1 Introduction

Institutions of political selection define whose preferences matter for the important question of who wields political power – and this substantially determines the characteristics of public officials and the quality of governance. Most fundamentally, these institutions distinguish liberal democracies from authoritarian states. Over a broad sweep of history, the evidence favors the principle of democratic elections as the selection institution that produces high governance quality (see Besley and Reynal-Querol 2011). Even so, in the contemporary world, authoritarian China presents a sophisticated and, by some measures, successful contrast to any liberal democratic version of political selection. Understanding how and how much the preferences of the few at the political center in Beijing systematically shape the composition and actions of the tens of thousands of leaders who manage Chinese politics, society, and the economy across the country is foundational to understanding China.

Paradoxically, however, at the same time as scholarship on political selection in China has greatly flourished in recent years, the research contours of this important question have shrunk. The study of political selection in China has become practically synonymous with the statistical analysis of promotion of subnational (mostly provincial) leaders, who are modeled as participants in starkly institutionalized yardstick competition with jurisdictional peers for career advancement as top economic performers. Studies focus on estimating how well local gross domestic product (GDP) growth predicts promotion and thereby explains the Chinese "economic miracle" of the 1980s and after. The dominant challenge to this economic tournament model analyzes career advancement – and indeed Chinese politics more generally – as distinctly *not* institutionalized. Instead, it estimates how well personal connections in the political elite determine who gets ahead. In this Element, I rethink foundations and findings in this literature on political selection in China, guided by lessons from fieldwork and views from the inside, some from my own work and many more from work by other scholars. My aim is to critically review and better structure our knowledge on this question.

Specifically, I clarify the sources of greatly disparate findings in foundational and later statistical studies and identify major descriptive challenges to these studies in rich qualitative and quantitative evidence. The challenges provide building blocks for a different way of thinking about how and why Chinese officials get ahead or merely get along in their careers. I propose a "good-fit" analytical perspective that takes the challenges into consideration. The perspective considers political selection as highly institutionalized – but also finds a place for the significant heterogeneity of standards by which official

performance is evaluated in China. It identifies on-the-ground institutional flexibility by powerful communist party organization departments as integral to the design and practice of political selection in China.

1.1 The Notion of Political Selection

Political selection is about how individuals are selected to political office rather than how they are motivated or constrained once in office. For example, in liberal democracies, consistent with an underlying normative ideal of popular representation, multiparty elections are the institution by which voters select policymakers and legislators, even though political parties select the candidates for competition in most democracies (Hazan and Rahat 2010). Whatever its actual workings, the liberal democratic ideal in political selection is a design intended to empower each voter to choose his or her preferred politicians through competitive elections (Key 1966; Mayhew 1974; Fiorina 1981; Buchanan 1989; Manin 1997). This story is different from the notion of elections as an accountability design, which is about preventing politicians from engaging in self-dealing once elected. Besley (2005) observes that modern political economy has neglected the problem of political selection, instead focusing more on incentives that keep politicians accountable in office.

For bureaucrats in liberal democracies, the selection principle is different: they are appointed and their tenure in office is secured through institutions intended to realize an underlying normative ideal of meritocracy, not representation. As with elections, the agency problem looms large in the literature on bureaucratic discretion (e.g., Brehm and Gates 1997; Gailmard 2002; Whitford 2002; Balla and Gormley 2017) – but again, that is a story about control of how bureaucrats exercise delegated authority in office, not their selection to office.

Political selection in China presents a stark contrast to the allocation of selection power to voters in the liberal democratic ideal of representation. More than fifty years ago, Barnett (1967) identified communist party control over all careers of any importance from top to bottom as the "linchpin" of party rule in China; despite vast change in China since then, the description remains basically accurate. As elaborated in Section 1.3, the hierarchically organized ruling communist party monopolizes the appointments, promotions, transfers, and dismissals of bureaucrats and formally elected politicians.[1] The party center in Beijing directly manages a few thousand individuals in Beijing and the

[1] It extends to a wide range of individuals not strictly relevant to the study of political selection – for example, managers of state-owned enterprises, presidents of public universities, and administrators of state hospitals and public schools. This breadth reflects the formal reach of the Chinese state, even today.

provinces; it delegates the management of others to governing communist party committees below it.

In this sense, all Chinese leaders are like the bureaucrats in liberal democracies. This selection arrangement does not itself make Chinese officialdom a contemporary example of the meritocratic ideal; that requires, at least notionally, transparent communication and impartial application of standards of competence in personnel decisions. It does, however, allow for the possibility of it in authoritarian China – an idea that is politically provocative, even as a theoretical proposition.

The degree to which actual political selection measures up to the normative ideal is an empirical question. Bell (2015) develops the idea of political selection in contemporary China as meritocracy.[2] He points to a history of more than 1,300 years of competitive examinations for public officials in imperial China as a cultural basis for an idea that "political theorizing should be concerned with the question of how to select political leaders with superior abilities and virtues" (Bell 2015, 66). Imperial China's answer to the problem of selecting the competent and virtuous was the content of examinations: long study of the Confucian classics, necessary for examination success, inculcated the desired qualities for officials.[3] Political selection organized around the ideal of meritocracy, rather than representation, has important implications for the relationship between regime performance and regime legitimacy. For example, in a liberal democracy, incompetent or corrupt politicians can be replaced at the polls; by implication, voters are to blame for the political winners the elections produce. In authoritarian China, by contrast, widespread corruption and other serious performance failures pose an existential threat to the ruling communist party, which monopolizes political selection. If political selection in authoritarian China is done well enough, however, it may effectively compensate for the inadequacy of other institutions to monitor official behaviors and punish abuses of official power (Manion 2018).

[2] Bell goes further than the mere idea. He argues that public service examinations, which recruit officials to lower levels of government in China, reflect political meritocracy in practice, although he seems to recognize that such examinations are not used to select the political generalists who manage the party and government (Bell 2015, 78, 103). He also points out that the university entrance examination system, success in which is now required for political appointments, is perhaps "the least corrupt political institution in China" (Bell 2015, 87). These are empirical, not theoretical, arguments.

[3] There is an excellent extensive English-language literature on China's imperial examination system. See, for example, Miyazaki (1976), Herbert (1988), Chaffee (1995), Elman (2000), De Weerdt (2007), and Pines (2012). The debate on examination content was resolved differently over dynasties and across ranks, but Confucian classics figured large for most examinations in Chinese imperial history.

The notion that contemporary Chinese political selection is in principle meritocratic is provocative not only for its implied normative superiority to liberal democratic institutions but also (more subtly) because it implies that Chinese elite politics is institutionalized. This claim runs counter to a large literature that views Chinese politics as organized around networks of personalized factions, held together with patronage connections devoid of any substantive policy content (e.g., Nathan 1973; Pye 1980; Dittmer 1995). These competing views undergird the two dominant paradigms in the literature on political selection in China.

The *performance paradigm* implies that the *formal* institutions of political selection described in Section 1.3 are working more or less as designed. The party center in Beijing articulates the qualities it values – notably, GDP growth – which give highly specific content to metrics that party committees at lower levels use in evaluating the performance of officials relative to their peers – and officials are promoted or not promoted accordingly. By contrast, the *patronage paradigm* implies that *informal* institutions – notably, personal connections – underlie decisions on political selection: the metrics and evaluation procedures are mere "parchment institutions" (Carey 2000) that do not structure expectations about appointments.

1.2 Party and Government Leaders in China

Chinese officials are distinguished by administrative rank and salary grade, but the most important distinction is between "leading" and "ordinary" officials (see Pieke 2009, 30–32). Leaders, not ordinary officials, are the focus of interest here. As is true of all authoritarian states, we have little knowledge about the process by which leaders at the very apex of power are selected.[4] For the most part, the literature on political selection in China does not apply to these individuals but to the selection of subnational leaders – about which we know quite a lot.

The Chinese state is organized in a hierarchy of parallel governing communist party committees and governments that exist at the political center in Beijing and below, in each of the mainland's 31 provinces, 332 cities, 2,853 counties, and 33,272 townships. Townships are nested in counties, counties in cities, and cities in provinces.[5] Two leaders – a communist party secretary and a head of

[4] On selection of the roughly two dozen leaders at the top, we do have some interesting autobiographical accounts, some of them written with the obvious bias of "losers" in power struggles. In English, Wu (2015, 222–293) draws on many insider sources in his excellent study. In English translation, see the compilation of documents edited by Nathan and Link (2001) and the "secret journal" of Zhao Ziyang (2009).

[5] A note on terminology: here and throughout this Element, provinces also include the five minority-dominant regions and four mega-cities; cities refer to prefectural-level [地级] cities and also include rural prefectures; counties also include county-level cities; townships also

government – wield chief executive political power at each level of the state hierarchy, with the party leaders more powerful and higher in rank than their government counterparts.[6] These party and government leaders constitute the Chinese political elite below the apex of power, broadly, but not too broadly, defined. The literature focuses nearly exclusively on them – as I do in this Element.[7]

Statistical studies rarely extend their analysis to leaders below the city because systematic biographical data are not easily available. Indeed, most statistical studies focus on provincial leaders. By contrast, because of limitations on gathering evidence through fieldwork, qualitative studies mostly focus on townships, the lowest rung of the state hierarchy. If we exclude township party and government leaders – who are usually not considered in the ranks of senior officials – the population of interest is roughly *6,400 individuals*, who manage China's provinces, cities, and counties at any given time.[8] Table 1 summarizes a few characteristics of these individuals.

Overall, at every level, Chinese party and government leaders are predominantly male, ethnically Han, highly educated, and fairly young. The education and age characteristics reflect valued qualities that the party center in Beijing set out as part of a broad set of reforms intended to be the "organizational guarantee" of a "high-quality cadre corps" (Manion 2008, 613) beginning in the early 1980s and codified more strictly in the 1990s. Mandated retirement and age guidelines associated with different administrative ranks have important effects on promotions, an issue discussed in Section 3.1. Han Chinese comprise 92 percent of the Chinese population. Ethnic minorities often hold government

include towns. Provincial capitals and a few other cities rank administratively above the prefecture level, but I follow the literature in including them here with prefectural-level cities. Villages in rural China and neighborhoods in urban China are crucial to grassroots governance, but they are not formally part of the state structure.

[6] For the most part, officials working in communist party structures are party members, but party membership extends far beyond party structures. Roughly, anyone of political importance is a party member. This is certainly the case for government leaders – but party members are found everywhere, across occupations and among college students. Communist party members in 2022 totaled nearly 97 million, with large numbers of young people and well-educated professionals (Rui 2022).

[7] A reasonable but more expansive conception of the political elite would include the whole roster of "core party leaders" (Zeng 2016, 75) at each level of the state hierarchy below the political center, namely standing committee members of governing party committees and all members of township governing party committees, which are too small to form standing committees. These party committees and their standing committees are headed by the party secretary, normally with the government head sitting concurrently as deputy party secretary. The same institutions of political selection apply to both this collection, perhaps about 260,000 in total, and the subset of chief executives. Ang (2016, 106) suggests an even more expansive occupation-based definition, which counts 500,000 public officials as the political elite. Most of these are not leaders, however. Liu (2018) includes the entire civil service as the political elite, about 7 million individuals. For an informative earlier discussion, see Brødsgaard (2004).

[8] Including township leaders, the total is roughly 73,000 individuals.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of party and government leaders

	Province		City		County	
	Party	**Government**	**Party**	**Government**	**Party**	**Government**
Male	100%	88.9%	97%	93.4%	93%	90.7%
Han	92.6%	77.8%	92.2%	78.7%	86.3%	75.9%
Average age	65	60	56	53	52	49
College	96.3%	92.6%	94.9%	95.2%	57.7%	67.4%

Note: Figures for provincial and city leaders are for 2020; for county leaders, they are for 2018. College attendance includes special training programs organized for officials [干部专修科] by universities and communist party schools.

Source: Computed from data provided by Xiaoshu Gui, Duke University, and Pierre Landry, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

(but rarely party) leadership offices in jurisdictions where they constitute at least a plurality of the population. As to the predominance of males, women have never gained anything close to representation in the communist party, much less in leadership offices, despite regular policy pronouncements throughout the party's history supporting gender equality. At the apex of power, the Politburo Standing Committee has always been exclusively male. The somewhat larger Politburo has typically featured only one woman among its roughly two dozen members. The Politburo selected in 2022 features no women at all. The scarcity of women in political leadership across China plainly refutes any argument that China's political selection institutions are fundamentally meritocratic.[9]

1.3 Formal Institutions of Political Selection

Since the 1950s, as in the former Soviet Union, the communist party has managed its power over the careers of all individuals of any importance with a *nomenklatura* system (Manion 1985; Burns 1989, 1994, 2006; Huang 1995; Lam and Chan 1996; Brødsgaard 2004; Chan 2004; Landry 2008). This system assigns to governing party committees at each level of the state hierarchy the complete authority over appointments, promotions, transfers, and dismissals of officials one level down. The one-level-down principle was introduced in 1984, as part of the revival and reform of the *nomenklatura* system, which Mao abandoned in the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s.[10] At the apex of power, the Politburo Standing Committee appoints approximately 100 state-level officials. Its Central Organization Department manages the appointments of provincial party and government leaders. Below the political center, provincial party committees appoint city party and government leaders, city party committees appoint county party and government leaders, and county party committees appoint township party and government leaders.[11]

At each level of the state hierarchy, the actual work of managing officials is conducted by communist party organization departments, whose heads are *ipso facto* members of the party standing committee. Organization departments

[9] Indeed, legal discrimination is also at work. Women have less time to advance their official careers before facing mandatory retirement: below the city level, women retire at age fifty-five, men at age sixty. See Section 3.1 and Table 5.

[10] The *nomenklatura* system adopted in the 1950s observed a two-levels-down principle, which was briefly revived in the early 1980s. Its greater span of central control facilitated the rehabilitation of officials purged across China in the Cultural Revolution. Once rehabilitation was basically completed, the party center substituted greater delegation and more regulation for direct control. The introduction of the one-level-down principle in 1984 reduced the number of officials on the party center's *nomenklatura* from about 13,000 to about 4,200 (Landry 2008, 45). For a brief history, see Manion (1985).

[11] More precisely, party committees appoint the "leading group" one level down. This includes deputy party secretaries and all other members of party standing committees.

collect, assess, and store information about officials. Organization department heads present cases to the full party committee, with recommendations for appointments, promotions, transfers, or dismissals. In this sense, the *nomenklatura* system makes communist party committees and their powerful organization departments the "selectorates" (and principals) of officials one level down. Given the formal requirement of Leninist party organizational discipline, which mandates compliance to superior organizations in the party hierarchy, this makes the party center in Beijing, with its general secretary and half-dozen Politburo Standing Committee members at the pinnacle, the supreme principal. The party center also controls official careers by setting standards for advancement, to reflect its policy priorities. The *nomenklatura* system, with its key organizing principle "the party manages cadres" [党管干部], is the scaffolding of formal institutions of political selection in China. In the post-Mao years, the party center has issued several sets of detailed regulations that establish how to vet and select leaders for career advancement.

As early as 1979, the Central Organization Department called for a formal system to evaluate performance, to be developed first as an experiment in several localities, with the goal of formalizing it within a few years. As Whiting (2004, 103) notes, this marked an important turn away from subjective assessments of political attitudes that had prevailed in previous decades toward "specific, measurable, and quantifiable indicators of performance." In 1995, the Central Organization Department followed up with specific standards to evaluate performance of township and county leaders, as an input into decisions on career advancement.[12] The arrangements explicitly encouraged competition across peers in the same jurisdiction. What became the "target responsibility system" [责任指标体系] was gradually implemented nationwide, with coverage extended to city leaders in 2005 (Whiting 2004; Gao 2015; Zuo 2015).

Under the target responsibility system, leaders sign contracts to fulfill highly specific performance targets. The targets are assigned weights, which vary across localities to reflect local priorities (see Edin 1998, 2003; Whiting 2000, 2004). Some targets contradict others. Moreover, as Bulman (2016, 155) observes, "the sheer number of targets in different fields makes promotions based on uniform comparable criteria nearly impossible." However, some targets are always and everywhere weighted more heavily. Indeed, targets for social order, population control, and economic growth are categorized as "imperative" [一票否决]: failure to achieve them disqualifies leaders for promotion. Performance rankings (but not scores) within the jurisdiction are public

[12] Chan and Gao (2008) translate and discuss the 1995 document, issued by the Central Organization Department on August 31. This is different from the Central Committee document issued on February 9, 1995, and discussed later in this section.