



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on December 7, 2022

Xi Honors Deceased Former Leader Jiang Zemin Amid Challenges to His Rule

On December 6, Chinese President Xi Jinping lauded the late former president Jiang Zemin for being China's leader during a time when it experienced great internal turmoil as well as "Western pressure." Subsequently, Xi urged for greater unity under his aegis.

At a state funeral for Jiang, Xi remarked that Jiang had emphasized that Chinese Communist Party members should "always put the Party in the highest position in their hearts and always uphold and safeguard the party's leadership in all tasks."

Attended by the current Party elite, retired officials and Jiang's family, the funeral brings to an end a week of mourning. The Great Hall of the People in Beijing, the venue of Jiang's funeral ceremony, was draped in black.

"This is the hope of our party and country," said Xi, in his 50-minute eulogy speech.

Xi's remarks come amid [recent nationwide protests challenging his draconian Covid-19 measures](#). Although Beijing has started to ease some Covid-19 controls, the public display of outrage and frustration, occasionally targeting the Chinese Communist Party and Xi himself, is regarded as the regime's most serious challenge since the Tiananmen incident in 1989.

"Comrade Jiang Zemin has said that our Party is leading the people in the great struggle of socialist modernisation and will inevitably encounter many complicated situations. The severe international and domestic circumstances, and different social and ideological systems will test every Party member," said Xi.

"We must have a heroic spirit that overcomes all enemies, we must not bow our noble heads."

Xi further praised Jiang as an "outstanding leader with great prestige and a great Marxist." He applauded Jiang for being at the helm after the bloody Tiananmen crackdown when the Communist Party forcefully silenced protesters.

Furthermore, Xi credited Jiang for leading China to join the World Trade Organisation, leading to China's opening up to overseas markets. Xi hinted that these trade policies would persist under his leadership, deeming "reform and opening up" to be modern China's critical strategy.

Political analyst Willy Lam, an adjunct professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, commented that Xi's call for more unity under the Party's leadership on the one hand, and for sustained efforts to open up on the other, mirrored difficulties that the Party has to deal with at the present moment.



AP Images
Memorial to Jiang Zemin



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Xi and other top leaders have been “disturbed” by the protests over zero-Covid, Lam said, highlighting that the Chinese economy has slowed down considerably.

“Xi wants to show that he will continue the open-door policy that Deng Xiaoping began and Jiang continued.... The Chinese economy is in bad shape and they need foreign investment, (especially since) they are facing US pressure, and foreign companies are having second thoughts about investing in China because of the Covid-19 situation,” Lam elaborated.

Jiang died of leukemia and multiple organ failure in Shanghai last week. He was 96. His body was flown to Beijing one day later.

In the days following Jiang’s passing, Chinese state media have been eulogizing the man who functioned as the Party’s general secretary from 1989 to 2002 and head of state from 1993 to 2003.

Online photos depict residents laying flowers to mourn Jiang at his former residence in Yangzhou, in eastern China’s Jiangsu province; at a food factory where he worked in Shanghai; as well as on the campus of his alma mater, Shanghai Jiaotong University.

A Weibo post with a video depicting flowers placed in front of Jiang’s old house in Yangzhou had almost 300,000 likes.

Jiang’s death comes amid public challenges to virus controls in China’s cities. Some protesters openly called for Xi to step down in a rare show of protest against single-party rule. Although the protests have since died down, attempts to mourn Jiang — who tried to open China to the world — could provoke further gatherings to criticize Xi’s leadership. Jiang’s death could be a potential catalyst for more protests from disillusioned Chinese citizens who are fatigued due to China’s harsh Covid-19 measures and dampened economic prospects.

“The Communist Party is now facing a crisis because there’s so much negative news and morale is low,” said Dr. Alfred Wu, associate professor at the National University of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

“After the death of such a big figure in Chinese politics, some people may write articles, people may have gatherings, and this would be totally legal and allowed,” speculated Dr. Chen Gang, an assistant director and senior research fellow at National University of Singapore’s East Asian Institute.

“If such activities continue, people can make the contrast between the previous leader and the current situation. That may have a kind of backlash effect upon the current administration.”

Such an outpouring of public grief is not entirely new in Communist China. In 1989, following the death of ousted Communist Party official Hu Yaobang, public mourning evolved into prolonged pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square, with associated protests around the country.

By June of 1989, China’s then-paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, eventually dispatched the military into the square to crush the protests.

Following the bloody Tiananmen crackdown, Deng nominated Jiang as leader, while the outside world suspended ties with Beijing in efforts to sanction it.

Despite his links to internal domestic turmoil, Jiang proceeded to spearhead China’s return to the global arena. During Jiang’s leadership, China became more open to the outside world and developed economically.

Public nostalgia for the Jiang era could resonate with those unhappy about Xi’s more insular approach



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of slower economic growth and greater focus on security.

Jiang's popularity among the Chinese people can be attributed in part to his personal charisma in the digital age that enabled him to amass fans among China's younger generation.

Memes of so-called toad worship, in which internet users used photos of the amphibian to celebrate Jiang's legacy, usually highlighted nostalgia for his rule.

Still, support for Jiang pales in comparison to the public grief felt at Hu's death, said Wang Dan, former student leader of the Tiananmen Democracy Movement and founder of the Dialogue China think tank.

"Today's younger generation, I don't think they really love Jiang Zemin, because they know nothing about him," Wang told the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan on Thursday. "It's not enough to push them to the street."

Additionally, the current regime under Xi has indicated a willingness to quell any attempt to repeat the recent protests.

China's top law-enforcement body declared on Monday that it would not tolerate "illegal and criminal acts that disrupt social order."

Those arriving at potential protests sites this week saw large groups of police at those locations.

Neil Thomas, a China analyst at Eurasia Group, a political risk-advisory and consulting firm, said the communist regime will go into "overdrive" to control the message of public mourning for Jiang and to ensure public security during any official commemorations. "Beijing is not unprepared for Jiang's death," he said.



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