



**3rd International Conference
on Public Policy (ICPP3)**

June 28-30, 2017 – Singapore

Panel T10P04 Session 1

[Methodological Challenges for Policy Elites Analysis](#)

Political Mobility of Chinese County-level Elites:
An Empirical Analysis of 532 County Party Secretaries

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28 June 2017

Abstract

This article examines the political mobility of Chinese county party secretaries. Using the biographical data of 532 incumbent county party secretaries, statistical description first demonstrates the group characteristics of these county leaders. Based on this, regression analysis shows that young and better-educated cadres become rising stars of local politics, whereas many senior cadres with richer working experiences or more technical expertise fall behind in the promotion competition; moreover, *guanxi* factors still exert influences on local cadre selection. To address these problems and better achieve the goal of choosing good leaders, the optimization of cadre evaluation mechanism and motivation system as well as the reinforcement of official virtue would be the main concerns of the future cadre and personnel system reform.

Keywords: local cadre selection, political promotion, county party secretaries, China

Leadership research is one of important topics in the field of China study. Before 1970s, the totalitarian paradigm dominated Chinese political elite study.¹ Assuming that Chinese political system was a monolithic bloc, scholars generally believed that top leaders within the party took command and substantially decided the change of all the policies, ideologies and organizations. Under this circumstance, understanding Chinese politics just needs to study on top leaders.² Since the reform and opening up, Deng Xiaoping's decentralization policy granted sub-national governments with more economic and political autonomy, makes the role of local leaders became more prominent.³ Scholars start to turn their attention to local political elites. Generally, provincial elite mobility is mostly studied.⁴ In recent years, scholars pay attention to the political mobility of municipal leaders, yet few focuses on Chinese county leaders, especially in terms of quantitative research.⁵ Choosing Chinese county leaders as the main object, this article seeks to fill this gap and focuses on the following questions: who are Chinese county leaders? Who get faster promotion and for what reasons? What are the problems in Chinese local cadre selection?

¹ Wei, Shan (2008). "Meiguo xuejie dui zhongguo zhengzhi jingying de yanjiu (The Study of Chinese Political Elite in America: The State of the Field) ", *Zhejiang shehui kexue* (Zhejiang Social Sciences), No. 05, pp. 13-21.

² Frederick, C. Teiwes (1974). "Chinese Politics, 1949-1965: A Changing Mao", *Current Scene*, vol. 12.1, pp. 1-18.

³ Jia, Hao, and Zhimin, Lin (1994) eds. *Changing central-local relations in China: reform and state capacity*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

⁴ For representative works on the political mobility of Chinese provincial elites, see Zhiyue, Bo (1996). "Economic performance and political mobility: Chinese provincial leaders", *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 5(12), pp. 135-154; Zhiyue, Bo (2002). *Chinese provincial leaders: Economic performance and political mobility since 1949*. New York: ME Sharpe ; Hongbin, Li & Li-An, Zhou (2005). "Political turnover and economic performance: the incentive role of personnel control in China", *Journal of public economics*, vol. 89(9), pp. 1743-1762; Xiaowei, Zang (2006). "Technical training, sponsored mobility, and functional differentiation: Elite formation in China in the reform era", *Communist and post-communist studies*, vol. 39(1), pp. 39-57; Sonja, Oppen, Victor, Nee & Stefan, Brehm (2015). "Homophily in the career mobility of China's political elite", *Social science research*, vol. 54, pp. 332-352.

⁵ For representative works on the political mobility of Chinese municipality elites, see Cheng, Li & David, Bachman (1989). "Localism, elitism, and immobilism: Elite formation and social change in post-Mao China", *World Politics*, vol. 42.01, pp. 64-94; Pierre F. Landry (2005). "The political management of mayors in post-Deng China", *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 17, pp. 31-58. Pierre F. Landry (2008). *Decentralized authoritarianism in China*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p.31; Tingjin, Lin (2012). "The promotion logic of prefecture-level mayors in China", *China: An International Journal*, vol. 10(3), pp. 86-109.

Explanations for Chinese Political Elite Promotion

Since the end of 1970s, the Chinese elite study has shifted from the totalitarian paradigm to the pluralist paradigm. Scholars no longer concentrate only on top leaders based on the model of “Mao-in-command”, but turn to explain Chinese elite mobility at various administrative levels and from different perspectives. Under the pluralist paradigm, studies on Chinese political elite mobility have formed two contrasting patterns. One is the *guanxi* (relation)-based pattern which concerns informal politics beyond the formal political structure. It focuses on factionalism or personal connections among cadres. The other, however, is the merit-based pattern which sprang up since the early 1990s when more scholars started to pay attention to policy changes and institutional factors. Under this pattern, scholars focus more on political elites’ ability and merit, including their personal attributes, professional ability, work performance, and so on.

Guanxi-based Pattern

As an important factor with Chinese characteristics, *guanxi* has attracted attention of many scholars. They believe *guanxi* perspective can well explain contemporary Chinese politics and thus stress the role of *guanxi* in Chinese elite politics. With a view to informal politics, *guanxi*-based pattern concerns both organizational and individual level of social relations.

From the organizational level, scholars mainly discuss factionalism and its role in Chinese elite politics. *Guanxi* has and will continue to play a fundamental but concealed role in shaping Chinese politics, particularly as it operates as the bonding power for factionalism.⁶

As the representative of Chinese factionalism politics, Andrew J. Nathan argues that faction

⁶ Lucian W. Pye (1995). "Factions and the politics of *guanxi*: paradoxes in Chinese administrative and political behaviour", *The China Journal*, vol. 34, pp. 35-53.

is a structure that is 'mobilized on the basis of clientelist ties to engage in politics and consisting of a few, rather than a great many, layers of personnel'.⁷ Both sides in the faction are not equal: one side attaches to the other for protection or interests.⁸ Bo discusses four factional groups in relation to the 16th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): Shanghai Gang, CYL group, Qinghua clique and the Princelings.⁹

From the individual level, scholars focus more on personal ties. Feng finds that county cadres establish different personal ties, including family, nominal kin, fellows, classmates, comrades-in-arms, among which the role of "political family" is particularly important.¹⁰ Oppen, Nee and Brehm explore the promotion patterns of China's provincial leaders during the period from 1985 to 2005, and they find that network-based promotion plays a crucial role in leadership recruitment and the leadership promotion in China is determined by personalized relations.¹¹

However, the explanatory power of *guanxi* perspective is limited. First of all, *guanxi* is a social factor interacted with many other aspects and even many coincidental factors. It is so complicated that it is difficult for outsiders to capture it. Second, *guanxi* is difficult to be measured although scholars try to, especially in the term of local level where information availability is quite limited. In Oppen, Nee and Brehm's research, they calculate the personal networks of Chinese provincial leaders by checking their officially documented friendship, their (previous) membership of Communist Youth League Committee, and their potential

⁷ Andrew J. Nathan (1973). "A factionalism model for CCP politics", *The China Quarterly*, vol. 36, No. 3, pp. 34-66.

⁸ Carl H. Lande (1977). "Introduction", in Schmidt, Steffen W., et al. *Friends, Followers, and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism*, Berkely: University of California Press, p. 20.

⁹ Zhiyue, Bo (2004). "The 16th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: formal institutions and factional groups", *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 13.39, pp. 223-256.

¹⁰ Junqi, Feng (2010). *Zhong County's Cadre*, Beijing: Sociology Department, Beijing University, Doctoral Dissertation, pp.151-161.

¹¹ Sonja, Oppen, Victor, Nee & Stefan, Brehm (2015). "Homophily in the career mobility of China's political elite", *Social science research*, vol. 54, pp. 332-352.

connections with members of the standing committee of the politburo. This trial is pioneering yet it is still far from comprehensively measuring and interpreting *guanxi* factors. Third, when it comes to politics, *guanxi* usually happens under the table as a shady deal, which increases the difficulty in collecting valid data and diving into details. For reasons above, *guanxi* is at most a supplementary theory rather than a mainstream perspective for explaining cadre mobility in China.

Merit-based Pattern

Since the reform and opening up, great changes have also happened in the contingent of cadres. More young cadres with higher-level educational background and expertise show up in the political arena and gradually grow into an important force. Both native scholars and foreign researchers begin to notice these changes. They start to study the formation and structure of the new generation of political elites and pay attention to a wider range of factors that have influences on political mobility. In this regard, two main approaches have gradually been formed to explain Chinese cadre mobility.

The first one is economic performance approach. With the policy of "taking economic construction as the central task", the ability to develop regional economy becomes one of the most important qualities for regional leaders. Since the early 1990s, accordingly, economic performance has been employed as a key variable to examine the political mobility of Chinese political leaders. For instance, Bo applies a performance model to study provincial leader promotion from 1949 to 1998 by measuring the economic performance in terms of taxation contribution.¹² Li and Zhou illustrate that the higher-level government uses

¹² Zhiyue, Bo (2002). *Chinese provincial leaders: Economic performance and political mobility since 1949*, New York: ME Sharpe.

personnel control to motivate leaders to develop the local economy.¹³ Based on this, Zhou further proposes a "promotion tournament model" which claims that the superior government sets a GDP-oriented promotion tournament for its lower-level governments.¹⁴ Comparing to the old elites, therefore, new elites in China are keener on economic achievement.¹⁵ It is unsurprising since the CCP places great emphasis on economic development, especially after Deng's reform and the opening up. Economic performance approach could be viewed as a mainstream perspective of explaining political mobility, however, it is neither applicable to trace one's career trajectory prior to being promoted as a regional leader nor feasible to examine the political mobility of ordinary cadres.

Some other scholars concern political elites', educational credentials, working experience, and so on, which could be summarized as human capital endowment approach. As one of classical economists, Adam Smith takes skills, dexterity (physical, intellectual, psychological, etc.) and judgement ability as human capital, which can be acquired through formal schooling and on-the-job training.¹⁶ Explicitly, human capital endowments perspective focuses mainly on the aspects of educational background, human skills, occupational training, and so on. Owing to Deng's "four standards" of the cadre corps, some changes have gradually happened in the contingent of cadres.¹⁷ The overall educational level and the professional level of the Chinese leaders have been greatly improved, which draws scholars'

¹³ Hongbin, Li and Li-An, Zhou (2005). "Political turnover and economic performance: the incentive role of personnel control in China", *Journal of public economics*, vol. 89.9, PP. 1743-1762.

¹⁴ Li-An, Zhou (2007). "Zhongguo difang guanyuan de jinsheng jinbiaosai moshi yanjiu (Governing China's Local Officials: An Analysis of Promotion Tournament Mode)", *Jingji yanjiu (Economic Research Journal)*, vol. 7.36, pp. 36-50.

¹⁵ Cheng, Li and Lynn, White (1990). "Elite transformation and modern change in mainland China and Taiwan: empirical data and the theory of technocracy", *The China Quarterly*, vol. 121, pp. 1-35.

¹⁶ Joseph J. Spengler (1977). "Adam Smith on human capital", *The American Economic Review*, vol. 67.1, pp. 32-36.

¹⁷ Deng's "Four Standards" of the cadre corps refers to "better educated, professionally more competent, younger, and more revolutionary (zhishihua, zhuanqiyehua, nianqinghua, geminghua)". See Xiaoping, Deng (1983). *Deng Xiaoping Wen Xuan (Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping)*, vol2, Beijing: People's Publishing House, pp. 326, 361.

attentions to the educational credentials and professionalism of Chinese political elites. Being different from the ideology-oriented elites of previous generation, the technocrat-oriented elites of the new generation are characterized by important position, technical education and professional expertise.¹⁸ Specifically, education variables have greater influence on governmental officials' career advancement (than party officials).¹⁹

Moreover, bureaucratic career path is another perspective of examining political mobility of Chinese elites. It concerns how individuals are selected into the bureaucracy and how they are promoted within the organizational hierarchy.²⁰ By focusing on high-level elites' work experience and career path, Kou and Tsai find three methods to overcome age dilemma can get faster promotion: Communist Youth League route, temporary transferred duty (*guazhi duanlian*) and non-regulation promotion (*poge tiba*).²¹ Kou and Tsai's idea is fundamentally consistent with Lin's conclusion that a leaders' chance of further promotion is limited by their promotion speed in the past; while the promotion speed in turn is determined by the human capital accumulated.²² Scholars focusing on the political career path approach believe that career history or trajectory of cadres has a major effect on

¹⁸ Cheng, Li and Lynn, White (1998). "The Fifteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Full-Fledged Technocratic Leadership with Partial Control by Jiang Zemin", *Asian Survey*, vol. 38.3, pp. 231-264.

¹⁹ For analysis of different career path between governmental officials and party officials, see Andrew G. Walder (1995). "Career mobility and the communist political order", *American Sociological Review*, vol. 60, No. 3, pp. 309-328; Andrew G. Walder, Bobai, Li and Donald J. Treiman (2000). "Politics and life chances in a state socialist regime: Dual career paths into the urban Chinese elite, 1949 to 1996", *American Sociological Review* vol. 65.2, pp. 191-209; Xiaowei, Zang (2004). *Elite dualism and leadership selection in China*. London and New York: Routledge.

²⁰ Xueguang, Zhou (2001). "Political dynamics and bureaucratic career patterns in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1994", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 34.9 1036-1062.

²¹ Chien-wen, Kou, and Wen-Hsuan, Tsai (2014). "'Sprinting with Small Steps' Towards Promotion: Solutions for the Age Dilemma in the CCP Cadre Appointment System", *The China Journal*, vol. 71, pp. 153-171. According to Kou and Tsai, "non-regulation promotion" here refers to promotion of cadres outside pre-defined regulatory criteria, such as those on age, ethnicity, educational experience, gender and so on. Some scholars also call it as "exceptional promotion".

²² Tingjin, Lin (2012). "The promotion logic of prefecture-level mayors in China", *China: An International Journal*, vol. 10(3), pp. 86-109.

political mobility. Since the CCP places special emphasis on the quality and seniority of its cadres, this approach is becoming popular in the field of elite politics.

Seeking for an Integrated Approach

Merit-based pattern covers not only political leader's personal attributes, professional ability, working experience but also concerns leaders' work performance. Compared to the *guanxi*-based pattern which concentrates on factionalism or personal ties, the merit-based perspective has a stronger explanatory power in regard of Chinese political mobility. However, the merit-based pattern still faces some challenges. First, it depends on some more important factors, i.e. institutional factors and policy changes. A typical example is that, after Deng's policy of "Four standards" of the cadre corps, cadres' age, educational background and performance have growing influences on their political mobility. This implies that the more important thing is to investigate the institutional factors behind. Second, main approaches under the merit-based pattern actually intertwine with each other and thus cannot be fully separated. Third, it cannot be denied that *guanxi*-based pattern still has a certain degree of explanatory power, which suggests *guanxi* factors should not be ignored in understanding Chinese elite mobility. For the above reasons, it is a necessity to bring back the institutional factors and integrate existing research patterns of Chinese elite mobility.

As Andrew Nathan argues, "institutionalization" is the root cause of resilience of communist China, and one of the aspects of institutionalization is "the increase in meritocratic as opposed to factional considerations in the promotion of political elites."²³ As a political system that places emphasis on choosing virtuous and competent political leaders,

²³ Andrew J. Nathan (2003). "Authoritarian Resilience", *Journal of Democracy*, vol.14.1, pp.6-17.

political meritocracy should be a more proper yardstick to evaluate Chinese politics.²⁴ Bell provides us a broad theoretical framework of political meritocracy by summarizing three general qualities required of political leaders in large, peaceful, and modernizing meritocratic states -- intellectual ability, social skills, and virtue.²⁵ In the case of China, “having both ability and virtue” is the frequently-mentioned and currently-used cadre selection criteria, which means talent selection should be ability-based on the premise of virtue. Based on the discussion on abilities required of Chinese political leaders, this article attempts to reframe the merit-based pattern.

First of all, intellectual ability is the basic requirement for leadership in all walks of life, and of course, in all kinds of regime, since leaders need knowledge to generate solutions, tailor solutions to the organization, and implement these solutions within the organization.²⁶ In addition, political leaders must also possess “leadership expertise”, including communication skills, problem-solving skills, persuasion skills, negotiation skills, conflict management skills, and coaching skills.²⁷ These qualities directly determine the work performance and accomplishment of political leaders. They can be summarized as “occupational competence” which is accumulated by the working experience and on-the-job exercise.²⁸ But on the other hand, these qualities are also correlated with political elites’ personal traits, such as

²⁴ Daniel A. Bell. "Yong xianneng zhengzhi hengliang zhongguo zhengzhi tizhi geng heshi (It is more proper to measure Chinese political system with political meritocracy) ", *The Global Times*, 12 Jan 2015.

²⁵ Daniel A. Bell (2015). *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the limits of Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 107. Bell thinks China is the only country that comes close to fitting that description.

²⁶ Michael D. Mumford, et al. (2000). "Leadership skills for a changing world: Solving complex social problems", *The Leadership Quarterly*, vol. 11.1, pp. 11-35.

²⁷ Chan, Sow Hup (2010). "The influence of leadership expertise and experience on organizational performance: a study of Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia", *Asia Pacific business review*, vol. 16.1-2, pp. 59-77.

²⁸ “Occupational Competence” in this research is different from Bell’s argument of “social skills” which puts more emphasis on emotional intelligence, temperament and communication skills.

age and gender. Therefore, merit-based pattern to explain Chinese elite mobility actually concerns political elites' personal traits, intellectual ability and occupational competence.²⁹

Moreover, *guanxi* factors should not be neglected as they still exert influences on political mobility. Taking this into consideration, the integrated approach to examine career mobility political mobility should include four aspects: personal traits, intellectual ability, occupational competence and *guanxi*.

Data and Variables

This research draws on a database including biographical information of 532 incumbent party secretaries in Chinese county-level divisions (hereinafter referred to as the "Chinese county party secretaries ", CPSs). Government chiefs are not selected for the following reasons: as the boss of the county party committee, party secretary is the *de facto* top leader of a county, which makes this position the most significant; moreover, most county party secretaries were promoted from the position of county government chiefs, which means the government chief usually has a very similar career path to the party secretary.³⁰

Data were collected from 22 provinces in China. Among 34 provincial administrative divisions in China, four municipalities directly under the central government (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Chongqing) are excluded in the database because of their special status and the consequent different mechanism of political mobility. Five autonomous regions for ethnic minority (Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia and Guangxi) are not included owing

²⁹ Economic performance is not on the list because this approach is only applied to explain the political mobility of regional leaders or economy-related elites. It cannot be used to trace one's career trajectory prior to being promoted as a regional leader nor feasible to examine the political mobility of ordinary officials, because not every official has working experience in economy-related post.

³⁰ This can also be proved by the data of the dissertation: 425 (79.9%) county party secretaries in the database had once taken the position of county government chief.

to their particularity of ethnic minorities as well as data deficiency.³¹ Two special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macau) and Taiwan Province are also excluded due to their differences in political system and structure. And in the rest 22 provinces, districts (*qu*) or counties under provincial capitals are eliminated from the database because these they are designated as the deputy departmental/bureau level (*fu ting/ju ji*) which is higher than the county level. As a consequence, cases are collected from 2,095 county-level administrative divisions under non-capital cities in 22 provinces. Table 1 shows the composition of the database.

Table 1 Database Information

Province		Number of county-level administrative regions excluding those under the provincial capital	Number of cases	Percentage (%)
1	Hubei	90	44	48.9
2	Heilongjiang	110	32	29.1
3	Guizhou	78	37	47.4
4	Zhejiang	77	21	27.3
5	Hebei	148	26	17.6
6	Guangdong	108	26	24.0
7	Gansu	78	19	24.4
8	Shannxi	94	22	23.4
9	Jilin	50	5	10.0
10	Shandong	127	31	24.4
11	Jiangsu	88	22	25.0
12	Fujian	72	7	9.7
13	Henan	146	20	13.7
14	Hunan	113	34	30.1
15	Yunnan	115	16	13.9
16	Qinghai	36	14	38.9
17	Liaoning	87	9	10.3
18	Hainan	20	10	50.0

³¹ Therefore, CPSs in the database come from six types of county-level administrative divisions: county, county-level city (*xianjishi*), district under the municipality (*shixiaqu*), ethnic minority autonomous county (*shaoshu minzu zizhixian*), special zone (*tequ*), forest zone (*linqu*). Two other types, *qi* and *autonomous qi*, were not included because ethnic minority autonomous regions have been removed from the database.

19	Shanxi	109	24	22.0
20	Jiangxi	91	38	41.8
21	Anhui	96	27	28.1
22	Sichuan	162	48	29.6
Total		2,095	532	25.4

Biographical notes of these county party secretaries are all collected in 2016 from the *Data Bank of Local Leadership*, an official website sponsored by the party newspaper *People's Daily*.³² After filtering those incomplete ones, 532 complete archives were eventually collected among 2,095 county-level administrative divisions in 22 provinces.³³

Following the integrated approach, I use four sets of variables to examine the political mobility of Chinese county leaders: personal traits, intellectual ability, occupational competence and *guanxi*.

The first set of variables is CPSS' **personal traits**, including age, gender, ethnicity and party seniority. Similar personal trait variables have been used by Zang in his research on Chinese elite formality.³⁴ *Age* and *party seniority* are interval variables. *Ethnicity* is a dummy variable with Han Chinese coded as 0 and cadres of ethnic minority status as 1. *Gender* is also a dummy variable with female cadres as 0 and male cadres coded as 1. Ethnicity and Gender are control variables.

The second set of variables is **intellectual ability**, including years of full-time education, technical background (in college) and years of in-service degree education. For *years of full-time education*, educational level of junior school is recorded as 9 years, educational level of high school or technical secondary school is recorded as 11 years, junior college diploma is

³² For details of the data bank, see <http://ldzl.people.com.cn/dfzlk/front/xian1.htm>.

³³ A complete resume of county party secretary should include his or her biographical information (name, date of birth, gender, ethnicity, birthplace, party standing, both full-time and in-service educational background, and year of employment, etc.) and career histories including position changes and the tenure of each phase.

³⁴ Xiaowei, Zang (2006). "Technical training, sponsored mobility, and functional differentiation: Elite formation in China in the reform era", *Communist and post-communist studies*, vol. 39(1), pp. 39-57.

recorded as 14 years, bachelor degree is recorded as 16 years, master degree is recorded as 19 years, and doctor degree is recorded as 22 years. *Technical background* is a dummy variable, which mainly refers to county leaders' major in college or university. It is defined pretty much as the same way as technocracy scholars do.³⁵ Technical training includes two key components: management science majors and engineering majors. Other majors, such as arts, education, history, Chinese, philosophy, are defined as non-technical background. County leaders with technical background are coded as 1 and others as 0. For *years of in-service degree education*, years of party school education, on-the-job education in universities as well as overseas study are added up.

The third set of variables is **occupational competence** which is measured by working experiences from both horizontal and longitudinal dimensions. From the horizontal dimension, occupational competence variables include the number of counties a cadre transferred as well as the number of departments a cadre once worked for, namely *trans-regional experience* and *multi-department experience*. From the vertical dimension, *working experience at grassroots levels* is used as a dummy variable (once worked at towns or villages = 1, never worked at grassroots level = 0) since the CCP puts much emphasis on it.³⁶ Grassroots working experience tempers cadres' ability to overcome difficulties in harsh conditions, skills to communicate with workers and peasants, and spirit of selfless devotion.

³⁵ See Cheng, Li and Lynn, White (1988). "The thirteenth central committee of the Chinese communist party: From mobilizers to managers", *Asian Survey*, vol. 28.4, pp. 371-399; Cheng, Li and Lynn, White (1990). "Elite transformation and modern change in mainland China and Taiwan: empirical data and the theory of technocracy", *The China Quarterly*, vol. 121, pp. 1-35.

³⁶ According to Article 8(1), 2014 *Regulation on the Selection and Appointment of Party and Government leadership (dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong gongzuo tiaoli)*, those who are nominated to hold leadership positions at the county/divisional level should serve for more than five years and possess grassroots-level working experience for more than two years; according to Article 54(4), young cadres who have very simple working experience or lack of grassroots-level working experience should be dispatched to the grassroots level, remote areas with harsh conditions, and complex circumstances in a planned way.

The fourth set of variable concerns *guanxi* factors. Factionalism identifies that work experience in CYL system exerts a positive influence on political promotion.³⁷ For cadres with CYL committee working experience, age advantage after reassignment allows them to take time experiencing more extensive training in various fields, thus facilitating their rise to higher positions.³⁸ As an institutional part of Chinese politics, moreover, *mishu* have an advantage in getting rapid promotions not only because their close personal ties with their superiors but also because they have special skills of managing human relations.³⁹ Therefore, *working experience in the CYL committee* and *mishu experience* are used to examine whether *guanxi* factors have influence on the political mobility of Chinese county leaders.

I use *promotion speed* of Chinese county leaders as the dependent variable. It is a common sense that it is conceptually different between the rank of “county/divisional level” and the position of “CPS”, even though CPS is a county/divisional-level position.⁴⁰ Thus I define Promotion Speed A as the number of years worked prior to being promoted to a county/divisional-level position, while Promotion Speed B is defined as the number of years worked prior to the first acceptance as a CPS. Accordingly, there will be two models (for two dependent variables, promotion speed A and promotion speed B). For each model, intellectual ability variables, occupational competence variables and *guanxi* factor variables are computed respectively by their corresponding time points: the year of promoting to the county/divisional level and the year of first attaining the position of CPS.

³⁷ Cheng, Li (2001). *China's leaders: the new generation*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, p.149.

³⁸ Chien-Wen, Kou (2013), “The Rise of Youth League Affiliates and their Paths to the Top”, in Kou, Chien-Wen and Zang, Xiaowei (eds.), *Choosing China's Leaders*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 142–64.

³⁹ Li, Wei and Lucian W. Pye (1992). “The ubiquitous role of the *mishu* in Chinese politics”, *The China Quarterly*, vol. 132, pp. 913-936.

⁴⁰ In the database of this research, 97.7% CPSs rose to other positions at the county/divisional level before being appointed as a CPS. To be more accurate, therefore, attainment of both the rank and position is used as reference point.

Statistical Description of Chinese CPSs

Looking into the promotion logic of Chinese county leaders first requires some knowledge of the background of the 532 Chinese CPSs. This section discusses their age, gender, ethnicity, party seniority, educational background, professional qualification, and work experience by available data.

Table 2 shows the age of Chinese county leaders based on two baselines. When promoting to the county/divisional level, their average age is 40.25 years. While, their average age of being appointed as CPSs is 46.71 years. In this database, only 9 (1.69%) leaders were directly appointed as count CPSs from the deputy county/divisional level. Averagely, they were nominated as county party leaders after training in other county/divisional-Level positions for approximately 6 years and a half.

Table 2 Age of Chinese County Leaders

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age (as of 2016)	34	59	50.2406	3.68516
Age A (when the cadre was promoted to the county/divisional level)	24	52	40.2462	4.19190
Age B (when the cadre was nominated as the CPS for the first time)	31	55	46.7068	3.56702
Age B – Age A	0	17	6.4605	3.39939
N of valid cases	532			

As shown in Table 3, males constitute the vast majority of CPSs, while women only account for 7.3% of the total CPSs. Conforming to the common sense, it is much more difficult for women cadres to reach the position of regional leader even if they have equal ability with their male counterparts. Or in other words, promoting to a target position

requires female cadres to pay more effort than males. In Chinese political circle, the trend of male dominance still continues.

Table 3 Gender Distribution of Chinese County Leaders

	Frequency	Percent
Male	493	92.7
Female	39	7.3
Total	532	100

Table 4 presents the distribution of ethnicity among 532 Chinese county leaders. Most CPSs are of Han ethnicity, and 45 (8.5%) of them are minority leaders who are mostly limited to serving in minority areas. Given that five autonomous regions for ethnic minority (Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia and Guangxi) are excluded from the database, these minority leaders are from ethnic minority autonomous counties.

Table 4 Ethnicity of Chinese County Leaders

	Frequency	Percent
Minority	45	8.5
Han	487	91.5
Total	532	100

As for party seniority of 532 CPSs, Table 5 suggests that their average age of joining the CCP is 23.6 years. As the political life of a communist official, party seniority starts when he or she joins the CCP. It indicates the amount of political credentials a party cadre accumulates, and thus can be used as a better measure for political mobility than party membership which only represents whether he or she has a political credential. Further, this table indicates the length of CCP membership of 532 CPSs based on two baselines. When climbing to the county/divisional level, their average party age is 16.64 years. And their average party age of first acceptance as CPSs is 22.48 years. Serving as a regional leader

raises higher requirements on a cadre's comprehensive qualities. Normally, the party committee and its organization departments at each level do not appoint new recruits to very responsible positions. As shown in Table 5, the CCP averagely trains and observes inner-party cadres for 22.48 years prior to nominating them as the CPS.

Table 5 Party Seniority of Chinese County Leaders

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age of party entry	17	36	23.6071	3.21569
Party Age A (when the cadre was promoted to the county/divisional level)	1	29	16.64	4.833
Party Age B (when the cadre was nominated as CPS for the first time)	6	34	22.48	4.383
N of valid cases	532			

Li and White believe that new elites in China have come to power in part because of their advanced educational backgrounds.⁴¹ In this research, data of 532 CPSs also support this point. According to Table 6, most county leaders have received college or university education: 355 (66.7%) of them have obtained the degree of junior college or above.

Table 6 Full-time Education of Chinese County Leaders

	Frequency	Percent
Middle school	10	1.9
High school / secondary technical school	167	31.4
Junior college	115	21.6
Bachelor	224	42.1
Master	14	2.6
Doctor	2	0.4
Total	532	100

⁴¹ Li, Cheng, and White, Lynn (1990). "Elite transformation and modern change in mainland China and Taiwan: empirical data and the theory of technocracy", *The China Quarterly*, vol. 121, pp. 1-35.

Previous studies have discussed the impact of professional background on promotion of political leaders at higher levels. For example, Zang's research demonstrates that technical training accelerates the promotion of China's top leaders, particularly in the case of governmental officials (instead of party cadres).⁴² This research, then, investigates the academic background of Chinese county leaders. In the database, there are totally 477 (89.7%) CPSs have once received professional education in college or university, including 357 (67.1%) of them studying in technical majors and 120 (22.6%) of them studying in art majors.

In the database, 440 (82.7%) CPSs have once received on-the-job education and the majority of them studied in social sciences, like economic management, law, party history, basic principles of Marxism. Based on different timelines, they have averagely received on-the-job education for 3.10 years before rising to the county/divisional level. And prior to the attainment of the CPS position, they have averagely received on-the-job education for 3.66 years.

By examining the working experience on both horizontal and vertical dimension, I measure the occupational competence of Chinese CPSs. In the term of vertical dimension, 242 (45.5%) county leaders in the database have been trained in grassroots levels, i.e. townships or villages.

Table 7 shows CPCs' working experience on the horizontal dimension: before rising to the county/divisional level, the county leaders have averagely transferred to 1.35 counties and 2.69 departments; while prior to the attainment of the position of CPS, they have averagely transferred to 2.23 counties and 3.28 departments.

⁴² Xiaowei, Zang (2006). "Technical training, sponsored mobility, and functional differentiation: Elite formation in China in the reform era", *Communist and post-communist studies*, vol. 39.1, pp. 39-57.

Table 7 Horizontal Working Experience of Chinese County Leaders

	Number of counties the cadre transferred	The number of departments the cadre transferred
when the cadre was promoted to the county/divisional level)	1.35	2.69
when the cadre was nominated as CPS for the first time)	2.23	3.28
N of valid cases	532	

Table 8 also indicates county leaders' work experiences in certain positions. In this table, 156 of county leaders once worked in the CYL committee at different levels, accounting for 29.3% of county leaders in the database. As the cradle of young cadres, the CYL trains and promotes a crop of young men with superior education background and high political quality. Among all the county leaders in the database, 156 (29.3) of them have once served as the *mishu* for the superior.

Table 8 Work Experience of Chinese County Leaders

	Frequency	Percent
Never served in the CYL system	376	70.7
Once served in the CYL system	156	29.3
Never served as a <i>mishu</i>	376	70.7
Once served as a <i>mishu</i>	156	29.3
Total	532	100

Findings

The statistical description presents the basic information of 532 Chinese CPSs. Based on it, this section is going to conduct the OLS regression analysis on the promotion speed of Chinese CPSs. By testing four groups of independent variables (personal trait, intellectual ability, occupational competence, and *guanxi*), regression models show the promotion

mechanism of Chinese CPSs. According to the definition of both promotion speed A and B, a smaller number means a faster promotion, which is to say, a negative coefficient denotes that the variable accelerates the promotion speed.

Table 9 Regression Analysis of merits on Promotion Speed of Chinese County Leaders

	Model A		Model B
DV	Promotion Speed A		Promotion Speed B
IVs			
Male	.232 (.012)		.242 (.014)
Ethnic Minority	-.137 (-.008)		.074 (.005)
Age_A	.682*** (.587)	Age_B	.560*** (.434)
Party Seniority_A	.101*** (.100)	Party Seniority_B	.283*** (.270)
Full-time education	-.642*** (-.328)		-.582*** (-.315)
Technical background	.669*** (.064)		.823*** (.084)
In-service education_A	-.021 (-.011)	In-service education B	.035 (.021)
Trans-regional experience_A	.102 (.021)	Trans-regional experience_B	-.045 (-.010)
Multi-department experience_A	.250** (.062)	Multi-department experience_B	.209** (.061)
Grassroots experience_A	.044 (.035)	Grassroots experience_B	.023 (.019)
Experience in the CYL committee_A	.140 (.013)	Experience in the CYL committee_B	-.240 (-.024)
Mishu experience_A	-.239 (-.022)	Mishu experience_B	-.461* (-.046)
Constant	-3.601** (--)		-1.863 (--)
Adjusted R ²	.741		.637
F	127.502***		78.604***

* p≤0.10, ** p≤0.05, *** p≤0.01.

As shown in Table 9, Model 1 reports the regression analysis of CPSs' promotion to the county/divisional level, while Model 2 presents the regression analysis of their promotion to the position of CPS for the first time. Results of both models are substantially consistent.

Both Models show that age is strongly correlated with the promotion speed of CPSs. The data show that the later a cadre was born, the less time it will take to climb the political hierarchy. In other words, cadres who are younger in age get a faster promotion. Besides, party seniority fails to facilitate promotion, which actually demonstrates that newly-recruited party members climb faster in the political hierarchy than veterans.

Unsurprisingly, the result both models indicate that full-time education greatly facilitates county leaders' promotion. However, in-service education does not show any significant effect on promotion speed. Unexpectedly, data analysis shows in both models technical training slows down the political mobility of Chinese county leaders.

Data analysis fails to prove that those with stronger occupational competence run faster in the promotion competition. Multi-department experience even shows a negative effect on the promotion speed of county leaders in both models. Given the fact that the CCP has laid great emphasis on cadres' grassroots experience, both models present a completely opposite result as grassroots social skills delay county leaders' promotion. In other words, cadres with richer experience at the grassroots level are less likely to get a faster promotion either to the county/divisional level or the position of CPS.

Last two variables show the impact of *guanxi* on county leaders' promotion speed. Model 2 shows that *mishu* experience facilitates the promotion speed of county leaders, which means that *guanxi* factors exert influences on the career mobility of Chinese county leaders.

Rising Stars: Young and Better-educated Cadres

In the Mao era, when "RED and expert (*you hong you zhuan*)" was set as the core principle of selecting political leaders, political loyalty or redness was set as the highest priority beyond dispute. After Deng came into power, he re-discussed the principle of "being both

red and expert” and proposed “Four Standards” of the cadre corps. Though political stance is still emphasized by the party as the first consideration of leadership selection, it is no longer the sole determinant. Instead, more emphasis has been placed on educational level, expertise and rejuvenation of cadres. This trend, in the meanwhile, actually weakens the link between party seniority and political mobility.

Since 1980s, great changes have taken place in the contingent of cadres. During the decades after the end of the Cultural Revolution, a pool of young talents with higher educational background is selected through the college entrance examination system, filling the talent gap led by the Cultural Revolution. This trend continues to expand especially after the implementation of the civil service examination system, allowing a great number of young men with good education background to enter public sectors grow into the main force in Chinese bureaucracy. By virtue of sound educational background and expertise, some juniors even achieve a faster promotion than seniors, and consequently young and better-educated cadres become the rising stars of Chinese politics.

In recent decade, such headlines about young cadres’ faster promotion frequently gain people’s attention. A large pool of post-1980s cadres with advanced academic degrees enters local politics. They were mostly recruited into the party when they were studying in colleges or universities, and many of them get a very fast promotion after being engaged in politics.

In 2009, a piece of political news, A Tsinghua University Graduate is Nominated as the Youngest Mayor in China, made a big splash all around China. As the main character of the news, Zhou Senfeng was born in 1980 and joined the CCP in 2000. He received his bachelor’s degree in civil engineering at Tongji University in 2001,

and finished his master degree in science and engineering at Tsinghua University in 2004. Five years later after serving as a deputy divisional/county-level cadre in the Construction Committee of Xiangyang city in Hubei province, Zhou was appointed as the mayor of Yicheng, a county-level city under the jurisdiction of Xiangyang city. At the age of 29, he was well known as China's youngest mayor throughout the country.

This is a typical case of young stars in Chinese local politics. With few exceptions, reports and articles always highlight their young age, high education level and, sometimes, their work history, while material about their practical ability is rarely found. Compared to the situation in the Mao era, the quality of the contingent of cadres has been greatly improved indeed, especially in the age structure and educational level. From the perspective, it cannot be denied that Chinese bureaucracy is becoming meritocratic than before. However, it is too early to draw the final conclusion. Going back to the case above, in 2011 Zhou got another promotion to deputy bureau/departmental level, leading to a heated discussion once again. Without enough information about Zhou's practical ability and actual performance, people still doubt if he deserves such a fast promotion.

Political Glass Ceiling for Local Cadres

It is generally recognized that the position of regional leader requires capacities of coordinating, commanding, overall planning, overcoming difficulties in harsh conditions, and so on. Therefore, it is natural that candidates with stronger practical abilities will be preferred. Unexpectedly, data analysis indicates the negative impact of actual occupational competence on the political mobility of Chinese county leaders.

Practical abilities derive from cadres' previous practices in multiple departments and regions with different characteristics at various management levels, and they can improve with the growth of work experience. As indicated in both models, trans-regional working experience and grassroots working experience fail to show any positive effect on fast promotion, and multi-department working experience even delays the promotion speed of county leaders. These results demonstrate that cadres who received more training in various departments fail to get a faster promotion. Instead, those who have relatively less experience in grassroots areas and simpler experience in different regions or departments climb faster in the political hierarchy.

Moreover, data analysis also suggests technical training greatly decreases the promotion speed of Chinese CPSs. In other words, faster climbers in county-level regions are those who studied in art majors or received no professional education, which is contrary to some previous studies on higher-level political leaders.⁴³ In the early stage of reform, a large number of talents with technical training were recruited into public sectors to meet the demands of economic construction. Many of these cadres, especially those who have expertise in agriculture, forestry, veterinary, water conservancy and other engineering-related fields, were assigned to rural areas. However, yet the majority of them they dedicate considerable time to grassroots and miss the opportunity for upward mobility.

As Kostka and Yu argue, age and education restrictions, limited available spots, weak network ties, and superior leaders' appointment preferences lead to the obstacles against county-level cadres' further promotion to upper ranks. Facing with very limited

⁴³ See Xiaowei Zang (2006). "Technical training, sponsored mobility, and functional differentiation: Elite formation in China in the reform era", *Communist and post-communist studies*, vol. 39(1), pp. 39-57; Cheng, Li & David, Bachman (1989). "Localism, elitism, and immobilism: Elite formation and social change in post-Mao China", *World Politics*, vol. 42.01, pp. 64-94; Tingjin, Lin (2012). "The promotion logic of prefecture-level mayors in China", *China: An International Journal*, vol. 10(3), pp. 86-109.

opportunities for upward mobility, a large number of lower-ranking cadres spend a great deal of time and energy working in towns and villages or transferring laterally between departments but fail to get career advancement. Many of them are competent ones with strong problem-solving skills or technical background. The political glass ceiling is very likely to cause complaint and resentment in local cadres. Furthermore, some juniors' rocket-like promotion aggravates their grievance and will adversely affect their motivation to work.

Entangled with Guanxi Factors

Data analysis shows experience in the CYL committee has a positive effect on faster promotion, while it is not significant. On the other hand, *mishu* experience significantly facilitates the promotion to the position of CPS, which suggests that Chinese county cadre selection is entangled with personal ties. This result supports scholars' idea on the role of *guanxi* in Chinese politics.

Chinese political leaders rely on a long and culturally shaped tradition of *guanxi*-based recruitment and promotion to secure individual commitment and organizational consent.⁴⁴ While *guanxi* is practiced to promote harmony and cohesion in elite politics, it usually evolves into favoritism, nepotism or corruption behaviors which go against merit-based appointment and will cause damages to political ecology. As long as there is no strong system of laws or well-defined popular faith to uphold the ideals of legitimacy, *guanxi* can be expected to continue its crucial role in Chinese politics.⁴⁵ For China, a large, modernizing country without free election or checks and balances, virtue plays a special role in cadre and personnel management. In addition to the improvement of legal system, the enhancement

⁴⁴ Joseph, Fewsmith (1996). "Institutions, Informal Politics, and Political Transition in China", *Asian Survey*, vol. 36.3, pp. 230-245.

⁴⁵ Xuezhij, Guo (2001). "Dimensions of *guanxi* in Chinese elite politics", *The China Journal*, vol. 46, pp. 69-90.

of official virtue should be the main consideration in the optimization of Chinese cadre and personnel management system.

Conclusion

Using a new biographical database of 532 Chinese CPSs, this article has analyzed their group characteristics and mobility mechanism. Generally speaking, Chinese CPSs is a group of people who are well educated and rigorously tested through a strict selection process. Data analysis further indicates that comparing to old generations, many young and better-educated cadres become rising stars in Chinese local politics, accompanied with a large number of competent senior cadres facing political glass ceilings in their way of upper mobility.

Without denying the fact that Chinese bureaucracy is becoming more and more meritocratic due to Deng's "Four Standards" of the cadre corps, Chinese cadre and personnel system runs into some problems. Better-educated juniors with few practical skills get faster promotion to leadership position in counties and even important positions in the municipality, yet a large number of senior ones with rich work experience or/and professional expertise get stuck in counties and even townships. To deal with the political glass ceiling problem, the cadre evaluation system and incentive mechanism needs an overhaul. Moreover, the finding of statistical analysis also shows the influence of *guanxi* in local cadre selection, which will easily give rise to some unhealthy tendencies in local cadre selection, including nepotism, favoritism and corruption. Given China's political condition, the reinforcement of official virtue might be the important concern of the future reform.