Foreign Minister Wang Yi has made huge efforts in recent years to demonstrate his loyalty to Xi, and now he has been rewarded by his appointment to the Politburo as a veteran diplomat. Chen Wenqing (陈文清), chief official in the Chinese intelligence system, is the first person to enter the Politburo from the Ministry of State Security (this Ministry did not come into being until 1983). In the past five years, Chen was concurrently in charge of the office of the Central Commission on State Security, which was chaired personally by Xi.

It is not clear if the six other new members of the Politburo had any personal connections with Xi before Xi took power in 2012, but it is obvious that, in one way or another, since then they have joined the group of Xi's favorites. It is reported that they all have access to Xi, but via different channels. Yin Li (尹力), party secretary of Fujian province, and Ma Xingrui (马兴瑞), party chief of Xinjiang, are said to have established close connections with Peng Liyuan (彭丽媛), Xi's wife, at some stage of their careers.⁷ Chen Jining (陈吉宁), newly appointed party secretary of Shanghai, and Li Ganjie, who possibly will be appointed director of the Central Organization Department (COD), are protégés of Chen Xi (陈希), who was Xi's roommate when they were both undergraduates at Tsinghua. The head of the COD will be responsible for recommending future cadres to Xi and the party center.⁸

Liu Guozhong (刘国中) enters the Politburo from the post of party secretary of Shaanxi province, Xi's home province. Earlier in his career, he had been a subordinate of Li Zhanshu (栗战书), Xi's closest ally on the 19th PBSC and China's No. 3 leader who now chairs the NPC. Another new member of the Politburo, Yuan Jiajun (袁家军), is party secretary of Zhejiang province, Xi's major power base.

It seems that Zhang Guoqing (张国清), party secretary of Liaoning province, is the sole person among the new members of the Politburo who has never had a special personal relationship with Xi or with any from Xi's inner circle. However, he shares a military-industrial background with

unofficial reports about CCP leaders, including those cited below, as it is impossible to have a sense of the complicated research and testing processes involved.

⁶ For example, see the following news report regarding Li Shulei's connections with Xi Jinping. <https://www.ntdtv.com/gb/2022/10/26/a103560280.html>

⁷ Shandong is home province of Peng, Yin, and Ma. There are reports attributing Peng's appointment as WHO Goodwill Ambassador to efforts by Yin, as at the time Yin was vice minister of Public Health. Ma was not born in Shandong, but his ancestral home is Yuncheng (郟城) county, where Peng was born and grew up.

⁸ There are numerous reports about Chen Xi's experience as Xi's roommate at Tsinghua. See, for example, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/zhuannan/yehuazhongnanhai/gx-04302013112626.html>, and <https://www.wenxuecity.com/news/2013/04/26/2360407.html>

a number of the cadres named above, such as Ma Xingrui, Yuan Jiajun, and Li Ganjie (to be discussed below).

Old Factions Die, New Factions Rise: A Sketch of the New Leadership's Factional Landscape

The lingering influence of the former party chiefs has been greatly reduced, if not totally eliminated. With the retirement of Li Keqiang (李克强) and Wang Yang (汪洋), and, especially, with the surprisingly exclusion of Hu Chunhua (胡春华), the youngest member of the 19th Politburo, from the 20th Politburo, Hu Jintao's faction, mainly consisting of those with Communist Youth League (CYL) backgrounds, has now left centerstage. It can be argued that Zhao Leji (赵乐际), who continues as a member of the PBSC, might be the last CYL-related high-ranking leader. But his major career advancements occurred during the Jiang Zemin era, and it is obvious that he successfully cultivated connections with Xi after the latter came to power, thus better explaining his survival.

The legacy of former party chief Jiang Zemin on the 20th Politburo seems a bit stronger than that of Hu Jintao as a number of the current top leaders, including PBSC members Wang Huning (王沪宁) and Ding Xuexiang, made significant career advances in Shanghai, Jiang's major power base. Since Xi's coming to power, however, Wang Huning has also won Xi's trust; Ding, who worked as Xi's chief of staff during the past decade, has also thrived politically under Xi's patronage. Thus, there may be, as explained below, a Shanghai gang in the current leadership, but this is a *new* Shanghai gang, to be distinguished from Jiang's old Shanghai gang.

As the former factions seem to have disappeared, new factions under Xi's supreme umbrella of power are beginning to emerge. At this stage it might be too early to identify them as such, but we can already cite some likely signals. Among Xi's persons, those with Fujian, Zhejiang, Shanghai, and Shaanxi backgrounds can be recognized, as noted below:

-- The Fujian group, including Cai Qi (蔡奇, PBSC), He Lifeng, Wang Xiaohong (Central Secretariat), and Huang Kunming (黄坤明), all of whom are from Fujian and established relationships with Xi during his time there. This group also includes Generals He Weidong and Miao Hua (苗华; both as CMC members), both of whom are reported to have been born in Fujian province. During the long period that Miao was stationed there he became close to Xi, as did, though to a lesser degree, Li Shulei, Chen Wenqing, and Yin Li, all of whom were assigned to work in Fujian after Xi became CCP party chief.

-- The Zhejiang group, including Li Qiang (李强, PBSC) and Chen Miner (陈敏尔), both of whom grew up in Zhejiang and worked under Xi's leadership there; Cai Qi and Huang Kunming, who were transferred from Fujian to Zhejiang as mid-level cadres and, later, promoted to higher positions when Xi was party chief of the province. The group also includes He Weidong (CMC) and, to a lesser degree, Yuan Jiajun, both of whom are discussed above.

-- The Shanghai group is a bit more complicated, as it includes both persons who are Shanghai natives as well as outsiders who were transferred to the municipality (it should be noted that Shanghai is notorious for natives who look down upon newcomers). Wang Huning and Ding Xuexiang belong to the former category. For the latter, there are Li Xi (李希, PBSC,

concurrently head of the CCDI), who was assigned to Shanghai after Xi became CCP party chief, and Li Qiang (PBSC), party chief of Shanghai and now No. 2 in the country.

-- The Shaanxi group, including Zhao Leji (PBSC), a Shaanxi native and, for a time, party chief of the province; Zhang Youxia, who is also a Shaanxi native; Li Xi, who worked in Shaanxi for years; and, to a lesser degree, Liu Guozhong, current provincial party secretary.

In addition, five other groups can now be identified:

-- The military-industrial group, now a large group on the Politburo, includes Ma Xingrui, Yuan Jiajun, Zhang Guoqing, and Li Ganjie. They all have good educational backgrounds, having been trained as aerospace, nuclear, or military-weapon engineers and having risen within the military-industrial sector to leadership positions of major state-owned, military-industrial corporations, and then transferred to the party-state's provincial administrative posts. Liu Guozhong might also be considered a member of this group, as, even though he does not have much experience in running a huge military-industrial corporation, he was trained as a military-industrial engineer. In the bigger picture, the rise of this group is seemingly indicative of Xi's new strategy of economic and technological development, with an emphasis on state capacity in promoting technological progress and a reduction in the weight of the private sector in the Chinese economy.

-- The Chen Xi/Tsinghua group: Chen Xi retired from the 20th Politburo, but his influence remains significant, especially with respect to personnel issues. Chen Jining, former Beijing mayor who now has been appointed as party chief of Shanghai, and Li Ganjie, who, as stated above, might succeed Chen Xi in his position on the COD, were both Chen's subordinates at Tsinghua University.

-- The Peng Liyuan group: Both Yin Li and Ma Xingrui have connections with Peng, and their promotions may be partly attributed to such relations.

-- The Central Party School group: Shi Taifeng and Li Shulei worked together with Xi at the Central Party School for many years and both are alumni of Peking University.

-- The group from the security sector: An outstanding feature of the new Politburo is the extraordinary weight of members who either had experience or currently have responsibilities in the security sector. Such leaders include: Chen Wenqing, former minister of State Security, who, as currently secretary of the Central Political-Legal Commission (CPLC), is in charge of law enforcement; Liu Jinguo (刘金国), a new member of the Central Secretariat and concurrently No. 2 leader of the CCDI, whose earlier career was in the Ministry of Public Security, where he climbed to the high position of Executive Minister; and Wang Xiaohong, in his capacity as minister of Public Security, is also currently China's chief of police.

The above groups might not be immediately labeled "factions," but they will inevitably become the bases of faction-building in leadership politics following the 20th Party Congress (it is also true that some of them were members of various former factions). Also, the above groupings do not necessarily mean that those in the same group will necessarily belong to the same political faction. In addition, the overlap among the various groups further complicates the factional landscape. However, the point here is that even though they can all be considered Xi's men, they are members of different sub-Xi groups in terms of shared identities, similar experiences, related career paths, and thus they provide a solid base for political faction-building.

Politics, Norms, and Generational Change: Why Factional Power Competition Is Inevitable

With the presence of such factions or proto-factions, this essay argues that the rise of different factions and factional politics driving elite politics under Xi will be inevitable during the next five years and beyond. Some of the major reasons for this judgment are discussed below.

First, this can be attributed to both dictatorship politics, in general, and to Xi Jinping's style of rule, in particular. A dictator will always feel insecure, probably because he exists in opposition to everyone else, both his followers and his enemies, and, especially, it is those close followers who can present potential but immediate challenges. He therefore prefers that his followers will be divided up into competing groups, which would underline, rather than undermine, his supreme status, power, and authority. But he does not want any one of these groups to be overwhelmingly powerful; one effective way of preventing this is to maintain a kind of factional checks and balances under him. Based on his political practice over the past ten years, it is clear that Xi is good at this. In the leadership arrangements for the next five years, Xi has intentionally made use of factional politics to serve his own interests.

Taking the leadership of the next State Council as an example. Li Qiang presumably will be No. 1 in the PRC state administration and Ding Xuexiang will probably be No. 2. In addition, He Lifeng is widely expected to be vice premier in charge of macro-economic and financial policy, playing a role like that of Liu He (刘鹤) in the former State Council. However, these three powerful leaders come from diverse backgrounds: Li from Zhejiang, Ding from Shanghai, and He from Fujian. They are all Xi's men, of course, but they each have their own respective interpersonal networks and, accordingly, powerbases. Will Xi prefer that these three are united, with both Ding and He closely following Li Qiang in the State Council, or will Xi prefer that they all report directly to him? It is not difficult to answer this question. The fact that Ding and He accompanied Xi practically every day during the past five years, while Li was far away in Shanghai, indicates that Ding and He are closer to Xi than they are to Li Qiang.

This situation might be called "checks and balances with Chinese characteristics."⁹ In fact, although checks and balances exist in every power relationship, they exist in fundamentally different ways. In a democracy, they provide a check over the supreme power in institutional ways. In Xi's China, however, although Xi, as dictator, has virtually avoided any checks and balances in his path to leadership at the 20th Party Congress, he can still make checks and balances work on his behalf among his subordinates, thus ensuring that they are unable to threaten his power or status. In addition, Xi will not allow any one of the factions below him to grow to such an extent that it will be dominant. This would encourage the different factions below him to grow, or, at a minimum, allow space for the different factions to thrive.

Second, due to administrative reasons, it is unimaginable that governance of such huge entities as the CCP and the PRC can be done without any delegation of power. When power is delegated to lower-level leaders, a cascade phenomenon of power and interpersonal networks at lower levels of the hierarchy of governance emerges. Take the supposed Li-Ding-He triangle in the leadership of the State Council as an example. When the three take office, each will need to get his business done, for which each will need his own people. It is natural that they have different interpersonal

⁹ Guoguang Wu, *The Anatomy of Political Power in China* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005), chap. 3: "Checks and Balances with Chinese Characteristics: Transitional Structures of Political Power in the Jiang Zemin Era."

networks and that they will appoint cadres from their respective networks to relevant positions, thus leading to the growth of factions, at least in the State Council. This logic applies equally to other branches of the Chinese party-state-military system.

Third, factional politics will rise due to institutional reasons, or, more exactly, due to the absence of relevant institutional norms in determining the career tracks of leading cadres. Xi's reshuffling of the leadership at the 20th Party Congress did not follow existing CCP promotion and retirement norms. As norms for a redistribution of power decline, this essay argues, personal dependence will accordingly escalate, because, as in the game of the jungle, there are no rules to follow and one will simply follow the most powerful or, if that is impossible, one will join a group headed by a lesser but still powerful figure. That means, when institutions are weak, there inevitably will be strong momentum for the rise of factional politics as there are no rules for a distribution of power and thus personal alliances for competition will prevail. As CCP cadres seek to advance their careers in the party-state system without explicit norms to follow and no opportunities to win Xi's favor, they will seek to join either Li Qiang or Ding Xuexiang or, for lower-ranking leaders, to join a protégé of either Li or Ding, thus contributing to a future growth of factions.

Fourth, in purging and marginalizing Jiang Zemin's protégés and, especially, Hu Jintao's protégés who are generally younger than their peers within the CCP regime, Xi Jinping intentionally slowed down the progress of generational change of CCP elites during the past decade. This has resulted in an older average age of high-ranking leaders. Now with his absolute domination of power, in the years to come Xi is likely to accelerate the promotion of younger cadres to ministerial and provincial levels. The 20th Central Committee includes at least eleven younger full members who are the No. 3 leaders of their provinces, something that is exceptional, at least in the recent decades of CCP history.¹⁰ Their promotions to full provincial/ministerial-levels positions are expected to be announced in the forthcoming months. This is a clear signal of Xi's next step in promoting younger cadres. Opportunities for promotion, however, will significantly depend on the interpersonal linkages within the Politburo and the PBSC of these younger cadres. Similarly, those top-level leaders will take the opportunity to strengthen their respective power bases, or, in fact, to build up their own factions among the younger cadres who have promising futures.

In light of the forthcoming politics of power succession to Xi, for which there are no functioning norms, the relatively young but high-ranking members of the Politburo will be driven to build up their own factions in preparation for future fierce battles over this issue. History teaches them

¹⁰ They include: Cheng Lihua (程丽华) of Anhui (born in 1965), Hu Yuting (胡玉亭) of Liaoning (b. 1964), Huang Jianfa (黄建发) of Zhejiang (b. 1965), Jin Xiangjun (金湘军) of Tianjin (b. 1964), Liu Wei (刘伟) of Jilin (b. 1965), Liu Xiaoming (刘小明) of Guangxi (b. 1964), Lu Zhiyuan (陆治原) of Shandong (b. 1964), Meng Fanli (孟凡利) of Guangdong (b. 1965), Wang Zhijun (王志军) of Heilongjiang (b. 1965), Yin Yong (殷勇) of Beijing (b. 1969), and Zhao Gang (赵刚) of Shaanxi (b. 1968). Li Yifei (李邑飞) of Xinjiang does not belong to this group, because, in his capacity as chairman of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, he is already a ministerial-level cadre. Immediately following the 20th Party Congress, Yin Yong was appointed acting mayor of Beijing, thus becoming the youngest among all provincial leaders.

that this is a life-or-death issue. Even if one is not driven by ambition for the top position but nevertheless is at the higher levels, it is still inevitable they will become involved in the battle over succession. In this sense, the existing and emerging sub-Xi factions will become involved in any future clashes over succession.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping's overwhelming dominance of the CCP leadership, as evidenced by its further strengthening at the 20th Party Congress, brought to an end the old era of factional politics among CCP elites. The long-lasting powerful factions built up during the tenure of former party chiefs Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have virtually been excluded from the redistribution of top-level power. However, when Xi's men now occupy nearly all the seats on the Politburo, the PBSC, the Central Secretariat, and the CMC, a new era of factional politics is unfolding. Xi's status and authority as top leader are unlikely to meet any challenges from within high-ranking CCP cadres, but factional competition is already starting to take place among the various groups of Xi's followers who currently sit on the Politburo and its Standing Committee. In this sense, it is impossible for the current CCP elites to be "united as a piece of hard steel."

As Xi emphasizes "struggle" to achieve the goals that the 20th Party Congress has formulated for the CCP and China, "struggle" will also take place among his own men. This is inevitable due to many significant reasons, especially those embedded in the political, administrative, and institutional nature of the regime and in the forthcoming generational change and power succession. In reviewing the backgrounds of the new members of the Politburo, this essay finds that even if they are not yet in play, the different career patterns and networks of interpersonal relationships among these high-ranking leaders will provide a basis for faction building in the next five years. In fact, in arranging the current leadership, Xi has already intentionally made use of such factional differences to strengthen his control over these powerful leaders, and, in particular, to avoid any one of them of becoming sufficiently powerful that they might undermine his rule. This dynamic will continue as new leaders in future job assignments will need to build up their own teams to implement Xi's policies. In the long term, perhaps even beyond five years, these sub-Xi factions that will become involved in relatively moderate competition over the short term might well become engaged in tense struggles in preparation for a post-Xi power transition.

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Photo Credit: The Great Hall of the People, which was the venue for the 20th Party Congress
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