

Wang Huning: China's Gray Eminence

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Introduction

In the 17th century, Cardinal Richelieu, a French religious and political figure, held an extraordinary degree of influence over the affairs of the French Kingdom. His [vision](#) of foreign and domestic policy was second only to that of Louis XIII, and throughout his tenure he often served as France's preeminent statesman. During his political career, Cardinal Richelieu was accompanied by François Leclerc du Tremblay, a Capuchin friar who served as his confidant and advisor. In contrast to the imposing red worn by Richelieu, Tremblay wore the simple gray robes emblematic of his order. From this relationship, the term *Éminence grise* (gray eminence) emerged. Used to denote a political figure who wields outsized influence behind the curtains of state affairs, gray eminences have often shaped state policy throughout history. In contemporary American politics, Henry Kissinger is widely [referred](#) to with this title. His exceptional influence on foreign policy in the Nixon and Ford administrations is a striking example of the power held

by such figures. The modern world abounds with the *Éminence grise*; however, few have risen to such heights of consistent and powerful influence as Wang Huning has. Much like Richelieu and Tremblay, Wang is a key source of intellectual capital for Chinese President Xi Jinping, and holds unmatched rhetorical influence within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Wang has guided Chinese policy through his political theory for decades, yet most in the West have never heard this reclusive ideologue's name.

An Ideologue in the Imperial Garden

Wang Huning [began](#) his career in 1984 when he joined the CCP after completing a master's degree in international politics and law at Fudan University in Shanghai. When Wang was young, his father [faced](#) persecution under the Cultural Revolution. During his youth, Wang developed a deep appreciation for literature, reading banned foreign classics alongside Maoist texts. Unlike his future colleague Xi Jinping, Wang [avoided](#) Mao's re-education initiative to send urban youth to communes in rural China due to his poor health, and instead began training in French until 1977 under a government-sponsored program. During the educational reforms enacted by China's second paramount leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978, Wang quickly distinguished himself as a highly competent scholar on international politics and Marxist thought. His master's dissertation [focused](#) on a Marxist analysis of Western theories of sovereignty, demonstrating an early aptitude for political theory. Wang [rose](#) rapidly throughout the rigid ranks of early Chinese academia, and was promoted to Associate Professor at Fudan in 1985 just as he turned 30.

By 1989, Wang had [gained](#) a considerable reputation as one of China's top political scientists, and during this period, traveled throughout the United States as a visiting professor. He wrote about his experiences in the United States in [*America Against America*](#), one of his most widely read works. Published in 1991, with the collapse of the USSR and Tiananmen Square protests still in recent memory, Wang's writing was able to appeal to many anxieties held by Chinese leadership about the future of the CCP. Many top CCP officials felt that the [democratic](#) movement of the late 1980s was an unintended consequence of economic modernization, and that the Tiananmen Square protests represented a direct threat to the rule of the CCP. The book was widely read across China, arguing that the West was plagued by inherent ideological

contradictions with the introduction [stating](#), “The constraints of private property on political democracy in the capitalist system of the United States cannot be ignored...American scholars have said that a political democracy cannot function properly where the differences in economic power are so great that one group can use non-political means to determine the woes of another group.” Throughout *America Against America*, Wang eloquently wrote about “The American Phenomenon,” demonstrating his expertise in comparative politics and his deep-seated enmity towards American culture and governance.

While he was [impressed](#) by the material capacity and innovation within the United States, Wang’s primary thesis focused on the American culture of individualistic consumerism and the disintegrated family structure that had formed a corrosive void at the heart of the American nation. Decades later, this idea would even emerge prominently within American politics, with many ideologues on the right and left appealing to voters’ fear of moral decay within American society. Within four years of publication, Wang’s book had [caught](#) the attention of high-ranking political figures. Wu Bangguo and Zeng Qinghong, two members of former President Jiang Zemin’s Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC—the highest body of governance in China) and undoubtedly some of the most powerful individuals in Chinese politics at the time, were highly impressed by the young academic.

In 1995, Wang Huning was [called](#) to Beijing to join Jiang Zemin’s staff. Jiang was so taken with Wang’s work that he once [quoted](#) passages of it to President Bill Clinton during his 1998 visit to China. The political climate in Beijing at the time was torn between [reformists](#) seeking to maintain the unprecedented growth of the Chinese Economic Miracle and conservatives who feared the effects of economic “Westernization” would lead to a USSR-style collapse. During this period, China saw extremely rapid industrialization and economic [growth](#) from opening up to the global trading network, leading to widespread societal changes. Wang [worked](#) as a member of the Central Policy Research Office (CPRO), the top think tank within the CCP, that is tasked with writing speeches, developing policy, and progressing ideology. Wang [played](#) a pivotal role in the development of Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents,” a cornerstone of Chinese ideology and policy that sought to [incorporate](#) the growing business class into the CCP. Wang continued his work with the CPRO, and after the 2002 transition of leadership from Jiang Zemin

to Hu Jintao, was promoted to head of the CPRO and a member of the CCP Central Committee (the roughly 200 highest ranking party officials). Unlike in the United States, where lawyers and political scientists [rarely](#) reach the upper echelons of politics, Wang was able to climb the ranks of Chinese politics. The Chinese political landscape is [dominated](#) by those with military connections and technocratic regional governance experience, with a majority of PBSC members holding degrees in engineering or related fields. In under a decade, Wang Huning advanced from a respected academic to one of the most powerful ideologues in China. If his rise was unusual, his next steps were unprecedented.

Xi & Wang

When Xi Jinping took the reins of power in 2012, it marked the dawn of a new era for China. The largely moderate and weak leadership of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, was replaced with a level of ambition and centralization unseen since Mao. Xi [began](#) his first term with widespread purges of political rivals and corrupt bureaucrats, an early sign of his future political consolidation. Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign [continues](#) to this day and has resulted in massive turnover within the upper echelons of Chinese leadership. While many officials [were](#) dismissed or worse, Wang's political influence expanded significantly within the CCP hierarchy. In 2017, Wang was [promoted](#) to Xi's PBSC, with the official title of Executive Secretary alongside his role as Head of the CPRO. Xi's core ideology, Xi Jinping Thought, shows considerable [influence](#) from Wang throughout. The integration of ideology constructed by Wang's office into official policy within the CCP serves as the conduit through which his power is fully realized. It is no understatement to [call](#) him "the world's most influential living political theorist." Wang's influence on Chinese politics over the past three decades rivals the profound impact of writers like Locke, Kant, Waltz, or Marx. While Wang has stopped publishing work aside from boilerplate CCP releases since his ascension to political office, the influence of his writings from the 90s remains visible.

When Wang visited the United States, he saw a land so steeped in individualism that it had [lost](#) a sense of "cultural sovereignty." In his view, if anyone could be an American, then was anyone truly one? He [drew](#) parallels between this milieu and that of post-Cultural Revolution China, arguing that the unchecked repression of traditional Chinese culture had resulted in an erosion of

identity among the Chinese people. To him, the rapid liberal modernization of the Deng era had further diluted Chinese identity, and regaining this idea was not only a matter of tradition, but one of national security. Wang linked geopolitical competition with cultural identity early on, and this has since been [reflected](#) in Xi's writing: "China's excellent traditional culture is the root and soul of the Chinese nation." This stance is a far cry from the Maoist doctrine of cultural [repression](#), in which millennia of Chinese culture was destroyed for a supposed inherent subversion against the virtue of the working class. The revival of Chinese culture undertaken during Xi's tenure has borne considerable fruit, with nationalism [rising](#) in China during the 2010s at a faster rate than almost any other nation. Xi's "Chinese Dream" [calls](#) for not simply the rejuvenation of culture, but of China's status as the world's paramount great power, something achieved just as much through the Belt and Road Initiative as it is by the [Hanfu movement](#), a push among urban Chinese youth to revive traditional Chinese fashion. Wang's early writings have set a clear warning to the CCP: economic revival is untenable without cultural revival, and in seeking to surpass the United States, China must not do so by becoming like it.

Gray Crane Flies Over the Pine Forest

Wang Huning's longevity and influence within the highest ranks of the CCP is a truly unique feat within the realm of the highest cadres. Wang stands as the most important *Éminence grise* of the 21st century, and his true impact on China is yet to be seen. His perspective is uniquely shaped by firsthand observation of the virtues and vices of the United States and has strongly influenced the ideology of the modern CCP. While remaining largely reclusive compared to Xi, Wang's [continued](#) role as one of the top diplomatic envoys within Xi's circle demonstrates his continued importance. The previous decade's shift towards a more [assertive](#) and nationalist China can only be understood by examining the influence of China's chief ideologue. When the post-Xi era comes, whether through blood or ink, one gray crane may yet remain perched atop the highest pines of Beijing.