

*KEYNOTE SPEECH FOR EAI'S 5TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION*  
*Singapore, July 17 2002*

**China in Political Transition**

I feel honored to have been asked by my old friend Wang Gungwu to give a keynote speech in such distinguished company at this anniversary conference. Gungwu is one of the great scholars of the contemporary China field. I remember a remark made by my old Harvard teacher Yang Liansheng at a *China Quarterly* conference on history which I ran in 1964. (My goodness that was a long time ago!) Yang told Gungwu that his Chinese colleagues greatly admired his ability to use with equal facility the tools of both Western and Chinese historiography.

The subject I have chosen is 'China in Political Transition' and I shall focus on succession politics. As everyone here today knows, China is at this very moment in the run-up to a most important political transition, succession at the very top of the Communist Party. How that succession process evolves will tell us a lot about the degree of institutionalisation that has taken place in the Chinese political system since the Cultural Revolution. It will also provide some insight into whether the new generation of leaders will be able to cooperate or whether they will continue to consider politics as a zero sum game.

Succession is, and should be, a perennial topic in the consideration of any political system, not only because the politicians and the media are so interested--when will Gordon Brown take over from Tony Blair?--not only because the succession might be disputed--should Al Gore be president of the United States?--nor only because in a leader-friendly Leninist system like China, the identity of the leader has enormous implications for the whole polity.

As Seweryn Bialer wrote when discussing what was then the imminent succession to Brezhnev:

The impact of a change of leader on the system is more pronounced the greater the impact of the leader on the establishment and the society he governed.<sup>1</sup>

But the main importance of this topic is that the moment of succession is the midnight of the state, the time of its maximum weakness, the moment at which power passes from the veteran to the novice. The succession process is therefore a key element in determining whether or not a nation gets through this particular pass without mishap.

When monarchs ruled as well as reigned in England, the moment of national weakness was guarded against by having in place an heir apparent, normally the eldest son of the king, who became king immediately on the death of his father. 'The king is dead, long live the king!' This formula was designed to combine speed with certainty, essential characteristics of a pre-modern succession system when transitions were more likely to be disputed than in 21st century America!

Modern democratic states have sacrificed speed in favour of greater certainty. The transitional election period paralyses British decision making for three weeks, and the American political system for six months or even longer. But at the end of the day, the result is fair and seen to be fair and so the possibility of it being upset is minimal. Floridas aren't supposed to happen, and normally they don't.

Where democracy is new, and politicians have qualms about its stability, the old world is brought in to shore up the potential deficiencies of the new. Throughout South Asia for instance, dynastic succession has been seen as a key element of stability. In India, when Nehru's

immediate successor died within 18 months, the 'Syndicate,' as the Congress party power brokers were called, decided that none of them trusted the other, and so it would be better to nominate Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, as a symbol of continuity, a guarantee of votes, and somebody they could control. To their shock horror, they had a tigris by the tail, and one result of their decision was a renewal of dynastic politics. When Indira Gandhi's chosen heir, her younger son, was killed while flying, she insisted that her reluctant elder son, Rajiv, take his place. After first the mother and then the son were assassinated while in office, the prime minister's post went to somebody without dynastic claims. But today, the Congress party has Rajiv's Italian-born wife Sonia as its leader, and if or when she falls by the wayside, the talk is that her daughter Priyanka might take her place.

In Pakistan, Harvard's own Benazir Bhutto is a woman of passion and intelligence--I do not comment on her performance in office--but she inherited the leadership of the People's Party and eventually the premiership, because to party members she was the daughter of their martyred leader. In Bangladesh, the contending party leaders who alternate in power are respectively the daughter of the first leader of independent Bangladesh, and the widow of a subsequent president, both men having been assassinated. In Sri Lanka, Mrs. Bandaranaike succeeded her husband as prime minister when he was assassinated, and later her daughter succeeded her. At one time, the daughter was president, and her mother was prime minister. Clearly assassination strengthens the claim of a potential dynast--there is a seen need to fulfil the legacy.

Nor are dynastic politics limited to new democracies. In the US, the Bush family has had two presidents in short order and hopes for a third. Bobby Kennedy could well have been the

---

1 <sup>1</sup>Bialer, Seweryn, *Stalin's Successors* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 69.

second Kennedy to defeat Richard Nixon for the presidency had he not been assassinated; and the Kennedy family's name can still cast spells, even outside Massachusetts, and despite the antics of some of its scions. Here again, the assassinations of the two older Kennedys may be an important reason.

And of course, dictatorships, too, can breed dynasties, like North Korea's Kims, the Great Leader and the Dear Leader; the Ceaucescu family village in Romania; Papa Doc and Baby Doc in Haiti; and the recent passage of power from father to son in Syria. In China in the 1970s, Mme Mao dreamed of succeeding her husband in emulation of the fabled Tang dynasty Empress Wu.

Dynastic successions have one great advantage for the departing dynast. He or she can normally assume that their policies or, more importantly, their 'legacies,' whatever they may be, will be sustained. Their reputations should be in safe, because loyal, hands. I am sure that George Bush the elder feels that the disgrace of his defeat by Bill Clinton, whom he despised, has been partially compensated for, and he personally has been vindicated, by his son's defeat of Clinton's chosen successor: the people finally saw through the flim flam of the Clinton presidency.

In no country has the legacy issue been more important than communist China; nowhere else does it seem as important that the future justify the past. But despite this concern, nowhere has the succession process been so singularly mishandled.

The CCP had two succession systems to look to: the imperial one with its immense historical overhang for somebody so conscious of China's past as Mao, who was already 18 when the last emperor abdicated; and the Soviet one, for Mao and his colleagues also aspired to modernity. Wasn't the 'Soviet today, China's tomorrow.'?

The imperial system under the Qing was modelled on that of the Ming. In their native land before the conquest of China, the Manchus were accustomed to having the great khan chosen by his peers, but during an early crisis, the Kang Xi emperor adopted the Ming system because he wanted to ensure that the Chinese, bureaucrats and people, would be on his side. The Ming system was a variation on the dynastic model common in pre-modern England: the successor was the son of the emperor, but unlike in England, the emperor had the right to choose which of the many male offspring from his various wives should be the lucky, or perhaps unlucky, one. The objective, according to Silas Wu, was political stability and the legitimacy of the succession. It also enabled the mandarins to ensure that the heir apparent was properly educated.<sup>2</sup>

But there was a problem which stemmed from what Evelyn Rawski has described as the perils of combining the Han Chinese system of succession--naming the heir at an early age--and the non-Han conquest tradition of employing imperial kinsmen in governance.<sup>3</sup>

What this meant was that as Kang Xi got disenchanted with his heir apparent, his other sons began vying for the succession. In other words, there was legitimacy without stability. The result was the adoption of a system of secret succession. After disinheriting his first heir apparent, the Kang Xi emperor refused to name the next one until he was on his deathbed. Since this resulted in rumours of fraud, later emperors wrote down the names of their successors in edicts which were sealed in a casket to be opened as the incumbent was on his deathbed. From the mid-1800's till the end of the dynasty, it was the Empress Dowager who did the choosing.

---

2 <sup>2</sup>Wu, Silas, *Passage to Power* (Harvard, 1979), pp. 31-2.

3 <sup>3</sup>Rawski, Evelyn, *The Last Emperors* (California, 1998), p. 102.

What I want to stress about the Ming-Qing succession system is not just the search for stability common to all succession systems, but the method of choice. The incumbent, whether the legitimate emperor or the illegitimate Empress Dowager, did the choosing. There might be a presumption that it would be the eldest son of the chief wife, but that wasn't guaranteed, and the choice could be invalidated if the incumbent saw fit.

The Soviet model gave similar powers to the incumbent. Lenin of course didn't designate any heir, and the result was the power struggle that resulted in the triumph of Stalin and the execution of all his rivals. Stalin, however, did indicate who his successor should be, choosing Malenkov to give the political report at the last party congress he attended. But living in Stalin's shadow, Malenkov did not have the time to establish an independent status and his absolute primacy, and after Stalin's death the surviving senior members of the CPSU Praesidium were equal enough to insist that he could not emulate Stalin's combination of party and state leadership. Guessing incorrectly that under Stalin as prime minister, the Government machine had become the main source of power in the Soviet system, Malenkov ceded the party secretaryship to Khrushchev, who reestablished party primacy and eventually purged Malenkov and his other main rivals. When Khrushchev was purged in his turn in 1964, it was the acolyte whom he seemed to be grooming for the succession--Brezhnev--who took over.

Brezhnev's short-lived successors, Andropov and Chernenko, were of his generation and emerged as the choices of the older members of the Praesidium, as the Soviet Politburo was called. It is the coming of Gorbachev that is more interesting because at that time, in 1985, it was clear that (1) it was time for a new generation to take over and (2) there were a number of aspirants. According to the memoirs of Gorbachev's onetime close associate, Yegor Ligachev, he (Ligachev) was telephoned the night before the crucial meeting by Andrei Gromyko, who

indicated he was inclined to vote for Gorbachev and asked for material about him. At the meeting, Gromyko rose first and proposed Gorbachev, after which all debate was stilled. In effect, one party elder of enormous authority and experience had preempted the issue and decided who should be successor--rather like the Empress Dowager in fact.

In the case of the Chinese Communist Party (the CCP), the Comintern, or in the last analysis Stalin, played the role of elder statesman from the mid-1920's to the mid-1930's, until the emergence of Mao Zedong at Zunyi in 1935. The only real choice made by the Chinese before then was that of their first leader Chen Duxiu. The Comintern representative went first to the distinguished radical scholar, Li Dazhao, but Li didn't want to be involved with organising a party and sent him to the equally distinguished intellectual, Chen Duxiu. From 1921 till 1935, the Comintern picked and purged. After 1935, Mao still had to struggle with Zhang Guotao and Wang Ming, another Comintern favorite, to ensure his emergence as party leader. In those efforts the support of the generals was crucial.