

## China Politics & Policy

# Speculation grows Xi Jinping will defy China rule on leadership retirement

President faces test of authority at Communist party congress next year



*Current and past leaders: Xi Jinping, left, Hu Jintao, centre, and Jiang Zemin*

YESTERDAY by: **Tom Mitchell** in Beijing

For more than a decade, a tacit understanding among [China's](#) (<http://www.ft.com/world/asia-pacific/china>) top rulers has ensured the ruling Communist party does not become a gerontocracy. That understanding, known as *qishang baxia* or “seven-up, eight-down”, dictates that only leaders 67 or younger can ascend to or remain in top posts, while those 68 or older must retire when the party changes guard every five years.

But as China prepares to enter a “selection year” under the leadership of a very unconventional president, [Xi Jinping](#)

[http://www.ft.com/topics/people/Xi\\_Jinping](http://www.ft.com/topics/people/Xi_Jinping)), there is increasing speculation he may try to dispense with the retirement convention entirely.

If so, it will be the biggest test yet of his authority over the party and further distinguish him from his predecessors Hu Jintao and [Jiang Zemin](http://next.ft.com/content/273fce40-61dc-11e6-a08a-c7ac04ef00aa) (<http://next.ft.com/content/273fce40-61dc-11e6-a08a-c7ac04ef00aa>), who took a “first among equals” approach during their presidencies.

“To waive the rule is going to be difficult because it would establish [Xi] as significantly more than first among equals,” says Steve Tsang, a sinologist at Nottingham university.

It would also be the strongest signal to date that Mr Xi could ignore a similar unwritten rule on term limits that would require him to step down from his current position as party leader in 2022.

[Mr Xi](http://next.ft.com/content/57371736-4b69-11e6-88c5-db83e98a590a) (<http://next.ft.com/content/57371736-4b69-11e6-88c5-db83e98a590a>) heads the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee, the party’s most powerful body. Since 2012 he has overseen a draconian anti-corruption campaign and asserted his authority over the military and even economic policy, an area traditionally delegated to the premier.

As a result, he is widely regarded as the party’s most powerful leader since Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China’s reform and opening, if not [Mao Zedong](http://next.ft.com/content/63a5a9b2-85cd-11e6-8897-2359a58ac7a5) (<http://next.ft.com/content/63a5a9b2-85cd-11e6-8897-2359a58ac7a5>), the party’s revolutionary hero.

Mr Xi and his premier, Li Keqiang, will be 64 and 62 respectively when the 19th Party Congress convenes late next year to appoint a new Politburo Standing Committee and State Council, ensuring both men another five years at the top of China’s party-state.

All five other members of the Standing Committee will be required to step down under the current retirement rule.

This rule is not enshrined in the party constitution and was only introduced by Mr Jiang in 2002 as a way to ensure one of his rivals could not stay in office after he retired.

Despite its arbitrary origins, the age limit is seen as a strong sign of institutionalised rule that is crucial to the party’s claim to legitimacy.

For Mr Xi, the 19th party congress will be an unprecedented opportunity to stack top party and government posts with his allies, giving him even more authority. “Just wait for his second term” is a common refrain among the president’s supporters, many of whom admit privately that the party has yet to deliver on many of the bold economic reforms promised at the outset of his presidency.

But a year can be even longer in Chinese politics than elsewhere. Jockeying will begin in earnest later this month at an annual gathering of the Central Committee — membership of which is a prerequisite to serve on the Politburo Standing Committee — and it will continue right up until next year’s congress.

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The dictator is enjoying a surge of popularity. But the rise of this neo-Maoist movement could upend China’s stability

“Xi appears to be strong on the surface,” says Qiao Mu, a Beijing-based scholar. “But it’s hard to say if he can get what he wants [at the congress]. Nobody knows for sure until the last moment.”

Willy Lam, a China expert at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, says: “I don’t think anyone is powerful enough to openly challenge Xi if he wants to ignore the retirement rule. But people would definitely fight it internally.”

If the *qishang baxia* rule is waived, party insiders say the immediate beneficiary would be Wang Qishan. Mr Wang has spearheaded Mr Xi’s anti-corruption campaign and turns 69 next year. Technically the party’s sixth-highest-ranking official, Mr Wang is widely regarded as second only to the president in terms of real clout.

Mr Wang, a veteran banker involved in every pivotal financial reform since the mid-1990s, is the most economically literate member of the current Politburo Standing Committee at a time when the Chinese economy faces mounting problems.

After enduring a credibility-sapping series of [market and currency crises](http://next.ft.com/content/4cde4cc4-b847-11e5-b151-8e15c9a029fb) (<http://next.ft.com/content/4cde4cc4-b847-11e5-b151-8e15c9a029fb>) in the second half of last year and early 2016, economic growth has stabilised with the help of one of history's biggest credit bubbles. Now Mr Xi and Mr Li are attempting to deflate that bubble without denting economic growth.

“Wang likes the idea of staying on,” says one person close to the party leadership. “But he is worried about the precedent it might set for Xi himself.”

Mr Xi will be 69 at the expiry of his second term as party general secretary in 2022, and thus ineligible for a third term. But if the retirement rule is waived for Mr Wang, then it could be waived for Mr Xi as well.

In a rare hint that he may indeed be contemplating a third term, an official journal quoted the president in early 2015 as saying that the party “can't simply draw the line based on age” when appointing officials.

*Additional reporting by Wan Li*

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## China's top leadership grows ever more youthful



*Villagers carry portraits of Chinese leaders, from left, Hu Jintao, Jiang Zemin, Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong during a festival in northwest Shaanxi province © AP*

Over the past 40 years, the age of China's most senior political figure has been steadily ratcheted back as the ruling Communist party embraced a more consensual leadership model and adopted institutional constraints to prevent the excesses wrought by an unchallenged Mao Zedong in the last decade of his life.

Ten years after unleashing the devastating [Cultural Revolution](http://next.ft.com/content/40b84132-18cf-11e6-b197-a4af20d5575e) (<http://next.ft.com/content/40b84132-18cf-11e6-b197-a4af20d5575e>), Mao died in 1976 as an 82-year-old tyrant who could still single-handedly change the political weather in the world's most populous country.

His successor Deng Xiaoping was 84 when, as head of the Communist party's powerful military commission, he ordered the violent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in [Tiananmen Square](http://next.ft.com/content/4f970144-e658-11e3-9a20-00144feabdco) (<http://next.ft.com/content/4f970144-e658-11e3-9a20-00144feabdco>) in 1989.

Deng resigned from the military commission later that year but was still recognised as the final arbiter on political matters until debilitated by frail health in 1994.

Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, served a half-term in the chaos after Tiananmen and then two full five-year terms, but had to wait until Deng's death in 1997 to establish himself as the country's most powerful politician.

Mr Jiang and his formidable premier, Zhu Rongji, were 71 and 69 respectively at the outset of their final term in office, during which time they steered China into the World Trade Organisation and restructured a bankrupt state banking industry.

The party's unofficial retirement age of 68 for senior posts was finally established during Hu Jintao's tenure as party general secretary from 2002 until 2012, effectively limiting him to two five-year terms in office.

Mr Hu was 64 at the start of his second term — the same age Mr Xi will be at the beginning of his second term in late 2017.

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## **Politburo Standing Committee ages at 19th party congress\***

### **1. Xi Jinping**

*Government position:* President



*Party position:* General secretary

*Age:* 64



## **2. Li Keqiang**

*Government position:* Premier

*Party position:* —

*Age:* 62



## **3. Zhang Dejiang**

*Government position:* Head of National People's Congress

*Party position:* —

*Age:* 71



## **4. Yu Zhengsheng**

*Government position:* Head of Chinese People's Consultative Conference

*Party position:* —

*Age:* 72



## **5. Liu Yunshan**

*Government position:* —

*Party position:* —

*Age:* 70



## **6. Wang Qishan**

*Government position:* —

*Party position:* Head of Central Commission for Discipline Inspection

*Age:* 69



## **7. Zhang Gaoli**

*Government position:* Vice-premier

*Party position:* —

*Age:* 71

Assuming congress is held on November 8 2017

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