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Clientelism by Design: Personnel Politics under Xi Jinping

Jérôme DOYON

Abstract: Since Xi Jinping took power in late 2012, analysts have puzzled over how best to define his political trajectory. Is he consolidating power and building a personality cult around himself, or is he strengthening the Party as an organisation? I tackle this issue by focusing on the transformation of personnel policies under Xi. I highlight an increasing concentration of power in the hands of Party leaders at all echelons. At the institutional level, the Party increasingly controls the management and disciplining of officials. At the level of the individual cadres themselves, promotion processes are increasingly managed behind closed doors and less importance is being given to objective criteria for cadre advancement. The age-based rules which structured the promotion of officials and ensured a high level of personnel turnover within the party state are also de-emphasised. I argue that these changes are paving the way for a more clientelist and aging party state.

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Keywords: China, party state, cadre management, clientelism

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Introduction

Has Xi Jinping been consolidating his own power at the expense of the Party? Since Xi became the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in late 2012, a series of events appear to point in the direction of an increased personalisation of power. After Xi was designated the "core" (核心, *hexin*) of the central leadership at the Sixth Plenum of the 18th Party Central Committee in October 2016 (*Xinhua* 2016a), "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想, *Xi Jinping xin shidai Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi sixiang*) was added to the CCP charter at the 19th Party Congress of October 2017 (*Xinhua* 2017a). Hu Jintao, Xi's predecessor, failed to receive this symbolic denomination as core despite his 10 years of leadership. Besides that, Xi has seen his "thought" elevated to the Party's guiding ideology after only one term in office. His predecessors Hu and Jiang Zemin had to wait until retirement for their theoretical contributions to be given such status. Beyond these symbolic acknowledgments of Xi's power, it is the removal from the People's Republic of China (PRC) constitution of the two-term limit for the Office of President that has attracted the most attention – as Xi now has no legal restriction on remaining president after 2022. This change appears to be a clear sign of Xi's challenge to the process of institutionalising Chinese politics that first started in the 1980s (Shirk 2018; Guerguiev 2018).

Although most observers agree that Xi is challenging the status quo, there is wide disagreement on the implications of the institutional changes that he has put forward. For some, the current changes amount to a new phase of centralisation of the party-state apparatus, aiming at greater efficiency (Kostka and Nahm 2017). Before the lifting of the presidential term limit, some scholars would go even further, describing Xi's centralisation of power as the first step in a profound reform of the system towards greater institutionalisation (Wang and Zeng 2016). Conversely, the lifting of the term limit – an institutional mechanism described as a pillar of Chinese elite politics' relative stability since the 1980s (Ma 2016) – provides fresh support for those arguing that Xi's reforms aim at a simple personalisation of power, at the expense of the Party (Shirk 2018). Finally, they are others who try to find a middle way, refusing to see the relationship between Xi's personal power and the Party's organisational strength as a zero-sum game (Guerguiev 2018).

The article engages with this debate by focusing on the transformation of the Party's personnel policies under Xi, and specifically on the mechanisms governing the recruitment and promotion of leading cadres. It aims to provide a systematic analysis of the recent evolution of personnel politics to see how it fits with the personalisation of power narrative. Such an organisational approach also allows for evaluating the changes made under Xi in light of previous personnel policies.

A careful analysis of critical documents tied to cadre management issued by the CCP since Xi took power highlights a trend towards the increased concentration of power. Contrary to a pure centralisation of power, the increased concentration thereof in Xi's own hands goes together with the strengthening of Party leaders' positions at every echelon of the party state. At the organisational level, recent reforms have expanded the Party's reach in terms of personnel management and discipline. At the level of individual cadres, Xi is both putting pressure on leading officials through the Party's disciplinary apparatus and giving them more agency in personnel recruitment and promotion. To do so, Xi is dismantling the mechanisms aimed at increasing transparency in the promotion process that had been put forward under Hu, as well as downplaying the importance of age as a criterion for promotion. This carrot-and-stick strategy gives more weight to the leader's subjectivity, and is being reproduced at every level of the party-state apparatus.

After reviewing the existing literature on the progressive institutionalisation of the CCP's cadre system, I unveil the reforms strengthening the position of the Party apparatus in personnel management and discipline. Finally, I detail critical changes to the personnel system occurring under Xi, which challenge both intra-Party democracy (党内民主, *dangnei minzhu*) mechanisms and elite turnover. I argue that these changes strengthen the party state's clientelist features and will limit that elite turnover.

The Institutionalisation of the Cadre Management System, and Its Limits

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese cadre corps gradually became an organised bureaucracy with a structured ranking and wage system. First steps towards the institutionalisation of bur-

eaucratic rules were observable at the local level starting from the 1950s. Oksenberg (1968) has shown that, during what he called the bureaucratic phases of Mao Zedong's era – which took place in between major political campaigns, such as the anti-rightist campaign (1957), the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), or the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) – political recruitment grew more codified and educational background became a more critical selection criterion relative to class background. In the 1960s, Vogel (1967) examined the regularisation of commonly understood standards to evaluate and train cadres. Barnett (1967: 45) argued that in the late 1960s, China's cadre management practices had developed into a system in which performance was more important than interpersonal factors in determining career advancement. This initial phase of institutionalisation ceased with the onset of the Cultural Revolution.

After Mao's death in 1976 and the reforms that followed, a whole branch of literature emerged on the renewed institutionalisation of cadre recruitment in China (Lee 1991). It demonstrated how, starting in 1980 with Deng Xiaoping's call for a four-way transformation, the cadre corps was reformed through the promotion of individuals who were "revolutionary, younger, more educated, and more technically specialised" (Deng 2014: 326). The CCP stopped relying on class background as a criterion for political selection, and developed new rules in the 1980s regarding cadres' recruitment, training, and promotion. Education now became a key criterion herein (Lee 1991).

The new retirement regulations were instrumental in transforming the regime's elite. It was the end of the life-tenure system (Manion 1993). Moreover, from ministerial positions downwards, new rules regarding age limits were promulgated in the 1980s for every cadre rank (Kou and Zang 2014). Parallel to these written regulations, unwritten norms were gradually established to force the retirement of national Party leaders. At the 15th Party Congress in 1997, an unwritten age limit of 70 was first applied to the election of Politburo members (Kou and Zang 2014). Beyond age-related regulations, other emerging rules regarding term limits and progressive promotions also led to a more stable and predictable promotion system for officials (Kou and Zang 2014).

Related to these changes, a debate emerged in the 1980s about the relative role of the Party and the state in cadre management. In

1980 Deng Xiaoping voiced his dissatisfaction with the rigid personnel management system and underscored that the role played by the Party should be redefined (Chan 2016). Both Deng and Zhao Ziyang pushed, then, from 1986 onwards for separating the Party and the state when it comes to personnel. This emphasis led to the establishment of the Ministry of Personnel in 1988, a new body to take responsibility for the management of cadres working in central government organs, service units, and public enterprises (Burns 1994). The suggested reforms, however, never went as far as proposed by Zhao and would stall after his eventual fall from power and the political repression of 1989 (Chan 2016).

While the separation of the Party and the state was never implemented (Brødsgaard 2018), starting from the 1990s their respective responsibilities were clarified with the structuring of a civil service system. In addition to the establishment of a decentralised structure of civil service examinations, one of the most important developments of the new civil service system established in 1993 was the separation between the management of leading cadres (领导干部, *lingdao ganbu*) and that of non-leading ones (非领导干部, *feilingdao ganbu*) (Edin 2003). Leading cadres are the highest-ranked party-state figures at every level of the polity and within public sector units. The distinction between leading and non-leading cadre takes form within a structured hierarchy, with the ranks determining salaries and benefits. Leading cadre ranks start at the section leadership level (科级, *keji*) – the equivalent of a township leader or a department director in a county-level government, and go all the way up to the state leadership level (国级, *guoji*) (Edin 2003). While official party-state statistics generally refer to leading cadres starting from the division director level (处级, *chuji*), a recent article has estimated the overall number of such individuals at about two million (Chan and Gao 2018). The leading cadres are held responsible for, and evaluated on, the performance of their unit. They are managed through the nomenklatura system under the control of the Party's Organisation Department, while state organs manage non-leading cadres (Edin 2003). The Party's control over leading positions was formalised into law in 2005 with the drafting of the "Civil Service Law" (Chan 2016).

Before Xi's rise to power, it was hence widely accepted that the CCP had over a prolonged period of time developed clear structures and mechanisms to recruit, supervise, and promote its officials. Still,

scholars have debated the system's degree of institutionalisation and meritocracy. The literature has stressed the development of precise guidelines to evaluate local cadres based on specific performance criteria (Heberer and Trappel 2013; Edin 2003). Some scholars went even further, and described the Chinese political system as approaching a "political meritocracy" (Bell 2018). However, only mixed empirical evidence accounts for a positive effect of work performance on the promotion of officials. Several studies highlight relationships as being more crucial than work performance (Landry, Lü, and Duan 2018; Shih, Adolph, and Liu 2012). Other scholars have argued that cadre management is only partially formalised, and that this is increasingly visible under Xi (Fewsmith and Nathan 2019). There has, however, been no systematic study to date of the evolution of the cadre management system since 2012.

To study the changes, then, in cadre management under Xi I choose to focus on key documents issued by the Central Party apparatus:

First, I analyse the "Plan to Deepen Reform of Party and State Institutions" (hereafter, Plan to Deepen Reform) released in March 2018. This document was adopted at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 19th CCP Central Committee, and then approved by the National People's Congress (NPC). It lays out a comprehensive plan for the transformation of both Party and state structures. While the official goal is to modernise further and render bureaucracy more efficient, I highlight how it strengthens the role played by the Party in personnel matters (CC of the CCP 2018).

Second, I focus on the main Party document regarding the management of leading officials: "Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres" (hereafter, Work Regulations). These regulations apply to all levels of the party-state structures, as well as Party leading cadres in the People's Liberation Army, state-owned enterprises, and other social organisations. When the initial version came out in 1995, it was described as the first complete and systematic document on the management of leading officials (CC of the CCP 1995). This document was since revised several times, in 2002, 2014, and again in March 2019 (CC of the CCP 2019a). Comparing the different versions reveals the changing trends in the recruitment and promotion of leading officials.

In line with previous studies focusing on the evolution of the party-state personnel management system through official documents (Manion 1985; Burns 1994; Chan 2016), a detailed analysis of these two regulations allows a deeper understanding of the institutional changes promoted under Xi. While this approach leaves open the question of their implementation, it does give us a sense of the direction of change and of the party state's view regarding personnel issues. Such an organisational perspective also allows for a more transparent and systematic study of the transformation of Chinese elite politics than the "pekinological" approach – which analyses fluxes in power based on the supposed personal relationships between top officials, and which remains mostly speculative (Li 2016).

The Party Manages and Disciplines Cadres

While the separation of the Party and the state was never fully implemented vis-à-vis personnel management, it remained the official line throughout the reform era and formed an essential background to the introduction of the civil service system in 1993 (Brødsgaard 2018). This is now changing under Xi. In March 2017 Wang Qishan, then secretary of the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, publicly challenged the notion of a separation between Party and state, talking instead of a "division of labour" (党政分工, *dangzheng fengong*) (*Lianhe Zaobao* 2017). The Plan to Deepen Reform clarified this new approach, including when it comes to cadre management. It called for the "strengthening of the Party's centralised and unified leadership over the civil servant ranks" (加强党对公务员队伍的集中统一领导, *jiaqiang gongwuyuan duiwu de jizhong tongyi lingdao*).

In practical terms, the Plan to Deepen Reform includes the absorption of the State Administration for Public Service by the Party's Central Organisation Department (CC of the CCP 2018). This state agency was, up until this reform's enactment, part of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and was in charge of managing civil servants – now 10 million in number (Xue and Chen 2018). It will henceforth exist only in name, for public relations purposes. The Organisation Department is also to exert direct control over the State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform, which is in charge of allocating personnel and organisational resources (CC of the CCP 2018). These changes not only affect personnel management, as the

Plan to Deepen Reform details the further strengthening of the Party over the state in other policy areas – such as propaganda work or the management of religious affairs (CC of the CCP 2018).

These changes do not directly contradict previous practices, either. The Party has always played a key role in personnel management and supervised the state structures in charge of human resources (Brødsgaard 2018). In contrast to its previous focus on the management of leading cadres, however, these institutional changes put the Party in direct charge of all personnel management and human resource allocations, including regarding non-Party members too.

A similar trend emerges when it comes to punishing party-state officials, as the disciplining campaigns launched by Xi have effectively expanded the Party's power over these individuals. In the spring of 2013, Xi initiated a massive anti-corruption campaign: some 1,537,000 party-state cadres were disciplined, within the Party or through the courts, between the 18th and the 19th Party Congresses (2012–2017) (Li 2018). This campaign is overseen by the Party's Central Discipline and Inspection Commission (CDIC). Beyond sheer numbers, Xi's campaign is exceptional as it targets not only low- and mid-level officials but also high-ranking "tigers." At the end of 2017, 440 cadres above deputy ministerial level had been punished (Li 2018). Overall, Xi used this campaign as a strategic tool for dismantling competing networks (Fu 2014); several of the disgraced officials were, in fact, accused of organising themselves against the incumbent (Bloomberg 2014).

In June 2013, and parallel to the anti-corruption campaign, Xi launched a new "Mass Line Education and Practice Campaign" (群众路线教育实践活动, *qunzhong luxian jiaoyu shijian huodong*) (CC of the CCP 2013). Officially, the campaign's primary goals were to make the government more accessible to the public and to eradicate "the four [bad] work styles" (四风, *sifeng*): formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism, and extravagance (*Xinhua* 2013). The Mass Line Campaign went hand in hand with Xi's anti-corruption drive and his efforts to strengthen the CCP. The former provided the ideological background, as well as information to fuel the latter.

One of the critical enforcement tools of the Mass Line Campaign took the form of regular self-criticism sessions, called "democratic life meetings" (民主生活会, *minzhu shenghuo hui*) across all party-state units. The democratic life meetings did not stop with the end of

the campaign in 2015, and have since been formalised as a disciplinary procedure by the "Guidelines on Intra-Party Life in the New Situation" (CC of the CCP 2016). These democratic life meetings are regularly organised by the CCP committees at each level, and overseen by the Party's disciplinary apparatus. At the central level, Politburo members must attend such meetings at least once a year. During these officials are encouraged to come forward and atone for bad behaviour, as well as to denounce their colleagues' failings (CC of the CCP 2016).

Rather than decreasing in force after a few years, as often happens with Party campaigns, this disciplinary drive has in fact intensified and been further institutionalised. In 2017 investigations instigated by the Party continued to rise, with a 27 per cent increase in number as compared to the previous year (Wedeman 2018). To pursue anti-graft efforts further, starting from the end of 2016 new structures have been set up. In November 2016, a new Central Leading Group for Deepening the Reform of the Supervision System was established. This new body's role is to organise the establishment of a network of supervision commissions throughout China (*Xinhua* 2016b). At the same time, the NPC approved a constitutional amendment creating a National Supervision Commission (NSC) and adopted a "Supervision Law" detailing its operations (NPC 2018).

The NSC oversees local commissions, established at the provincial, city, and county levels. This reform integrates within the respective supervision commissions the various departments already dealing with supervision and corruption prevention, and in particular elements of the State Ministry of Supervision, of the CDIC, and of the Procuratorate. Although the State Ministry of Supervision and the Party Discipline and Inspection Commission have, in practice, been merged since 1993, this new Commission formalises this unification and includes the judicial authority of the Procuratorate. The NSC and its local versions have, therefore, supervisory power over all public sector personnel (Wedeman 2018).

Beyond administrative streamlining, the Plan to Deepen Reform makes clear that the new NSC will share offices, organisational structure, and personnel with the CDIC. They are supposed to operate as one institution with two different names (CC of the CCP 2018). Besides that, Yang Xiaodu, head of the NSC, is also deputy director of the CDIC, thus illustrating the hierarchical inferiority of the new

commission in comparison with the Party structure (Horsley 2018). Overall, while the plan for a new supervisory body offered the possibility of a formalised disciplinary mechanism external to the Party, the new commission is mainly a way for the CDIC to extend its reach beyond Party members – to the whole public sector.

The changes initiated under Xi have therefore further strengthened and structured the Party's control over the management and disciplining of all party-state officials – beyond leading cadres, and beyond Party members too. This is being done at the expense of the supervisory power of the state. This does not, however, equal a centralisation of power in Xi's hands pure and simple. While they are under increased scrutiny, local Party leaders are indeed also granted more discretion in the evaluation, promotion, and recruitment of their subordinates.

The Subjective Power of the "Number One"

Local Party leaders, the "number one" (一把手, *yi ba shou*), have always been the key players in terms of recruitment. These decisions may be collective in theory, but they are also highly hierarchical – with the Party secretary at the relevant level having the final say (Edin 2003; Zeng 2015). Recent changes in the recruitment and promotion of officials now give Party leaders even more leeway in personnel matters. The Work Regulations were revised twice under Xi, in 2014 and 2019 (CC of the CCP 2019a). These successive changes highlight how the system of cadre management is being altered.

Most importantly, the new regulations modify the evaluation system for leading officials. Since the 1990s the party state has developed an evaluation system based on specific performance criteria, especially for leading cadres who are held responsible for that of their unit. Statistical assessments of performance are a crucial part of this evaluation. The gross domestic product growth of a locality, for example, is essential in evaluating the performance of local party-state leaders (Heberer and Trappel 2013). This approach was challenged under Hu, and the evaluation system became more complex; cadre evaluation metrics became less focused on economic growth (Zuo 2015). The 2014 version of the Work Regulations mirrored these evolutions, updating the 2002 one. In addition to existing indicators regarding social stability, economic development, and environmental

impact, new ones have been developed – including the level of employment, public income, technological innovation, education, healthcare, and social security (CC of the CCP 2014). These changes were a response to various issues experienced by the party state when measuring performance, as well as to the problem of statistical manipulation or "gaming" (Gao 2015).

The April 2019 version sets forth changes insisting on cadres' moral and political correctness. It introduces a "political standard" (政治标准, *zhengzhi biaozhun*) as the most important criterion for evaluation. Although it still states that a cadre's performance evaluation should not be based merely on economic growth, it does not go into much detail regarding the other criteria to be taken into account. Instead, it mentions that cadres must be evaluated in light of their contribution to "economic construction, political construction, cultural construction, social construction, construction of an ecological civilisation, Party construction, and so on" (经济建设、政治建设、文化建设、社会建设、生态文明建设和党的建设等, *Jingji jianshe, zhengzhi jianshe, wenhua jianshe, shehui jianshe, shengtai wenming jianshe he dang de jianshe deng*). These vague terms leave much leeway to local leaders to decide what to focus on when evaluating their subordinates. The most recent version of the Work Regulations confirmed these changes (CC of the CCP 2019b).

Second, intra-Party democracy procedures introduced in the first decade of the new century to make the promotion process more transparent are now being dismantled. After 2002, the first necessary step when selecting a cadre for promotion had been "democratic recommendation" (民主推荐, *minzhu tuijian*). This recommendation procedure plays a gatekeeper role, so as to select through a supposedly transparent process those qualified to go to the next stages (Zeng 2015). The procedure was revised in 2014. From being "the most important basis" (重要依据之一, *zhongyao yiju zhiyi*) in candidate selection, the results of the recommendation process became defined as only an "important reference" (重要参考, *zhongyao cankao*) (CC of the CCP 2002, 2014). The 2019 iteration further decreases the importance of democratic recommendations in the recruitment process. While until then appointments of leading officials "had to" (必须, *bixu*) go through this process, they now only "should" (应当, *yingdang*) (CC of the CCP 2014, 2019a).

In more practical terms, by contrast with the system developed in 2002 – which implied recommendation through a secret vote – the 2014 Work Regulations mark a shift to oral recommendations instead (CC of the CCP 2002, 2014). This change was justified by the fact that officials sometimes treated "recommendation votes" (推荐票, *tuijian piao*) as "elective votes" (选举票, *xuanju piao*), overlooking the fact that they were only supposed to inform the decision (CC of the CCP 2014). The 2019 iteration goes one step further in dismantling this process, as recommendation meetings are not the primary medium anymore and can be replaced by "recommendation though discussion and investigation" (谈话调研推荐, *tanhua diaoyan tuijian*) conducted individually. These changes are pushed forwards in the name of efficiency, but in practice make the recommendation process less and less transparent and at the mercy of individual discretion.

The new practices were already used for the selection of the new central party-state leadership in preparation for the 19th Party Congress. The selection process was conducted through face-to-face consultations rather than an internal election, as had been the case for the last two such congresses. According to an official description, Xi met personally with 59 senior and retired party-state leaders to seek their input and advice on the final personnel decisions. Other members of the outgoing Politburo Standing Committee also held similar meetings, and in total 290 ministerial-level cadres and senior military officers were consulted. According to the official account, the choice made in favour of informal recommendations over a formal vote was motivated by the malpractices linked with such elections (*Xinhua* 2017b). Both the 2007 and 2012 congresses saw "voting based on personal connections" (关系票, *guanxipiao*) or on "personal affinity" (人情票, *renqingpiao*). According to official reports, purged party-state leaders Zhou Yongkang, Sun Zhengcai, and Ling Jihua had engaged in "vote buying" (贿选, *huixuan*) and "campaigning" (拉票, *lapiao*) (Xinhua 2017b). Although such practices have been a significant concern for the party state regarding the democratic recommendation process (Zeng 2015), the new mechanism strengthens the system in which the Party secretary decides – almost unilaterally – who will take up a position, without even pretending to make the process transparent.

The democratic recommendation procedure introduced in 2002 aimed, as noted, at greater transparency in the recruitment process. It

far from guaranteed that though, as officials could game the system, and the local Party secretary remained the chief gatekeeper (Zeng 2015). Still, it introduced some procedures which limited – at least partially – the leaders' actions. By giving more leeway to local Party leaders in recruitment and evaluations procedures, the new developments tend to strengthen the clientelist features of the party-state cadre management system. They echo a recent survey among Chinese officials showing that the recognition of superiors is the most essential criterion for promotion, before competence or achievements (Li and Gore 2018). In addition to strengthening clientelism, the new regulations limit the pathways for young officials to rise through the ranks. Hiring practices for Party officials, which have enabled the party state to renew its elite continuously since the 1980s, are now being radically challenged.

Limited Avenues for Elite Renewal

The formalisation of promotion mechanisms for officials in the 1980s raised the issue of cadre renewal. Deng himself argued in 1980 that

> we cannot confine cadre promotions to the current system of step-by-step promotion of Party and state cadres from the district level, to the county level, to the prefectural level, to the provincial level in that order […]. We must really promote outstanding young and middle-aged cadres, promote them quickly. (Manion 1985: 232)

The strict ranking and step-by-step promotion system made it very difficult for young officials to reach high-level positions. In order to solve this issue and promote elite renewal, channels for rapid promotion were formalised (Kou and Tsai 2014). The changes led to a dual-track promotion system, with some individuals being selected for leading positions early on and promoted quickly through a variety of institutional fast-track channels, while the majority would continue to follow the slower progressive promotion process (Pang, Keng, and Zhong 2018).

In contrast to previous practices, and officially to avoid the promotion of the unfit and inexperienced, the Party now tries to limit "exceptional promotions" (破格提拔, *poge tiba*) (referring to the rise through the ranks of a young cadre who has not followed a step-by-

step promotion process). While in the first decade of the new century exceptions to the progressive promotion rules could be made for "particularly exceptional young officials" (特别优秀, *tebie youxiu*) (CC of the CCP 2002), the process is now more restricted. The 2014 Work Regulations invite officials to "strictly control" (从严掌握, *congyan zhangwo*) such exceptional promotions, an evolution reaffirmed in the 2019 version. Such promotions are also now prohibited if the officials in question did not spend at least one year in their previous post. Also, they cannot be promoted by more than one rank at a time (CC of the CCP 2014, 2019a).

As a result of the outlined changes, avenues for rapid promotion – the "open selection" (公开选拔, *gongkai xuanba*) and "competitive appointment" (竞争上岗, *jingzheng shanggang*) mechanisms – have now been largely dismantled. The 2002 version of the Work Regulations included a whole section on these mechanisms. Competitive appointment refers to the process of selecting among candidates internal to the recruitment administration, while open selection denotes the recruitment of external ones. The latter can come from another administration or locality. They both require the Party to make a public announcement for vacant positions, open a procedure for all candidates who fulfil the necessary conditions to submit job applications, and to select individuals through written exams and through interviews (CC of the CCP 2002). The idea behind the development of these mechanisms was to make recruitment more transparent as well as to bring new blood into the leadership ranks. In practice, these procedures made it easier for young officials to skip ranks in a very hierarchical system; the open selection process in particular became a well-known fast-track channel for young officials to get ahead in the Party (Kou and Tsai 2014).

The scope for open selection has, however, been restricted since 2014. It can now only be used when the local party-state unit is unable to find suitable candidates internally. Besides that, the 2014 Work Regulations also insist that recruitment is to be done based on an overall vision of the candidate's performance and not only on the grades that they obtained during the exam and interview (CC of the CCP 2014). The decreasing importance of open selection and competitive appointment becomes even more apparent with the 2019 Work Regulations. While in 2014 these mechanisms were still described as the "main method of appointing leading officials" (领导干

部选拔任用的方式之一, *lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong de fangshi zhi yi*) (CC of the CCP 2014), as of the latest version it is now "one method to generate candidates" (产生人选的一种方式, *chansheng renxuan de yi zhong fangshi*) – and not for appointments per se (CC of the CCP 2019a). Open selection can only be used if the recruiting unit has no qualified candidate to offer, and competitive appointment is only an option to generate a first round of selection if the recruiting unit has a surplus of qualified candidates. These mechanisms should also be used for recruitment to deputy positions rather than full-ranked leading ones (CC of the CCP 2019a).

To symbolise the decreasing importance of the open selection and competitive appointment procedures, the 2019 Work Regulations no longer include a dedicated section thereon (CC of the CCP 2019a). In contrast to previous versions of the document, they now no longer provide details on how to operationalise these procedures – by setting out, for example, whether they should include interviews, written exams, or similar. As a result, unit leaders have gained significant leeway in deciding whether to use these procedures or not – and in choosing what form they should take.

Mirroring the discussion on democratic recommendations, these changes have officially been made to limit nepotism and other abuses. Some officials had used these methods to rapidly promote their affiliates, and designed job criteria so precisely that only the official they were aiming to recruit would match them (CC of the CCP 2014, 2019a). However, these changes lead to less transparency and more leeway for local Party leaders to recruit whomever they want. Beyond the issue of transparency and the formality of the recruitment process, these avenues which allowed young officials to rise quickly through the ranks within the party state are now far more restricted, limiting elite renewal.

At the same time, previous regulations aiming at Party rejuvenation by limiting the maximum age of officials are being eroded. Rules thereon for leading cadres were first developed, starting in the 1980s under Deng, in order to accelerate the rejuvenation of the cadre corps. They affect promotions at every level of the Chinese polity (Kou and Tsai 2014). These rules allow for regular turnover within the party-state hierarchy, which is largely seen as one of the features explaining the system's resilience (Nathan 2003). Xi is progressively rolling back this age-based system, however. A document on how to

implement the recruitment of leading officials during the 2014–2018 period notes that age limits should not be "imposed uniformly" (一刀切, *yi dao qie*) when it comes to promotions and transfers (Central Office of the CCP 2014). Similar language was also used regarding the selection of CC members in the run-up to the 19th Party Congress (*Xinhua* 2017b). Xi additionally raised the issue of age rules and the promotion of the inexperienced at a meeting he chaired in July 2018 regarding young party-state officials (*Xinhua* 2018).

Officially, these changes are being undertaken so as to constrain the rapid promotion of inexperienced and unfit cadres relying on personal ties to accelerate their career (*China Youth Daily* 2014). In practice though, by limiting the importance of age-based rules and the level of cadre turnover, Xi risks accelerating the aging of the party-state elite. Institutional springboards for fast promotion are decreasing in importance. That is true not only of open selection, as we have seen, but also of the Communist League Youth League. This body used to play a critical role as a fast-track pathway towards leadership positions, but has seen its importance weakened in recent years – especially at the central level (Doyon forthcoming). These changes will not prevent young officials from being promoted to high-level positions anymore, but rather will likely make their occurrence rarer. In the absence of formalised paths, and of objective criteria, promotion will increasingly be based on clientelist relationships with incumbent leaders going forwards. The effects of these changes started to become visible with the current CC selected during the 19th Party Congress, which is the oldest in decades – with an average age of 57, compared to 56.1 in 2012 and 53.5 in 2007 (*South China Morning Post* 2017).

Conclusion

Xi Jinping's concentration of power in his own hands goes together with increased power for local Party leaders too. Xi puts pressure on leading officials through disciplinary campaigns, but at the same time Party leaders at every level now have greater discretion over recruitment and promotion. Rather than pure centralisation, this appears to be a tendency towards concentrating power in the hands of Party leaders at every level. The "decentralised authoritarian" configuration described by Landry (2008), which combines high levels of local au-

tonomy with a strong Party hierarchy, is therefore being deepened under Xi rather than challenged.

Against the political ideals of the Deng Xiaoping era – albeit never really implemented – of a separation between Party and state and the collective leadership of the former, Xi emphasises instead the concentration of power and democratic centralism (Pei 2019). At the institutional level, as has been shown in detail, the Party's control over personnel management and disciplining is increasing. These changes run counter to a more efficient anti-corruption drive involving external scrutiny. When it comes to the officials themselves, Xi is dismantling evaluation and recruitment mechanisms developed in the first decade of the new century. New regulations regarding personnel management make evaluation criteria less transparent by emphasising political standards instead. Procedures aiming at greater intra-Party democracy are also under attack. While these procedures far from guaranteed full transparency, they imposed certain limits on the Party secretary's power over cadre selection and also facilitated elite turnover.

Xi is strengthening, then, the clientelist features of the party state. The subjectivity of the Party secretary is increasingly at the centre of the picture. Referring to the end of the Mao Zedong era, Walder (1986) captured this form of institutionalised clientelism with the expression "principled particularism." It creates a "clientelist system in which public loyalty to the party and its ideology is mingled with personal loyalties between party branch officials and their clients" (Walder 1986: 124). He argues that these clientelist ties replace the impersonal standards of behaviour dictated by the party state's ideology and policies, upon which individuals are supposed to be evaluated. At every level of the organisational structure, the supervisor determines who they think shows adherence to the regime's ideology through their behaviour. They reward, therefore, those individuals who – according to them – display appropriate commitment. Clientelism is institutionalised as specific rewards for compliance, and displays of loyalty are instituted as organisational principles. Principled particularism is very much alive and well under Xi.

These organisational changes strengthen Xi's grip on power, and favour his own generation of officials. Following the same logic as the constitutional amendment which removes the two-term limit for the president, the changes discussed here are good examples of what

Slater (2003) calls "rigging": the modification of institutional rules to limit competition for leadership positions. By limiting formal avenues for rapid promotion and challenging the age-based promotion rules, Xi is reducing competition for his generation of officials now in power. He is, however, moving away from the rejuvenation mechanisms of the Deng era, which helped facilitate elite turnover and contributed to the Party's longevity (Nathan 2003; Landry 2008). This strategy may prove costly in the long run, as it could become increasingly difficult for the party state to attract the best young candidates – leaving an aging organisation standing.

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