

Cambridge Elements

Elements in Chinese Economy and Governance

edited by

Luke Qi Zhang

Fudan University

Mingxing Liu

Peking University

Daniel Mattingly

Yale University

MERITOCRACY OR PATRONAGE?

*Political Foundations of China's
Economic Transition*

Fubing Su

Vassar College

Ran Tao

The Chinese University of Hong Kong



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-50797-4 — Meritocracy or Patronage?
Fubing Su , Ran Tao
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009507974

DOI: 10.1017/9781009507967

© Fubing Su and Ran Tao 2024

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009507967

First published 2024

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-009-50797-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-50800-1 Paperback

ISSN 2976-5625 (online)

ISSN 2976-5617 (print)

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
remain, accurate or appropriate.

Meritocracy or Patronage?

Political Foundations of China's Economic Transition

Elements in Chinese Economy and Governance

DOI: 10.1017/9781009507967
First published online: November 2024

Fubing Su
Vassar College

Ran Tao
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Author for correspondence: Fubing Su, fusu@vassar.edu

Abstract: This Element interrogates the theoretical and empirical validities of two dominant theories about the Chinese state in the post-Mao period. The authors argue that the meritocratic view has under-theorized the innate contradiction between officials' personal competence and their political loyalty. In order to survive political struggles, political leaders need to rely on patronage networks to recruit followers and solidify trust, often at the expense of official competence. The popular view also misrepresents China's cadre assessment system in several important ways. The authors supplement this theoretical and anecdotal evidence with a systematic study of provincial-level officials between 1978 and 2020. Contrary to the meritocratic view, leaders' economic performance does not increase their promotion chances. Work ties with central leaders, on the other hand, have provided provincial officials with advantage in promotion. This Element contributes to general theories of the autocratic state and informs the debate about autocratic growth in the political economy literature.

Keywords: meritocracy, patronage, China, development, political economy

© Fubing Su and Ran Tao 2024

ISBNs: 9781009507974 (HB), 9781009508001 (PB), 9781009507967 (OC)
ISSNs: 2976-5625 (online), 2976-5617 (print)

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	How Is the Chinese State Organized? Two Dominant Views	9
3	Meritocracy in One-Party China? A Critical Evaluation	25
4	Provincial Leader Promotion: A Reassessment	54
5	Patronage and Development Path: A New Research Agenda	77
	References	84