



September 29, 2012

Elite and Deft, Xi Aimed High Early in China

By IAN JOHNSON

ZHENGDING County, China — Thirty years ago, a young government official with a plum job in Beijing made an odd request: reassignment to a poor rural area.

At the time, millions of young people were still clawing their way back to China's urban centers after being exiled to the countryside in the Mao era. But 30-year-old [Xi Jinping](#) bucked the trend, giving up a secure post as adviser to a top military leader to navigate the tumultuous village politics of Zhengding, in Hebei Province.

The move offers a window on the political savvy of Mr. Xi, who, despite a recent two-week absence from public view that raised questions about his health, is on the cusp of taking over as China's supreme leader at a party congress that officials announced Friday would begin Nov. 8.

Mr. Xi (his full name is pronounced Shee Jin-ping) gained a measure of credibility to speak for rural Chinese compared with many other well-connected children of the elite. He also realized, according to several inside accounts, that his powerful family stood firmly behind him, ensuring that his stint in the countryside would be a productive and relatively brief exercise in résumé building that could propel him up the Communist Party hierarchy.

His powerful father, Xi Zhongxun, a revolutionary-era military leader, helped orchestrate his transfer, selecting Zhengding because of its relative proximity to Beijing, and later having Mr. Xi reassigned when he ran into local opposition, Chinese experts who have researched Mr. Xi's background said.

His connections allowed him to take chances in Zhengding. He pushed through market-oriented reforms when they were still considered cutting edge, and sidelined pro-Maoists. His stint in the countryside also helped him form new alliances with other offspring of the elite who would later prove important allies.

Even three decades into the country's rapid industrialization, China's leadership still pays heed to its heritage as a party of peasants, and it has tended to promote officials who can claim to be deeply rooted in the rural struggle. But it has also tended to favor "princelings,"

the privileged offspring of former leaders who had ties to the party's revolutionary history.

After his time in Zhengding, Mr. Xi could check both boxes.

“People think of him as being from the new generation of technocrats,” says Jin Zhong, a Hong Kong-based analyst of Chinese political leaders. “But he's really a continuation of the red bureaucracy of his father's generation.”

Mr. Xi's trajectory was similar to that of Bo Xilai, another princeling who used stints in the provinces to create an image of a bold reformer and champion of the poor before his career was derailed by a major scandal this year. Mr. Xi's stay in Zhengding, however, was characteristically more cautious, even as parts of it have entered modern Chinese political lore.

When Mr. Xi volunteered for rural duty in 1982, he did so along with two other up-and-coming officials, including Liu Yuan, son of the former head of state under Mao, Liu Shaoqi.

The men's decision to work at the grass roots caught the popular imagination after the author Ke Yunlu wrote a 1986 novel, “New Star,” about a party secretary who takes modern, market ideas to a backward province. The official meets many troubles but manages to triumph.

The novel's hero was a composite character based on Mr. Xi and the other two young officials. The book was soon made into a popular television series and is still widely known as a classic of that early reform era.

What Mr. Xi found in Zhengding was less romantic than the novel. He had hoped to be a party secretary with direct authority over a town or county but the conservative provincial party secretary, Gao Yang, blocked that. Disgusted by inexperienced but well-connected princelings like Mr. Xi parachuting into his domain, Mr. Gao made him deputy party secretary of Zhengding.

Still, Mr. Xi took on the assignment with gusto. He wore a green army greatcoat from his involuntary service in another rural area under Mao, roaming the town night and day to survey its problems. Wang Youhui, a local official, wrote in a published essay that he recalls seeing Mr. Xi for the first time and being taken aback by his plain style.

“I realized that this guy, who from his style of dress made him look like a lad from the canteen crew, was the new deputy party secretary,” Mr. Wang wrote.

Mr. Xi's biggest challenge was managing the county's roads, which were part of national north-south arteries. They were so bad — strewn with manure, dirt and grain left out to dry

— that the county was labeled in government reports as “chaotic, dirty and backward.”

Mr. Xi took firm action. According to internal government histories, he held mandatory classes for 43,200 people — 10 percent of the county’s population — on how the roads should be handled. As a member of the county’s Politics and Law Committee he also helped lead a draconian crackdown on crime, part of a nationwide attack on “Spiritual Pollution.”

The county began holding show trials of criminals through the summer and autumn of 1983, according to these government accounts. Four people were executed in public on one occasion.

Later in 1983, Mr. Xi was promoted to party secretary and kept a firm hand on social issues. Under his leadership the local government strictly enforced the national one-child policy. According to internal government documents, the county sterilized 31,000 women and fit another 30,000 with intrauterine contraceptive devices.

Like the crime campaign, the family planning measures were part of a national policy and there is no evidence that Mr. Xi was more zealous than others. But it illustrates a truism for successful Chinese leaders — that social issues have to be dealt with firmly to create political space for market-opening economic measures.

It was in economics as well as personal connections that Mr. Xi stood out.

Zhengding was a grain-growing center, with peasants forced to grow huge amounts for central granaries. Mr. Xi formed a clever alliance with Maoists and used his family ties in Beijing to cut Zhengding’s grain quota by one-quarter. That freed up farmers to use their land more lucratively, such as for raising fish, geese or cattle.

Mr. Xi caused even more of a stir in Zhengding when he tried to make it a center of television filming. State television was filming the classic novel “Dream of Red Mansions,” which is set in a palace and surrounding grounds. Crews had already built an enormous replica of the park in Beijing. But Mr. Xi used his political connections to get the mansion built in Zhengding, meaning the cast had to travel six hours to Zhengding to shoot indoor scenes.

Despite local opposition, Mr. Xi pushed through a plan to spend three times the original amount in a bid to make the set permanent.

The story of building the television studio is now firmly part of Mr. Xi’s official lore, touted as an example of his visionary economic leadership. In justifying the costs, he said it would help create a tourist attraction, and for many years it was popular because the television series was a huge hit. Several other shows were also filmed there in the 1980s and early

1990s. But what is rarely mentioned is that the Rongguofu mansion now gets few visitors and has not been used as a set for 20 years. It also spawned two spinoffs in Zhengding that are bankrupt, with one torn down and the other shuttered.

Despite his clout, and unlike the character in the novel “New Star,” Mr. Xi was not able to vanquish all his enemies.

He was never promoted beyond county chief. He was blocked, local residents and biographers say, by Mr. Gao, the provincial party secretary. According to Hu Lili, one of the authors of a new biography published by Mirror Books, Mr. Xi’s family decided that three years in Zhengding was enough. In 1985 his father arranged to have him transferred to China’s wealthier and more reform-minded coast, where he served under a more sympathetic party chief with ties to his father.

Yet the time in Zhengding helped Mr. Xi hone his skills, setting a template for his rise. It also cemented his bond with Liu Yuan, who is now a senior leader in the People’s Liberation Army. He also made an ally in Li Zhanshu, who was a local official in Hebei at the same time as Mr. Xi. Mr. Li has now been tapped to take over the party’s nerve center, its General Office.

“You can’t separate his accomplishments from his political support,” said Yang Zhongmei, a Xi biographer and lecturer at Yokohama City University. “This is the model you see today: if you have enough political support and money, you can accomplish a lot.”

Jake Fromer and Patrick Zuo contributed research from Beijing.



OPEN

MORE IN A

**Ex-Sou
Haunts**

Read More
