

Wang Qishan 王岐山

Born 1948

Current Positions

- Vice president of the People's Republic of China (2018–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Wang Qishan was born in 1948 in Tianzhen County, Shanxi Province.¹ Wang was a “sent-down youth” at an agricultural commune in Yan’an County, Shaanxi (1969–1971).² Wang was a staff member at the Shaanxi Museum (1971–73 and 1973–79) before he joined the CCP in 1983. He received his undergraduate education from the history department at the Northwestern University in Xi’an City, Shaanxi Province (1976). Early in his career, Wang worked as a researcher and director at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (1979–82) and then moved to the Rural Policy Research Office of the CCP Central Committee (1982–88).

Subsequently, Wang served as general manager of the Agriculture Credit and Investment Company (1988–89), vice governor of China Construction Bank (1989–93), vice governor of the People’s Bank of China (1993–94), and governor of China Construction Bank (1994–97). Wang was transferred to Guangdong Province in 1997 to serve as vice governor. Three years later, in 2000, he was appointed director of the State Council General Office of Economic Reform. Wang then worked as party secretary of Hainan Province (2002–03). At the peak of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) crisis, Wang was appointed mayor of Beijing (2004–07). He then became vice premier of the State Council (2008–13), a Politburo member (2007–17), and a Politburo Standing Committee Member (2012–17). Wang most recently served as secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (2012–17). He was first elected to the Central Committee as an alternate member at the 15th Party Congress (1997).

Family and Patron-Client Ties

Wang’s father was a professor at Tsinghua University who also worked as an engineer at the Design Institute in the Ministry of Construction. As the son-in-law of Yao Yilin, a former Politburo Standing Committee member and vice premier, Wang is considered a princeling. Wang is married to Yao Mingshan. The two met in 1969 in Yan’an, where both were sent-down youths. Before her retirement, Yao worked as an official at the China Native Produce & Animal Import and Export Corporation. The couple does not have any children.

Wang is widely considered to be a protégé of both Zhu Rongji and Jiang Zemin. During his work in the financial sector in the 1990s, Wang established his patron/mentor relationship with Zhu, who was in charge of China’s financial affairs at the time. Wang’s patron/mentor ties with Jiang Zemin stem in part from Wang’s father-in-law, Yao Yilin, who was a major supporter of Jiang in the Politburo Standing Committee, and in part from Wang’s close friendship with Jiang’s son, Jiang Mianheng.

Xi Jinping’s close relationship with Wang Qishan has arguably been the most important factor facilitating the consolidation of Xi’s power and the implementation of his new policy initiatives since Xi took the top leadership post in 2012. It is not clear when Xi and Wang first met. However, several Chinese sources reveal that Wang and Xi became close friends over forty years ago, when both were “sent-down youths” in two neighboring counties in Yan’an.³



Policy Preferences and Political Prospects

Wang Qishan is viewed by the Chinese public as capable in crisis situations. In particular, his management of the SARS epidemic in the spring of 2003 has been taken as evidence of his efficacy in crisis.⁴ Wang's experience handling crises and other challenges includes his appointment as executive vice-governor of Guangdong in 1998 to manage the bankruptcy of a major financial institution in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis; his appointment as party secretary of Hainan Province in 2002 to address the decade-long real estate bubble on the island; and his role as mayor of Beijing during the 2008 Olympics.⁵

Wang is widely recognized in China by the nickname "chief of the fire brigade" (救火队长). Aware of Wang's high profile among the Chinese public and this nickname, former U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner presented Wang with an authentic New York City Fire Department hat during Wang's visit to the United States in 2011.⁶

During Xi's first term, Wang Qishan was Xi's strongest political ally and acted as the party's "anticorruption czar." Wang launched the largest anti-graft campaign in the PRC history, purging approximately 440 leaders at the vice-ministerial and vice-provincial levels (副省部级) on corruption charges, including 79 PLA officers holding the rank of major general or higher and 45 members of the CCP's 18th Central Committee.⁷

Wang Qishan's toughness, popularity among the Chinese public, expertise in finance, and international reputation have made him indispensable to Xi. However, Wang has ostensibly also made many political enemies. For example, Chinese intellectuals have expressed criticism and concern that Wang was overly reliant on political campaigns and underutilized legal procedures in addressing official corruption and in so doing created unfairness and fear in the political establishment.

Wang will likely assist Xi in two important fields: China-U.S. relations and the "Belt and Road Initiative." Both tasks will be very challenging due to the rapidly changing international environment. How the relationship between these two strongmen in China, Xi and Wang, will unfold in the years to come remains to be seen.

Compiled by Cheng Li and the staff of the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings

Notes:

¹ Some unofficial biographers say he was born in Qingdao City, Shandong Province, and that Tianzhen was his ancestral home.

² "Sent-down youth" (插队知青) refers to young, educated urbanites who left their home cities to serve as manual laborers in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.

³ Zhang Lei, "Nongchaoer" [The man who paddles against the incoming tide], *Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan* [Southern People Weekly], August 26, 2013; and Wu Rujia and Lin Zijing, "Wang Qishan lianpu" [Changing roles of Wang Qishan], *Fenghuang Zhoukan* [Phoenix Weekly], December 5, 2013.

⁴ Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2016), p. 268.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 313-314.

⁶ See "Everybody Loves Chinese Vice-Premier Wang Qishan," *Public Intelligence*, January 23, 2011. (<https://publicintelligence.net/everybody-loves-chinese-vice-premier-wang-qishan/>).

⁷ See "Xi Jinping's Personal Secretary Suddenly Speaks Prior to China's Two Conferences: Some People Are Attempting An Internal Coup In the Party." [习近平大秘两会前突发声：有人想篡党夺权] Boxun, February 25, 2018. (<https://boxun.com/news/gb/china/2018/02/201802251958.shtml>), and also Cheng Li's research.