China's Top Leading Cadres: More Red, Expert, or Gold?

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There is no standard conception of 'ruling class' or 'political elite' in China studies. Even cadres in the villages have labeled as (political) 'elite' (O'Brien and Li 2000; Oi and Rozelle 2000; Manion 2009). Similarly, researchers use different criteria to divide cadres into 'rankings' for theoretical or practical purposes (Zhou 2000; Nee and Cao 2002), and it is subject to debate which cadres belong to the ruling class with in the Chinese Party-state and which belong to the middle classes. Yet the ruling CCP has its own official criteria, which are clearly defined and rigorously implemented. Simply put, there are twelve administrative rankings in the cadre hierarchy: cadres above the fifth rank (*zheng ting ji*) are normally called 'senior cadres' (*gaoji ganbu*); personnel above the vice-ministerial level are referred to as 'top leading cadres' (*gaoji lingdao ganbu*). This chapter concentrates on the core constituent of the ruling class within the Chinese Party-state, the 'top leading cadres', although it must be acknowledged that 'senior

cadres' and even officials at lower levels of Party-state jurisdictions, particularly those who are actively involved in its governing functions, can and should be included in China's ruling class as well.

Many authors working on China's top leading cadres have traced their evolution over time and analyzed the paradigm shifts in the evolution and methodological approaches to this group in the scholarship (Harding 1984; Madsen 1993; Unger 2002; Shan 2008; Lieberthal 2010; Ni and Yuan 2011). Additionally, there are a large number of studies of top leader that focus on prominent individuals, mostly in the form of biographical analysis or biographies (Hairen 2002; Kuhn 2004; Zhao 2009; Vogel 2011). These studies doubtlessly provide interesting and important insights into various aspects of the 'inner circle' of China's ruling class – and even more intriguingly, it has become a new 'vogue' for retired top leaders, including former members of the CCP's Politburo Standing Committee, to publish books about their personal lives and unpublicized ideas.

This vast literature is impossible to summarize in this short chapter. I will only present a brief overview of the academic scholarship on China's top leading cadres as a group. In general, I agree with Chien-wen Kou's (2002) classification of the major paradigms

into four categories, namely totalitarianism, factional politics, generational politics, and technocracy. Furthermore, this chapter will speak to three basic questions recurrring in the literature: (1) whether China's top leading cadres have been transformed from bureaucrats to technocrats; (2) how to understand the factionalism and informal politics within the Party-state; and (3) how to evaluate the impact of the market and capital on China's top politics, especially on promotion patterns.

From bureaucracy to technocracy?

The distinction between 'bureaucrats' and 'technocrats' has been a long-standing topic of interest in the literature on Communist power (Baylis 1974; Konrád and Szelenyi 1979) and authoritarian regimes (Putnam 1977; Fischer 1990; Centeno and Silva 1998). It is also commonplace, though not without debate, for scholars of China to focus on the ruling class and top-level politics in the country (Zang 2013). A parallel is the distinction between 'red' and 'expert'. The former refers to 'revolutionization' or 'political loyalty', while the latter means 'intellectualization' or 'expertise'. Revolutionaries or (political) bureaucrats are the personification of 'red', and intellectuals represent 'expert'. In the view of the advocators of 'technocracy', until the

1980s China's ruling class comprised a group of revolutionaries and bureaucrats who mostly came from rural areas or from the military, and could not meet the need of modernization (Scalapino and Bennett et al. 1972); although a small number of technocrats and professionals were recruited into the Party-state, their promotion often met with numerous obstacles (Kau 1969).

This situation started to change systematically after Mao's death, in particular after 1982, when the Twelfth Party Congress called for promotion of younger cadres to leading posts. There are researchers who believe that it was Mao's attacks on both revolutionaries and China's old educated elite during the Cultural Revolution that fostered intra-elite unity, paving the way for the consolidation of a new, important political elite known as 'red engineers' (Andreas 2009) in the ruling class in the post-Mao era. Others argue that the recruitment of technocrats into the ruling class is an internal requirement of authoritarian regimes for maintaining legitimacy (Szelenyi 2002). Despite the predomination of bureaucrats in the ruling class of state social systems, cadres from technocratic backgrounds are indispensable to almost every regime that faces severe legitimation crises to varying degrees, particularly after the death of charismatic leaders.

Their differences notwithstanding, scholars of China were largely agreed that the transformation of the ruling class from old revolutionary cadres to professional technocrats was taking place in in post-Mao China (Mills 1983; Lee 1991). There seems to be no consensus amongst researchers, however, on the extent of technocracy. For example, Li and White argue that a full-fledged technocratic leadership emerged after the Fifteenth Party Congress (Li and White 1998). Zhao and Zhang share a similar view on the account that all the nine members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the CCP's Sixteenth Party Congress had technocratic backgrounds and sixty percent of the members of the Politburo were technocrats (Chiu and Zhang 2006). By contrast, Zang contends that bureaucrats and technocrats actually coexist in the top leadership. More importantly, most 'technocrats' in China are better seen as political technocrats because political principles still prevail (Zang 2001). Victor Shih claims that technocracy only reaches to the provincial level, while top leaders in the Politburo and above should be viewed as patrons of technocrats (Shih 2008a).

These differences reflect the lack of conceptual clarity over technocrats/technocracy. In existing empirical studies technocrats are mostly measured by education, profession,

position, and experience. For instance, Zhao and Zhang mean by technocrats those who have diplomas in both scientific and economic management as well as more than five years' experience working in economic or professional positions (Chiu and Zhang 2006). Li and White use three indicators to define technocrats: education, occupation, and position. In their terminology, technocrats are Party-state cadres who hold degrees in finance, engineering, and other applied subjects, as well as have working experiences in factories, industrial sectors, or economic sectors (Cheng and White 1988). Walder and his colleagues proposed a dual-path model of two distinctive career trajectories related to the logic of China's politics. One is the bureaucratic path based on political performance, and the other is the technocrat path based on professional skills (Walder and Li et al. 2000; Li and Walder 2001). The multiple definitions of technocrats/technocracy, as some scholars suggest, have hampered further and deeper studies in this field (Chiu and Zhang 2006).

Technocrats should not be defined by position but by expert knowledge. An assumption consciously or unconsciously shared by almost all researchers in technocracy is that technocrats are people whose behavior and thought are detached from both politics and ideology and neutralized as a result of 'instrumentally rational techniques' (Centeno

and Silva 1998), 'expertise knowledge' (Fischer 1990), 'technocratic mentality' (Putnam 1977), or 'matters of technique' (Baylis 1974). In other words, a technocrat can be any person in a given domain, including social science and law, as long as he or she legitimizes his or her power by technical know-how (Konrád and Szelenyi 1979; King and Szelényi 2004). The technocrats' relationship with bureaucrats in politics could be 'dependent' (Xu 2001) or one of 'clientelism' (Shih 2008), although technocrats can still retain a certain degree of autonomy thanks to their expert knowledge. This autonomy can be termed technocrats' 'technocratic autonomy', in the vein of 'state autonomy', which indicates bureaucrats' ability to make policy or decisions relatively independently of other vested interest groups. Technocrats are able to make professional decisions independently of non-technical personnel on account of their expert knowledge. Unfortunately, so far the absence of reliable methods for measuring technocratic autonomy, coupled with the lack of conceptual clarity, has made it rather difficult to assess technocracy.

Technocrats should be distinguished from humanistic intellectuals as well. As Gouldner (1979) notes, there are two ideal types of intellectuals: technical intelligentsia and humanistic intelligentsia. Both share the 'culture of critical discourse' (CCD) – the deep

structure of the common ideology of discourse forming a 'speech community'. On the other hand, the intelligentsia's intellectual interests are fundamentally 'technical', while the humanistic intellectuals' interests are primarily 'critical, emancipatory, hermeneutic and hence often political' (Gouldner 1979). In other words, the legitimacy of humanistic intellectuals derives, first and foremost, from the idea or meaning they create. The idea or meaning is conceived to be value-free: it can be any idea, and particular ideas (e.g., pro- or anti-socialism) do not in and of themselves define technocrats or humanistic intellectuals. As Ivan Szelenyi and Lawrence King correctly pointed out, 'the technocrats, especially during the post-Stalinist epoch, are much closer to power than is the humanistic intelligentsia, and can even be seen as a dominated fraction of the ruling estate of late state socialism' (King and Szelényi 2004: 91).

Finally, what is most important to bear in mind but often forgotten is that the concepts of technocrat/technocracy are 'ideal types'. While a typical bureaucrat is 'red' and a typical technocrat is 'expert', there are always some incumbents who are both red and expert. In China studies, unfortunately, technocrats' relationship with humanistic intellectuals is seldom discussed. Contrary to the arguments of some scholars (Pye 1981), not all Chinese cadres are politically rational, rather some can be viewed as

idealists steeped in the 'culture of critical discourses'. Two notable examples are Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, former General Secretaries of the CCP who were dismissed in the late 1980s because of their pro-liberalism stance. In fact, as Weber notes, bureaucrats who live 'for' politics differ remarkably from those who live 'off' politics. A bureaucrat who lives 'for' politics makes politics his life, because 'either he enjoys the naked possession of the power he exerts, or he nourishes his inner balance and self-feeling by the consciousness that his life has meaning in the service of a 'cause''; while a bureaucrat 'who strives to make politics a permanent source of income lives 'off' politics as a vocation' (Weber 1994). Weber's idea of an ethic of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*) is applicable to the scholar as much as to the politician, especially a scholar who contests the ultimate ends of the politician (Goulding 1999).

'Factionalism' and 'informal politics'

The scheme of 'bureaucrat-technocrat-humanistic intellectual' only determines the position of a certain cadre in terms of mentality, but it is not enough. The political and policy preference of a cadre does not only lie in his or her professional knowledge, but also hinges on his or her 'formal institutional post' and 'informal institutional position'.

The former refers to the department where a cadre works and his or her title, while the latter is addressed by studies of ‘factionalism’ and ‘informal politics’.

Ironically, the original formation of ‘factional politics’ and ‘informal politics’ were two competing ideas. Factionalism or factional politics became one of the most influential theories about China’s ruling class and politics at the top due to a ground-breaking article by Andrew Nathan (1973). For Nathan and his followers, factional politics is built on a mutually beneficial network based on clientelist ties which aim to sustain and expand the power of the patron and the interests of the clients. Therefore, the essence of factionalism, whatever form it takes, is a patron-client relation or clientelism (Shih 2008). In contrast, Tsou Tang and Lowell Dittmer prefer to use the term ‘informal politics’ instead, a term that they argue involves many other interpersonal relationships such as school ties and family ties (Dittmer 1995; Tsou 1995). Although Andrew Nathan insisted on a factionalism model instead of ‘informal politics’ (Nathan and Tsai 1995), their differences are not substantial. The foundation of factional politics is clientelist ties emerging from *guanxi* or personal face-to-face ‘connections’ (Nathan 1973). A clientelist tie is, after all, a personal relationship.

More important, both schemes of factionalism and of informal politics reject the totalitarian paradigm such as Mao in command, which used to be popular among analysts of China's ruling class and top elite politics (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988). For those working with factionalism theory, faction becomes a vital unit in top politics due to the unpredictability of China's political struggle (Pye 1981). Even the most powerful man cannot dominate the whole Party completely (Shih and Shan et al. 2010). Therefore, in order to advance their political interest and survive, top cadres within the ruling class have to form various 'factions'. Scholars have named several different factions in their empirical analysis. For example, Andrew Nathan (1973) identified the 'Linbiao Clan' and the 'Gang of Four' as the major factions during the Culture Revolution; Tsou Tang made a distinction between 'conservatives' and 'reformers' in his analysis of China's politics before and after the Tiananmen Movement (Tsou 1999).

Among the studies of China's ruling elites, Victor Shih's book on the policy-making of China's financial industry is particularly worth noting (Shih 2008a).He regards technocrats as a faction, i.e., a technocrat faction, and as a competitor to the generalist faction. The former consists of top economic officials based a small circle of reciprocal private network. The latter is represented by top political officials who control key Part-

state agencies and are followed by a mass of common cadres. In Shih's argument, it is the games between these two factions that create a constant vicious circle of inflation and inefficiency (Shih 2008 a).Though this book is widely praised (Tsai 2008; Yang 2009), it is seriously flawed in its conceptualization of technocrat as a single faction. It is common knowledge that technocrats not simply exist at higher echelons of the Party-state but in its local-level apparatus as well (Chen 1998). The struggle between central and the local authorities cannot be simplified into a game between two factions. In addition, the idea of technocrats as a faction is premised on the assumption that technocrats are united by technocratic affinity and proclivity. However, technocratic know-how, as already noted, is characterized by relative autonomy and it is thus inconceivable that a substantial, reciprocal network could emerge from technocratic affinity and proclivity. Equally implausible is the notion of a large faction based on similar educational backgrounds, schooling, or working experience in the same work units.

This is not to deny the existence of factions but simply to question the characterization of technocrats as a faction. It is certainly possible that each faction may comprise both bureaucrats and technocrats. As Andrew Nathan's work on China's factionalism

demonstrates, a faction is hatched along with a career development of lower ranking cadres to higher positions. Higher officials handpick their successors, apprentices, and clients from lower bureaucrats as well as lower technocrats, and the sustaining of power continues as long as the faction thrives (Nathan 1973: 43). In the process, a technocrat can grow up into a bureaucrat without leaving his or her faction, a process that might be described as politicization.

The models of informal politics and factionalism have dominated studies of China's top elite politics from the1970s to the mid-1990s. But that does not mean the models haven been indisputable and undisputed. In fact, many scholars have instead called attention to the organizational basis of various political groups (Lampton 1987; Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Shirk 1993). After Hu Jintao's succession in 2002, in particular, factional politics was largely transformed and became 'embedded into institutional contexts' (Li 2008; Kou and Zang 2013). The increasing importance of 'formal politics' was primarily a result of declining charisma amongst China's new leaders combined with ongoing processes of political institutionalization. Formalized rules and norms have been playing increasingly important roles in elite entry and exit as well as in decision-making.

Changes in promotion patterns

For political scientists and sociologists in China studies, the career incentive of officials is either a variable to explain political phenomenon or a phenomenon itself to be explained. As an independent variable, one of the most provocative arguments comes from James Kai-sing Kung and Shuo Chen's research on the relationship between career incentive and political radicalism during China's Great Leap Famine from 1959 to 1961 (Kung and Chen 2011). To explain varied radicalism across provinces, they argue that provincial leaders with stronger career incentives (alternative members of the Central Committee of the CCP) were more likely to be politically radical than those less promotion-motivated cadres, like full members of CCP central committee. Though they do not dispute the function of personal idiosyncrasies, this widely cited statement has been challenged by many. For example, Dali Yang, Huayu Xu, and Ren Tao question the validity of Kuang and Chen's basic assumptions and credibility of their dataset. They propose an alternative explanation that provincial leaders' political loyalty to Mao was the vital factor (Yang and Xu et al. 2014).

Great Leap Famine is not the only puzzle that researchers try to solve from the angle of career incentives. For example, by employing county-level data from Zhejiang Province, Liu Mingxing and his colleagues argue that local cadres in areas where own guerrillas military forces established before the People's Liberation Army took power are more likely to protect and promote informal economy both in the Maoist time and the reform ear, because their factional ties with higher authorities were weak and their promotion was believed limited (Liu and Zhang et al. 2013).

When career incentives or promotion patterns become dependent variables, scholars seek answers from the perspective of '*guanxi*' or 'faction', especially for the Maoist era (Nathan 1973; Walder 1988; Huang 2006; Shih and Shan et al. 2010). The rise of market economy, however, brings about a new puzzle: will economic performance of cadres have a significant impact on their promotion after the country enters the new time of 'taking economic construction as the top priority' (*yi jingji fazhan wei zhongxin*)?

If the power of career incentive that is claimed in the aforesaid article by Kung and Chen (2011) is as effective in the reform eras as the authors suggest, provinces governed

by alternative members of CCP Central Committee should have faster GDP growth rate. This, however, is still an inclusive argument as the ongoing debate on the relationship between promotion and economic growth reveals. Some researchers believe that there is a correlation between economic performances and the likelihood of promotion. For example, by using a dataset of mobility of China's provincial leaders from 1949–1994, Bo Zhiyue (1996; 2002) finds that the more taxes a province contributes to the Center, the provincial leader at that certain province is more likely to be promoted. Based on his previous research and that of his colleagues (Chen and Li et al. 2005; Li and Zhou 2005), Zhou (2007) even borrow a term, 'tournament promotion model', to describe the incentive mechanism of local cadres. In addition to many other studies on provincial leaders, some scholars argue for the application of the model to even lower administrative rankings (Ho 1995; Edin 1998; Xu and Li et al. 2007; Wang and Zhang et al. 2011). For example, Guo (2007) suggests that revenue growth increases the probability of promotion of county chief executives, except for newly installed or minority nationality chief executives.

More scholars, however, doubt this performance–promotion nexus. Sheng (2007, 2009) notes that provincial economic resources and performance have no significant impact on

the promotion of cadres or a locality's representativeness in the Central Committee of the CCP. With respect to the municipality and county levels, Landry (Landry 2002) and Mei (2006) also demonstrate that there is no obvious correlation between promotion and economic performance (GDP per capita). Tao Ran and his colleagues (Tao et al. 2010) are still more skeptical of the performance–promotion nexus, claiming that it is only the illusion of a nationwide evaluation system that links political promotion to economic growth or any major economic indicators from the bottom to the province and to the central government. It can certainly be argued that economic performance measured by average GDP growth alone is not a sufficient condition for promotion, whereas factional identity and factional connections instead of economic performance is a more significant factor in recruitment and promotion of provincial leaders. A quantitative assessment of provincial leaders was not shaped until 2006 and it includes several socio-political and economic indicators. There is no empirical evidence in their dataset, they assert further, to support a positive relationship between GDP growth and provincial cadres' promotion, not to mention the fact that the provincial governments have much less power than county governments to intervene in local economic growth (Tao et al. 2010). Furthermore, through content analysis of provincial newspapers between 2000 and 2004, Victor Shih (2008b)concludes that 'nauseating' displays of

loyalty by factional members to the patrons functions as radars for promotion. Shih does not deal with promotion directly, but his research points to an alternative avenue of upward mobility.

We can therefore summarize two competing models, which to a large extent can be viewed as parallel to the aforesaid debate between 'red' and 'expert': promotion based either on patron–client relations or on economic performance. These models do not go beyond but are foreshadowed by two other major models in the general literature on politics in Soviet states, namely the patron–client model and the rational-technical model (Stewart et al. 1972).

It is worth noting that the two models in the scholarship of China, on the other hand, are not mutually exclusive. In fact, many scholars have been trying to strike a balance. For example, Choi finds that factional ties and good economic performance increased provincial Party secretaries' chances of promotion, while only economic performance mattered for the promotion of provincial governors. The author claims that good performance was a necessary condition for promotion even among factional members (Choi 2012). Another example is the study on 'semi-officials', or managers of giant

state owned enterprises (SOEs) (Yu 2010).[1] The researchers find that economic performance and political connections function complementarily in the political promotion of those tycoons of mega SOEs (Yang and Wang et al. 2013). Even those advocates of the performance model do not go so far as to deny the role of political connections. For instance, both Bo (2004) and Zhou (2007) admit that working experience in central Party-state departments or organizations is an advantage for promotion in the provinces. As Zhao and Zhou (2004) conclude, patters of promotion reflect the impact of both institutional persistence and emerging market forces.

Nevertheless, the debate over performance vs patrons has so far failed to generate a clear understanding of the subject. There are still at least four theoretical and methodological issues to be tackled. First, the most controversial problem is how to gauge patronization or factional ties, as well as many other immeasurable socio-political variables in promotion. What is even worse, compared to imperfect but at least harmless indicators, some plausible measurements (e.g. common regional origins, shared work experience, and university alma mater) might cause hard incorrectness. Second, the endogeneity problem could foreshadow many explanatory efforts. As is commonly pointed out, cadres with stronger patron backgrounds or better promotion potentials are

more likely to be appointed to an advantaged position at an economically better place, which in turn reproduce as a new leverage for the next promotion (Kung and Chen 2011; Lin 2010). If the endogeneity problem is not handled properly, research cannot stay at the descriptive level but becomes predominantly causal explanation based on unreliable evidence. Third, what is treated as the criteria of economic performance in existing literature is vastly diverse. Some economic indicators show its significance in models, while others do not (Yang and Wang et al. 2013). It is sometimes difficult for researchers to pick up certain indicators. Forth, common practices amongst cadres of falsifying economic data is a huge problem. As Li and Cheng (2012) point out, abuse of economic indicators through performance fabrication has caused serious problems in evaluating promotion models.

Studies of the promotion of cadres are surely not confined within the performance–patron debate. Sociologically, patterns of promotion are also part of the phenomenon of status attainment or elite mobility and are thus related to the question of ‘who can be cadres’. In addition, many researchers have revealed several critical mechanisms in promotion, which began to emerge in the 1980s and were used to regulate the promotion and retirement of political elites, including age limits, term limits and term

integrity, multiple work experiences before rank promotion, and step-by-step promotion, fast-track for age dilemma (Bo 2004; Kou 2010; Kou and Tsai 2014). Through these studies, not only have we learned much more about demographic and socio-political characteristics of top cadres, but we have also managed to crack open the black box of the policy-making of the Chinese Party-state at various levels.

Notes

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1. Top managers of SOEs are much less researched than those officials in the Party and governmental organs, but the former is in fact a part and parcel of the cadre group, no matter in terms of the nomenklatura system or their vital proportion in the Central Committee. As an informative article points out, the Party controls the appointment of the CEOs and presidents of those giant SOEs and manages a cadre transfer system in which political posts can rotate into management of SOEs (Brødsgaard, 2012). Researches on SOE management in politics and sociology are quite lagging behind compared to studies of cadres in the Party-governmental organs.

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