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978-1-107-09063-7 - Training the Party: Party Adaptation and Elite Training in Reform-era China

Charlotte P. Lee

Excerpt

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## 1 Introduction

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From its revolutionary roots to more recent reforms, China's modern political system has prompted lively debates about regime durability. In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, attention turned to the possibility of the demise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), driven by factors such as uncontrollable centrifugal pressures, demographic change, and institutional decay.<sup>1</sup> The party's dominance in the nearly three decades since the fall of other communist party-led regimes around the world, while defying some predictions, indicates that party institutions created for revolutionary purposes can negotiate key transitions. These transitions include responding to the ruling party's current agenda of administrative reform and modernization. Understanding these shifts and the party's durability over time necessitates an examination of the institutional underpinnings of this rising global power.

Institutions have often been the object of inquiry in the study of authoritarian systems. Designing, constructing, and maintaining institutions of governance are vital to the state-building process, if not synonymous with it. Political institutions that constrain elected officials in democracies are often established in autocratic contexts to serve the dictator's (or leaders') bid to stay in power. Such institutions facilitate the ordering of state and society and extend the coercive capacity of the ruler, and they do so across time and space. That institutions in authoritarian regimes often possess a complexity on par with their democratic

<sup>1</sup> In policy journals, Minxin Pei (2002) has noted that the CCP's growing weakness lies in "the shrinkage of its organizational penetration, the erosion of its authority and appeal among the masses, and the breakdown of its internal discipline" (p. 101). Rowen (2011) predicts significant political and/or economic change by 2020. Goldstone (1995) presents a neo-Malthusian argument, where population pressures, in combination with inadequate government capacity, will lead to significant political challenges to CCP rule. Chang (2001) focuses on incompatibilities between the Maoist state and the global environment. Susan Shirk's more recent and focused book on the insecurity of China's leaders offers an analysis of both internal and external threats (Shirk 2007). A discussion of those experts who are pessimistic versus optimistic about China's political future can be found in Shambaugh (2008a: Chapter 3).

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counterparts is not surprising, but the purposes of these nondemocratic institutions are at all times conditioned by the political context of which they are a part, that is, to sustain authoritarian rule. Given this core assumption, the task lies in discerning the functions served by a particular authoritarian institution and its impact on the individuals who guide and are guided by it. An additional undertaking lies in evaluating an institution's capacity for coping with the uncertainty, unforeseeable circumstances, and contingencies that all rulers in power must eventually confront. These matters of institutional design and adaptiveness are complicated by the "sunk costs" that accompany the creation of any institution, by the displacement of systemic missions with more local, organization-specific objectives, and also by tradition and the inertia that may resist pressures for change.

Elections, legislatures, and parties are among the most prominent and well-studied examples of political institutions adopted by authoritarian leaders.<sup>2</sup> The channels through which they contribute to regime survival are several: by co-opting potential opposition (Gandhi 2008b; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Lust-Okar 2006), managing elites in opposition groups (Blaydes 2008; Lust-Okar 2005; Tezcür 2008), providing political information (Cox 2009), and limiting economic predation by the autocrat (Gandhi 2008a; Wright 2008). More generally, institutions allow the dictator to make a credible commitment to sharing power with supporters (Magaloni 2008). This solves a core dilemma facing all dictators. In order to remain in power, the dictator must rely on some base(s) of support, but these groups are unwilling to back a dictator who may, once in power, renege on promises. To generate confidence in his decision to extend benefits to those who provide loyal service, a dictator may create "power-sharing institutions" that over time generate some confidence in the dictator's willingness to abide by nonarbitrary rules of the game.<sup>3</sup>

Parties are instrumental in solving this credible commitment problem. They allow the dictator to make credible commitments to loyalists by promising access to locally generated revenues or future privileges in exchange for service in the present (Lazarev 2005, 2007). One mechanism for this is the allocation of party membership and positions; the

<sup>2</sup> Surveys of the literature on the underlying logic for party formation include Magaloni and Kricheli (2010) and, on elections, Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009).

<sup>3</sup> A dictator nonetheless possesses, in theory, the authority to abolish an institution at will, though the threat of revolt by dissenting elites and/or the general population presents one potential deterrent. It is also the case that institutions may, by design or over time, obtain their own authority, resources, and legitimacy, all of which serve as bulwarks against arbitrary dissolution.

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privileges of party office present an intertemporal solution to the dictator's commitment problem. This present-service-for-future-privileges arrangement has been tested empirically in the Soviet regime, where the party controlled all political, economic, and social mobility, but this monopoly is not a necessary condition for the arrangement to remain credible. As the Chinese case attests, the emergence of private entrepreneurs does not imply the end of high demand for party office.

Critically, parties lengthen the regime's time horizon for survival. Because of this expectation of regime durability, parties structure intra-elite conflict by offering elites the promise of "medium and long-term gains despite immediate setbacks" (Brownlee 2007: 12). A stable outcome may result as parties generate expectations that they will remain in power, which in turn promotes elites' willingness to invest in development (Olson 1993).<sup>4</sup>

Single-party rule solves several additional problems of governance. Ruling parties, unlike collective leadership under military rule, generate strong incentives for party members to support the authoritarian status quo because these party members and cadres depend on the party for rents (Geddes 1999b).<sup>5</sup> Party members cannot "retreat to the barracks" as military leaders might. Even more, by dispersing authority over a broader political base, parties provide a counterbalance to the threat of military coup (Geddes 2008). Parties also engineer outcomes with a "tragic brilliance": the general population may accept corruption and suboptimal policies because of the party's ability to maintain widespread patronage networks (Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2003). In China, the narrower extension of party patronage to economic elites forges the credibility that encourages private investment (Gehlbach and Keefer 2008).

While those who invest resources in creating ruling parties are engaging in several trade-offs – dispersing authority, investing resources in party

<sup>4</sup> While party creation may mitigate this problem of incredible commitments, there are limits to this institutional strategy. Reforms in the USSR failed because the authorities of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) were unable to commit credibly to a long-term growth strategy. Instead, the party maintained discretion over whether or not to adhere to growth-promoting policies (Litwack 1991).

<sup>5</sup> I use the term "cadre" to refer to individuals who hold positions of authority – though not necessarily ranked positions – within the bureaucracies of a Leninist party-state. Lee (1991) spells out the evolution of this term, describing cadres as "people whose high level of political consciousness qualified them to assume responsibility for specific political tasks. In this original sense, cadres are the leaders . . . in a revolution. However, after the CCP became China's ruling party, the meaning of cadre expanded to include all those who were paid from the state budget but not engaged in productive manual labor. Thus, the current Chinese concept of cadre includes two analytically distinct categories: the political elite and the functionaries staffing the huge party-state apparatus" (p. 4).

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organization rather than repression, and so on – this institutional choice ultimately enhances the durability of the regime. Forming a ruling party appears to be a successful strategy: in the post–World War II period, authoritarian regimes led by a single party have enjoyed long durations of rule in comparison to authoritarian counterparts without a ruling party.<sup>6</sup> Among the institutions that a dictator may choose to establish or maintain, ruling parties are perhaps the most critical for understanding questions of authoritarian resilience.

While acknowledging that parties serve these important functions of elite management and mass mobilization, this book focuses on problems of party organization, particularly the organizations located within a ruling party and the individuals who guide those organizations.<sup>7</sup> In much of the existing literature, there is less emphasis on drilling down into the party itself and asking questions of party structure, the consequences of organizational design, and how these lay the foundations for stable single-party rule. Rather than treating parties as monolithic institutions, this study maps a more interior terrain. Its point of departure and focus is on variation in intraparty organization. This requires a look at the organization – and organizational problems – of perhaps the most highly structured of single-party regimes, those led by Leninist parties.

*Inside Lenin's "organizational weapon"*

Because of their emphasis on organization and hierarchy, Leninist party systems present an ideal case for probing the purposes, risks, and advantages of particular decisions in party-building. The revolutionary, and eventually totalitarian, aspirations that motivated the creation of these parties translated in practice to party organization that would

<sup>6</sup> Among the authoritarian types identified by Geddes, single-party regimes have persisted for, on average, 34 years, which compares favorably with the averages of 10 years for military and 18 years for personalist regimes. Regimes exhibiting characteristics across these ideal types, or hybrids, last the longest in her accounting. These averages span the period 1946 to 2000. See Geddes (2003), p. 78. Smith (2005) argues that this effect is due to the outliers of Mexico under PRI rule and the USSR, but Magaloni's separate accounting, with its finer-grained breakdown of authoritarian regime types, supports the original Geddes (1999) finding. Brownlee (2007) also controls for economic, regional, duration, and other institutional variables to find that single-party regimes are significantly more likely to endure than other authoritarian regime types (pp. 30–2). The Hadenius and Teorell dataset, which spans 1960 to 2003, lends additional support to the Geddes finding.

<sup>7</sup> More generally, I use Hannan and Freeman's (1984) definition of organizations as "special corporate actors. Like other corporate actors, they are structures for accomplishing collective action as well as repositories of corporate resources. Unlike other collective actors, organizations receive public legitimation and social support as agents for accomplishing specific and limited goals" (p. 152).

facilitate the complete control of state and society.<sup>8</sup> Lenin's original conception for the party was of an organization led by "professional revolutionaries" who were promoted from within the "rank and file" membership.<sup>9</sup> He wrote that "the only serious organizational principle for the active workers of our movement should be the strictest secrecy, the strictest selection of members, and the training of professional revolutionaries."<sup>10</sup> In contradiction to egalitarian ideological commitments, the party would be "an organization which of necessity is centralized" and governed by hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> The bureaucratic centralism that Lenin's party eventually embraced was done unapologetically (Wolfe 1984: 24–6, 192–95).<sup>12</sup> The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) became the organizational embodiment of the pragmatic recommendations bound up in Lenin's political vision. The party was to coordinate political functions, distribute economic power, and play the crucial centralizing role in the command economy and politically closed system that endured for over 70 years (Klugman 1989). In theory, it was also to possess the organizational flexibility to respond to unforeseen circumstances and contingencies.

With the global diffusion of Leninist principles, these parties have become highly structured and complex organizations, including extensive functional differentiation of constituent parts.<sup>13</sup> A range of subparty organizations play a supporting role in the maintenance of the party's political authority: propaganda bureaus, party personnel departments, courts, unions and other mass organizations, party schools, and the like.

<sup>8</sup> See Lenin's 1902 essay, "What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement" (Lenin [1964]: 347–529). In his 1918 essay, "The Chief Task of Our Day," he calls for the Bolsheviks to learn from the German model, which he saw as driven by "principle[s] of discipline, organization, harmonious cooperation on the basis of modern machine industry, and strict accounting and control." Party control of the media and cultural expression is discussed in Lenin's "The Party Organization and Party Literature," (Tucker 1975: 148–52).

<sup>9</sup> "What Is to Be Done?" (Tucker 1975: 75–7). <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 90. <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> In his early theorizing about the organization of the party, Lenin held democratic practice to be a secondary concern, since "'broad democracy' in Party organisation, amidst the gloom of the autocracy and the domination of gendarmerie, is nothing more than a *useless and harmful toy*" (Lenin [1964]: 479).

<sup>13</sup> In his collected letters (Tucker 1975), Lenin expresses some antipathy toward the "bureaucratic bog" of Russia ("Letter of January 1922 to A.D. Tsiurupa," pp. 717–18). His complaint was one of the impotence of the citizen in the face of bureaucratic authority: "The *complete lack of rights* of the people in relation to government officials and the *complete* absence of control over the privileged bureaucracy correspond to the backwardness of Russia and to its absolutism" ("The Tasks of the Russian Social-Democrats," p. 10). While pointing out the obstacle of the bureaucracy, he is also pragmatic: "Bureaucratism cannot be 'sent packing' from a peasant country, cannot be 'swept from the face of the earth.' One can only *reduce* it by slow, stubborn effort" ("Letter of May 1921 to M.F. Sokolov," p. 714).

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The central committee of a ruling communist party becomes the principal to these various organizational agents, and this relationship is mirrored at lower administrative levels in the system, forming overlapping chains of principal–agent relationships. This parallels the principal–agent relationship between higher-level cadres and their subordinates, for example, the principal role played by a city party committee over agents in a county or township located within the city’s jurisdiction. The pervasiveness of these hierarchical relationships within the political system, at both the individual and organizational levels, provides the structural basis for governance and the distribution of political power.

Leninist systems are characterized by a critical relationship that is often overlooked in general studies of parties in autocracies: party management of the state bureaucracy. Party organization, specifically party integration with and dominance over the bureaucracy, constitutes a source of political power (Barnett and Vogel 1967; Selznick 1960). As the most prominent example of an extant ruling party formally organized along Leninist lines, the CCP maintains and reinforces its organization through party penetration of the state.<sup>14</sup> While there have been attempts to draw an analytical and empirical line between the party and state in China (Zheng 1997), in practice the two political bodies remain intertwined.<sup>15</sup> Existing work on the Chinese case characterizes the relationship as suffused with bargaining and negotiation (Lampton 1987, 1992; Naughton 1992); a reflection of elite conflicts (Dittmer 1978); and, above all, distinguished by party domination and coordination (Harding 1981; Li 1994; Schurmann 1970). In this sense, the state bureaucracy in China is not a “neutral layer” between the ruling party and the governed but rather an instrument in the service of political power holders (Massey 1993).

At the individual-level foundations of this arrangement, who becomes a cadre, or bureaucrat of the party and/or state apparatus, is of fundamental and paramount importance. Since “the formation of cadres is a basic task of communist organization” (Selznick 1960: 19), it becomes vital for party authorities to manage who may enter and move up the ranks. In this sense, the party presents an organizational means to solve a political selection problem. This function is both separate from and part of the elite bargaining function noted previously. The party is an organized

<sup>14</sup> Drawing on the cases of England and the city-state of Venice, Gonzalez de Lara et al. (2008) make the interesting argument that the possessors of administrative power, not the threat of citizen revolt, may constrain rulers. For autocrats, then, control over the bureaucracy and those segments of society with administrative capacity is a critical cooptation strategy.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., officials occupy party and government offices simultaneously, the government funds party bureaus, and party and government training centers are often integrated on the same campus.

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means for selecting those who are most likely to advance party goals. In the case of China, it is in the interest of CCP authorities to devise effective instruments for controlling bureaucrats and party organs at various levels of administration because disciplined party agents are more likely to implement party policies. More simply put, “Leading cadres are at the head of the reform train [in China]. We must develop these leaders, otherwise reforms will be fruitless.”<sup>16</sup> In light of the critical role played by those institutions that control who joins the party elite, this book will focus on party strategies of both bureaucratic management and political control.

*Controlling China’s political elite*

Through interlocking but functionally specific bureaucratic organizations, a Leninist ruling party attempts to control several overlapping groups of key political actors: party members, rank-and-file party and government cadres, and senior (leading) party and government cadres. Who is a member of the political elite in China? Scholars have identified this population in general by employing a variety of criteria, beginning with the vague parameter of those in possession of “decisive” political power (Smith 1979: Appendix A) or those who enjoy “exclusivity, superiority, and domination” (Farmer 1992: 2). This is consistent with Putnam’s (1976) emphasis on those who “influenc[e] the policies and activities of the state, or (in the language of systems theory) the . . . authoritative allocation of values” (p. 6). These definitions, which have the advantage of comparative application, are difficult in practice to apply defensibly to particular cases. Drawing from Mills’ (1959) precedent, in which the “power elite” are those in positions of authority, this study employs a positional approach to defining the political elite in China. Those members of the party and state bureaucracy who have attained some “leading” rank at the level of vice-county magistrate or equivalent are considered members of the political elite within China.<sup>17</sup> Attaining such rank often requires marching up the grassroots ranks of the party bureaucracy or civil service. The disadvantage of this approach is its emphasis on formal title, as opposed to informal bases of power, which may overlook to some degree the increasing diversity in Chinese society, where entrepreneurial talent, global connections, and political authority may be interconnected but separate bases of political influence.

<sup>16</sup> Interview 120, Central Party School professor, February 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Leading cadres in China are those ranked at the vice-county (*fuxianji* or *fuchuji*) level or above. See COD (1999), p. 589, for a discussion of these definitional issues.



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In a Leninist system, cadres are responsible for party and government work at various administrative levels and across functional areas of specialization. This population of party and government managers is then divided into increasingly smaller and exclusive ranks, at one time up to 25 ranks in the Peoples' Republic of China's (PRC).<sup>18</sup> "The CCP referred to its functionaries by the generic term 'cadre' (*ganbu*), regardless of whether they worked for the party, the Government or the army. In this usage, cadre referred to those who had a certain level of education (initially secondary school level), who had some specialist ability, and who carried out 'mental' rather than 'manual' labor" (Burns and Bowornwathana 2001: 23).<sup>19</sup> More bluntly, a cadre is anyone who "eats the state's grain" (*chi guojia liang shi*).<sup>20</sup> At present, the Chinese bureaucracy, in all its organizational variety, comprises over 40 million individuals.<sup>21</sup> Table 1.1 offers a sketch of the size of the entire bureaucratic system and levels within the system.

At the very top of this hierarchically organized system is a stratum of individuals whose appointments are managed by the Central Committee of the CCP.<sup>22</sup> A slightly larger population of "leading cadres" (*lingdao ganbu*) possesses local policymaking and allocation authority for the party and state. Leading cadres maintain the party's political dominance and the state's administrative authority. This leading cadre class produces the policies that the rest of the bureaucracy must implement (Burns 1989a, 2006). In 1998, leading cadres totaled 549,929 individuals (Central Organization Department 1999). In other words, the more than 45 million public officials in China must be sifted through to produce an elite decision-making corps of fewer than 1 million.

Controlling promotion to and within this latter group, the senior cadre ranks, is a crucial arena for the party's maintenance of "organizational health" (Nee and Lian 1994). This is especially critical in a system as decentralized as China's (Landry 2003). Inability of higher-level authorities to manage party and government reformers is tantamount to a loss of party

<sup>18</sup> Interview 112, Central Party School professor and party historian, February 2008. Today, the ranking system has been streamlined to two ranks per administrative level, and this system is compatible with the hierarchy within the state ministry system.

<sup>19</sup> Burns draws from Strauss' distinction between "lettered official" (*wenguan*), public servant (*gungwuyuan*), and cadre (*ganbu*) and Lee (1991) for this definition of cadre.

<sup>20</sup> Interview 112, Central Party School professor, February 2008.

<sup>21</sup> In 2005, the size of the cadre population was 47.78 million, which represents about 3.1 percent of the total population (Ang 2012). Shambaugh distinguishes party cadres, which number 6.9 million, from state cadres, which number 33.6 million. He cites a 2002 Central Organization Department source for these numbers. These differ from the Ang figures, which derive from a 2003 Ministry of Finance publication and include public service unit employees.

<sup>22</sup> Changes in *nomenklatura* are reviewed in Burns (1994, 2003).



Table 1.1 *The organization of public officials in China, 1998*

Administrative level	Administrative rank	Population size	“Leading” ( <i>lingdao</i> ) cadres?	Examples
Township and below	Section ( <i>ke</i> ) level and below	~46 million	No	Section head in a county-level ministry, township party secretary
County	Deputy department ( <i>fuchu</i> ) and department ( <i>chu</i> ) level	500,576	Yes	County party secretary, mid-level supreme court judge
City	Deputy bureau ( <i>fusiju, fuditing</i> ) and bureau ( <i>siju, diting</i> ) level	45,688	Yes	City mayor, provincial party school principal
Provincial	Deputy ministry ( <i>fubu</i> ) and ministry ( <i>bu</i> ) level	3,665	Yes	Ministry head, politburo member
Central	Premier ( <i>zongli</i> )		Yes	

Source: COD (1999) and Heilmann et al. (June 2000).

authority. The collapse of the Soviet Union reinforced for Chinese party authorities the danger in, among other things, a decline in party discipline (Shambaugh 2008a, 2008b; Wang 2002; Xiao 2002). Elite personnel decisions are a paramount responsibility of the party (Naughton and Yang 2004). Complicating this, authority relations between party managers and their subordinates are dynamic. While these relationships are moderated by the institutions that authorities use to monitor and control subordinates and the flow of information between levels, they are subject to the dictates of new generations of leaders and system-wide shocks – such as the transition to a market economy, technological change, new global balances of power, and shifting international alliances.

*Placing China in context: high growth, low  
bureaucratic exit*

While the tasks of political elite selection and party organization must be confronted in all single-party authoritarian regimes, the CCP faced

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particular circumstances and challenges at the onset of reforms in the late 1970s, as the Chinese state was “growing out of the plan” (Naughton 2007: 92–3). Comparatively low bureaucratic turnover during the post-Mao economic transition, which commenced in 1978, generated pressures for internal updating of cadre administrative skills. Party leaders, beginning with Deng Xiaoping, realized the need to engineer a bureaucratic transformation to meet the demands of a market transition, but political constraints made a purging of party managers unfeasible. The legitimacy wielded by the old revolutionary cadre generation limited the range of alternatives. At the same time, the demands of an assertive economic modernization program were straining the human resources of a political system designed to manage a command economy.

With the implementation of liberalizing economic and social reforms under Deng, the party faced a problem: Chinese leaders realized that the party comprised a high number of public managers with outdated and irrelevant skills. There existed a cadre class that suffered from “one high and two lows” – bureaucrats were, on average, too old (i.e., their age was too high) while their education and professional skills were insufficient (Lee 1983: 676). Hence, the rallying cry was to develop a “revolutionary, younger, better educated, and more technically specialized” (*geminghua, nianqinghua, zhishihua, zhuanqiyehua*) cadre corps.<sup>23</sup>

This bureaucratic transformation was to take place in the context of unprecedented economic development. With the initiation of reforms in 1978, China’s economy underwent dramatic change in terms of growth and industrial development. Official annual growth rates averaged 9.98 percent for the period 1978 to 2011.<sup>24</sup> Industrialization also took off in urban special economic zones and through “local state corporatist” strategies in the countryside (Liao et al. 1999; Oi 1992, 1998a). The economic miracle presented by contemporary China has a seemingly incongruous basis in a single-party authoritarian regime, which begs

<sup>23</sup> See Deng Xiaoping’s “Opening Speech at the Twelfth National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” 1 September 1982, available online at [http://archive.org/stream/SelectedWorksOfDengXiaopingVol.3/Deng03\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/SelectedWorksOfDengXiaopingVol.3/Deng03_djvu.txt), accessed December 20, 2012. See also Manion (1985b) for a discussion of the personnel policies resulting from these “four transformations” (*si hua*). This idea of well-trained and professionalized cadres leading the modernization drive was repeated in a speech before the Politburo, where Deng’s opening remarks linked China’s economic development and political advancement with the “urgent need to discover, train, employ and promote a large number of younger cadres for socialist modernization, cadres who adhere to the Four Cardinal Principles and have professional knowledge.” See “On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership,” available online at <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol2/text/b1460.html>, accessed March 6, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> World Development Indicators, World Bank, available online at <http://data.worldbank.org/country/china>, accessed December 11, 2012.