

The Wonk Who Has the Ear Of China's New President



Wang Huning, who has advised three presidents, seated left behind former President Jiang in 2007.

BY JEREMY PAGE
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When Xi Jinping sat down with Russian and African leaders in March during his first overseas visit as China's new leader, at his shoulder in every meeting was a bookish, bespectacled figure, listening intently and occasionally taking notes. Look for him to be there too in Rancho Mirage, Calif., on Friday when Mr. Xi and President Barack Obama meet for a summit.

Even in China, few people would recognize Wang Huning, head of the Communist Party's secretive Central Policy Research Office. And small wonder: The former university professor seldom talks in public, barely speaks to old acquaintances and makes a point of not associating with foreigners.

Yet party insiders and experts on Chinese politics consider him one of the most influential figures in China today, a key architect of its domestic and foreign policy over the past decade, and now of Mr. Xi's signature "China Dream" campaign that evokes a militarily and economically strong nation reclaiming its place of prominence in the world.

Mr. Wang, who briefly studied in the U.S. and has headed the Research Office since 2002, occupies a unique place in the party as the only person to have served as a top policy adviser and speechwriter to three successive presidents: Jiang Zemin, his successor Hu Jintao, and now Mr. Xi.

His influence stems partly from his being a godfather of China's neoconservatives, who have provided the ideological backbone for Chinese leaders since 1989 by arguing against Western-style democracy and in favor of authoritarian government and state-sponsored nationalism. Mr. Wang, 57 years old, also is the only member of the Politburo—the party's top 25 leaders—who is a specialist on U.S. politics.

That means he is likely to play an integral role at this week's "shirt-sleeve" summit, which is designed to allow Messrs. Xi and Obama to eschew protocol and have broad, unscripted talks—a format unfamiliar to Chinese leaders. State television has already shown Mr. Wang sitting next to Mr. Xi during visits to the Caribbean and Central America in the past few days.

One senior foreign diplomat described Mr. Wang as "Karl Rove and Henry Kissinger rolled into one" because of his influence on domestic and foreign policy. Other observers likened him more to a traditional Confucian scholar-official who dedicates his life to the emperor.

Mr. Wang's precise role in policy-making is unclear. The Research Office has no website, spokesperson or even public telephone number, and attempts to reach Mr. Wang directly for comment weren't successful.

His expertise, experience and rising status in the party suggest he will play an important role in shaping China over the next decade, and possibly well beyond, according to party insiders, diplomats and analysts. He was promoted in November to the Politburo, making him a contender for a seat on its Standing Committee, the top decision-making body, in 2017. If current retirement norms endure, he would not have to step down until 2027.

Because of his background as a professor at Shanghai's Fudan University, where he headed the international politics department and was dean of the law school, he was expected by many observers to replace Dai Bingguo as the top foreign-policy official this year after a Parliament meeting in March.

Instead, despite the biggest leadership shake-up in a decade, Mr. Wang remained head of the Research Office. Several friends said he had turned down a promotion, preferring to work behind the scenes.

Nevertheless, Mr. Wang is expected to have an expanded role in foreign policy. Some Western officials and analysts hope he will counterbalance hawkish military commanders and other interest groups who favor more confrontational diplomacy.

Several friends and former colleagues of Mr. Wang, however, said such hopes may be misplaced. They said his academic specialty was comparative politics—studying different countries' political systems—not international relations, and he was likely to argue in favor of Chinese leaders projecting an image of strength to a domestic audience.

"Wang Huning's now got more power and will have stronger influence on foreign policy," said Huang Jing, who also attended Fudan University at the same time and is now a professor and expert on Chinese politics at the National University of Singapore. "That's good news for China, but not very good news for other countries."

Another Chinese scholar who has known Mr. Wang since the 1980s said it would be a "disaster" if Mr. Wang is given greater say in foreign policy because he is a leading advocate of the more assertive diplomacy that has alienated many of China's neighbors.

"When Communism was bankrupt, they needed something to replace it, and Wang Huning proposed patriotism and neoconservatism," the scholar said. "But his concern is how to keep the party in power, not how to make China strong."

By no means does Mr. Wang have a monopoly on Mr. Xi's political thinking. Also competing for the leader's attention are other Politburo members, retired leaders, family friends, prominent intellectuals and business chiefs.

But as in the American system, Chinese leaders tend to rely on a small circle of advisers who they believe share their views. Friends and party insiders said Mr. Wang, like the Chinese president, is an admirer of the U.S. and wants to learn from its strengths, but believes the party should maintain its monopoly on power while pursuing limited internal reforms.

"I think Xi trusts him," said another Fudan University contemporary and friend. "Wang Huning still believes in Marxism, and he still believes that the party makes the correct choices. He doesn't believe China should become a multiparty system or have division of powers."

Mr. Wang's influence derives in part from having daily access to the Chinese leader. He has accompanied three successive presidents on almost every domestic and foreign trip of the past decade.

The only other person with similar access now is Li Zhanshu, head of the party's General Office, which organizes the president's schedule, living arrangements and document flow.

But Mr. Li was appointed only in November and has little influence on policy, according to diplomats and political analysts.

As head of the Research Office for the past 11 years, Mr. Wang has overseen the "brain trust" for the top leadership, giving policy advice, commissioning research and writing speeches and official reports.

"Wang Huning is the biggest internal brains of the CPC," or Communist Party of China, said Zhu Xufeng, a professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing who has studied the role of think tanks in the Chinese system. As a speechwriter, Mr. Wang would be evaluated based on how much his speech

In His Own Words | Selections from the works of Wang Huning

'The most fundamental question about how to achieve China's economic modernization is: can you complete the process of economic modernization under a system of public ownership?'

'America against America,' 1991

'In America's capitalist system, private property constraints on political democracy cannot be ignored...America's major economic decision-making powers lie mainly in the hands of private consortiums.'

'America against America,' 1991

'In the confrontations among the world superpowers, China's best strategy is to insist on its independence. Without independent foreign policy, China cannot stand firm among the nations of the world.'

'Cultural expansion and cultural sovereignty: the challenge to the concept of sovereignty,' 1994

'Central authority is the prerequisite and precondition of the founding of every nation...Emphasizing central authority is not rejecting market economy. On the contrary, it is facilitating market economy.'

Interview with 'Exploration and Free Views,' 1995

drafts had to be revised, Mr. Zhu said. "If it's rarely revised by leaders, it's good—you're familiar with the leader's thoughts."

The Research Office also plays a key role in organizing collective-study sessions for the Politburo, roughly every month. It sets topics for the sessions and, together with the General Office, vets the experts chosen to deliver the lectures and the texts of their presentations, according to analysts who have studied that process.

Friends and analysts described Mr. Wang as a workaholic and insomniac who is discreet and almost obsessively low-profile. Several friends said he had largely cut off communication with them since taking charge of the Research Office.

One former U.S. official, who said he first met Mr. Wang in 1989 when he was briefly a student in the U.S., recalled crossing the room to greet him during an official bilateral meeting in Washington. "He turned away and totally blanked me," the U.S. official said. "He'd clearly made a decision not to associate with Americans."

Mr. Wang was unusual for his generation in that he wasn't taken out of school and sent into the countryside to work during the Cultural Revolution. People who know him said that because of a childhood illness and his family's connections, he was instead enrolled at an elite foreign-languages school in Shanghai to study French.

He moved to Fudan University in 1978 to study international politics, becoming one of



Mr. Wang, center, in March with President Xi Jinping, left, and Premier Li Keqiang in Beijing.

the first Chinese students exposed to Western concepts of democracy and law. Many of his contemporaries became pro-democracy activists. Some of his early writings suggest a liberal bent, such as a 1986 paper blaming the Cultural Revolution on a lack of democracy within the party. But even before the military crackdown on pro-democracy protests in 1989, Mr. Wang was among a group of intellectuals who were publicly challenging the relevance of Western political values to Chinese society. His critique of the U.S. political system, "America against America," was published in 1991.

His profile rose further in 1993, when he

led a Fudan team to victory in an international debating competition in Singapore, an experience about which he co-wrote a popular book. "He was most concerned with the question of how to manage China," recalled Forrest Zhang, a member of the debating team who is now an associate professor of sociology at the Singapore Management University. "He was suggesting that a strong, centralized state is necessary to hold this society together. He spent every night in his office and didn't do anything else."

Mr. Wang's political break came in 1995, when he was summoned to join the Research Office by then President Jiang, who had got-

ten to know him as Shanghai party chief in the 1980s and embraced his neoconservative views after the Tiananmen crackdown.

Since then, Mr. Wang has played a role in almost every major political initiative. He wrote China's first academic paper on "soft power"—the idea that global influence derives as much from a nation's ideals and cultural values as its military strength. He is thought to have been a driving force behind China's investment in promoting Chinese culture overseas in the past decade.

Communist Party insiders said Mr. Wang was part of a small team that devised President Jiang's "Three Represents" initiative to amend the party constitution in 2002 to allow private businessmen to join for the first time. He helped concoct President Hu's initiatives to promote a "harmonious society" and "scientific development," according to Chinese political analysts. He also led the team that wrote the final report Mr. Hu delivered at last year's 18th Party Congress, according to the party insiders.

Now, they say, he is overseeing Mr. Xi's "China Dream" campaign to revive popular support for the party with a simple catch phrase—and to cultivate Mr. Xi's image as a strong, charismatic leader.

"He's very good at explaining leaders' ideas," said Mr. Huang of the National University of Singapore. "Leaders often come up with big ideas, but don't know how to translate them into concrete policies. Wang Huning knows how they think."