



November 6, 2002

**COMMENTARY****Hu Won't Change China**By **SCOTT KENNEDY**

November 6, 2002

As a political scientist who focuses on China, I should be foaming at the mouth in rapt anticipation of this week's historic 16th Communist Party Congress. Like others, I've been combing through biographical dictionaries and reading the media tea leaves, charting who's up and who's down, who's in and who's out. My primary conclusion is: So what?

The supposed big story is that Jiang Zemin will begin ceding the holy trinity of seats -- Communist Party general secretary, chairman of the military commission and state president -- to Hu Jintao, a native son of Anhui province. Such a smooth and full transfer of the reins, which could be completed at next March's plenum of the National People's Congress, has never before occurred under the party's watch. That the exchange is supposedly connected to an unwritten rule disqualifying leaders from a new term in office after they've reached 70 has led some to get carried away and claim China is making a great leap forward in political reform.

The reality is that, at best, it only amounts to a small step forward. There are several reasons to be skeptical about any supposed institutionalization of the leadership transition. Transfers of power in autocracies are inherently informal and opaque. By definition, that's what divides authoritarian systems of rule from democracies. Backroom dealing may take place in the latter, as parties choose their nominees and coalition governments put together cabinets, but such haggling is tied to primary or national elections that give citizens a precious say in the new government's composition and direction.

No such check exists in China to ensure that Mr. Hu's elevation has any semblance of popular support. That the chattering class will trade gossip right up until the new Politburo Standing Committee parades before the press at the end of the congress further indicates how little elite politics have changed in China.

The best way to know if leaders are genuinely committed to institutionalizing a regular, systematic transfer of power is to see if the policy preferences of the successor differ from those of the incumbent. A similar benchmark, the victory of an opposition party, is typically used to judge the consolidation of nascent democracies. Only in such circumstances can you determine if the incumbent's willingness to step aside is grounded in a belief in the process itself, or in the comfort that the successor will carry on his legacy.

All signals point to a weak commitment to the rule of law in China. Mr. Hu has been vetted for a decade to ensure he will loyally follow in Mr. Jiang's footsteps. He has made it to the top precisely by echoing his predecessor's positions or keeping his mouth shut. Whereas former U.S. Vice

**DOW JONES REPRINTS**

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit:  
[www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

President Al Gore tried to step out from Bill Clinton's shadow and prove he was his "own man" during America's 2000 presidential election campaign, Mr. Hu has made it by ensuring he isn't. Take politics. Despite countenancing some discussion of political reform in think tanks, Mr. Hu would be unlikely to permit anything more than tinkering around the edges. In July, Mr. Hu called the new regulation on cadre appointments "democratic" even though they allow recruitment and promotion to remain a hidden top-down affair, just as was the case with his own choosing.

Not content with a compliant Mr. Hu, Mr. Jiang has been hard at work trying to stock the Politburo Standing Committee with other trusted allies, to ensure he continues to hold sway after his ostensible retirement. These include Zeng Qinghong, Mr. Jiang's point man and until last month head of the party's organization department. Some believe Mr. Zeng will rise all the way to number two in the party hierarchy, despite being widely disliked within the Chinese bureaucracy.

Other potential candidates with close ties to Mr. Jiang are the even less popular Shanghai party chief Huang Ju; Wu Bangguo, one of Huang's predecessors more recently responsible for heavy industry; and their counterpart as Beijing party chief, Jia Qinglin. The retiring Li Peng and even Mr. Hu are involved in the same game. Such factional jockeying has been a staple of communist politics since the party's earliest days.

Seen in comparative context the forthcoming party congress looks even less like a major breakthrough. The Jiang-Hu baton pass resembles what happened in Singapore in 1990, when Lee Kuan Yew ceded the prime minister's chair to Goh Chok Tong and became senior minister. Nor is it very different from the upcoming, and prescribed, retirement of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Neither change puts at risk the dominant position of the People's Action Party in Singapore or the United Malays National Organization in Malaysia.

By contrast, Chen Shui-bian's election as Taiwan's president two years ago signaled the maturing of the island's democracy, largely because of how far his Democratic Progressive Party differed from the Kuomintang, whose candidate he defeated, on their visions of the island's economic and political direction. Those searching for political reform at the 16th party congress can only look at such events with envy, knowing full well that Mr. Jiang would never countenance ceding power to his opponents.

That's a shame because the Communist Party and China are in dire need of a new generation of creative and bold leaders willing to be accountable to the Chinese public. Mr. Jiang's theory of the "Three Represents" is so far mere pablum, designed to solidify the party's continued rule. It contains nothing concrete to tackle China's mounting list of problems: failing state-owned enterprises, a teetering financial system, the widening gap between rich and poor, ecological devastation, raging corruption and a rising tide of popular resentment. The mounting scale and ferocity of protests around the country, such as those in the northern city of Liaoyang last spring, should sound alarm bells that the current strategy needs to be retooled.

At the party plenum which follows the congress, Mr. Hu will deliver his maiden speech as the new general secretary. This event will probably be notable only for the fact that he appears at the podium, but Mr. Hu could make it genuinely successful if he used this forum to demonstrate that he is boldly moving the party forward toward sustainable development, social justice and political accountability. But don't get your hopes up, given that keeping trust with his retiring patrons is far more important to his political career than earning the confidence of the Chinese public. Even if the event is televised, no one should blame television viewers for switching channels.

***Mr. Kennedy, an assistant professor at Indiana University, is editor of "China Cross Talk: The American Debate over China Policy since Normalization, A Reader" (Rowman & Littlefield,***

*Dec. 2002).*

**URL for this article:**

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1036535684471562748.html>

**Copyright 2007 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved**

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).