



## *Opinion*

*Robert Lawrence Kuhn*

# History will be kind to the meticulous and curious Jiang Zemin

- **He was an unexpected choice as leader, and not especially popular among elites and intellectuals right after stepping down**
- **But as more learn of his professional leadership and intellectual curiosity, Jiang is winning fans**

When I woke to the news of Jiang Zemin's death, I felt as if I had lost a member of my own family – that's what happens when one dedicates years to writing a biography.

Jiang loved learning and speaking foreign languages – he had decent knowledge of English, Russian and Romanian, and familiarity with others – and he enjoyed surprising foreigners with his skills. Some may have mocked Jiang's showboating, but languages enhanced his cross-cultural sense.

At a private dinner, Jiang announced that only English would be spoken. He then teasingly scolded one minister for not learning English by instructing the translator *not* to translate, and he chided another for not speaking his excellent English for fear of embarrassing Jiang with his weaker English. Jiang said, "You wouldn't embarrass me; rather, you would help me improve." Jiang then confided that he had been secretly studying Spanish for a year to prepare for a trip to South America.

When I first met Xi Jinping, then the Zhejiang party secretary, in February 2005, I handed him the Jiang biography, just weeks after it was published. Xi startled me by knowingly turning to one of the photo sections, pointing to a woman singing with Jiang, and asking, "Do you know who she is?" When I sheepishly shook my head "no", Xi beamed. "That's my wife!"

I was later to learn that Jiang himself had sent Xi one of the first copies of the biography, a point of historical trivia that perhaps takes on deeper meaning given all that would happen thereafter. Chinese elite politics is complex and ever-shifting; there are rarely single-themed explanations and what may be true today may not be tomorrow.

Contrary to what some book reviewers aver, Jiang didn't choose me to be his biographer; I chose Jiang to be my subject. The biography was my idea; I planned it, financed it, and wrote it to trace China's nonpareil story through eight tumultuous decades of trauma and transformation. I had help – translators, researchers, editors – but I maintained absolute editorial control and made every editorial decision, and no one in China ever thought otherwise.

When I finally interviewed Jiang, the rules were explicit: no recording, no notes. He began by saying, "I hear a rumour you are writing my biography; I don't know whether the rumour is true, but if it is, I shall be interested in reading it."



Was my Jiang biography censored? Two rules. For the English edition, zero. Sure, I ran sections past experts in China for feedback, but no one in China even saw the final English manuscript before publication (except the Chinese translators). For the Chinese edition, censors could take out anything – but they couldn't add anything. They told me they cut 10 per cent; it was closer to 15, perhaps 20 per cent.

After the biography was published, Jiang felt compelled to comment. Issued through a friend, Jiang said, "Kuhn wrote objectively; he didn't try to beautify me – but he got my wedding date wrong."

I had got his wedding date from his best man, Jiang's lifelong friend. No matter. Jiang's comment was a clever way of dissociating, perhaps protecting himself from statements in the book that were unambiguously not the party line (e.g. on the 1999 US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia, 2001 spy plane collision, and obviously, Tiananmen in 1989).

The Chinese publisher put a disclaimer: "Certain viewpoints and opinions of the author, as a Westerner, bear a definite distance from those of our own. Hopefully the reader will understand."

In January 2005, when the book was published, my wife, Dora Serviarian Kuhn, was piano soloist with the China Philharmonic Orchestra in the Forbidden City Concert Hall. We invited Jiang and his wife, Wang Yeping, but protocol precluded them from attending.

Instead, Jiang surprised us by hosting a dinner for Dora and our family. He was most gracious at the dinner, standing next to the piano as my wife gave a mini-recital of Chopin. In preparation, Jiang refreshed his knowledge of the Soviet-Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian, as my wife performed the Khachaturian Piano Concerto (her speciality).

For Jiang to have studied up for such an inconsequential occasion reflected both his professional way as a political leader and his inveterate curiosity as an intellectual.

Two meetings between Jiang and Wang Daohan, a former party secretary of Shanghai who was Jiang's mentor, bookended Jiang's path to leadership. One end was when they first met in 1949: Jiang, 23, presented to Wang, 34, a local official, a business plan for sourcing, producing and marketing *ice cream*.



***Jiang Zemin makes a rare appearance to pay his last respects at Wang Daohan's funeral in Shanghai on December 30, 2005. Wang, who was 90, died early on December 24. Photo: AFP***

The other end was during the turmoil of 1989, when Deng Xiaoping shocked everyone, including Jiang, by selecting Jiang to be the Communist Party's general secretary. Jiang was nonplussed, needing to meet with Wang to make a list of the pros and cons of accepting the job. How history turns on the mundane.

When the Jiang biography was published, it is fair to say that the former president was not especially popular among elites and intellectuals. One of the superb Chinese translators sent me a Chinese edition with an inscribed note. "Prior to translating," he wrote, "my opinion of Jiang was quite low; I am now an admirer." History will be kind to Jiang Zemin.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn is the author of *The Man Who Changed China: The Life and Legacy of Jiang Zemin* (2005). He received the China Reform Friendship Medal (2018)**

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