

Li Xi 李希

Born 1956



Current Positions

- Party Secretary of Guangdong (2017–present)
- Member of the Politburo (2017–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (2017–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Li was born on October 16, 1956, in Liangdang County, Gansu Province. Li joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1982. He received an undergraduate education in Chinese language and literature from Northwest Normal University in Lanzhou City, Gansu Province (1978–82), and an MBA from the School of Economics and Management at Tsinghua University in Beijing (via part-time studies, 2008–11).

Li was a “sent-down youth” in the Yunping People’s Commune in Liangdang County, Gansu Province (1975–76).¹ He then served as a clerk at the Culture and Education Bureau and the Party Committee of Liangdang County (1976–78). After graduating from college in 1982, he worked as a *mishu* (personal assistant) in the Department of Propaganda of the Gansu Provincial Party Committee (1982–85) and as a *mishu* in the office of Gansu Party Secretary Li Ziqi (1985–86). Li Xi worked as an official (1986–87), deputy division head (1987–90), and division head (1990–95) in the Organization Department of the Gansu Provincial Party Committee. He served as party secretary of Xigu District, Lanzhou City (1995–96). After that, he served as director of the Organization Department (1996–99) and, concurrently, as deputy party secretary (1999–2001) of the Lanzhou Municipal Party Committee. He served as party secretary of the Zhangye Prefecture Party Committee (2001–04), a period during which he attended a four-month mid-career training program at the Central Party School (2004). He became secretary-general (chief of staff) of the Gansu Provincial Party Committee for a few months in 2004 and then was transferred to Shaanxi, where he served concurrently as secretary-general and a member of the Standing Committee of the Shaanxi Provincial Party Committee (2004–06). He concurrently served as party secretary of the Yan’an Municipal Party Committee (2006–11).

In 2011, Li was transferred to Shanghai, where he served as director of the Organization Department and as a member of the Standing Committee of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee (2011–13), and then as deputy party secretary of Shanghai (2013–14). He was appointed deputy party secretary and governor of Liaoning Province (2014–15) and then promoted to party secretary (2015–17). He was first elected to the Central Committee as an alternate member at the 17th Party Congress in 2007 and continued his alternate membership at the 18th Party Congress in 2012.

Family and Patron-Client Ties

Li Xi has strong ties with Xi Jinping. Their relationship can be traced to the mid-1980s, when Li Xi served as a personal assistant to Li Ziqi, who was then the party secretary of Gansu. Li Ziqi was born in Shaanxi and, as a 13-year-old in the 1930s, participated in the communist military uprising in the northwestern region, which was led by Xi Jinping’s father, Xi Zhongxun.² Li Ziqi was persecuted in the early 1960s, the same period during which Xi Zhongxun was fired. Both were charged with conducting antisocialist activities but were later rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution. In 1983, Xi Zhongxun nominated Li Ziqi to be party secretary of Gansu Province.³ It is believed that through this important

connection with Li Ziqi, Li Xi came to know the Xi family, including Xi Jinping himself. They have remained friends ever since.

According to an overseas Chinese media source, Li Xi's native county (Liangdang, Gansu Province) was where Xi Jinping's father led the revolutionary uprising in 1932 — the only military uprising led by the CCP in the northwestern region of the country during the first civil war.⁴ According to one reporter, while Li Xi was a local leader in Liangdang, he “did an impressive job highlighting the historical significance of this uprising during the Communist red revolution.”⁵ Furthermore, when Li Xi was party secretary of Yan'an, he designated the location where Xi had worked as a sent-down youth as a “model village” of the province.⁶ The personal relationship between Xi Jinping and Li Xi has been widely reported in the Chinese media, reinforcing the public perception that Li is a confidant of Xi.⁷ Li's rapid promotion in recent years suggests that Xi intends to make him a national leader. Li Xi also worked under Zhao Leji — presently a Politburo Standing Committee member — when both were in Shaanxi Province.

Policy Preferences and Political Prospects

As party secretary of Liaoning, Li Xi was known for his tough stance against corruption and his enthusiastic support for Xi's call for more strict enforcement of party discipline. His previous leadership experience in Shanghai was primarily in party affairs. Li's current position as party secretary of Guangdong, a major economic hub, has allowed him to gain much-needed leadership experience in economic affairs. A priority for Li will be promoting the economic integration of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Bay Area into a world-class urban cluster. Under Li's leadership, Guangdong has become a principal driver for the promotion of the Maritime Silk Road project, coordinating the Pacific Islands arm of the Belt and Road initiative. Important components of this new strategy include technological and commercial innovation, as well as environmentally friendly urban development.

Li Xi's strong ties with Xi Jinping and his broad leadership experience in Gansu, Shaanxi, Shanghai, Liaoning, and now Guangdong make him a leading contender for the next Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). If he obtains a seat on the PSC this October, Li will likely serve in one of the following three positions: chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), executive secretary of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee, or secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI).

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

Notes:

¹ “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.

² Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), pp. 307–8.

³ For further discussion on the strong ties between Li Ziqi and Xi Zhongxun, see Li Ziqi, “Deeply cherish the memory of Comrade Xi Zhongxun” [Shenqie mianhuai Xi Zhongxun tongzhi], *Gansu Daily* [Meiri Gansu], October 10, 2013, <http://gansu.gansudaily.com.cn/system/2013/10/10/014708123.shtml>.

⁴ Chu Wen, “The political rise of the ‘Shaanxi Gang’: Four heavyweight leaders have entered the core power circle of the Chinese Communist Party” [Zhengtan ‘Shaanjun’ jueqi, sida hanjiang buru Zhonggong hexinquan], Duowei Net, July 3, 2015, <http://china.dwnews.com/news/2015-07-03/59664886.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Shi Qing, “Xi Jinping welcomes Li Xi-led party and government delegation from Yan'an to visit Shanghai” [Xi Jinping huanying Li Xi shuai Yan'an shi dangzheng daibiaotuan lai hu fangwen], *Oriental*, August 18, 2007, <http://sh.eastday.com/qtmt/20070818/u1a343068.html>, and Fang Ledi, “Li Xi takes new office in Liaoning” [Li Xi luxin Liaoning], *Dagong*, April 28, 2014, <http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/focus/2014-04/2446110.html>.