

# Communist Youth League

## Zhōngguó Gòngchǎnzhǔyì qīngniántuán 中国共产主义青年团

**Established in the 1920s, the Youth League has been the training ground for the Chinese Communist Party for the last eighty years. With over 86 million members, it has been a route since the 1980s for leaders to enter the top echelons of the party, and is one of the most influential groups in China.**

The Communist Youth League (CYL) was established in Shanghai as the Socialist Youth League of China in 1920, a year before the first congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), an organization that the CYL's history has shadowed. When the CYL held its first congress in 1922 in Guangzhou (Canton), one of the leading intellectuals of early Chinese Communist history, Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), spoke. The league changed its name to the “Chinese Communist Youth League” in 1925 and to the “Chinese New Democracy Youth League” on establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. At about this time it became more merged into the organizational structure of the CCP. It was named the “Communist Youth League” in 1957.

Suspended during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the league came to greater political prominence in the 1980s, being perceived as a training ground for future high-level Chinese leaders, among them President Hu Jintao. This idea of the CYL being a “party reserve” lingers, with several of the current members of the Politburo (the principal policymaking and executive committee of a Communist party) having had positions in the CYL. The

extent of its influence, however, is debated, with many arguing that the CYL's influence has been overstated.

In terms of size and structure the CYL reflects the CCP. Its 70 million members come close to the 74 million members of the CCP, with 210,000 committee members. It has a party secretary, much as the CCP does, who sits, in fact, on the Central Committee of the CCP and reports to that committee. Like the CCP, the CYL holds five yearly congresses, the last of which, in 2003, included the election of Hu Chunhua, previously a party official in Tibet (like Hu Jintao). Membership in the league is restricted to people ages fourteen to twenty-eight, with the Young Pioneers group open to those up to the age of fourteen. Like the CCP, too, the CYL has representation and separate command structures in China's provinces, autonomous regions, and cities under municipalities. The CYL operates the *China Youth Daily* (established in 1951).

According to its mission statement, the CYL “unites and leads youths to focus on economic construction, and doing the great practice of building socialism with Chinese characteristics, to temper themselves as successors who are well educated, and have lofty ideals, moral integrity, and a high sense of discipline.” (Retrieved from <http://www.cycnet.com/chinayouth/organs/ccyl.htm>). The CYL was led from 1957 to 1978 by Hu Yaobang, who was to go on to become general secretary of the CCP in the 1980s and whose death in 1989 was one of the precipitating facts of the Tiananmen Square disturbances that year. The CYL was led from 1984 to 1985 by Hu Jintao and from 1993 to 1998 by Li Keqiang, who is a current Politburo member and predicted to be one of China's key leaders after the retirement of Hu and Wen Jiabao in 2012.



**Young Pioneers look and learn from the paintings in the People's Art Exhibition Commemorating the Thirtieth Anniversary of Chairman Mao's Yanan "Talks on Art and Literature," Beijing, 1972.**  
PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

The idea of the CYL being a training ground for elite politicians took root in the 1980s when CCP leader Deng Xiaoping elevated people with a previous record in the CYL to national positions. At the seventeenth party congress in 2007 a new group of younger leaders who had previously occupied positions in the league was elevated to the Politburo. However, the highly diffracted nature of Chinese politics now means that it is increasingly difficult to settle on clear factions. The influence of the Shanghai group, associated with CCP leader Jiang Zemin in the 1990s and early 2000s, has also been questioned. In the end the best that can be said of the CYL is that it remains

an important (and large) organization under the CCP and that it is likely to continue producing political figures and being a political network. However, the CYL itself is not associated with any specific viewpoint on important policy and social issues.

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### Further Reading

Official website for the Youth League. Retrieved November 21, 2008, from <http://www.cycnet.com/china/youth/organs/ccyl.htm>.