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JIANG ZEMIN  
AND CHINA'S NEW ELITE

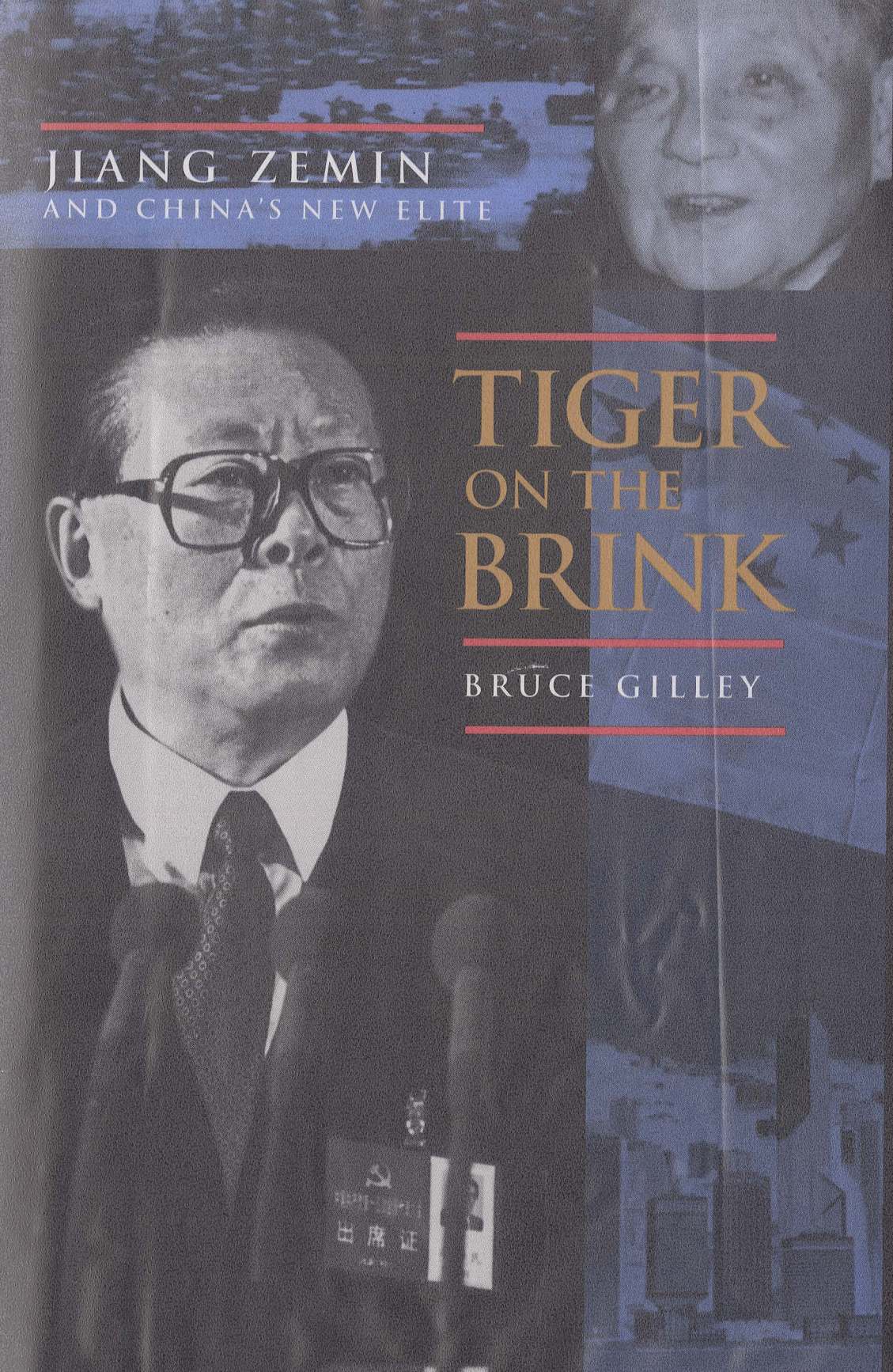
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TIGER  
ON THE  
BRINK

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BRUCE GILLEY

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# *Tiger on the Brink*

Jiang Zemin  
and China's New Elite

Bruce Gilley



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
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# *Contents*

*Preface* ix

## PART I. "SON" OF A MARTYR, 1926-1970

1. Leaving Yangzhou 3
2. Mao's China 30

## PART 2. MR. TIGER BALM, 1970-1988

3. Foot Soldier for Deng 59
4. Shanghai's Chief Clerk 74

## PART 3. CALLED IN A TIME OF DANGER, 1989-1992

5. Tiananmen 113
6. The Great Reconciliation 149

## PART 4. TAKING COMMAND, 1993-1994

7. The President's Men 193
8. Glad and at Ease 221

## PART 5. BREAKING WITH DENG, 1995-1998

9. Independent Kingdoms	239
10. Jiang Thought	263
11. The Emperor's Mandate	288
<i>Conclusion</i>	331
<i>Notes</i>	341
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	377
<i>Index</i>	381

## *Preface*

My first and only encounter with China's president and party chief Jiang Zemin was in a bathroom. Wearied by the deliberations of Guangdong province delegates at the annual session of China's National People's Congress, or parliament, in 1995, I slipped out of a stuffy room in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing and went downstairs to wash my face. Attendants waved me into the nearest men's room, which was empty. But when I went to leave they barred the doors. "Keep that foreigner inside," I heard someone say. Peering out of the opaque windows of the loo, I soon discovered the reason for my temporary incarceration. Out of a nearby conference room burst Jiang Zemin, wiping his forehead with a pink washcloth after a lengthy discourse before delegates from Jilin province. Jiang had obviously sipped too much tea. To the surprise of my captors, he made an abrupt turn and headed straight for my tiled prison. I disengaged my nose from the glass door just in time to be flung against the wall by Jiang, who glanced at me nonchalantly, and a single bodyguard.

One's journalistic instincts evaporate under such stress. I knew my colleagues in the foreign press would want me to take the high road and ask Jiang about some weighty matter of state, such as, "How's the health of patriarch Deng Xiaoping?" But I knew equally well that my colleagues in the Hong Kong and Taiwan press would prefer the low road. "Samples! Samples! Where are the samples?" they would demand of me.

In the end, I was plucked from the bathroom by one of the attendants outside before having to make the invidious choice, emerging into the carpeted foyer only seconds before Jiang, to the astonishment of the assembled Jilin delegates. Jiang brushed past me on the way into an adjoining reception room. The cameras of the mainland press photographers began to flash as he shook hands with each and every one of the Jilin delegates standing in three rows of bleachers.

Although I would not say this book was born in a bathroom, my brush with Jiang did have the effect of making him a living and breathing figure in my mind, an impression sometimes difficult to form from the officially served leader of the Chinese press. It came at a time when I was considering making an exploration of this man's life, which, despite his then six years as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, remained a subject barely touched by journalists or scholars. It helped to spur me on.

My purpose in writing this book is to reappraise Jiang, who although bearing all the hallmarks of a weak transitional figure was able to carry on past the death of Deng Xiaoping owing to a combination of personal and historical reasons. In so doing, I hope the book will shed light on the nature of post-1989 and post-Deng Xiaoping politics in China.

As I finish this, it is now almost a decade since Jiang came to power. Deng has died, and there is little to guide us about this man.<sup>1</sup> I hope this book will provide insight into both his personality and China itself. Wary, after years in the Hong Kong press, of the semi-astrological accounts of Chinese politics often reported as news in the territory, I have used only official sources and firsthand information.

The two Hong Kong-based magazines I refer to often, *Jing bao* (Mirror) and *Guangjiaojing* (Wide Angle), are both published by members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress and enjoy official backing. They are the only two such magazines that can be circulated in China, and I take them to be reliable in their information. I treat them, and the Communist-run newspapers *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao* in Hong Kong, as "official" sources.

Given that Jiang Zemin is still in power, this can only be a start in writing his biography. When he eventually falls from power or leaves the stage, more will be needed. New information from reliable sources may perhaps help us understand him better. Until then, I hope readers will tolerate the deficiencies of this first attempt by a Westerner.

I have received no funding or support from any government or institution of any sort for this project. However, I do owe an enormous debt

of gratitude to the *Far Eastern Economic Review* for putting up with my topsy-turvy schedule as I completed the manuscript. In particular I would like to thank the editor, Nayan Chanda, and the former regional editor, V. G. Kulkarni. I also benefited greatly at the conception of this project from the advice and support of Maurice Brosseau of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and later from Jeffrey Wasserstrom of Indiana University. Kenneth Lieberthal of the University of Michigan provided invaluable assistance. All the staff at the incomparable Universities Service Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong were, as usual, helpful and friendly. Thanks also to Chris Robyn of the University of California Press, who expressed interest in the project at an early stage and remained its faithful supporter throughout.