

In late December 2019, Luo Huining 骆惠宁 was set aside and taken down from his provincial position (Shanxi Party Secretary [2016-2019]) and instead sent, as several 65-year-old Cadres often do before their official retirement, to a commission led by the National People's Congress (NPC). Luo, a provincial veteran (Anhui Standing Committee [1999-2003], Governor [2010-2013] and Party Secretary of Qinghai [2013-2016]), seemed then to follow in the footsteps of his Qinghai predecessor, Qiang Wei 强卫¹.

Replaced by Lou Yangsheng 楼阳生 – part of Xi's Zhejiang "army", Luo, despite being regarded as competent when it came to the anti-corruption campaign, has never shown any overt signs of siding with Xi. As such, the sudden removal of Wang Zhimin 王志民² – now ex-director of the Hong Kong Liaison Office for the Central government, which, to be fair, was predictable³, became even more confusing when it became known that he would be replaced by Luo.

Some are saying this "new" player could bring a breath of fresh air and bring new perspectives on the current state of affairs; some might see this move as either an ill-advised decision or the result of lengthy negotiations at the top – negotiations that might not have tilted in Xi's favor.

A fall from "grace" in the shadow of Zeng Qinghong

Wang Zhimin's removal, as previously stated, is almost a non-event, as Xi was (and still is) clearly dissatisfied with the way the Hong Kong - Macau affairs system 港澳系统 is dealing with the protests. The main issue being the liberty taken by certain officials to distort Beijing's message for the benefit of their own or for other various informal rival groups.

The obvious choice here to replace Wang was Chen Dong 陈冬, one of Xi's Fujian *mishu* and deputy to Wang. Although Xi did fail to replace the predecessor of Wang Zhimin – Zhang Xiaoming 张晓明 (current director of the Hong Kong – Macau Affairs Office for the State Council), with Chen back in 2017, he was successful in positioning Zhao Kezhi 赵克志 (State Councilor and Minister of Public Security) under Han Zheng 韩正 – leader of the leadership group on Hong Kong and Macau and associate of the old Shanghai gang 上海帮.

This time, the switch was simply too fast: Wang was removed, and Luo was brought back from the NPC to sit in. This would come as a surprise as not only was Luo already 65 and not destined to reach the deputy national rank 国家级副职 – which would justify further promotion regardless of his advanced age, but also because Luo had no priors and possibly the "wrong" priors to occupy this position: Luo, contrary to all his predecessors, has regional leadership experience, and was a member of the NPC. Yet, this might not be the most interesting point regarding this appointment.

The problematic of Luo's mentor and the rest of his background

Luo, known in most political circles as Hui Liangyu's 回良玉⁴ "great" *mishu* – a close lieutenant of the old guard (Jiang Zemin's clique)⁵, was also well acquainted with Hu Fuguo 胡富国 (Shanxi Party Secretary [1993-1999] and close to both Ling Jihua 令计划 and Jiang Zemin).

¹ An ally of Beijing's ex-Party Secretary Liu Qi 刘淇 (also Sun Zhengcai's 孙政才 patron), and of Ling Jihua 令计划.

² As far as things go, his "stepping down" might also indicate Carrie Lam's change of heart when it comes to factional affiliations; if she actually gave in to Xi, the obvious first round choice of termination would be Wang Zhimin.

³ <https://asialyst.com/fr/2019/11/09/chine-xi-jinping-consolide-son-pouvoir-sans-se-debarrasser-de-ses-rivaux/>

⁴ Anhui (1998-1999) and Jiangsu Party Secretary (1999-2002), Politburo member from 2003 to 2013 (Vice-Premier in charge of rural and agricultural issues under Wen Jiabao 温家宝).

⁵ Hui was also one of the leading figures of the "Huibang" 徽帮 – Anhui clique, which also encompasses the now fallen Zhao Zhengyong 赵正永 (Shaanxi Party Secretary [2012-2016]). During his tenure in Anhui, Hui also helped Jiang Zemin's sister Jiang Zehui 江泽慧 – then deputy director of the Anhui Agricultural College, to become deputy director of the Anhui's Provincial People Congress (1993). It is also worth noting that Jiang Zehui might be Sun Zhengcai's 孙政才 first political benefactor. Back in the late 1990s, Jiang was the director of the Chinese Academy of Forestry 中国林科院院, thus "presiding" over Sun Zhengcai who at the time was deputy director of Beijing Agriculture and Forestry Academy of Sciences 北京市农林科学院. She introduced Sun to Jiang Zemin and later to Liu Qi 刘淇 (Mayor [1999-2003] and Party Secretary of Beijing [2002-2012]).

That said, during his tenure in Anhui, Luo also rubbed shoulders with both Wang Yang 汪洋 (born in Anhui and served as its deputy governor [1993-1999])⁶ and Li Keqiang 李克强 (born in Anhui) – two of Hu Jintao’s *tuanpai* (Communist Youth League) generals 团派大员.

In addition to this background, the relationship between Wang Qishan – Xi’s right-hand man – and Hui Liangyu was also far from harmonious. Hui, who was in charge of the agricultural reforms in Jilin back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was technically under Wang Qishan, who was then on the rural policy research team of the Central Secretariat 中央书记处农村政策研究室. That said, Hui was able to go past Wang – in terms of promotion – and was recommended to Jiang Zemin by the then “North-East chief”, Gao Di 高狄. A close friend of Jiang, Gao – a mastermind propagandist – propelled the careers of not only Hui, but also Xu Caihou 徐才厚, Zhang Dejiang 张德江, and even Bo Xilai 薄熙来. As such, Wang, who was seen as a more capable reformer, lagged behind Hui during the 1990s. This relationship would come back to haunt Hui at the time of his retirement in 2013 when Wang became the head of the CCDI⁷. It is of no surprise, then, that Wang Qishan dedicated a large amount of resources in investigating cases in Jiangsu, where Hui had previously been Party chief (1999-2002)⁸.

Some additional issues can also be raised for Luo’s tenure in Qinghai between 2003 and 2016. While under Su Rong 苏荣 – a close ally of Hui from back in Jilin, but also an important lieutenant of the “*jiangpai*” 江派, Luo became close to Jiang Jiemin 蒋洁敏 – ex-CEO of CNPC (2011-2013) and of PetroChina (2006-2011) and one of Zhou Yongkang’s 周永康 fallen men, and to Mao Xiaobing 毛小兵 (Party Secretary of Xining [2011- 2014]), a fallen ally of Su Rong and Qiang Wei 强卫.

As such, this change from Wang Zhimin to Luo Huining does not seem to be a wise one, in both a factional and an organizational way. That said, Luo did prove to be a “team player” when it came down to the anti-corruption campaign in Shanxi. Yet, aside from visiting Hong Kong with Shanxi businessmen, Luo has no experience in managing an SAR. If Xi’s objective is to go around Zeng’s networks and to create a better communication channel between Hong Kong and Beijing, Luo is perhaps an ill-advised choice for the Party leadership.

A fresh look: an ill-advised choice or a compromise?

The answer as to why Luo was selected remains hard to find and even harder to justify, especially when we take a close look at his background and his mentor.

However, Luo was also under the leadership of Zhao Leji 赵乐际 for four years in Qinghai and was later often referred to as being an expert of “cleaning up messes” 收拾烂摊子 (especially in Shanxi)⁹. To be fair, although Luo can anticipate pushback from the Hong Kong-Macau affairs system, we do not believe he was sent to Hong Kong to overcome the stalemate between the protesters and the local administration.

He might actually, considering his good relationship with Wang Yang, be softer than some of Zeng Qinghong’s allies in handling the protests. In all due fairness to Luo, who seems to be a compromise candidate more inclined to “accept all factions”, he might just be there as a placeholder that will not serve for an extended period of time while a more suitable candidate is found.

As the Party entered uncharted territory in dealing with Hong Kong’s unrest, each step it takes needs to be carefully thought out as mistakes could have catastrophic consequences for the current political arrangement between the Central government in the SAR.

⁶ Wang is currently President of the Political Consultative Conference (*zhengxie* 政协) and a Standing Committee Member of the Politburo since 2018.

⁷ Some accounts say that Hui “gave face” to Wang Qishan by stating that he rejoiced the moments he was “under his leadership” back in the 1980s.

⁸ Also the stronghold of Jiang Zemin, and indirectly of Hui, Wang took it upon himself to clean the province in addition to tackling allegations of systemic corruption between the Ministry of Civil Affairs (back then under Li Liguo 李立国) and Hui Liangyu (who was in charge of civil affairs back when he was Vice-Premier).

⁹ An expression often used to talk about Wang Qishan.