

CHINA BEFORE JIANG ZEMIN

Naazir Mahmood

53



The recent death of Jiang Zemin – the former general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and president of the People's Republic of China – provides an excuse to look at this amazing country which has transformed itself in the past 40 years or so.

Jiang Zemin was not one of the old guards of the CCP to assume the top office in 1989. His elevation to power owed a lot to the prevailing conditions in China in the 1980s. Perhaps a look at some background would be helpful here. The two top leaders of Communist China died in quick succession in 1976. Zhou Enlai – the first prime minister of the People's Republic of China since 1949 died in January 1976 at the age of 78. Chairman Mao Zedong – the supreme leader of CCP died in September at the age of 83. To understand the politics of Communist China it is worth clarifying certain nomenclatures. After the Communist revolution succeeded in October 1949, there were two top office holders: the Party Chairman, Mao Zedong, and

Premier, Zhou Enlai. In 1954 some significant changes in the nomenclature took place when the Chairman Mao also became Chairman of the People's Republic (head of state) and the head of the Military Commission. In 1959 Mao appointed his close friend and party ideologue Liu Shaoqi as the new chairman of PRC with Dong Biwu as the Vice Chairman of the country.

Liu Shaoqi held his office until his removal in disgrace by Mao in 1968 at the height of the Cultural Revolution. Then the position of Chairman of the PRC or head of state remained vacant for four years, though Party Chairman Mao remained the supreme leader of the country and the party. In 1972, Mao promoted Dong Biwu as acting chairman or head of state – a largely ceremonial post. Biwu died in 1975 at the age of almost 90 and the office was abolished. The next year, both premier and party chairman died and a new leadership had to assume office.

In 1974, Zhou Enlai had brought in 70-year-old Deng Xiaoping as his deputy and was grooming him to be his successor. But when Zhou died in January 1976, Mao appointed 55-year-old Hua Guofeng as the new prime minister and in April also elevated him to be the Party Vice Chairman. Thus it became clear that Mao wanted Hua Guofeng to replace him as the next leader of the country and the party as well. After Mao's death in September 1976, Hua succeeded him as Chairman of the Military Commission and the Party while he was also holding the office of the Prime Minister.

This was the first time that one person held the three most powerful offices. He targeted the notorious Gang of Four loyalists to Mao, and also brought back Deng Xiaoping to the highest inner circle of the leadership as Vice Chairman of both the Military Commission and the Party. That was the beginning of Hua's undoing. While he was also initiating his own personality cult, his fortunes started turning against him. Deng Xiaoping who was now also Chairman of the People Consultative Conference – an advisory body of the party – emerged as the most dominant leader of the party.

Deng and some other party elders such as Chen Yun attempted to prevent the new personality cult and managed to convince Hua Guofeng to relinquish the office of Prime Minister in 1980. A 60-year-old Zhao Zhiyang assumed the office of the Prime Minister. The elders of the Party were also not happy at the economic and political policies that Hua Guofeng was introducing. Hua was in his 50s but his outlook was conservative and not in accordance with the changing times. Deng was 17 years older than Hua but was much more intelligent and sharp in his observations and outlook.

Gradually Deng established his position as a senior leader and in June 1981 – after just five years in power – Hua Guofeng had to give up both his positions as the Chairman of the Military Commission and of the Party. The new Party Chairman was 65-year-old Hu Yaobang and new head of the Military Commission was 76-year-old Deng Xiaoping. Now a group of Eight Elders emerged who supported Deng as the supreme leader and supervised relatively younger party head Hu Yaobang and Premier Zhao Ziyang. Of the eight, four were more powerful: Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, Li Xiannian, and Yang Shangkun.

This group of septuagenarian elders encouraged open criticism of the Cultural Revolution and its excesses during the last decade of Mao's rule. Boluan Fancheng Period – translated as 'Eliminating Chaos and Returning to Normal' – had been launched in the late 1970s by the party elders. It was a far-reaching programme that attempted to correct the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution, gradually dismantling the Maoist policies by rehabilitating millions of victims of persecution. Now various economic, political, and social reforms were initiated that were the brainchild of Deng Xiaoping supported by the Elders.

In the early 1980s the Party Chairman played a less significant role and the nomenclature was changed from Chairman to General Secretary in 1982 when Hu Yaobang transitioned from chairmanship to secretary. That was a period of transition in the early 1980s that became the

bedrock of the historic reform and opening-up programme. Now the primary focus of the Chinese government changed from class struggle to economic construction and modernization. The 1982 Constitution provided a legal basis for the broad changes taking place in China's economic, political, and social institutions and outlook.

The posts of President and Vice President once again emerged in the nomenclature and term limits on key leadership posts restricted the top offices to two-terms. Compared to the Constitution of the Soviet Union which contained an explicit right of secession, the Chinese constitution explicitly forbids secession. The Soviet constitution had created a federal system while the Chinese formally creates a unitary multi-national state – whatever that means. Per the new constitution, in 1983 one of the elders, 74-year-old Li Xiannian, assumed the office of the head of state as the President of China.

By the mid-1980s, the senior Chinese leadership – especially Deng Xiaoping and Li Xiannian – also embarked on improving relations with the United States. As the US President Ronald Reagan was putting pressure on the Soviet Union through his announcement of the Star Wars programme and financing military dictator General Zia ul Haq to support the Afghan resistance to the Soviet Union, America was also approaching China. In 1984, Reagan visited China and in response Chinese President Li Xiannian visited the US in 1985. That was the period when Jiang Zemin in his mid-50s became a member of the party central committee and the minister of the electronics industry in 1983.

His turning point was to become Mayor of Shanghai in 1985. Deng and Li spotted Jiang Zemin as a potential leader for future and nominated him to the Politburo in 1987. By that time Party Secretary Hu Yaobang was losing favour of the elders who were unhappy with his more liberal policies in dealing with student unrests across China. The elders relieved Hu Yaobang of his position and appointed Prime Minister Zhao Zhiyang as the new party chief.

Zhao had been instrumental in introducing the stock market and futures trading in China. With his support Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou became experimental cities of a joint stock system, though in most companies the system only issued stock to their workers. In 1985, the first share-issuing enterprise came into being in Shanghai. By 1986, the joint stock system was about to take off nationwide. Now the Chinese economic reforms were energizing enterprises. Zhao had also played a role in the coastal development strategy that played a significant role later on.

After assuming the office of the Party Secretary, Zhao relinquished the office of Prime Minister and Vice-Premier Li Peng assumed charged as the new PM in 1988. Deng Xiaoping remained the supreme leader as the head of the Military Commission. He was in favour of term limits and persuaded President Li Xiannian to give up his office in 1988 after serving one five-year term. Another Elder, 81-year-old Yang Shangkun, became the new head of state. By the late 1980s, China's accelerated reforms had also caused inflation and unrest with demands for political changes too.

Hundreds of thousands of students gathered and remained there for months expecting the Chinese Communist party to accept their demands of political reforms and relaxation on freedom of expression. The Supreme Leader Deng Xiaoping denounced these protests as anti-Party and anti-Socialism and called for a crackdown on demonstrators. While Prime Minister Li Peng strictly refused to negotiate with the protesters, Party Chief Zhao Zhiyang adopted a milder approach. On the instructions of the Elders, Prime Minister Li Peng imposed martial law and brutally crushed the protesters, marking the end of the protests and of the Party Chief Zhao Zhiyang who had opposed the crackdown.

Now that created a golden opportunity for Jiang Zemin who had endeared the Elders as a dynamic Mayor of Shanghai transforming the city to its modern status. The Elders selected Zemin to be the next Party Secretary in June 1989 and three months later he also became the Chairman of the Military Commission when Deng Xiaoping relinquished his office. In 1993, Jiang Zemin also became President of China. The 1990s were the decade of development under President Jiang Zemin and Prime Minister Li Peng who transformed China.

The author is an analyst, columnist, educationist, and consultant who has taught at a series of higher education institutions in Pakistan, including the IBA Karachi, Hamdard University, and FAST NUCES. He writes weekly columns for Daily Jang in Urdu and The News International in English and has worked for various donor agencies including UNDP, EU, CIDA, WBG, UK Aid, and USAID. He may be reached at mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk.

