

A New Theory for China's Next Generation of Leaders: The Three Blurs?



Getty Images

Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping (right) and Chinese Vice Premier Li Keqiang (Center) react as they chat with Li Changchun (Left), a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang are widely expected to be named China's president and premier, respectively, in 2012.

From a man who helped explain China's policy of "three represents" now comes a theory called the "three blurs."

Robert Lawrence Kuhn, an American businessman who has written as a

confidant of Chinese officials like former President Jiang Zemin, says the generation of Communist Party leaders who are expected take power in next year's once-per-decade personnel shuffle will struggle with overlapping interests and constituencies. He dubs their challenge the "three blurs."

The twin motivations for Chinese leaders, he told members of the Shanghai Foreign Correspondents Club on Thursday, are "a desire to raise the standard of living of the people" and "the concept of pride."

"In every sphere," he said, referring to the pride issue, "China wants to be among the world's leaders." For instance, Mr. Kuhn said, Mr. Jiang decided in 1992 that China would pursue manned space missions, which Mr. Kuhn said was unaffordable and "absurd" at the time. The episode well reflects China's ambition as a world power, he said.

Mr. Kuhn is best known for his authorized 2005 biography of the former president Mr. Jiang, "The Man Who Changed China." The book got [unfavorable reviews](#) in the West for lacking criticism of the former leader, but access to the country's most powerful official made Mr. Kuhn a star in China. Today, he has consulting interests related to China and is a partner in a [sports management business](#) with Chinese broadcaster CCTV.



**Robert Lawrence
Kuhn**

He said he was shaken in July when rumors spread across the Chinese Internet and on Hong Kong TV suggesting – [wrongly](#) – that the 85-year-old

former president had died. On Thursday, Mr. Kuhn said, “Jiang, I know, is well,”

During the coming transition, Mr. Kuhn said he anticipates a more independent minded group of leaders to emerge, led by presumptive president-to-be Xi Jinping. Mr. Kuhn referred to Mr. Xi as someone with “a personality, a spark.” He said leadership sources tell him that Mr. Xi, currently a vice president, has recently spoken up in support of China’s small business owners.

In coming months, Mr. Kuhn said he expects pretransition nervousness in Beijing to translate into tougher media controls and detention of dissidents.

A more permanent strategy, he said, will be to emphasize culture as a “pillar industry” that contributes to China’s gross domestic product growth, generates a consumer economy, provides a richer standard of living to the country’s people and provides for their broader participation.

Chinese leaders came out of the annual meeting of the Communist Party’s Central Committee last month [trumpeting the need for cultural reform](#) that, in the words of current top leader Hu Jintao, “significantly improves the nation’s ideological and moral qualities.” State media have been hammering away at the cultural reform theme ever since.

Back to the blur theory.

No more, Mr. Kuhn said in explaining the first “blur,” will China’s leaders be able to draw clear lines between domestic and international policymaking. Also, governing portfolios will overlap, as areas like security crowd into economics. The Internet represents the third leg of his theory, with the virtual world blurring into the real one.

“Chinese leaders cannot make decisions in a vacuum any more. They need to recognize public opinion,” Mr Kuhn said. He described top level Party decision-making as “more democratic” than the U.S. executive branch, given the requirement for consensus in the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee.

Catch-phrase political theories about China tend to sound fuzzy and vacuous. Perhaps the best example was former President Jiang’s “[three represents](#),” which later became enshrined in the country’s constitution.

China's new leaders will have training in law, mathematics and other areas that will create a more diverse base than the engineering-heavy backgrounds of the current leadership, Mr. Kuhn said, adding that the line up of the next generation of top leaders is widely considered to be set give or take a couple spots."

He quipped that a mix of officials with diverse backgrounds might work better with Washington, which tends to be run by former lawyers. "Maybe the reason is that lawyers and engineers can't talk to each other, not Chinese and American's can't talk to each other," he said.

– James T. Areddy. Follow him on Twitter [@jamestareddy](https://twitter.com/jamestareddy)

Correction: A previous version of this item incorrectly said Xi Jinping was a vice premier.

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