CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-47194-7 — Bribery as a Third Path to Power?
Jiangnan Zhu
Excerpt
More Information

1 Introduction: Why Study Buying and Selling Offices?

Although corruption permeates society, economic corruption – the abuse of political power for business opportunities and profit – often attracts the most attention, because it can directly cause distorted resource allocation, inefficient industrial policies, reduced investment, unproductive economic activities, and slow economic growth (e.g., Mauro & Driscoll 1997; Rose-Ackerman 1999). Thus, governments and scholars are inevitably more concerned with economic corruption than other forms of corruption. The Chinese authorities legally equated corruption with economic crimes at an early stage in China's reform and opening up, as corruption intensified with economic reform (Lü 2000; Gong 2002; Manion 2004; Sun 2004; Wedeman 2004; Guo 2008). Studies of corruption in China have illustrated how various forms of corruption have evolved alongside changes in economic policies over time, from speculative and profiteering activities in the 1980s to the illegal privatization of public assets in the 1990s and the widespread exploitation of land transactions in real estate development in the 2000s (Gong 2002; Wedeman 2004; Guo 2008; Ko & Weng 2012; Zhu 2012a; Wang 2013; Sun 2015; Pei 2016; Wang 2016; Chen & Kung 2019; Li & Tu 2024). Government intervention in the transitional economy is widely considered a major cause of corruption, in addition to power concentration, the design of the anticorruption system, and cultural factors (Gong 1994; Lü 2000; Manion 2004; Sun 2004; Cai 2014; Zhu 2014). Works explaining the paradoxical coexistence of rapid economic growth and high levels of corruption in China (Wedeman 2012; Zhu & Zhang 2017a; Ang 2020) also contribute to the classic debate on the relationship between corruption and economic development (e.g., Leff 1964; Méon & Sekkat 2005).

Outside the economic arena, an important but understudied type of corruption is buying and selling government offices, which can directly affect government quality and indirectly incur socioeconomic costs. This Element focuses on buying and selling offices in China. I use terms – such as "personnel corruption," "office-buying/selling," "sale of government offices," and "purchasing offices" – interchangeably, depending on the context. By investigating two original datasets, I find that this type of corruption encompasses a broader range of activities and actors and is more extensive and deeply embedded within China's Party-state hierarchy than commonly assumed.

Moreover, office-selling cases offer a new vantage point for examining elite mobility and shed fresh light on political selection in China. They draw attention to an "elephant in the room": While previous research on promotions emphasizes candidates' performance and connections, leaders may also be motivated by the opportunity to extract rents from candidates and maximize their personal wealth during political selection. Thus, a central question is to what extent the influence of money can alter the competitive dynamics of political selection suggested by prevailing explanations. My research in this Element shows that in some scenarios, monetary gains take precedence over or even override other considerations, such as a candidate's performance or loyalty, for leaders who sell public offices, such that paying for offices is more of a capital investment for potential career advancement. In other circumstances, paying for public offices represents a seemingly minor divergence from widely understood norms of political selection. For example, bribes may be used as an alternative means to strengthen connections with superiors and even cement mutual trust. However, nuanced differences remain between personal ties forged through bribery and those based on shared experiences in traditional elite politics.

Therefore, I propose the inclusion of *purchase* as a third paradigm, challenging the popular binary view of performance versus patronage (see Manion 2023 for a review and more discussion later). The key distinction between the novel purchase paradigm and the well-established patronage paradigm lies in the primary motivation of superior officials. The patronage paradigm is principally concerned with loyalty cultivation. Patronage functions as a long-term political investment, where a superior builds an interpersonal network to ensure that their agenda is faithfully executed and to secure future career protection. The currency of this paradigm is trust and allegiance, often built upon shared experiences. In contrast, the purchase paradigm is driven by the goal of rent seeking. Public office is treated as a commodity, and the superior's primary goal is financial maximization. The distinction between the two paradigms is not always clear-cut. As discussed in Section 5, some forms of office-selling can generate a distinct type of coerced loyalty, which involves a blackmailing mechanism based on mutual incrimination. This relationship differs fundamentally from the trust-based allegiance sought in traditional patronage networks. In other circumstances, a preexisting patronage network can facilitate a "purchase" transaction, as the trust and interpersonal connections established within such a network reduce the significant risks associated with an illicit activity such as buying and selling offices. The network provides the credible commitment needed to ensure that the deal is honored and vastly reduces the risk of leaks or betrayal. In this context, patronage does not compete with but rather enables purchase. Thus, the tripartite framework of performance, patronage, and purchase reimagines political selection in China, highlighting the complexity and multifaceted nature of how individuals ascend to public positions. In navigating these pathways, leaders select candidates who offer resources and qualities aligned with the leaders' political and economic aspirations – some of which are related to their leadership roles. This multitude of routes for advancement points to the coexistence (sometimes mutual reinforcement) and contestation of multiple state models based on different selection paradigms: a meritocratic state, which prioritizes competence; a clientelist state, where loyalty prevails; and an investment state, which is bound by money.

1.1 The Notion of Buying and Selling Offices

Office-selling is neither new nor unique to contemporary China but has deep historical roots across cultures and eras. In premodern Europe, offices of the state were generally either sold outright or granted as patronage by the crown (Allen 2005; Guardado 2018). For example, the British army awarded commissions (i.e., formal documents of appointment) to officers who offered the highest payment, a practice that only ended with the introduction of professional officer corps in 1871 (Allen 2005). Similarly, in imperial China, such as during the Qing dynasty, in addition to the widely known meritocratic examination system, the office purchase system (*juanna*) was preferred by wealthy individuals seeking career advancement (Zhang 2022). Although purchase has been criticized both historically and in contemporary times as inherently corrupt, ruling authorities, including emperors and other monarchs, often sanctioned the sale of official positions as a legitimate means of raising revenue from their ownership over public offices. These institutionalized transactions were not only explicitly regulated and monitored by the state but also integrated into the governance structures of the time.

In contrast, the modern sale of official positions is a form of wealth extraction whereby office sellers abuse their power to fill their pockets, making it a clear example of corruption. Office-selling occurs clandestinely in many countries and regions today, including India, Indonesia, post-Soviet Eurasia, and even some Western democracies (Wade 1985; Engvall 2015). For instance, the former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev acknowledged that public offices in Russia were effectively for sale, with the sole exceptions of the presidency, the prime ministership, and a handful of positions in their immediate orbit; all other posts were accessible to those with sufficient financial resources (Engvall 2015). In the United States, the former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich was found guilty of trying to "auction" Barack Obama's vacated Senate seat "to the highest bidder" for financial benefits after Obama was elected US president in 2008.[1]

In this Element, I closely examine buying and selling offices in contemporary China, where it occurs primarily *within* the government, often involving a vertical corruption network of two or more government officials. Senior

1 See https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna28139155.

officials (e.g., the Party chief of a local government or head of a functional department) accept or solicit bribes from their subordinates to help them (or their relatives) with personnel issues. A narrow form of this type of corruption corresponds to its direct Chinese translation *maiguan maiguan* (买官卖官), which literally means "paying for (in monetary form) and selling the positions of public officials." A typical example is that of Ma Weiling, former head of the Shanwei Municipal Police Department, who promoted nine subordinates in exchange for payments. Reporters even drew up his rate card – from HKD100,000 (approximately RMB91,500) for a district station's political commissar to USD80,000 (approximately RMB569,568) for deputy head of the urban police department. An example from the buyers' side is that of Nie Weidong, a low-level official who bought the vice-mayorship of Sanmenxia, Henan province by bribing the city's Party secretary. He boasted that the RMB1 million he paid was a steal, having set aside RMB2 million for the job.[2]

However, this Element amply shows that office-selling should be understood broadly as personnel corruption (*renshi fubai* 人事腐败) in the public sector. First, in the official discourse of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the concept of buying and selling offices goes beyond its direct Chinese translation to encompass a series of similar issues. For example, a search in the *People's Daily* between 2000 and 2024 reveals a cluster of terms frequently mentioned together with *maiguan maiguan*, such as *weigui yongren* (违规用人, illegal hiring), *lapiao huixuan* (拉票贿选, vote buying), and *paoguan yaoguan* (跑官要官, lobbying for office). These terms essentially denote varied forms of purchasing offices. Figure 1 illustrates the fluctuating frequencies of core terms in the conceptual family of buying and selling offices. The peaks of several terms between 2015 and 2017 overlap with the temporal summit of President Xi Jinping's corruption crackdown. "Corruption during the selection and employment of cadres" (*xuanren yongren zhongde fubai*), CCP jargon for personnel corruption, was one of the main targets in those years, along with the arrest of many mid- to high-ranking officials such as Zhou Yongkang (Zhu, Huang, & Zhang 2019; Kang & Zhu 2021; Wang & Dickson 2022; Li & Manion 2023).

Moreover, while government officials are the core actors in this type of corruption, and government positions are often its main trading focus, the offices purchased do not always carry political authority. Buying and selling posts in other public sectors, such as state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and public schools and hospitals, and even positions of village heads, is also considered this type of corruption, because the Chinese government has indistinct boundaries and the public sphere is expansionary because of the Party-state system.

2 See www.hkcd.com/content/2016-04/08/content_994829.html.

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-47194-7 — Bribery as a Third Path to Power?
Jiangnan Zhu
Excerpt
More Information

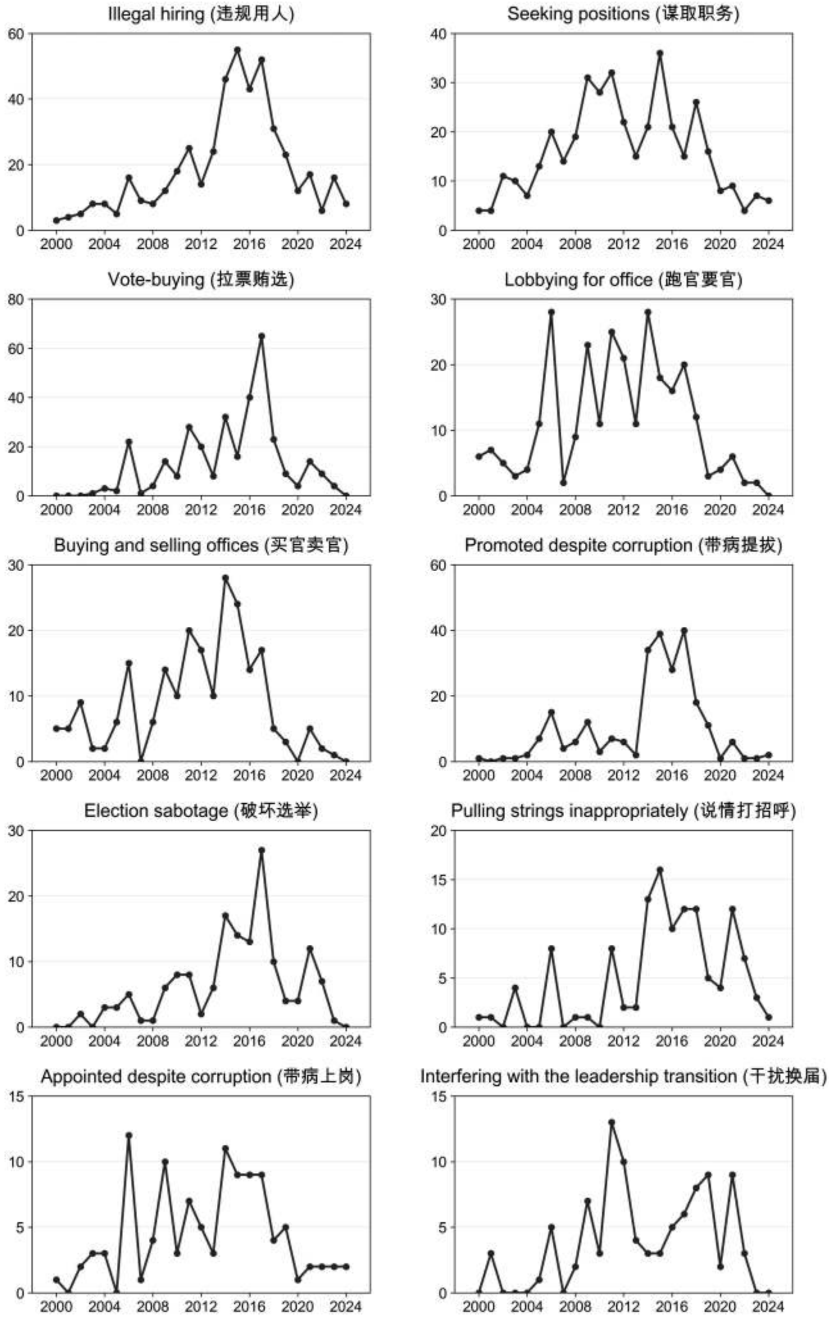

Figure 1 Top ten words most frequently appearing alongside "buying and selling offices" in the *People's Daily*, 2000–24.

Note: The y-axis shows the frequency of appearance of each term in the CCP's official mouthpiece. The fluctuations in word frequency reflect the CCP's changing attention to the issue (see Section 6).

Public organizations are funded by governments, and public employees are referred to as state functionaries in Chinese criminal law (Ko & Weng 2011). Many government officials were formerly public employees of nongovernment units. Thus, the positions bought and sold may involve any posts in the public sector.

In addition, the personnel issues involved in buying offices are not limited to officials' promotions (*tiba* 提拔 or *jinsheng* 晋升) but cover myriad career-related matters associated with public employees. At the entrance level, these matters concern recruitment, including admission to schools (as educational attainment affects one's career opportunities), and personnel assignment. Higher up the administrative ladder, personnel corruption surrounds appointment, lateral transfer (*diaodong* 调动), obtaining positive evaluations or high rankings in assessments (*pingbi* 评比), advancing to higher ranks (*jinji* 晋级), and so on.

Finally, a single office-selling case could signal entrenched personnel collusion within the government. Behind one case may exist an extensive network of multiple public employees, some sellers of offices, some acting as intermediaries, and others buyers of offices. The bribes also take various forms and come from different sources; they include office buyers' savings, bribes collected by office buyers from businesspeople, and more complicated economic and non-economic interests, sometimes delivered through a middleman. Thus, buying and selling offices and economic corruption fuel each other. Although government hierarchy is the primary venue for office-selling, the phenomenon can expand beyond government boundaries and generate more corruption. As shown later, the prices of political positions also reflect the unequal opportunities to make informal incomes through economic corruption.

Therefore, office-selling affects a core component of Chinese politics: namely, the political selection of officials – specifically, which individuals are selected to wield public power and how. The selection process and results can profoundly determine whether "those who are fit to serve" can be found (Besley 2005, p. 43), "the characteristics of public officials," and "the quality of governance" (Manion 2023, p. 1). As argued by Key (1956, p. 10), "the nature of the workings of government depends ultimately on the men who run it." Thus, selecting the right people is at least as important as supervising them, if not more so. Additionally, office-selling exposes weaknesses in the incentive system and oversight institutions that fail to hold officials accountable (Pérez-Durán 2023). Personnel corruption is thus a great concern for the Chinese authorities. Xi Jinping commented in 2014 as the general secretary of the CCP: "Corruption in personnel matters is a prominent problem; the practice of appointing officials in violation of the rules is widespread. Our system of cadre management is for show only. In some areas, the problems of bribing for votes, lobbying for office, and *maiguan maiguan* are grave" (cited in Pei 2016, p. 78).

1.2 A Dual Perspective on Personnel Corruption and a Tripartite Framework for Analyzing Political Selection

Despite the prevalence and political importance of personnel corruption in China, research on this topic is limited. To the best of my knowledge, only two English language studies to date have investigated it in great detail: The first is my case study article on a long office-selling chain in Heilongjiang province uncovered in the early 2000s (Zhu 2008), and the other is a chapter by Pei (2016) based on fifty cases of public offices for sale. Relatedly, Burns and Wang (2010) discuss how buying offices undermines the impact of civil service reform. Wang (2016) explores the buying and selling of military positions via ethnographic interviews. Sun (2004) and Manion (2023) briefly discuss possible patterns of personnel corruption relative to economic corruption. In the rare Chinese language scholarship on office-selling, Feng's (2010) participant observation research reveals how local cadres rely on monetary means to assist their promotions, and Gong and Wu (2012) confirm the prevalence of buying and selling offices in China in a large sample of cases collected from Chinese newspapers. Albeit limited in scope, these works greatly inform the current study and provide tentative conjectures for further examination.

I consider a dual perspective, combining corruption and elite mobility, to learn more *about* and *from* personnel corruption in China.

1.2.1 Corruption Perspective

This perspective, which is often presumed in prior research, including my own, views personnel corruption primarily as deviance from formal institutions violating the Party-state regulations – ultimately a problem to be corrected. This is essentially a state-centered perspective on buying and selling offices. Adopting it, we investigate the severity of this type of corruption (e.g., the levels of officials, positions, and amounts of money involved), the establishment of "money for power" transactions, the causes, particularly the institutional loopholes allowing it to occur and persist, and whether government policies have brought it under control.

1.2.2 Elite Mobility Perspective

The elite mobility perspective diverges from the corruption perspective by putting aside the illegality of personnel corruption and juxtaposing purchasing offices with other elite mobility paths argued by extant studies. This perspective may help us see the unseen, because abandoning the state approach that views informal markets as a deviation from formal institutions, as demonstrated by Reno (1995) in his research on corruption in Sierra Leone, is a necessary first step in "understand[ing] alternative methods of political organization" (Engvall 2015, p. 28). I argue that the elite mobility perspective can not only help unlock the nature of buying and selling offices but also provide novel insights into political selection in China on at least two fronts.

First, studies of political selection focus primarily on the top two officials in local jurisdictions (e.g., Party secretaries and governors of provinces, prefectures, and counties), leaving a gap in understanding of the mobility and bureaucratic appointment of the majority of cadres who work in Party and government functional departments, SOEs, and other public sectors. As He Xian, the former vice-minister of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, remarked, among the 7.17 million public servants in China, nearly 80% are frontline personnel at or below the county level (He 2016). Many office buyers are these "ordinary" bureaucrats, revealing how they advance their political careers.

Second, and even more importantly, the elite mobility perspective prompts reflection on the prevailing explanations of political selection in China (e.g., Choi 2012; Shih, Adolph, & Liu 2012; Yang, Xu, & Tao 2014; Jia, Kudamatsu, & Seim 2015; Jiang 2018; Landry, Lü, & Duan 2018; Doyon & Keller 2020; Shih & Lee 2020; Chen & Hong 2021). Manion (2023) artfully categorizes this rich body of literature into the *performance paradigm* and the *patronage paradigm*. The two paradigms involve divergent assumptions about the fundamental goals of an authoritarian leader. The performance paradigm suggests that formal political selection institutions function largely as intended. Officials are promoted on the basis of comparisons of their performance, particularly in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, with that of their peers. Underlying the evaluation criteria is a development-driven Party-state that values candidates' pro-growth qualities, such as competence. In contrast, under the patronage paradigm, the authoritarian leader cares the most about their political survival; therefore, informal institutions, such as personal connections and factional ties, are believed to drive decisions regarding political selection. Metrics and evaluation procedures do not effectively influence expectations about appointments. Instead, as in premodern Europe, appointments by patronage are rewards for individuals who demonstrate loyalty to a leader, awarded with the expectation that the appointees act in the interests of the patron (Allen 2005). Thus, beneath performance and patronage are two different qualities that an authoritarian leader seeks from subordinates: competence and loyalty, respectively (Egorov & Sonin 2011). Although scholars' beliefs differ on whether competence or loyalty dominates political selection and whether the two constitute a trade-off at different administrative levels, their discussion is largely constrained to the binary perspective. However, the dilemma of selecting between competent and loyal subordinates originates from the perspective of the topmost authoritarian leader, who perceives high stakes in the regime. Subnational leaders' interests may diverge from those of the central ruler. The prevalence of office-selling indicates that many leaders see political selection as an opportunity to increase personal wealth; even rulers of premodern states considered public offices to be tax farms for fundraising (Doyle 1996). Historians treat the purchase or sale of offices, patronage, and professionalism (which values performance and meritocracy) as separate mechanisms that could be used by autocratic rulers as substitutes to fulfill different needs and employed by political elites at various points in their careers (Allen 2005; Zhang 2022). I build upon the performance–patronage divide summarized by Manion (2023) and propose the inclusion of purchase as a third paradigm for understanding political selection in China.

To argue for the purchase paradigm is not to assert that bribery *is* the third path to power in China but to open a serious discussion and theorization of the role of money in political selection in China. As mentioned, numerous historical studies investigate money as both the means and ends of political appointment, especially in premodern Europe and its colonies. The influence of money, specifically campaign finance and fundraising, on elections in democracies, including their competitiveness and results, is systematically studied (e.g., Adkins & Dowdle 2002; Fouirnaies 2021; Thomsen 2023). Surprisingly, the direct interaction of money with contemporary Chinese political competition is rarely studied, as if salient corruption in China could be segmented from political selection and the entrepreneurial officials in economic reform would not also be "entrepreneurial" in the political arena.

Conventional wisdom tends to simplify the relationship of buying offices with performance and patronage, obscuring the motives for seriously considering bribery in political selection. First, selling public offices is assumed to lead to the "negative selection" (Guardado 2018, p. 972) of officials, suggesting that office-selling directly contradicts the performance paradigm. However, whether this is always the case is worth examining. Second, another tendency is to lump bribery into patronage, because bribery indicates connections between the office seller and buyer. Because of the difficulty of observing elite relationships empirically, scholars also often infer connections and factional ties from outcomes (e.g., whether the promotion of a lower-level official occurs under a superior). While reasonable, this approach potentially gives the impression that bribery is rare in the promotion context and intended merely for building clientelist ties, as well as that ties of different origins are similar. Thus, bribery is merged with patronage and eventually disappears from theorization about political selection in China.

However, China's numerous office-selling cases indicate that bribery is common and that money can directly facilitate and be a goal of political selection. Moreover, in-depth case studies show that personal ties based on money differ in many ways from those based on common experiences or ideological pursuits, including their trust-ensuring mechanisms, the resilience of cooperative relationships, and the ultimate politico-economic agenda (Pye 1981; Boucek 2009; Rithmire & Chen 2021; Zhu 2022). Therefore, overlooking bribery or conflating it with patronage may disguise important nuances of elite dynamics. Including the purchase paradigm can help explain residuals or false positives unexplained by the two other paradigms, especially at subnational levels.

1.2.3 Tripartite Framework for Reimagining Political Selection

I use a tripartite framework to juxtapose the three paradigms and stimulate the theoretical reimagining of political selection. Imagine that the 3D space in Figure 2 contains all the possible career advancements of individuals, which can be mapped in accordance with different selection paradigms. Each axis represents one paradigm, and the key qualities or resources that leaders especially want candidates to supply under that paradigm are summarized in

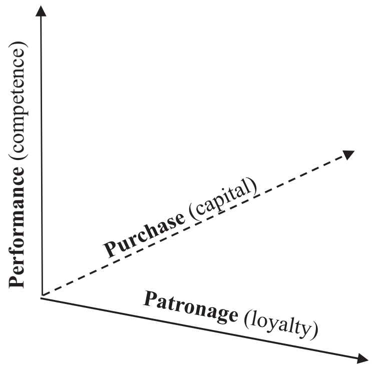

Figure 2 A tripartite framework for analyzing political selection in China.

Note: An individual's promotion outcome can be any point in the three-dimensional space, determined by the three dimensions' respective weights. Higher weights on specific dimensions denote their greater influence (e.g., as primary or secondary considerations) in influencing the promotion result.