

Transformation of China's Socialist Brick: Reproduction and Circulation of Ordinary Cadres

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'I am a socialist brick, and I can be moved anywhere if necessary.' This is a statement that Chinese often heard from cadres during the Mao era. In the ideology of China's communist revolutionaries, to build a socialist mansion requires many bricks, and the cadres within the ranks of the Chinese Party-state should be the most solid ones that could serve as cornerstones. In the post-Mao era, however, as the function and appearance of the socialist mansion change, so have the role of cadres and the recipe for manufacturing the cornerstones supporting the Party-state. The subject of this chapter is ordinary cadres (*putong ganbu*) as differentiated from top leading cadres (*gaoji lingdao ganbu*) and senior cadres (*lingdao ganbu*), or the rank and file of the Party-state's cadre corps, particularly those below the fifth rank in the Party-state's cadre hierarchy, which was outlined in Chapter 13.

As noted in the previous chapter, Chinese cadres have been rarely analyzed from the perspective of class, and it is subject to debate which cadres belong to the ruling class within the Chinese Party-state and which belong to the middle classes. In both the English- and Chinese-language literature, undifferentiated cadres, especially ordinary

cadres, are usually classified as middle classes on the basis of income, wealth, educational credentials, occupation and so on. This chapter follows this classifying practice, but it must be stressed that many ordinary cadres are better seen as part of the PRC's ruling class. Much depends on their power and position in the Party-state system and their role in the 'ruling', as well as their relationship with the ruling and ruled classes. What is at issue here is three basic questions about the class concept and class analysis. The first concerns how class is defined – with reference to the ownership of productive property, market capacity, capital of various kinds, occupation, income or other classifying criteria. A still more important question is whether or not the criteria by which class is defined constitute common causal factors of life chances or mechanisms through which social groups are sorted into classes, and whether these factors and mechanisms shape class members' subjectivities, whether the latter are understood as social consciousness, value orientations, life styles or attitudinal and behavioral patterns. Above all, the purchase of class lies in the actual and potential cause-effect relations between objective class positions and subjective class propensity possibly leading to social action or persistent patterns of behaviour. Related to both questions is the tension between empirical research and theoretical assumptions about class identity, value orientation, attitudes, action and behavior. It is commonly believed, for example, that the middle class is a driver of political liberalization and democratization; in other words, a subjective effect of objective causal factors such as education, occupation, income and so on and so forth. When this assumption is applied to China, a basic fact that must be taken into account is the large number of Party-state cadres. The question – both theoretical and empirical – is whether they are part of the Chinese middle class and if so whether they are indeed inclined towards liberalization

and democracy. Whatever the case, the answers to the question need to be related to the criteria by which they are classified as middle class, or the objective class positions they occupy. If cadres are included in the middle class and yet not found to be pro-liberalization and pro-democracy, it is reasonable to infer that their subjectivities are unrelated to their objective class positions, or that explanations of the former cannot be found in the latter alone. Rather, something other than education, occupation and income must be at work in the formation of cadres' subjectivities. The position, role and power of ordinary cadres in the Party-state system are most noteworthy in this regard and require careful consideration.

This chapter is primarily concerned with three major questions: How should cadres be conceived of and defined? Where do cadres come from? What are their rewards? With each of the questions, changes in two respects are of particular interest. The first is change over time during different periods of the PRC, ranging from the early years of communist rule and the Cultural Revolution to the reform era. The second is change in cadres' status and life chances in comparison with other social groups, especially ordinary Chinese citizens.

Cadre status and the nomenklatura system

The term 'cadre' (*ganbu*) is usually taken for granted in China studies and commonly used interchangeably with 'official' and treated as 'functionary' or 'bureaucrat'. Yet, this seemingly simple term is actually quite complex, as can be illustrated with an example. On 6 February 2013, Zhao Zhengyong, the Party Secretary of Shaanxi Province, took a

question during an on-line public interview. The question was simple: Can a person with worker status be promoted to cadre? Secretary Zhao was straight-forward: ‘No, because only a comrade with cadre status is eligible for promotion to a higher rank, according to the Party’s regulation’.¹ The answer attracted sharp criticism from the general public. Most critics argued that it indicated that common people had been deprived of the opportunity to become cadres. Yet, Zhao’s answer was consistent with a policy that the Chinese Party-state had adhered to for decades. The key word here is ‘status’, and there are two issues involved in the question and answer. One is whether an individual with worker status can be promoted to a cadre status, and the other is whether a worker can become a cadre. There has been a practice called ‘*tigan*’ (to be promoted to cadre), although the practice was more prevalent in the Mao era than in the post-Mao era. In this practice, a worker becomes a cadre, but he/she is a ‘worker as cadre’ (*yigong daigan*) unless he/she obtains a ‘cadre status’ prior to promotion or during his/her tenure as a cadre. Many studies confirm that a large number of Chinese cadres had been workers before they became cadres. During the 1950s, even capitalists, professionals, and managers were appointed as cadres as a compensation for the state’s nationalization of their assets (Davis 2000; Yu 2010).

A deeper and more nuanced understanding of the Party-state cadres and its personnel management (*ganbu yu renshi guanli zhidu*) is not only essential to grasping the workings of the political system, but also cadres’ career paths as well as their status and role in society vis-à-vis the ruling class and other classes, especially other social groups within the middle class. Fortunately, there are already numerous studies of this issue (Tao-Chiu and Chan 1996; Brødsgaard 2002; Chan and Suizhou 2007; Shambaugh

2008; Pieke 2009; Brødsgaard 2012). To understand ‘cadre’ as a ‘status’, in particular, has a sociological meaning: as China’s economic institutions have been transformed from a state-socialist redistribution system to a market-oriented economy, its social structure is also experiencing the transition from a status-based ranking society to a stratified class society (Szelenyi 2002; Szelenyi 2008; Lu 2012).² Most social and economic inequalities in China are related to this type of transitional, mixed socio-economic structure.

In most political studies, except for a few historical analyses (Yu 2010), cadres are simply taken as an equivalent of officials and defined as people with responsibility or occupying leading position within Party-state departments or organizations. The fact, however, is that cadres constitute a broader category than officials, play quite different roles and operate in a different milieu. Ordinary cadres include Party secretaries in villages, managers of state owned enterprises (SOEs), managing personnel in public institutions (*shiye danwei*), and so on.³ In other words, the category of cadres encompasses a broader range of subjects than such terms as ‘political elites’, ‘officials’ and ‘public servants’, including not only administrators in the Party and state organs but personnel at various levels and from diverse backgrounds in military and mass organizations. The category therefore must not be equated with political elites, officials or public servants.

Another important term related to cadres is *nomenklatura*, a term was originally developed in the Soviet Union. Many pioneering studies China’s political elites have applied the term to China’s cadre hierarchy. The Chinese translations of the term range

from ‘ruling elite’, ‘power elite’, ‘the establishment’, and so on. The essence of nomenklatura, however, lies in its distinctive institutions of recruitment and management of political elites. As Brødsgaard (2012) elaborates, some scholars view *bianzhi* (the authorized number of personnel) as a Chinese way of denoting the nomenklatura system, a widespread confusion that appears to be originated from Schurmann’s (1966) seminal work. The closest Chinese equivalent of nomenklatura is the ‘job title list’ (*zhiwu mingcheng biao*). Firstly established in 1955 and revamped several times subsequently, the list consists of hierarchical leadership positions and ‘cadre reserve’ positions. Each different administrative level of the Party-state ranging from the Central to the county has its own lists. This nomenklatura system, including its origins, the Chinese context, composition, and recent amendments, has been the subject of numerous works (Manion 1985; Burns 1989, 1994; Chan 2004). A clear understanding of the system is the basis for rigorous analysis and dataset building, although many researchers do not take Chinese administrative concepts seriously.

Empirical research on the China’s nomenklatura system, including its origins, the Chinese context, the composition and recent amendments, is often handicapped by the lack of access to reliable data. Despite the use of different methods of data collection in research on top cadres, it is a common practice amongst researchers to use standard biographical directories or ‘job title lists’ to code their own database, which can be sourced from websites of those leading scholars and their institutions (Heilmann and Kirchberger 2000; Li 2001). Beside ‘job title lists’ (Brødsgaard 2012), most quantitative researches usually employ nationwide sample data of individual ordinary cadres, such as Remin University’s Chinese General Social Survey, the Chinese Social Survey

conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, or researchers' own local surveys (Seckington 2007).

Status attainment: circulation or reproduction?

Who can become a cadre? This is about both political appointment and status attainment. Debates on the status attainment of cadres, despite vast differences in viewpoints, analytical approaches and foci of interest, mostly centre on one essential question: Is it a case of elite reproduction or of elite circulation (Szelenyi and Szelenyi 1995)? Yet, any direct answer, no matter whether it argues for reproduction or circulation, is descriptive. A further question therefore is to ask how the reproduction or circulation has happened, which demands a mechanism-based explanation. In theory, it is possible to summarize three mechanisms for selecting cadres: family (inter-generational) support, political capital, and cultural capital. These mechanisms of course are intertwined, but we will look at them separately.

Family background is usually viewed as an 'ascribed factor' in status attainment: if the advantage of certain family background continues, it is a case of 'reproduction of social status/class'. The twist of the Chinese context is that the same family background can be and often was marked with totally different political labels at different historical periods. A simple but effective solution is to take the end of the Mao era as a turning point. Many researchers claim that, on the one hand, Mao's de-stratification policy overturned the class structure of the old regime, converting the pre-revolutionary advantaged family background into a 'black' anti-revolutionary one (Whyte 1975; Parish 1984; Lee 1991; Walder and Hu 2009); on the other hand, driven by an

egalitarian ideology, particularly several waves of political movements before and during the Cultural Revolution, the advantages of 'red' family background were also neutralized (Walder and Hu 2009). In a word, family background does not play a decisive role in status attainment for cadres.

Nevertheless, as Zhou Xueguang and Hou Liren's study of children during the Cultural Revolution argues, a dramatic political event like the Cultural Revolution seems to have only interrupted the process of class reproduction temporarily (Zhou and Hou 1999). After all, it is important to bear in mind that in other socialist countries the reproduction of the bureaucratic class gave rise to a 'new class' (Djilas 1957), while the class relationships under these regimes were not as equal as were commonly claimed (Trotsky 1937; Szelenyi 1978). In China, the real purpose of state policy from the 1950s to 1966 (the year when the Cultural Revolution broke out), as some studies point out, was not to bring about egalitarianism but to crack down on old elites through class labels; those new revolutionary elites sought utilized state power to secure monopoly of privileges and the reproduction of political status, all in the name of achieving social equality (Gao 2005). Revolutionaries, cadres, and their children took advantage of their privileged class status (*chengfen*) when entering prestigious schools, joining the Party, and landing jobs in Party-state departments and organizations (Hu 2008). Some scholars even argue that to break down the privileges of the establishment was one of Mao's motivations when he launched the Cultural Revolution (Ray 1970).

Yet, most researchers concur that the privilege of family background as either pre-revolutionary elite or Party-state elite during the PRC, comes back in status inheritance

during the transition from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy since 1978. Children and grandchildren of Party-state elites have fared much better in status attainment than other social groups (Walder and Hu 2009). On the other hand, although the advantage of family background remains crucial in both context and practice (Walder and Hu 2009a, 2009b, 2009c)⁴, it alone is not a sufficient condition for status attainment but needs to combine with other intermediate mechanisms as to function effectively (Sun 2011). Chinese Communist Party membership and university qualifications are the two most critical determinants of status and upward mobility, which constitute political and cultural capital respectively.

The theory of Party sponsorship used to predominate in studies of cadres' promotion and status attainment. This theory takes Party membership as the key to understanding recruitment of political elites in socialist regimes, including China (Li and Walder 2001). Party membership represents political loyalty and sponsorship, while candidates from 'red' family backgrounds are more likely to join the Party – at least during the Mao era (Walder 1995; Li and Walder 2001). But it is worthwhile to stress that eligibility for Party membership (Bian et al., 2001) is a different question from 'what kind of Party members can become cadres' and 'what kind of cadres can be promoted', although these three questions follow similar logics. The separation of these three issues has been even clearer in the era of 'reform and opening-up'. As Xiaowei Zang (2001) points out, in elite studies CCP seniority is a better measure than CCP membership since virtually all Chinese leaders are CCP member. In fact, it has been an outdated measurement to take Party membership as a vital factor in entry to administrative elites. Some other socio-political variables have been scrutinized by recent researchers, such as working

experiences at local levels, ethnicity, and gender (Goodman 2002; Zhou 2006; Kou 2010).

Education has received as much attention from scholars of China as a critical measure in addition to the Party membership. The political and academic debate on ‘red’ and ‘expert’, in fact, is a core issue of political recruitment not only in China, but also in other socialist countries (Baylis 1974; Konrád and Szelenyi 1979; Szelenyi and Martin 1988). The division between ‘red’ and ‘expert’ also constitutes the starting point of elite dualism (Zang 2001, 2013). In China’s context, researchers believe that ‘expert’ paled by the side of ‘red’ during the Maoist era, though many senior Party leaders advocated in public the importance of both ‘red’ and ‘expert’ (Schurmann 1966). Some researchers suggest that even if education mattered, the Party did not improve educational level of the cadres as a whole through recruiting newcomers with high educational credentials, but by encouraging and pushing Party-state cadres to accept the importance of education. The Party emphasized different principles of recruitment at different career stages: demands for political loyalty (and ascriptive markers for the same) were emphasized when recruiting young cadres, while demands for educational attainment (and presumably professional competence) were directed primarily at mid- and late-career cadres (Li and Walder 2001).

Despite this, most scholars of China concur that the pendulum has increasingly swung towards ‘expert’ since the 1980s, though many disagree with each other on a myriad of theoretical or methodological issues. We discussed this topic in the previous chapter on the account that most scholars working with elite dualism theory take top leading cadres

as their research subjects. The emergence and growing popularity of technocracy theories in China can be seen as an intellectual reaction to the rise of the third wave of 'new class theory' in the global arena (Szelenyi and Martin 1988), while at the same time reflects the fact that China's cadre system was experiencing a historic transformation in the 1980s from revolutionary cadres to party technocrats (Lee 1991). It further reminds us that the analysis of cadre status attainment must take account of macro factors at different times. The importance of certain factors always hinges on structural or institutional change. Zang's work (2013) has emphasized the tremendous impact of institutional change on cadre entry. Some other studies have also found the significance of structural transformation on elite production and reproduction (Li 2000; Szelenyi 2002).

In the scholarship on ordinary cadres, (inter)generational mobility and the thesis of elite dualism have also been tested with general survey data. Much of the research on the subject has emphasized the effects of personnel reforms on increasingly high educational levels within the cadre system (Walder and Li et al. 2000; Li and Walder 2001; Zhao and Zhou 2004; Lin and Wu 2009; Sun 2011). On the other hand, as Seckington (2007) found out, at the county-level, though 95% of his respondents had a bachelor degree or above, a large number of respondents actually earned their degrees, especially post-graduate degrees, from 'on-the-job' training. He also found significant regional disparity; most county-level cadres with post-graduate degrees were based in the coastline provinces. This study reminds us of the importance of the 'on-the-job' training, among other types of training (e.g., cadre training schools), for the Party-state to mold itself into a 'learning' system (Tsai and Dean 2013).

Cadres' rewards: beneficiaries or losers?

Though socialist regimes go to great lengths to portray their cadres as people's servants through their propaganda machines, numerous works have revealed various privileges that cadres or bureaucrats enjoy (Trotsky 1937; Djilas 1957). As the classical study of Szelenyi (Szelenyi 1978) argues, in the state socialist society the gaps between different groups are small merely in terms of payrolls, but huge inequalities in non-salary rewards are generated between redistributors and direct producers, in the form of housing, welfares, price subsidy and so on.

There is no doubt that marketization alters the inequality dynamics. In the countryside, following the emergence of the 'second economy', an equalization effect was emerging in the 1980s (Szelenyi 1988). In the cities, a privatization-oriented reform of housing eroded the privilege of elites (Szelenyi and Manchin 1987). Victor Nee extended this line of research to China. His seminal paper in 1989 sparked a nation-wide debate on market transition in China, which was one of the most heated in China's social sciences in the 1990s. Though updated subsequently (Nee and Matthews 1996; Nee and Opper 2007, 2012), the original thrust of Victor Nee's market transition theory has remained unchanged; it posits that the transition from a state socialist redistribution economy to a market economy will be beneficial to direct producers instead of redistributors and to holders of human/cultural capital instead of political capital. In other words, the market transition will decrease the economic rewards of political power but increase the economic returns of human capital (Nee 1989). Many other scholars shared Nee's ideas

in the early 1990s (Huang 1990).

This market transition theory, however, has met with considerable opposition on both theoretical and empirical grounds. For example, Bian Yanjie and John Logan (1996) proposed a 'persistence of power' theory on the basis of their data with respect to household income in Tianjin from 1978 to 1993. This theory argues that China's reform was undertaken without fundamentally reducing political monopoly or eradicating the work unit system, and therefore it did not jeopardize the basis of redistributive power and political capital's payoff in the country. Similarly, William Parish and Ethan Michelson (1996) suggested that there emerged in the reform era a 'political market' which involved three relationships: between workers and cadres, between enterprises and governmental organs, and between local and central governments. These three relationships were competing with each other during China's market transition so that political capital would not be devalued. Andrew Walder argues that cadres at administrative posts and professional positions actually have two distinct career paths and would fare quite differently under a market economy. Cadres with political capital but less cultural capital would be vulnerable, while well-educated younger cadres would lead and benefit from the transition (Walder 1995). Similar research findings abound in the literature and point to the undeniable persistence of state power in the operation of China's 'market economy with Chinese characteristics'.

A focal point in the debate about China's market transition is how to evaluate the economic benefits of redistributive power. A large number of analyses in the past decade (Cao and Nee 2000; Guthrie 2000; Zhou 2000; Bian 2002; Chen Nabo 2006; Keister

2009; Lu 2012) are fruitful in stimulating a robust research program. Though empirical results remain mixed, most researchers appear to be agreed that the outcome of political capital does not only lie in different types and trajectories of market transformation (Walder 1996; Walder 2003), but is also contingent upon different stages of this process (Rona-Tas 1994; Szelényi and Kostello 1996).

Related studies have become more diversified in the new millennium, and academic interest in models of political career paths and (household) income attainment has declined. Victor Nee and his colleagues argue for a 'more direct way' to study the connection between marketization and the value of political capital by shifting from household to firm-level analysis (Nee and Opper 2009). A new pattern has emerged in Party-state cadres' response to opportunities arising from the fledgling market; urban cadres are increasingly more likely to be self-employed over time, and only those who became self-employed in the late reform stage have enjoyed higher income returns (Wu 2006).

Notes

¹ See the Central Committee of the CCP, *Regulations Regarding the Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres* (Dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong tiaoli), 2002.

² 'A society of status' is one of the most important clues to understanding China's social structure correctly, especially in the Mao era. Though the official ideology at the time was 'class struggle in command', the 'class' as defined by Marxist sociologists were actually eliminated following waves of socio-political movements (Shen, 2007). Some scholars even claim that communist societies, such as the Soviet Union and China, should be more accurately regarded as a 'status society' in which units of social

actors are not classes but ‘status’, estates, or other similar groups (like ‘*chengfen*’) (Bell 1991; King 2001; Gao 2004; Szelenyi 2008).

³ A fact mirrored this definition is that even today undergraduate students officially admitted by state universities would obtain a status of ‘cadre’ automatically. This status of course would become invalid automatically unless the graduate fulfils certain state regulations within two years. For most college graduates before the early 1990s, it was vital to keep this ‘cadre status’. While most employers have marginalized this concept, a graduate without ‘cadre status’ could encounter various problems in employment and welfare in state organs and state enterprises.

⁴ Assessment of political qualification (*zhengshen*) is still a mandatory process. In practice, family background is

Widely believed to be critical in entry and promotion of cadres, mostly in the form of corruption, nepotism, and rent-seeking.

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