

Presentation Memo for

Week 12: **(S)election** and Accountability – *China Context*

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The People's Republic of China is governed by a one-party system, predominantly under the auspices of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Governance across various administrative tiers is executed by officials, the majority of whom (almost all of them) are CPC members. The electoral system, in practice, operates through the People's Congresses at every level but is effectively managed by party committees, thus ensuring a selection process for officials that is both intricate and firmly entrenched within the party's framework.

In this memo, I start with revisiting the *Keju* system, which represents the historical antecedent to China's contemporary merit-based official selection examinations. Subsequently, the attention extends to the present-day methodologies employed by the CPC and the Chinese government at large, focusing on the criteria and mechanisms for the selection, promotion, and demotion of personnel.

1. **Historical Background: The *Keju* System (科举制)**

- The *Keju* examination system, initiated by Emperor Wen during the Sui Dynasty, allowed commoners to enter governmental administration, laying the groundwork for modern official selection processes in China.
- Influencing modern practices like the civil service and National College Entrance Examinations (*Gaokao*), the *Keju* system emphasised meritocracy through rigorous exams and emphasising the dominating ideology, from ancient Confucianism to current Communist ideology.
- The Communist Party of China (CPC) uses the *Keju* system to maintain ideological uniformity among officials and the populace, ensuring administrative actions align with a unified ideology.
- This system highlights the importance of education for social mobility and reinforces the value placed on academic success in society.
- The CPC has modernised and standardised the *Keju* system, referred to as CPC's meritocracy, albeit with a flexible definition of merit.

The genesis of the official selection mechanism in China dates back to the Sui Dynasty, during which Emperor Wen instituted the *Keju* system (科举制). This system constituted an entrance examination that allowed commoners to enter the administrative echelons of the government. Serving as a precursor to modern selection methodologies, the *Keju* system has exerted a profound influence on contemporary practices such as the Civil Service Entrance Examination (公务员考试) and the National College Entrance Examination (高考, *Gaokao*). Its impact is manifested primarily in two aspects: the prioritisation of meritocracy through rigorous examination processes and the fostering of a homogenised ideological education, from the ancient Confucian ideals to today's Communist doctrines (Huang, 2023a).

The implementation of the *Keju* system has enabled the Communist Party of China (CPC) to sustain a uniform ideological consensus among both officials and the general populace, thereby ensuring that the administrative frameworks operate within a cohesive ideological domain (Huang, 2023). Furthermore, this system underscores the significance of educational attainment as a conduit for social mobility, reinforcing a societal ethos that values academic achievement (Huang, 2023a). In another chapter of Huang's book, Huang (2023b) considers that the current adaption of *Keju* system of CPC has been systematised and standardised, and this has been called as CPC's meritocracy though the definition of merit is flexible. I will talk about this in the latter section of selection criteria.

2. China's Nomenklatura System and The CPC Organisation Department

Nomenklatura System (党管干部)

- The Nomenklatura system is a key tool for the Communist Party of China (CPC) to categorise state and party positions, set the framework for appointment and promotion, and ensure central control over key positions.
- It includes a hierarchical list of party and state roles, including reserve positions, assigned by higher echelons of the CPC hierarchy.

The Nomenklatura system serves as a foundational mechanism for the Communist Party of China (CPC) to exert and maintain control over the appointment and promotion processes within both the party's and the state's administrative apparatus. At its core, the system comprises a hierarchical cataloging of party and state positions—including reserve personnel—entrusted to individuals selected by the higher level's leaders in the CPC hierarchy (Burns, 1989). This methodical

arrangement not only facilitates the alignment of key positions with loyal party members but also reinforces the CPC's overarching authority across the governmental and societal spectrum.

The structural composition and the operational dynamics of the Nomenklatura system are crucial for comprehending the governance strategy of the CPC, especially highlighting the party's sustained focus on loyalty and ideological alignment (Burns, 1989). In the 1980s, during a period marked by significant socio-economic changes triggered by the reform and opening-up policies, the Chinese leadership implemented modifications to the Nomenklatura system. These modifications aimed at reconfiguring the system to meet the changing requirements of governance. A notable change was the reduction of the central management cadre from roughly 13,000 to 7,000 positions, a measure that seemingly shifted personnel authority towards lower-level authorities (Burns, 1989). In recent years, under Xi Jinping's leadership, the anti-corruption campaign has further refined the system, fortifying the party's dominion over it. This intensification of control is a response to the emergence of an illicit market within the party-state nexus, characterised by the covert yet frequent exchange of bribes for official positions, underscoring a systemic collusion among elites (Pei, 2016).

Table 1. The Tradeoff Between Loyalty and Competence.

	High degree of competence	Low degree of competence
High degree of loyalty	1 Regime stability	2 Economic risks
Low degree of loyalty	3 Political risks	4 Regime breakdown

Organisation Department (组织部)

- Selection and promotion of officials is its primary function, involving comprehensive assessments such as background checks, performance evaluations, and loyalty assessments.
- The department recommends candidates for vacancies, often proposing two to three for each opening, always with input from high level leaders.
- Tsai and Tian (2022) note a reduced influence of retired officials and a more cautious approach in nominations post the 18th CPC National Congress, emphasising accountability.
- Another key function is ensuring candidates demonstrate merit, competence, and loyalty. This includes organising democratic evaluation meetings for peer feedback and conducting one-on-one interviews to assess commitment to the party.

- The process also involves a thorough review of candidates' backgrounds, including personal, family, and social conduct, to compile a detailed dossier for the party committee's decision.

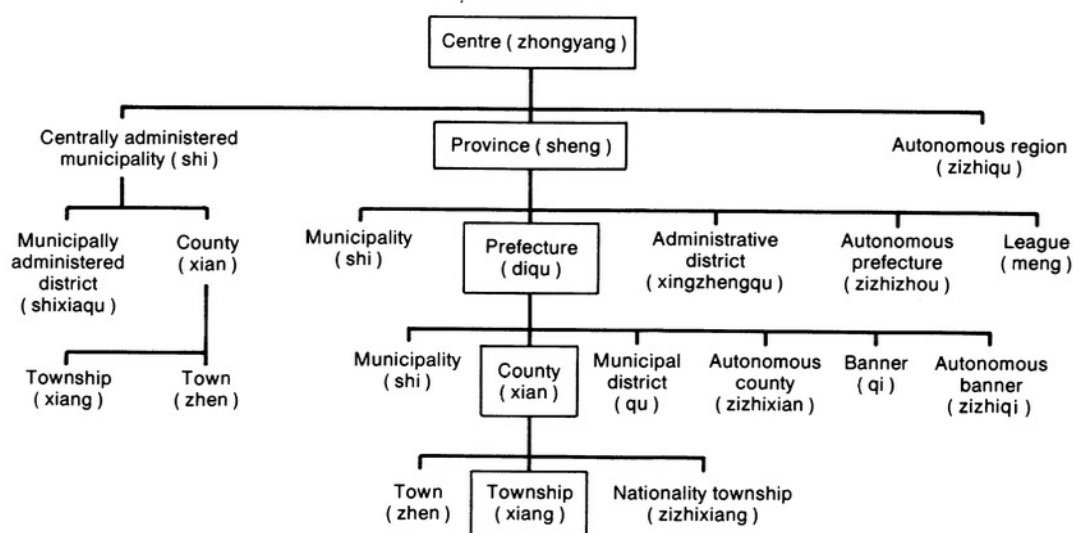
Established in 1921 (Tsai & Tian, 2022), the Organisation Department serves as a crucial arm of the Communist Party of China (CPC), operating across all levels of party committees, from county to the central. It plays a key role in the cadre management system, overseeing the selection and promotion of officials to ensure their alignment with party ideology.

The activities of the Organisation Department can be categorised into two main functions, with the selection and promotion of cadres being foremost. This process encompasses a comprehensive assessment, including background verifications, performance evaluations in current roles, and assessments of loyalty to the party ideals. The department is responsible for recommending candidates based on a holistic evaluation of these criteria. This phase is often regarded by scholars as the "most enigmatic aspect of the selection process." The Organisation Department proposes candidates to the party committee in the event of job vacancies. According to research conducted by Tsai and Tian (2022), it is common practice for the department to nominate two to three candidates for each vacancy for the party committee's consideration, incorporating feedback from party leaders into their recommendations. Their findings also indicate a diminished influence of retired officials in the nomination process. Post the 18th CPC National Congress, the implementation of the principle "whoever recommends a cadre is responsible for their performance" has instigated a more cautious approach among current officials in nominating candidates for positions. This change has significantly bolstered the Organisation Department's role, enabling it to conduct more rigorous evaluations of the candidates proposed by the party committee. It holds the authority to terminate the nomination process if the candidates presented are deemed problematic, reinforcing accountability within the cadre selection process (Tsai & Tian, 2022).

The second crucial function of the Organisation Department involves verifying that candidates possess merit, competence, and loyalty to the party. To this end, the department organises democratic evaluation meetings (民主测评会), where the colleagues of the candidates are invited to assess the candidate's abilities and provide (anonymous) feedback on their suitability for promotion. Tsai and Tian (2022) have also interpreted this practice as promoting a culture where aspiring officials are incentivised to cultivate positive relationships with their peers. Furthermore, the Organisation Department conducts one-on-one interviews with candidates to gain deeper

insights into their allegiance, emotional and ideological commitment to the party, and their efforts to serve the public good. Subsequent to these interviews, a thorough review of all pertinent documents and materials related to the candidates is undertaken to ensure accuracy and completeness. A final approach, emphasised following the 18th CPC National Congress, involves visiting the candidates' communities to observe their daily interactions and social networks. This step is indicative of a comprehensive vetting process that extends beyond professional accomplishments to include personal, family and social comportment. This kind of measurements are supported by Daniel Bell (2015), he considers that the “officials deemed “excellent” in China must also be virtuous and have good social skills.” Ultimately, the Organisation Department compiles a detailed dossier on each candidate, which is then submitted to the party committee for the final decision-making process.

Figure 1: Territorial Levels for Cadre Management



Note: The most numerous units are those with boxed titles. Equivalent units are placed at the same level on the figure. Prefectures, administrative districts and leagues are not considered regular levels of the Party and state hierarchy and do not have Party or people's congresses; they do, however, have fairly developed administrative structures to supervise subordinate organs on behalf of provincial-level leadership structures. Party committees at the township level are primary, not local, Party committees.

3. Selection Criteria

After gaining insight into the critical actors and elements of this system, it is also imperative to also understand the selection criteria employed. The criteria for promotion and demotion of officials within this system are notably flexible, varying across different eras and under different leaderships. Key factors influencing these decisions include political loyalty, ideology, meritocracy, and connections.

Performance Paradigm or Patronage Paradigm

(Memos on *Argument* might introduce more on this from Manion, M. (2023). *Political Selection in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)

- **Performance Paradigm:** Focuses on economic performance, especially GDP growth, as a key criterion for political selection in China.
 - Promotion Dynamics: likely promoted based on economic achievements; criteria for higher-level officials may differ.
- **Patronage Paradigm:** Emphasises personal connections and loyalty to the Communist Party over performance metrics for political advancement.
 - Importance of Relationships: Political networks and patronage are crucial for navigating the political hierarchy.

According to the Performance Paradigm, political selection in China emphasises economic performance, particularly focusing on GDP growth as noted by Manion (2023). Leaders under this paradigm are chosen for their ability to spur economic growth, engaging in a competitive environment akin to a "tournament" or "yardstick competition." This environment incentivises local leaders to exceed the performance of their counterparts for promotional opportunities. Landry, Lü, and Duan (2017) observed that this performance-based promotion is more applicable to lower-level officials, while the promotion criteria for higher-level officials may diverge from this pattern.

Conversely, the Patronage Paradigm posits that the criteria for political selection extend beyond mere performance metrics, placing a significant emphasis on personal connections and loyalty to the Communist Party (Manion, 2023). This viewpoint suggests that an individual's advancement within the political hierarchy is profoundly affected by their network within the party, indicating that personal relationships and patronage are crucial in the political landscape. This paradigm highlights how elite politics and internal party factions utilise appointments to reinforce their power and loyalty. Additional research, including findings by Shih, Adolph, and Liu (2012), and Fiva and Smith (2018), indicates that connections with higher-level leaders are beneficial for political elites in securing political advancements across both authoritarian and democratic contexts. Furthermore, studies by Lee (2013) and Doyon and Keller (2019) provide evidence that participation in Party schools or attending specialised training programs significantly boosts

officials' chances of promotion, underscoring the importance of educational and training affiliations within the Party for career progression.



Funny Discussion: Victor Shih's (2022) Coalitions of the Weak

Shih, V.C. (2022). *Coalitions of the weak : elite politics in China from Mao's stratagem to the rise of Xi*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Shih suggests that at moments of vulnerability, dictators may surround themselves with “coalitions of the weak” to prevent challenges from powerful rivals.

Victor Shih first highlights the widely accepted academic viewpoint that no dictator can govern an entire country alone. Instead of appointing the most politically adept individuals to high-ranking positions, his research indicated that a dictator might opt for those who are politically weaker and more compliant. This approach minimises the threat to the dictator's power, as these individuals lack the capability to challenge authority. Shih illustrates this with Mao Zedong's strategy during the late Cultural Revolution, where he elevated ordinary workers and farmers to senior positions while sidelining experienced Long-March veterans like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping (Marquis, 2023). This tactic becomes viable once the authoritarian regime has developed a structured institutional framework, including established party and military systems.

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