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China Primer: China’s Political System

The People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China) is the only Communist Party-led state among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and among the G-20 major economies. As Congress has intensified its focus on China over the last decade, some Members have increasingly sought to legislate and conduct oversight on matters that require an understanding of the PRC political system.

The Party-State

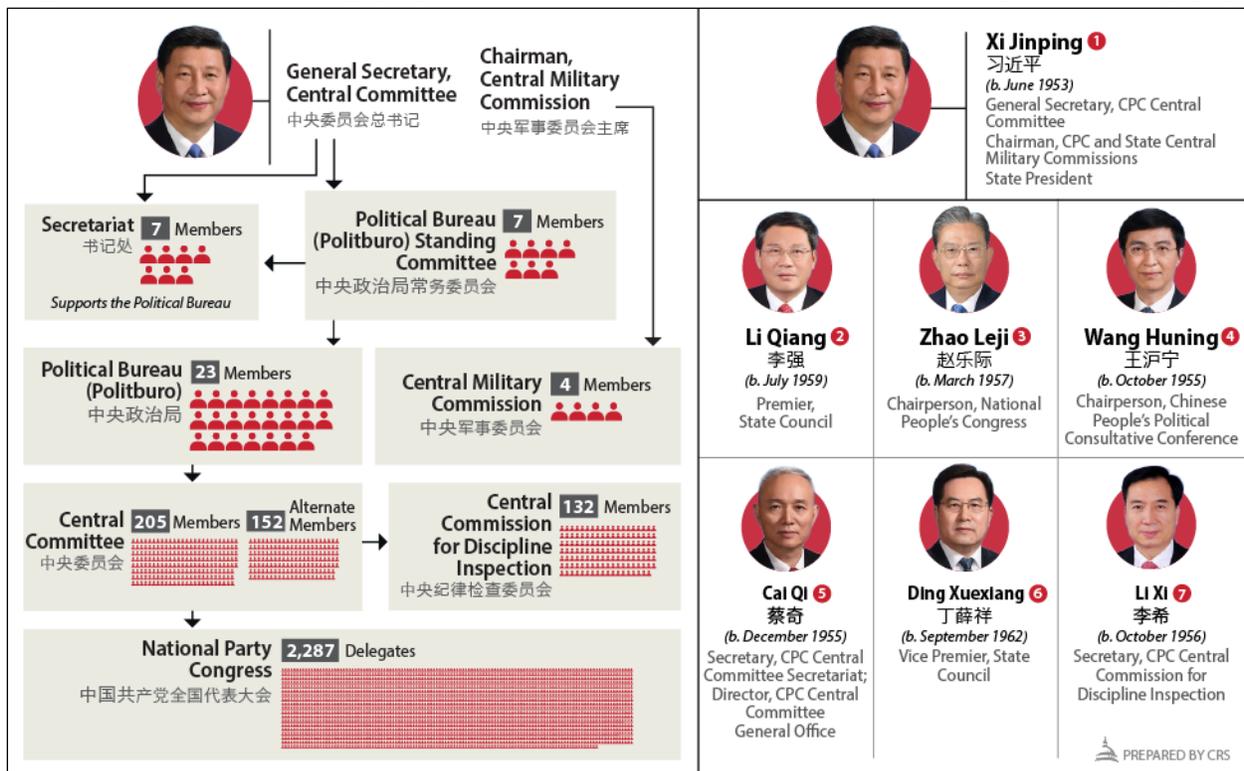
The PRC is a Leninist “party-state.” The Communist Party of China (CPC), also known as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is China’s dominant political institution. It operates a powerful and expansive bureaucracy and, per the CPC Constitution, “exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavor in every part of the country.” The Party tasks the government with administration. Interlocking Party and government hierarchies extend down to the level of small towns, with the Party leader at every level outranking his (or occasionally her) government counterpart. Provincial Party secretaries outrank governors, and municipal Party secretaries outrank mayors.

Xi Jinping, 72, leads the PRC party-state. He has served since 2012 as CPC General Secretary and Chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission (CMC), the body that oversees the Party’s armed wing. Since 2013, Xi also has served as PRC President, a head-of-state position with limited responsibilities. Xi broke norms by claiming third five-year terms in his Party and state posts starting in 2022 and 2023. He has not indicated whether he will seek fourth five-year terms in his Party posts at the CPC’s 21st National Congress, to be held in the second half of 2027.

The Communist Party of China

The CPC, officially founded in 1921, established the PRC on October 1, 1949. Today, the CPC’s 100.3 million members constitute 7% of China’s population. All members applied and underwent vetting to join. The Party’s apex institution is the 205-member Central Committee, with General Secretary Xi as its “core.” An all-male, all Han-ethnicity, 23-person subset of the Central Committee serves on its elite Political Bureau (Politburo). A 7-person subset of the Politburo serves on its Politburo Standing Committee, China’s top decisionmaking body. (Figure 1.)

Figure 1. 20th CPC Hierarchy (left) and CPC Central Committee Politburo Standing Committee (right)



Source: CRS graphic by Mari Y. Lee, based on data from the Communist Party of China’s news portal, <http://cpc.people.com.cn>.

Note: Data current as of 3/10/2026. 20th Central Committee (CC) Politburo Standing Committee members are listed in rank order. The 20th CC, CDIC, and CMC took office in 2022. Since then, the CC has lost 14 members (12 expelled, one resigned, one died), and promoted 14 alternate members to fill its vacancies. The 20th CMC has lost three members (expelled); two of the remaining four are under investigation.

The Central Committee meets at least once annually, with meetings known as “plenary sessions” or “plenums.” Politburo Standing Committee members hold concurrent posts atop all major parts of the political system, ensuring Party control of political life in China. In his CMC Chairman role, Xi Jinping oversees active duty and reserve forces of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), plus the People’s Armed Police (PAP) and the People’s Militia. They all formally and explicitly serve the Party, not the country. Since 2023, Xi has carried out a far-reaching purge of senior military leaders, leaving a single uniformed officer actively serving under him on the CMC.

Currently, the Party’s no. 2 official, Li Qiang, serves concurrently as Premier of the **State Council**, the cabinet of the Central People’s Government, overseeing the government bureaucracy. The Party’s no. 6 official, Ding Xuexiang, serves as the most senior Vice Premier.

The Party’s no. 3 official, Zhao Leji, heads the **National People’s Congress (NPC)**, China’s unicameral legislature. The NPC meets in full session each March. It enacts and amends laws, approves the government budget and national development plans, and appoints top government leaders. Delegates to 31 provincial-level people’s congresses plus election councils for Hong Kong, Macao, the PLA and, purportedly, “Taiwan compatriots” elect the NPC’s nearly 3,000 delegates, all based on CPC candidate lists. One-third of NPC delegates are senior CPC and government officials.

The Party’s no. 4 official, Wang Huning, heads the **Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)**, a political advisory body that meets in full session alongside the NPC. Their annual meetings are known as the “Two Sessions.” The CPPCC’s nearly 3,000 members represent 34 groups: the CPC; 8 CPC-approved minor political parties; non-party members; 8 “social organizations,” including the All-China Women’s Federation; 13 “social circles,” including scientists and religious figures; and 3 categories of “specially-invited personages.” The CPPCC’s role is to unite all society behind the CPC, an exercise the Party calls building a “patriotic united front.” Wang also manages Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan policy.

The CPC’s no. 5 official, Cai Qi, heads both the CPC Central Committee’s **General Office** and its **Secretariat**. The latter manages the CPC Central Committee bureaucracy, which includes six functional departments.

- **The Organization Department** is the Party’s personnel agency, responsible for recruiting and training personnel and assigning them to positions across the party-state.
- **The Publicity Department (or Propaganda Department)** is responsible for the Party’s messaging and for guiding the media and ideological work.
- **The United Front Work Department** works to win over non-CPC groups at home and abroad, including ethnic and religious communities; private business; and populations in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and globally, with a focus on the ethnic-Chinese diaspora.
- **The International Department** handles external party-to-party relations and takes the lead on diplomacy with fellow Communist countries, including North Korea.

- **The Commission for Political and Legal Affairs** oversees the work of the Supreme People’s Court, the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, and the Ministries of Public Security (MPS), State Security (MSS), and Justice. A former MSS Minister currently leads the commission; the sitting MPS minister is his deputy.
- **The Society Work Department** exerts Party control over management of public complaints, as well as community governance, social work, volunteer work, industry associations, and chambers of commerce.

The Party’s no. 7 official, Li Xi, heads the Party’s **Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI)**, which investigates CPC members for alleged violations of “discipline,” including corruption. His top deputy heads the **National Commission of Supervision**, an ostensibly government agency that investigates public sector employees for misconduct and corruption. Another deputy oversees the **CMC Discipline Inspection Commission**, and currently serves also as CMC Vice Chairman.

Central People’s Government/The State

The Premier, a CPC Politburo Standing Committee member, heads the government’s top institution, the **State Council (Figure 2)**. Four vice premiers, including one CPC Politburo Standing Committee member, manage primarily economic portfolios. Lower-ranking state councilor positions for foreign affairs and military affairs have been vacant since Xi removed their incumbents in 2023.

Figure 2. China’s State Council Leadership



Source: CRS graphic by Mari Y. Lee based on data from <http://www.gov.cn>. Current as of March 10, 2026.

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