

China's Parliament Is a Growing Billionaires' Club

By Sui-Lee Wee

March 1, 2018

BEIJING — In a country where the Communist Party makes all the big decisions, Chinese lawmakers hold very little political power. But they have plenty of money — \$650 billion of it — and that's growing.

According to the Hurun Report, a research organization in Shanghai that tracks the wealthy in China, the net worth of the 153 members of China's Parliament and its advisory body that it deems "super rich" amounts to \$650 billion, up by nearly a third from a year ago. That is just a touch below Switzerland's annual economic output.

While President Xi Jinping has pledged to close the income gap and alleviate poverty, the wealth of the nation's lawmakers has kept soaring. In 2017, it topped \$500 billion, more than doubling from the year before. The surge in wealth reflects the strength of the Chinese economy, which grew 6.9 percent in 2017, and stock markets all over the world.

Delegates to Parliament, or the National People's Congress, rubber-stamp most of the policies set out by the party's leadership and are expected to approve Mr. Xi's plan to scrap term limits and allow him to rule indefinitely when they meet in Beijing next week. But the gathering provides businesspeople with an opportunity to hobnob with one another. The title of delegate also gives them extra cachet in making business deals.

The number of billionaires in China's legislature could contribute to the perception that the government is out of touch in a country where disposable income per capita was just over \$4,000 in 2017. But many Chinese are proud of how quickly the ranks are growing. China added 210 billionaires over the past year — about four a week — 40 percent more than the United States, according to a separate list of the global rich by Hurun.

The wealthiest lawmaker is also China's richest person, Pony Ma, whose net worth is \$47 billion. He is the founder of Tencent, which owns WeChat, a social media mobile app that is indispensable in Chinese life. Tencent is now valued at \$540 billion, more than Facebook.

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Mr. Ma was trailed by Xu Jiayin, the chairman of the property developer Evergrande Group, whose net worth is \$41 billion. Mr. Xu was China's richest person in 2017, according to Hurun.

Other Chinese property developers also dominated the list. Lee Ka-kit, vice chairman of Henderson Land Development, is worth \$34 billion, while the net worth of Country Garden Group's founder, Yang Guoqiang, reached \$32 billion.

The fortunes of China's entrepreneurs have changed significantly since the Communist Party, which was founded to work for the interests of workers and stamp out capitalism, welcomed businesspeople into the party more than a decade ago. About 20 percent of the nearly 3,000 delegates to Parliament are businesspeople, according to government news media.

Victor Shih, an associate professor at the University of California, San Diego, and an expert on money and politics in China, said that being a member of the National People's Congress "affords a considerable protection for the wealthy."

"If you're part of the NPC, you become a state cadre, and so the local police can't arrest you easily without cause," he said, referring to the congress.

"That's not the case for a wealthy person who has no affiliation with the Chinese government, and wealth becomes very vulnerable to predatory action by a local government."

Zhang Tiantian contributed research.