

## FACTIONALISM IN CHINESE POLITICS

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### Abstract

Chinese politics has been dominated by the Communist Party of China (CPC) since 1949. Its eight “democratic parties” are only allowed passive participation in governance and passive opposition to the ruling party. These two conditions have made the polity a de facto one-party state. The ruling party with a membership of about 80,000,000 has been riven by factional infighting. It began factionalising in the 1950s with criticism of the Great Leap Forward. Mao's attempt to suppress factionalism was largely unsuccessful. The party flaunts a façade of monolithic cohesion. However, it is riven by mortally divisive infighting involving factions which use different strategies in their power struggle. The five factions that have existed within the party are: the Gang of Four, Taizi, Tuanpai, the Shanghai Clique and the Zhejiang Clique. The article is sourced with data from literature.

**Key words:** Factionalism, Chinese politics, Communist Party of China.

### Introduction

As a metaphysical abstract, faction is intra-organisational opposition (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). As a tangible existent, it is “an organized group of people within a larger group, which opposes some of the ideas of the larger group and fights for its own ideas” (*Collins Dictionary*). Madison (1787) understood it to be “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and [aggregate](#) interests of the community.” To him, its most common and durable cause is economic inequality. Factionalism commonly exists among political parties, rebels, freedom fighters, terrorists and religious groups. As regards political parties, a lack of consensus among members on issues such as the choice of election candidates or strategies can factionalise a party. A faction becomes a splinter if it abandons the parent group in order to assert a separate identity. Examples of factions that became parties are MDC-T and MDC-N in Zimbabwe. According to Köllner and Basedau (2005), “Factionalism can affect the stability and institutionalization of parties and party systems and it can impact on the efficiency and legitimacy of political parties and political systems as a whole.” Political parties are prone to factionalise, because they are not “homogenous organizations which are sure of their goals and which follow some sort of unitary will. Rather, parties consist of coalitions of political actors who pursue their individual interests and goals” (Köllner and Basedau, 2005, p.6).

Factionalism exists in every polity. In meta polities (states) where oppositional politics is banned or repressed, it mostly exists as tendencies among members of the ruling/dominant party. China is

One of such meta polity where factionalism has been the major factor mediating power

struggle in the ruling party, namely the Communist Party of China. Factionalism has created within the country's one-party polity "something approximating a mechanism of checks and balances in the decision-making process" (Li, 2012). China is a multi-party polity in theory but a single-party polity in practice. It has nine legal political parties. The eight parties allowed to exist alongside CPC (called "Democratic Parties") are "neither parties out of office nor opposition parties" (*China 2005*, 74). They are allowed to "participate in governance and political affairs" (Yang, p. 43); but they are not allowed to play opposition to CPC with which they collaborate on the multiparty platform called Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

This article focuses on factionalism within CPC, discussing its origin as well as the strategies used by the factions in their power struggle.

### **Origins of Factionalism in Chinese Politics**

China is a one-party state in theory in that it has been ruled by only one political party (namely CPC) since 1949 but a multiparty state in practice in that its constitution recognises the existence of nine parties. While the ruling party flaunts a façade of harmony and unity (Lai, 2012), the party leadership is not monolithic (Li, 2013). According to Lin (2023), "Finding out who's whose man---or identifying factions---is the most widely used method to track the changing balance of power in China's elite politics." Factionalism has been part of modern Chinese politics since 1949 (Miller, 2015). According to Lin (2023), "Finding out who's whose man---or identifying factions---is the most widely used method to track the changing balance of power in China's elite politics." The number of factions since the Deng era has increased from two to four.

The germ of factionalism was sown by Mao Zedong himself with the *Hundred Flowers Campaign*---a movement begun in May 1956 within the communist government "to lift the restrictions imposed upon Chinese intellectuals and thus grant greater freedom of thought and speech" (Encyclopaedia Britannica). In May 1956 Mao Zedong had invited criticism of CPC's policies by party members and others alike with this famous slogan from Chinese classical history: "Let a hundred flowers bloom together, let the hundred schools of thought contend." He wanted to cultivate the intellectuals who Premier Zhou Enlai had warned were not supporting his policies (Hoyt, 1989). His overture, however, backfired by opening the floodgates of trenchant criticism of not only government policies but of Mao himself, whereupon Mao amended the speech in which he had invited criticism of his party's policies. The amendment titled, "On the correct handling of contradictions among the people" signalled that the criticism, which was emboldened by the failure of the Great Leap Forward, had gone too far. Mao acknowledged CPC was factionalised thus:

Do we have a party outside our Party? I think that we do, and that we have factions inside the Party. We used to criticize the Kuomintang, who said: 'No party outside the Party and no factions inside the Party.' Some people put it, 'No party outside the Party is autocracy; no factions inside the Party is nonsense.' The same applies to us. You may say that there are no factions in our Party, but there are. For instance, there are two factions as regards attitude toward the mass

movements. It is just a question of which faction is the majority and which is the minority. If we had delayed holding this meeting a few months longer, things would have been in much more of a mess. So it is a good thing that this meeting was held. It has produced results (Mao, 1966).

Factionalism which was beginning to burgeon was suppressed during the Cultural Revolution. Those who dared criticise Mao during that period were labelled “capitalist roaders”, “anti-rightists”, “anti revolutionaries”, etc. Despite his heavy-handedness, it was during that decade that CPC began to really factionalise. Then factionalism began to silhouette with the emergence of discrete loci of power allied to prominent party chieftains, such as Lin Biao, Ye Jianying, Chen Boda and Jiang Qing (Mao's wife). However, it was only in 1974-75 that Mao acknowledged its existence, when he warned his wife and her allies: “You'd better be careful; don't let yourselves become a small faction of four. Don't function as a gang of four; don't do it anymore.” (see Hsu, 1982). Schurmann considered the self-assertiveness of men around Mao as one of the major factors that bred factions during the Mao era. Mao's death on 9 September 1976 did not only intensify factional infighting (Baum, 1994: 39), it also “marked an epochal turning point in Chinese politics” (Hsu, 1982, viii).

The Gang of Four was the earliest factional grouping to be accorded recognition as a discrete tendency in CPC's intraparty rivalry. The faction, comprised of Jiang Qing (Mao's third wife), Wang Hongwen (chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress), Zhang Chunqiao (Vice Premier) and Yao Wenyuan (a literary critic), was “the group of radical Communist leaders whose closeness to the all-powerful Mao enabled them to speak in his name and carry out what they said were his policies during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976” (Kristof). came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution. They were supported by Chen Boda and Mao Yuanxin. It unsuccessfully plotted to seize power upon Mao's death. Its attempt failed because while it controlled the propaganda apparatus (media and education), it was unable to increase substantially its military power (Hsu, 15). The gang orchestrated Deng Xiaoping's dismissal from his posts, blaming him for the uprising in the Tiananmen Square in April 1976 after Zhou Enlai's death (BBC, 1977). In 1981, all four members of the Gang were convicted---Jiang Qing and Zhang Chunqiao received death sentences that were later commuted to life imprisonment,

while Wang Hongwen and Yao Wenyuan were given life and twenty years in prison, respectively (Wikipedia). Jiang, who said defiantly at her trial: “I am Chairman Mao's dog. Whomever he told me to bite, I bit”, committed suicide on 14 May 1991 while still serving a life prison sentence “for her role as leader of the Gang of Four.” The Gang of Four disappeared with the imprisonment of Jiang and her allies.

Factionalism in Chinese politics became institutionalised with the contrived emergence of the *taizi* and *tuanpai* factions during the paramountcy of Deng Xiaoping. While factional rivalry was between the revolutionary comrades during the Mao era (1949-

1976), under Deng it was between protégés of the revolutionary veterans opposed to Deng's economic reforms and the Communist Youth League cadres cultivated by Deng and his allies, to checkmate the veterans. The two factions were embroiled in a mortal struggle to succeed Deng, who did not want *taizi* to succeed him.

Deng's reforms had been fiercely opposed by the majority of his revolutionary comrades most of who, like him, were purged during the Cultural Revolution. The eight most prominent revolutionary veterans (Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, Li Xinnian, Yang Shangkun, Peng Zhen, Bo Yibo, Wang Zhen, Song Renqiong, Deng Yingchao, Xi Zhongxun and Wang Li) were called the *Eight Elders* or *Eight Immortals*. Although he was widely accepted as the country's second Paramount Leader, Deng exercised powers within the labyrinth of checks and balances wrought by the gerontocratic clique of revolutionary veterans. His staunchest allies in the clique were Yang Shangkun and Peng Zhen, while his fiercest critics were Chen Yun and Li Xinnian. While they were sharply divided on the pace of the economic reforms and the reorientation of foreign policy away from ideological warfare to rapprochement with the West, the veterans were united on the need to leave the political system intact. Deng, who encouraged the co-option of younger heads in

governance, opposed attempts by some of his colleagues to corner privileges for their proteges---children, relations and friends. Fearing that nepotism would jeopardise his economic reforms, he cultivated *tuanpai* who he would use to prevent those revolutionary comrades opposed to his reforms from enabling *taizi* to succeed him. By cultivating the Communist Youth League cadres, he was able to sidestep direct confrontation with his opponents.

His allies, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, had wanted him to support their plans to investigate children of high-profile Party members, “who had grown up protected by their parents' influence.”

He was careful to not alienate his revolutionary comrades with his determination to scuttle their plan to erect a nepotistic edifice for their proteges. Deng's disagreement with his contemporaries laid the foundations of factionalism in Chinese politics. Some of those who benefitted from the political power play involving Deng and his critics had mixed factional background, for example Li Yuanchao (a CYL alumnus and son of Li Gancheng, former vice mayor of Shanghai) and Liu Yandong (a CYL alumna and daughter of Liu Ruilong, one of the founders of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army of the Reds---an early Communist revolutionary militia force).

The factions that have existed within CPC since the end of the Mao era are: *taizi*, *tuanpai*, the Shanghai Clique and the Zhejiang Clique.

### **Taizi**

*Taizi* (太子) was the title of the crown prince of imperial China. The traditional Confucian political theory espoused agnatic primogeniture or patrilineal primogeniture whereby inheritance was based upon seniority of birth among the male children of a monarch or paterfamilias. In modern Chinese politics, the term is used for “a privileged group

consisting of high-born officials who have risen to power mostly because of their families' strong political connections and influence” (SPG, 2007).

The protégés (mainly descendants or relatives) of prominent leaders of CPC, regardless of the generation of party leaders to which such leaders belong.

During the Deng era, it was used for the protégés of the revolutionary leaders. Initially, it was used restrictively for those with privileged family background. However, since the end of the Deng era, it has been elasticised to include as well those without privileged background but who owe their high-profile positions in society to *guanxi* (a euphemism for nepotism, cronyism or relationship by marriage) and not necessarily to ability. Among notable *taizi* are President Xi Jinping (son of Xi Zhongxun), Bo Xilai (son of Bo Yibo) and Yu Zhengsheng (son of Huang Jing).

The influence of *taizi* has been in decline since the Jiang Zemin era. Initially, President Jiang snubbed both *taizi* and *tuanpai*. The *Shanghai Clique* he fostered is the third faction within CPC. However, towards the end of his tenure, he put many *taizi* elements (for example, President Xi Jinping, Bo Xilai, Yu Zhengsheng, Wang Qishan and Zhou Xiaochuan) into important positions in a desperate attempt “to appeal to senior leaders of CCP and win their support for his continued influence” (Wikipedia). Deng wanted Hu Jintao (from *tuanpai*) to take over from Jiang, hence Hu's appointment as vice president. To appease the Party Elders most of who were discomfited by Deng's patent favouritism towards the *tuanpai*, Jiang orchestrated the appointment of Zeng Qinghong, and then Xi Jinping (both from *taizi*) as vice presidents under Hu. To balance factional representation, he allowed the appointment of Li Keqiang (a close ally of Hu's) as premier. The influence of *taizi* has declined rapidly in the past two decades, owing to infighting and the extinction of their revolutionary patrons. So weak have they become that they are no longer considered as a faction *a la* the Shanghai Clique or the Zhejiang Clique.

### **Tuanpai**

*Tuanpai* (团派), which literally means “Youth League Faction” or “League Faction”, refers to an informal grouping within CPC made up of cadres and government officials who originated from the Communist Youth League. The word may not be used for princelings who also passed through the Chinese Youth League, such as Xi. Its leader is an alternate member of CPC's Central Committee. Founded in May 1920, the 74 million-strong organisation controls the Young Pioneers, which is a youth organisation for children aged 6 to 14. It was banned throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and remained so until 1978. The term was originally used to protest Hu Yaobang's overreliance on cadres with CYL background. The faction suffered a second blow when Zhao Ziyang (Hu's replacement) was removed in 1989 but rebounded under Hu Jintao (2002-2012). Both President Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao were *tuanpai*. Both men had reasons to support Bo's fall. Firstly, they were *tuanpai*, whereas Bo was *taizi*. Secondly, Bo's ordeal would not only eliminate one of their most hostile critics but also exacerbate infighting among *taizi*. Thirdly, it was an opportunity to avenge the role by Bo's father in the fall of their mentors---Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. Wen (whose chief mentors were Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang) had supported Xi against Bo Xilai, probably to avenge his

father's role in the fall of both men (Golden, 2022). Hu ensured that Li Keqiang (first premier under Xi Jinping) was from *tuanpai*. It should be recalled that Hu was indisposed to Xi's appointment as vice president. So weakened has the faction become that “there is very little direct evidence that it exists today, or that it was ever terribly robust even when Hu was still in power” (Johnson, 2022, 12). Cai (9 May 2023) said it is “no longer the path to political power it once was.” Both its budget and membership have dropped away under Xi; for example, its budget was slashed by half in 2016 (Lim and Blanchard, 2016,); and Li Keqiang was dropped from PSC before his death in 2023. Hu Jintao has been fighting off Xi's efforts to extirpate the faction. According to Hatton (2013), retired top party leaders are pressured to meddle in politics by their protégés: “Some ageing leaders might yearn to retire in peace, but they are pushed to stay involved in political affairs by those who benefit from their influence.” Thus, those pushing Hu Jintao to stay involved “want to be sure the Youth League remains a fully coherent power block” (Tsang, quoted in Hatton). Its exclusion from the current PSC appears to have dealt the coup de grace to its continued existence.

### **The Shanghai Clique**

The term “Shanghai Clique” refers to leaders whose careers had advanced primarily due to their political association with former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Jiang Zemin in Shanghai. Jiang Zemin started to cultivate a web of patron-client ties based on his Shanghai associates when he was mayor and party chief of the city during the mid-1980s. When he became President in 1989, he appointed several of his confidants in Shanghai to important positions in Beijing (Li, December 2001, p.1). Notably, his clique is a collage of factional groupings, given that the members do not share any common factional background; for example, Xi is a princeling, whereas Li Keqiang was from *tuanpai*. Under Jiang, the high road to Beijing passed through Shanghai. The faction is short-lived, considering that it had begun to crumble just few years after Jiang left office with the downfall of Chen Liangyu (Mayor of Shanghai, 2002-2006/ Secretary of the CPC Shanghai Municipal Committee, 2003-2006). Until his fall due to pension fund scandal, Chen was being used by Jiang to checkmate President Hu (a protégé of Deng Xiaoping). Jiang, nonetheless, was able to manoeuvre Xi Jinping (another protégé of his) to replace Chen as party secretary. Barboza (2008) attributed Chen's predicament to “elite political struggle,” considering that “few members of the Politburo face legal troubles, even when there is some evidence of corruption, unless there are sharp political conflicts or a ferocious power struggle with more powerful leaders.” The faction was further weakened by the resurgence of Maosque absolutism under President Xi. The camaraderie between Jiang and Xi was short-lived, for by the time of Jiang's death in November 2023, Xi had removed nearly all protégés of Jiang, including Li Keqiang. No sooner had Xi become President than he started plotting his escape from the shadow of Jiang, his benefactor. His defection from the clique, coupled with Chen's downfall earlier, dealt a death blow to the clique.

**The Zhejiang Clique**

The Zhejiang Clique is President Xi Jinping’s own faction with the Communist Party of China. It is named after the Zhejiang Province where President Xi built support when he was governor and party chief from 2002 to 2007. All the six other members of the current PSC are core loyalists of Xi:

Name	Office	Association with Xi	Ranking
Xi Jinping	General Secretary of CPC/President of China /Chairman of Central Military Commission		1 <sup>st</sup>
Li Qiang	Premier (replaced Li Keqiang, an ally of Hu Jintao)	Secretary -General of Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee when Xi was Zhejiang’s Party Secretary Xi’s Chief of Staff	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Zhao Leji	Chairman, Standing Committee of National People’s Congress	Party Secretary of Shaanxi where he and Xi hail from	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Wang Huning	Chairman of Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference	Has worked with Xi since 2007	4 <sup>th</sup>
Cai Qi	First -ranked Secretary of Communist Party of China	Party Secretary of Taizhou in Zhejiang at the time Xi was Party Secretary of Zhejiang	5 <sup>th</sup>
Ding Xuexiang	First -ranked Vice Premier	Served on Xi’s staff in Shanghai , as secretary; Xi’s Chief of Staff since 2014	6 <sup>th</sup>
Li Xi	Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection	Party Secretary of Yan’an, capital of Shaanxi -- Xi’s native province	7 <sup>th</sup>

For the first time, all members of the apex decision -making organ of CPC are from one faction, to wit the Zhejiang Clique which Xi has built by decimating taizi, tuanpai and the Shanghai Clique.

**Strategies of Inter-factional Rivalry**

Factions in Chinese politics since the death of Deng Xiaoping have existed as highly personalised political associations founded by Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao or Xi Jinping. The factions use different strategies in their rivalry.

The armed forces play a pivotal role in Chinese politics since the founding of PRC. This accounts for the fierce struggle to control the PLA by the political leaders, even those out of office. Starting with Jiang, the most powerful man in Chinese politics must hold these

three posts simultaneously---General Secretary of CPC, Chairman of the Central Military Commission and President. By convention the three offices are relinquished piecemeal. The following shows the time order in which the posts have been relinquished by the incumbents since:

Outgoing	Incoming	President	General Secretary	Chairman, CMC
Deng Xiaoping	Jiang Zemin	-	-	9 November 1989
Jiang Zemin	Hu Jintao	15 March 2003	15 November 2002	8 March 2005
Hu Jintao	Xi Jinping	14 March 2013	14 March 2013	15 November 2012

Because PLA is not excluded from political governance, holding on to the chairmanship of CMC for a couple of years after leaving office is a *sine qua non* for continued influence in Chinese politics after leaving office. Factional leaders play the military politics by promoting protégés without military background to strategic posts in the military. For example, Jia Tingan (Jiang Zemin's former secretary when he headed the Ministry of Electronics Industry and again in 1985 when he became mayor of Shanghai) had no military background whatsoever, yet he was promoted severally in the military until the rank of general in 2011. Likewise, Xi Jinping has promoted Zhong Shaojun, an aide since his time in Zhejiang, to senior colonel in PLA, despite his civilian background. Irregular or fast-tracked promotion as well as inter-branch transfer in the military is also used to exert influence in the military. For example, Miao Hua, whose ties with Xi started during Xi's time in Fujian, was transferred from the army to the navy, then promoted admiral and then appointed director of the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission.

Secondly, factional leaders may fill top party and government positions with core loyalists. This strategy is arguably the most common among the various strategies used to fight rival factions in Chinese politics. To exemplify, Jiang Zemin manoeuvred Huang Ju (a close associate from Zhejiang) into the Politburo Standing Committee, in order “to safeguard his influence and legacy” (Chai). It is unthinkable that the incumbent President will not replace retiring or deceased or expelled high-profile party members with his own cronies. Thus, Huang's death created a vacancy in the Politburo that gave President Hu Jintao an opportunity to increase his grip on power by filling it with a supporter (Chai). Cronies are normally moved from the provinces to Beijing to become members of the Politburo and then members of the Politburo Standing Committee---the organ from which the President and the Premier have conventionally been elected since 1949. The current PSC Standing Committee is fully stacked with Xi's close allies (Wanyuan and Wong).

The third strategy is purging (expulsion from CPC). This strategy, which has been a feature of CPC's long history (Aljazeera, 2021), has been used to eliminate or contain potential or actual rivals. Among the prominent leaders purged during the Cultural Revolution were Peng Dehua, Liu Shaoqi, Xi Zhongxun (President Xi's father) and Deng

Xiaoping. President Xi's anti-corruption is thought to have multiple purposes one of which is to fight opponents (Minnich, 2014). For example, most of the top officials who have been purged under Xi' anti-corruption campaign are allies of either Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao (BBC, 2017). Among them are Zhou Yongkang, Xu Caihou, Guo Boxiong, Ling Jihua and Sun Zhengcai.

Currently, the unwritten retirement age for party leaders is 68. According to Li Ling (quoted in Hatton), “[T]he age limit is the only exit mechanism to end a Politburo Standing Committee member's tenure”. This norm, however, has been arbitrarily observed to suit the factional interest of the President; for example, at the 15<sup>th</sup> National Congress held in 1997, Qiao Shi (President Jiang's most vocal critic at the time) was forced to quit Politburo (SCMP, 1997).

Fifthly, opponents have been taken down in anticorruption campaigns. For example, Xi's anti-corruption campaign is said to be targeted at political opponents (Bhole, 2022). Among the “tigers” (high-ranking officials) who have been felled in the campaign are: Xu Caihou (Jiang Zemin's proxy in the military), Ling Jihua (President Hu's chief of staff), Bo Xilai (taizi rival) and Zhou Youkang (protégé of Jiang Zemin).

### **Conclusion**

The absence of oppositional politics is the major incentive for the factionalisation of the Communist Party of China. CPC is a mortally fragmented monolith, but which has successfully disguised its condition with a façade of cohesion. Under Mao, factionalism was virtually non-existent, for those who dared to oppose his economic policies (such as Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi) cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as a faction but rather as a cross-section with divergent viewpoints. Deng, during whose tenure the party started to factionalise in earnest, did not set out to create any factions. He merely wanted to use *tuanpai* to weaken reactionary opposition to his economic reforms. Faction-formation has evolved since the end of the Deng era. Factionalisation under Mao and Deng was latent, arguably because of the cult of personality. It has, however, become a feature of Chinese politics since the end of the Deng era, arguably because Deng's successors (Jiang, Hu and Xi), handicapped by the 10-year term limit, have regarded faction as the surest pathway to continued relevance after leaving office. Personalisation of factionalism, coupled with decimation of opposition, has predominated in Chinese politics since the Jiang era. These two phenomena are the greatest threats to CPC's continued domination of Chinese politics. Deng had used collective leadership to manage intraparty fighting (Shi, 2012). His successors have failed to achieve this feat. Instead, they have exacerbated the problem by pursuing empire building, which makes the disintegration for CPC increasingly predictable. In the absence of opposition parties, the faction in power act as the party in power, while the rival factions act as the parties in opposition.

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