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Xulio Ríos

"Private Secretaries" in Chinese Politics: The Invisible Architecture of Power

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Abstract:

"Private secretaries," or mishu (秘书), are an omnipresent actor in Chinese politics and represent more than just a singular component of the complex administrative apparatus. Their high political prominence is illustrated by a broad range of functions in key arenas. At the same time, they constitute a kind of "college" that serves as a genuine breeding ground for cadres destined to assume the highest responsibilities, as a result of their combination of expertise and trust. This model, distinct from "factions," represents another specific feature of Chinese governance, playing a substantial role in elite formation, decision-making, and the informal politics of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with both virtues and risks addressed in this article.

Keywords:

Mishu, CCP, networks of trust, factions, relational capital.

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Introduction

In modern political systems, power tends to be represented formally through institutions, positions, rules, or procedures. However, in certain contexts—and the People's Republic of China is one of the most paradigmatic—this representation remains incomplete if the informal mechanisms structuring decision-making are not taken into account. Among them, few are as decisive and, at the same time, as scarcely visible as the figure of the *mishu* (秘书), the personal secretary of senior leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Far from being merely administrative support, the *mishu* embodies a first-order political function, acting as mediator between the leader and the apparatus, the inevitable filter of information, the manager of access, and, in many cases, the embryo of future elites. Its relevance does not end at the operational level. Rather, it helps explain how the transition is articulated between two seemingly contradictory logics: that of the inner circle of trust, based on personal proximity, and that of the formal elite, grounded in the Party's institutional framework. At this intersection, the *mishu* acts as a conversion mechanism that transforms trust into power; understanding how real power is constructed requires taking this reference into account.

Academic literature has emphasized for decades the omnipresence of this figure. In their now classic study, Li and Pye (1992) describe the *mishu* as a "ubiquitous" element in Chinese politics whose function far exceeds conventional administrative tasks.[1] More recently, Tsai (2025) has conceptualized this phenomenon in terms of an "inner court," highlighting the role of secretaries as the core of informal power dynamics within the Chinese political system.[2]

It should be noted that in the Chinese model, personalist logic is not replaced by bureaucratic logic; rather, both are integrated through mechanisms such as the *mishu*, which institutionalize trust without depersonalizing power.

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[1] LI, Wei; PYE, Lucian W., *"The Ubiquitous Role of the Mishu in Chinese Politics"*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

[2] TSAI, Wen-Hsuan, "*The Inner Court of Communist China: Elites and Their Bureaucratic Institutions in an Authoritarian System (1921–2022)"*, Amsterdam University Press, Ámsterdam, 2025. También en TSAI, Wen-Hsuan; DEAN, Nicola, "*Lifting the Veil of the CCP's Mishu System: Unrestricted Informal Politics within an Authoritarian Regime"*, Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2017.

A significant and revealing fact underscores the importance of *mishu*: of the seven current members of the Standing Committee of the CCP Politburo, three have served as *mishu* at some point in their careers.[3] This includes Xi Jinping himself, Ding Xuexiang, and Li Xi. One might even argue that, although Li Qiang and Cai Qi have not formally been *mishu*, they are clearly part of Xi's trusted circle, having worked closely with him in Zhejiang province.

The *Mishu*: More Than a Secretary

The term *mishu* can be misleading if mechanically translated as "secretary"[4] without context. Within the CCP, its meaning goes far beyond that of a conventional bureaucratic function. At the highest levels of the system, the *mishu* is, above all, a trusted collaborator with privileged access to the leader and the ability to influence the flow of information surrounding him.

Formally, their tasks include document management, agenda organization, meeting coordination, and drafting speeches or reports. However, reducing their role to this dimension would ignore their true political function. In practice, the *mishu* acts as a strategic node, deciding what information reaches the leader, in what form and at what time; interpreting and transmitting instructions; and, at times, anticipating or qualifying decisions.

In a system where access to the leader is limited and highly regulated, this position acquires extraordinary value. Controlling access largely means controlling power. The *mishu*, therefore, not only manages the leader's routine but is decisive in shaping the environment in which decisions are made. As Li and Pye (1992) note, the *mishu* not only transmits information but interprets, filters, and sometimes redefines it.

Selection and Training: The Politics of Trust

Access to a *mishu* position does not follow a standardized procedure or open recruitment. It is a deeply political appointment in which personal trust is the decisive variable. This

[3] Una aproximación a las biografías en: https://www.questionchine.net/membres-du-20e-bureau-politique

[4] There is a rich body of internal Chinese literature (manuals, memoirs, journals such as *Mishu gongzuo*) that remains underexplored in the West, yet is key to reconstructing the system's actual practices.

trust may derive from shared trajectories, regional affinities, internal recommendations, or prior experience within the Party apparatus.

Nevertheless, some recurring traits characterize *mishu* profiles: relative youth and potential for development, administrative or Party office experience, absolute discretion, proven political loyalty, and personal affinity (sometimes generational or regional).

Rather than selecting a technical expert, the system seeks someone who can integrate into the leader's circle of trust without friction while enhancing effectiveness. In this sense, the *mishu* is less an expert than a repository of trust, whose main quality is political reliability.

This logic has important implications. On the one hand, the position becomes an exceptional learning opportunity, as the *mishu* is directly socialized within the elite, observes decision-making processes firsthand, and acquires privileged knowledge of how the system operates. On the other hand, it establishes a relationship of dependency that will shape future career trajectories. In this sense, the *mishu* functions as a space of political socialization where emerging cadres acquire not only administrative skills but also access to networks of power and influence. It is a kind of "institutionalized political sponsorship" that encourages the commitment of promising young cadres placed close to the leader's environment.

From Inner Circle to Elite: The Mechanism of Transition

The most interesting role of the *mishu* emerges when analyzing its function as a mechanism of transition between the inner circle of trust and the formal elite. To understand this process, it is important to distinguish between the two concepts.

The inner circle is a small, informal, highly personalist group built around a leader, based on direct trust relationships and lacking a defined institutional structure. The formal elite, by contrast, consists of cadres occupying recognized positions within the Party and state apparatus, with clearly defined responsibilities.

The Chinese political system needs to bring these two levels together. The core of trust provides cohesion and control, but lacks institutional stability. The formal elite, on the other hand, offers continuity, but can dilute the leader's will. The mishu acts as a bridge between the two through a gradual process of institutionalisation.

The process usually unfolds in three phases. In the first phase, known as the 'proximity' phase, the individual gains access to the leader's inner circle as a personal secretary, building up relational capital through their work. In the second phase, which we might call the delegation phase, they begin to carry out functions of coordination and the transmission of orders, gaining political experience in a grey area between the formal and the informal; in this way, they partially exercise attributes of power without holding a formal post and learn to operate politically. Finally, in the institutionalisation phase, they are promoted to formal positions (regional, ministerial, Party), where their capital of trust translates into effective power that gradually shifts towards their position within the central bodies.

This mechanism allows the core of trust to extend across the institutional framework without the need to alter its formal structures. Personal trust thus becomes a criterion for selecting the elite, but it also resolves fundamental concerns. For example, it considerably reduces uncertainty for a leader when promoting someone they already know and who has proven themselves in day-to-day management. And, of course, someone who is loyal, both ideologically and personally, which ensures consistency in the management and implementation of policies.

Distinction Between Network of Trust and Faction

In the Chinese case, the distinction between a network of trust and a faction is not only semantic; it explains two different ways of organizing power within the Party. From the outset, it should be noted that, unlike the era of Mao or Deng Xiaoping, in the new era of Xi Jinping there is more of the former than of the latter.

A faction is a relatively broad group, with a certain internal coherence and based on shared trajectories and institutional approaches or cross-promotions. Moreover, it usually has a clearly recognizable organizational base, which projects a certain sense of continuity over time and displays an evident capacity to reproduce and multiply beyond specific individuals. In short, it is a semi-institutional structure within a system that officially denies—and severely combats—its existence.

By contrast, the core of trust is a rather small circle, highly conditioned by the personalism

of its leader and built around him. To its extreme informality and total dependence on the leader, we should add another characteristic: relations of direct trust. Therefore, it is a personal and not an institutional structure.

If in the faction one is "part" of something, in the core one is "close" to someone. In one case, power comes from the group; in the other, it comes from the leader. In the first case, we can speak of a "proto-pluralist" logic, as opposed to the vertical and centralized logic of the core. The faction negotiates internally, competes with other factions, generates balances of power, is more stable over time, allows even a certain predictability, and transcends a founding leader. By contrast, in the core of trust only the will of the leader is carried out; it does not negotiate, it simply transmits and eliminates intermediations in a context of high volatility, since it depends on the leader's continued presence and can disappear rapidly with him.

The faction presents as an evident risk the activation of internal struggles and the fragmentation of power, in extreme cases even blocking decision-making, potentially affecting political stability. Hence the fear provoked by the lack of control and the determination to combat it, which historically refers us to episodes of rise and fall. The core of trust, for its part, has as a notable risk isolation, the tic of an almost visceral rejection of criticism and therefore a loss of quality in decision-making.

A Paradigmatic Case: Xi Jinping

Xi Jinping's career clearly illustrates the significance of this role and its dynamics. In his early years, after studying at Tsinghua University, Xi worked in 1979 as personal secretary to Geng Biao, a prominent figure in the Chinese military and diplomatic establishment, who served as General Secretary and a member of the Standing Committee of the Central Military Commission.[5] This experience enabled Xi to gain access to high-level circles—not entirely unexpected given his own family background—to participate in international activities and to acquire first-hand knowledge of the inner workings of the political elite. This period not only contributed to his development but also facilitated his integration into networks of power that would prove decisive in his

[5] When Geng Biao visited the United States in 1980, Xi accompanied him and was able to observe U.S. military power firsthand, visiting the Pentagon, Fort Bragg, and boarding a Kitty Hawk–class aircraft carrier.

subsequent career.[6]

Beyond its specific content, this episode reveals the function of the *mishu* as a space of political socialization. It is not simply about assisting a superior, but about integrating into a network of relationships that will condition one's entire subsequent career.

Already as a leader, Xi has reproduced this pattern, promoting numerous collaborators who have worked with him at different stages of his political trajectory, especially in provinces such as Fujian, Zhejiang, or in the special municipality of Shanghai. Figures such as Ding Xuexiang, current number six of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, or Li Qiang, number two, exemplify this pattern of promotion based on proximity and trust. In particular, in Ding's rise from secretarial positions, it is worth highlighting his role as Xi's *mishu* in Shanghai and as chief of staff for years, until reaching the Standing Committee, which underscores the system's capacity to convert personal relationships into institutional authority.

Taking this dynamic into account, we can observe the consolidation of figures of maximum influence in the country despite not having a solid political base of their own, but whose capital is almost exclusively proximity to a central leader, in this case Xi. It is a clear recent example of a *mishu* turned into a national elite figure.

But many other important cadres began this way. Li Xi, for example, number 7 and current anti-corruption chief, started as a provincial *mishu*, confirming this typical pattern of *mishu* of a relevant leader, promotion in local positions, and chain ascent by virtue of the network built. Its significance is such that, on occasions, people have come to speak of "secretaries' factions," which is undoubtedly an exaggeration.

Networks of Trust in Xiism

The *mishu* has existed throughout CCP history, but its role has evolved alongside the system.[7] This evolution of the *mishu* also reflects the transformation of the Chinese political system itself. From the personalism of Mao Zedong, through the institutionalization promoted by Deng Xiaoping, to the recentralization under Xi Jinping, the role of the private secretary has remained constant as an element of mediation

[6] SHAMBAUGH, David, *"China's Leaders: From Mao to Now"*, Polity Press, Cambridge (UK) / Medford (MA), 2021.
[7] RIOS, Xulio, *"The Metamorphosis of Communism in China: A History of the CCP"*, Kalandraka, Pontevedra, 2021.

between the leader and the apparatus.

Under Maoism, this structure was less institutionalized. Mao had revolutionaries at his disposal. His personal secretaries were very close to him, even in a domestic sense. Deng Xiaoping brought about a progressive institutionalization of this role, promoting a certain separation between the formal apparatus and the personal circle, integrating the mishu more visibly into the system, combining the personal logic characteristic of Maoism with the rising technocratic logic.

Under Xiism, one can speak of a relative return to a personalist logic, albeit with the addition of a considerably stronger institutional apparatus.

Unlike earlier periods, marked by the coexistence of relatively structured factions, the Xi era is characterized by the predominance of networks of personal trust. These networks do not constitute factions in the strict sense, but rather constellations of loyalty articulated around the leader.

Among them are networks such as that of Fujian, where Xi developed an important part of his early career; that of Zhejiang, associated with his period as Party secretary in that province; and the Shanghai circle, smaller but key in his transition to central power.

All three are genuine breeding grounds for cadres linked to Xi. In Fujian (1980s and 1990s), Xi spent several decades building his career. It is his oldest network and is based on long-standing loyalty, shaped by profiles with experience in economic management and relations with Taiwan. In Zhejiang, between 2002 and 2007, Xi consolidated his governing style, favoring a pro-business orientation, with increasing space for private initiative and a focus on efficiency in governance. From this period emerged figures such as the current premier Li Qiang and Chen Min'er, current head of the CCP in the municipality of Tianjin. Shanghai, finally, is the origin of the central office circle, from which the figure of Ding Xuexiang emerges.

This pattern under Xi reflects a significant change compared to previous decades. Under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, in the late Dengist period, the system displayed a greater degree of internal pluralism, with factions such as the "Shanghai clique" or the Communist Youth League competing for influence. These factions operated as broad networks with

internal bargaining capacity.[8] In Xiism, however, one observes a shift toward more personalist networks, where loyalty to the leader takes precedence over membership in institutionalized groups, often rooted in secretarial or administrative proximity.

At present, these structures have largely been subordinated to the imperative logic of the central core. It is a constellation of personal loyalty embedded within the Party apparatus that neither conforms to the classic Dengist model[9] nor constitutes a power that can be described as monolithic. Xi has not built an ideological faction but has instead prioritized trust, resulting in a very direct form of dependence in relationships, thereby avoiding the need to negotiate with potential rival factions that would possess their own political bases.

The General Office, Corruption, and Discipline

A key element in this framework is the General Office of the Central Committee of the CCP, the body responsible for managing documentation, the agenda, and the logistics of the Party leadership. In practice, it is a strategic institution that concentrates coordination and information control functions.

Many high-level *mishu* pass through this office, which provides them with a privileged position to understand how the system operates and to establish relevant contacts.[10] In this sense, the General Office acts as a breeding ground for cadres and a point of convergence between the inner circle of trust and the formal elite.[11]

Control of this institution is therefore a key indicator of real power within the Party. It is the true nerve center of the *mishu*, and those who pass through it can accumulate a considerable structural advantage, as it provides opportunities to rise quickly and to hold strategic positions.

It should be borne in mind that *mishu* constitute the first ring of trust, those who accompany the leader at key moments and who internalize his management style and

[8] BO, Zhiyue, *"China's Elite Politics: Political Transition and Power Balancing"*, World Scientific, Singapore, 2007.
[9] Dengism is here situated chronologically between 1978 and 2012, that is, the period of reform and opening-up driven under the guiding influence of Deng Xiaoping's policies.
[10] LIEBERTHAL, Kenneth, *"Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform"*, W. W. Norton, New York, 2004.
[11] XU, Ruixin et al., *"Zhongguo xiandai mishu gongzuo jichu"* [Fundamentals of Secretarial Work in Contemporary China], Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chubanshe, Beijing, 1989.

priorities. They represent the interpreted will of the leader, theoretically excluding their own interests and acting as de facto extensions of the leader within the system.

The centrality of the *mishu* in managing access to the leader entails evident risks. In a system where proximity translates into influence, the temptation to monetize that proximity is considerable. The secretary may become an intermediary of interests, a facilitator of contacts, or even a manager of clientelist networks, influencing the flow around the leader and aspects as far-reaching as the manipulation of appointments.

The management of access to the leader, by allowing the intermediation of interests and the formation of clientelist networks, can become a source of corruption. It is no coincidence that numerous corruption cases in China have involved *mishu* or close collaborators of senior leaders. Various studies on patronage in China have shown how personal connections decisively influence political careers.[12] In this context, the dense and prolonged anti-corruption campaign promoted by Xi Jinping can be interpreted not only as an effort to discipline the apparatus as a whole, but also as a mechanism to reconfigure power networks. The anti-corruption campaign led by Xi Jinping has paid particular attention to these circles, not only for ethical reasons but also for their potential to generate autonomous centers of power.

The fight against corruption, in this context, fulfills the dual function of disciplining the apparatus and reconfiguring networks of loyalty, eliminating those that do not align with the central leadership.

The system based on *mishu* and inner circles of trust presents clear advantages, as it provides high cohesion at the top, speed in decision-making, and agile implementation capacity.

On the other hand, it also entails significant risks, such as the reduction of diversity of opinions, excessive dependence on the leader, the possibility of information distortion, or vulnerability to group dynamics (groupthink). If cadres owe their careers to the patronage of a leader, their level of autonomy is diminished, and this may also translate into reluctance to express divergent—even constructive—opinions.

[12] KOU, Chien-wen, *"The Political Elite in China: Changes and Continuities"*, Routledge, London/New York, 2015. JIANG, Junyan, *"The Cadre Evaluation System and Political Incentives in China"*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018.

Ultimately, the very mechanism that ensures effective control may limit the quality of deliberation, increasing the risk of bias in decision-making. As Heilmann has noted, decision-making in China combines elements of experimentation and centralized control, which may be affected by the quality of the information available to the leadership[13]. Relational corruption is not a minor factor.

Conclusions

The *mishu* continues to be a training ground for political elites and a key filter in day-to-day governance. The channels through which power circulates have in it an indispensable reference point and an important mechanism of control by the leader over the apparatus.

The *mishu* is not merely an assistant; it is the mechanism that transforms personal proximity into institutional power and converts the leader's personal trust into positions of authority without disrupting the institutional architecture.

Ultimately, the analysis of the *mishu* makes it possible to understand a fundamental dimension of power in China: the politics of access through a singular pathway. Beyond formal structures, the functioning of the system largely depends on who has access to the leader and how that access is managed. In this context, *mishu* act as invisible gatekeepers, whose influence is decisive in shaping the political elite.

In the time of Mao Zedong, a personalist logic predominated, with secretaries closely tied to the leader in a context of limited institutionalization[14]. With Deng Xiaoping, there was a move toward greater formalization of the system, although without eliminating the importance of personal relationships. The decades of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were marked by a balance between factions, in which *mishu* played a relevant but not exclusive role.

Xi's era represents, in a sense, a return to the centrality of personal trust, albeit within a much more developed institutional framework. The *mishu* is thus consolidated as a key instrument for articulating this combination of personalism and bureaucracy and becomes

[13] HEILMANN, Sebastian, *"Red Swan: How Unorthodox Policy-Making Facilitated China's Rise"*, The Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 2016.
[14] HUA, Cheng (ed.), *"Zhou Enlai he tade mishumen"* [Zhou Enlai and His Mishu], Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi Chubanshe, Beijing, 1992. Or QUAN Yanchi, *"Mao Zedong: The Man"*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1992.

the privileged channel of access to the elite.

A comprehensive understanding of the *mishu* allows access to a dimension of power that rarely appears in official organizational charts. Beyond positions and structures, what emerges is a system in which proximity to the leader remains a decisive factor, and where well-leveraged personal trust translates into political authority.

In this context, the *mishu* is not a secondary actor, but a central operator in the construction of power. Its function as a bridge between an inner circle of trust and the formal elite reveals the deep logic of the Chinese political system, in which institutionalization does not replace personal relationships, but rather channels them. The *mishu* is the laboratory where a political career is shaped, combining opportunity, merit, and trust.

If in other political traditions power is legitimized through competition or representation, in China it still largely passes through access. And that access, carefully regulated, has gatekeepers. The *mishu* are precisely those gatekeepers: discreet, invisible and, nevertheless, indispensable for understanding how the most populous country in the world is really governed.

The risk for a system that claims to be meritocratic is that in this way it may not select the best, but rather those closest to the highest power. And if the *mishu* system functions as a structural mechanism for the selection of elites based on personal trust rather than institutional criteria, in contexts of high centralization of power, such as under Xi Jinping, the role of the *mishu* as a channel of political promotion intensifies.

In sum, the transition from circles of trust to formal elites in China occurs through processes of institutionalization of personal relationships mediated by the *mishu* system. It does not seem to be in question.

Xulio Ríos
Founder and emeritus advisor of the Observatory of Chinese Politics

@XulioRios