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Jérôme Doyon

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# REJUVENATING COMMUNISM

YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS AND ELITE  
RENEWAL IN POST-MAO CHINA



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JÉRÔME DOYON

# Rejuvenating Communism

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# Rejuvenating Communism

*Youth Organizations and  
Elite Renewal in Post-Mao China*

Jérôme Doyon

University of Michigan Press  
Ann Arbor

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## CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
CHAPTER 1	
Introduction	1
<i>Overview of the Argument</i>	5
<i>Political Youth Organizations in Contemporary China</i>	16
<i>Seeing Like a Young Cadre</i>	26
CHAPTER 2	
Becoming a Student Cadre	31
<i>Student Cadres at the Center of the Student-Management Apparatus</i>	33
<i>Commitment Is Rewarded</i>	44
CHAPTER 3	
Student Leaders as a Rogue Minority	61
<i>Student Leaders' Narrowing Social Circles</i>	63
<i>Cultivating Their Party Spirit</i>	67
<i>The "Bureaucratization" of Student Cadres</i>	74
CHAPTER 4	
Sponsorship Networks in Elite Universities	80
<i>Clientelism at Peking University</i>	82
<i>Chains of Sponsorship Ties in Elite Universities</i>	90
<i>An Elite within the Elite: The Political Career of Student Leaders from Peking University and Tsinghua University</i>	94

CHAPTER 5	
Starting a Political Career on Campus	105
<i>The Counselor System</i>	107
<i>Counselors as Officials in Training</i>	110
<i>Starting a Political Career outside the University</i>	114
CHAPTER 6	
Youth League Officials as Future Party-State Leaders	119
<i>The Perfect Reserve Cadres</i>	120
<i>Cultivating a Role as Leaders-to-Be</i>	126
CHAPTER 7	
Toward a Diffuse Allegiance to the Party-State	137
<i>Each Posting Entails Diverse Personal Ties</i>	140
<i>Turnover and the Multiplication of Personal Networks</i>	145
CONCLUSION: COMMITMENT AND ALLEGIANCE	153
<i>Summary of the Argument</i>	154
<i>Implications for the Study of Authoritarian Politics</i>	157
<i>Appendix</i>	161
<i>Bibliography</i>	163
<i>Index</i>	177

Digital materials related to this title can be found on the Fulcrum platform via the following citable URL:  
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## FIGURES

1	Simple tree-like hierarchy and structure complexified with nonhierarchical ties	15
2	The party-dominated control apparatus over youth organizations on campus	35
3	Unofficial hierarchy of student cadres in the CYL and the student union	42
4	Candidate presentation for the Nanjing University Graduate Student Union Chairperson elections	70
5	Handout for the election campaign of a faculty-level graduate student union	71
6	Xi Jinping visiting Peking University in 2012	72
7	A sponsorship chain from Peking University	92
8	A sponsorship chain from Tsinghua University	94
9	Yang Yue's youth organizations network	138



## TABLES

1	CYL and CCP Membership (1949–2018), in Millions	23
2	Ratio of CCP and CYL Members among University Students (1956–2019)	39
3	Former Student Union Chairpersons from Peking University and Tsinghua University Who Reached Ministerial and Vice Ministerial Positions (Post-1978)	97
4	Former Student Union Chairpersons from Peking University and Tsinghua University Who Became Grassroots Political Leaders (Post-1990)	98
5	Study Sessions for the CYL Central Committee Secretariat in 2014	123
A1	Age Rules for Party-State and CYL Leading Cadres	161



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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

Why are young and educated Chinese so attracted by the party-state? In November 2021, more than 1.4 million candidates took China's civil service exam, competing for 31,200 jobs opened that year in various departments and locales. This was not an exception: despite meager success rates, generally around 2 percent, more than a million people enrolled annually in this exam over the past decade.<sup>1</sup> Opinion surveys show that civil service jobs have been for years among the first career choices for college graduates.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership is also at an all-time high, reaching 95 million members in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

While they may have during the Mao era,<sup>4</sup> ideological factors cannot explain the attractiveness of the regime. Although it still impregnates the political discourse,<sup>5</sup> the revolutionary ideology, or what Schurmann has described as a “pure ideology” that CCP members internalize as guiding values,<sup>6</sup> does not play a structuring role in public-sector recruitment

---

1. “More Chinese Youth Are Chasing Government Jobs,” *Quartz*, 29 November 2021, <https://qz.com/2095491/more-chinese-youth-are-chasing-government-jobs/>

2. Wu Qing (吴庆), “2002 Report Regarding the Employment Situation for University Students in the Beijing Area (2002年北京地区大学生就业状况调查报告),” *Journal of China Youth College for Political Sciences* 22, no. 2 (2003): 26–31.

3. “2021 Report on Internal Chinese Communist Party Statistics (中国共产党党内统计公报),” *Xinhua*, 5 June 2021, <https://www.12371.cn/2021/06/30/ARTI1625021390886720.shtml>

4. Guobin Yang, *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China*, Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

5. Kerry Brown, *China's Dream: The Culture of Chinese Communism and the Secret Sources of Its Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

6. Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 38.

anymore.<sup>7</sup> As a result, party-state officials harbor a variety of ideological preferences.<sup>8</sup>

When it comes to joining the party, “working for Communism” was one of the main incentives during the Mao era (1949–78). It has since been replaced, at least partially, by self-interested motives, such as helping one’s career.<sup>9</sup> While not a professional commitment per se, joining the party is widely seen as a prerequisite to pursuing a career in the public sector and state-owned enterprises, as well as a plus for employment and advancement in Chinese private companies.<sup>10</sup> It is particularly attractive for university students, who will soon be on the job market. Of the 4.7 million new CCP members who joined between January 2020 and June 2021, 40 percent were students.<sup>11</sup> And these are only the ones who get recruited: opinion surveys among Beijing students have shown that around 75 percent of them apply.<sup>12</sup> To explain their application, college students tend to underscore the career benefits of CCP membership rather than political beliefs.<sup>13</sup> This opportunistic interest in party membership is very much in line with what has been described in other reforming communist states.<sup>14</sup>

If not ideology, is it all about career and financial incentives? While an

---

7. Victor Nee and Peng Lian, “Sleeping with the Enemy: A Dynamic Model of Declining Political Commitment in State Socialism,” *Theory and Society* 23, no. 2 (1994): 253–96.

8. David Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008); Tony Saich, *From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021); Timothy Cheek, Klaus Mühlhahn, and Hans J. Van de Ven, eds., *The Chinese Communist Party: A Century in Ten Lives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

9. Bruce J. Dickson, “Who Wants to Be a Communist? Career Incentives and Mobilized Loyalty in China,” *China Quarterly* 217 (2014): 42–68.

10. Bruce J. Dickson and Maria Rost Rublee, “Membership Has Its Privileges: The Socioeconomic Characteristics of Communist Party Members in Urban China,” *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 1 (2000): 87–112; Joanne Song McLaughlin, “Does Communist Party Membership Pay? Estimating the Economic Returns to Party Membership in the Labor Market in China,” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 45, no. 4 (2017): 963–83.

11. “2021 Report on Internal Chinese Communist Party Statistics.”

12. Guihua Xie and Yangyang Zhang, “Seeking Out the Party: A Study of the Communist Party of China’s Membership Recruitment among Chinese College Students,” *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 98–134.

13. Gang Guo, “Party Recruitment of College Students in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 43 (May 2005): 371–93.

14. Kenneth Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

important factor, material gain cannot fully account for the party-state's appeal among young Chinese. The departure from central planning, and the dismantling of the system of guaranteed job assignments for graduates in the 1980s, have created alternatives to the reward structure formerly controlled by the state.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, while civil service careers provide welfare benefits, salaries are lower than in the private sector.<sup>16</sup> Despite these limited incentives, transfers from the administration to the private sector are rare. The vast majority of China's seven-odd million party-state officials remain in the civil service for most of their professional lives.<sup>17</sup>

Is the officials' long-term commitment to their career then mostly tied to the power attached to party-state positions? Milan Svobik has argued that one-party regimes manage to secure long-term loyalty by forcing insiders to invest in the regime for years before they can reap the benefits of high-level positions, including power and rents.<sup>18</sup> By instituting norms of advancement, which give recruits some guarantee that loyalty to the party will be rewarded, these regimes can hence co-opt elite members and prevent splits.<sup>19</sup> In line with this argument, Zang Xiaowei has highlighted that joining the CCP and becoming an official as young as possible is crucial to reaching top positions in the Chinese party-state.<sup>20</sup> This is clear for the more than 2,500 officials who hold the rank of deputy minister or its local equivalent, vice governor, and above;<sup>21</sup> and even more for the 300 or so most highly ranked officials who compose the CCP Central Committee.<sup>22</sup>

Most officials, however, will never rise to these levels, and they often

---

15. Andrew G. Walder, "The Decline of Communist Power: Elements of a Theory of Institutional Change," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 2 (1994): 297–323.

16. Hon S. Chan and Jun Ma, "How Are They Paid? A Study of Civil Service Pay in China," *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 77, no. 2 (June 2011): 294–321.

17. Hon S. Chan and Jie Gao, "The Politics of Personnel Redundancy: The Non-Leading Cadre System in the Chinese Bureaucracy," *China Quarterly* 235 (2018): 622–43.

18. Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

19. Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115–44.

20. Xiaowei Zang, *Elite Dualism and Leadership Selection in China* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

21. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, "Cadre and Personnel Management in the CPC," *China: An International Journal* 10, no. 2 (2012): 69–83.

22. Victor Shih, Christophe Adolph, and Mingxing Liu, "Getting Ahead in the Communist Party: Explaining the Advancement of Central Committee Members in China," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (February 2012): 166–87.

know it early on in their careers due to the glass ceiling created by age limits for leading positions. If one has not become a county leader or equivalent by their forties, their chances of reaching top provincial or national posts is often compromised.<sup>23</sup> With only a minimal chance to attain the highest levels of the hierarchy, it is puzzling that young recruits would invest time and energy in the system.

Ensuring that large segments of a country's elite have a stake in the political system is a central factor in the resilience of authoritarian regimes.<sup>24</sup> The existing literature has pointed to the role played by both political parties<sup>25</sup> and civil service employment<sup>26</sup> as essential co-opting and recruiting channels. But how do these regimes remain attractive when the state does not have a monopoly over social mobility and ideological discourses anymore? Also, how do they maintain cohesion among the ruling elite as it incorporates young recruits who did not experience the intense ideological indoctrination or the shared experience of armed struggle linked to the revolutionary period?<sup>27</sup>

In this book, I tackle these issues by analyzing the first steps of political professionalization in Chinese official youth organizations, including the Chinese Communist Youth League, the CCP's leading youth organization, as well as its subsidiaries, in particular the student unions that can be found in

---

23. Chien-wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, "Sprinting with Small Steps' Towards Promotion: Solutions for the Age Dilemma in the CCP Cadre Appointment System," *China Journal* 71, no. 1 (2014): 153–71.

24. Andrew J. Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 6–17; Bruce J. Dickson, "Threats to Party Supremacy," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 27–35; Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jean-Pierre Cabestan, *China Tomorrow: Democracy or Dictatorship?*, trans. N. Jayaram (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

25. Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*; Daniel Koss, *Where the Party Rules: The Rank and File of China's Communist State*, Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

26. Bryn Rosenfeld, *The Autocratic Middle Class: How State Dependency Reduces the Demand for Democracy*, Princeton Studies in Political Behavior (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

27. Steven R. Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Beyond Patronage: Violent Struggle, Ruling Party Cohesion, and Authoritarian Durability," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 4 (2012): 869–89.

every university in China. These organizations select and cultivate recruits starting from the first years of college, and they play a vital role in cultivating the party-state elite. Many of the regime's top leaders have emerged from them, such as former president Hu Jintao or premier Li Keqiang. The relative accessibility of youth organizations, compared to the opaqueness of the CCP,<sup>28</sup> allows to study the nature of its cadres' investment in a political career as they are on an early path toward officialdom.

## Overview of the Argument

This book shows how early experiences in youth organizations transform political recruits as they are progressively inducted into the world of officials. Based on this analysis, I develop two main arguments regarding the Chinese political system.

I unpack how individual recruits progressively develop an “undogmatic commitment” to a political career, based on the progressive alteration of their personal relationships and the growing attachment to their social role as future party-state leaders, rather than on ideological conformity, policy preferences, or pure material interest. Beyond the individual level, I trace the multiple relationships cadres develop throughout their career and how it serves as the basis of their “diffuse allegiance” to the regime: they are embedded in complex networks made of hierarchical and horizontal ties, which render difficult the establishment of isolated cohesive groups, or factions, that could organize against the party-state itself.

Taken together, these arguments enrich our understanding of elite commitment and cohesion in the Chinese context and stand against two common, and often competing, approaches to the study of Chinese politics. By stressing the importance of political commitment and its relational aspect, I call into question the view that the Chinese party-state has to a large extent become a meritocratic bureaucracy.<sup>29</sup> Concurrently, by highlighting the complexity of cadres' personal networks and stressing the party-state's high level of elite solidarity, I challenge the factional approach to Chinese politics,

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28. Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

29. Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

which sees the party-state chiefly as a collection of separate blocs that compete for power and therefore emphasizes the officials' loyalty to one group against the others.<sup>30</sup>

### *Undogmatic Commitment*

Chinese officials' long-term commitment to a political career results from a cultivation process based on the progressive alteration of their social ties and the growing attachment to their social role. This commitment-cultivation process is essential for the party-state to maintain cohesion and ensure its survival, as the revolutionary ideology no longer structures the political system. Rather than dedication to an official doctrine, it is the tangible commitment to a career in the party-state bureaucracy, exhibited through zeal and adherence to one's role as an official, that recruiters value and reward. I call this phenomenon "undogmatic commitment," as it is based on the recruit's ambition rather than ideological fervor.

While these statements may appear uncontroversial, they have profound implications for understanding the Chinese system and authoritarian politics more broadly. By using the notion of commitment, I stress the importance of symbolic and social incentives<sup>31</sup> and contribute to a deeper understanding of the nonmaterial sources of regime stability.<sup>32</sup> The notion of political commitment is rarely used in authoritarian contexts. If so, it is to refer to dissidents or protesters,<sup>33</sup> as the regimes' officials are deemed loyal but not committed. Yet without equating the two phenomena, I think we can draw valuable parallels between what motivates voluntary militants to join political organizations in democratic contexts and what drives Chinese officials to commit to a lifelong political career.

Scholars of collective action, such as Doug McAdam or Roger Gould, have shown how social ties, both pre-existent or developed through activism,

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30. Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

31. Howard Saul Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

32. Levitsky and Way, "Beyond Patronage."

33. Pénélope Larzillière, "Political Commitment under an Authoritarian Regime: Professional Associations and the Islamist Movement as Alternative Arenas in Jordan," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 6, no. 1 (2012): 11–25.

are instrumental in explaining why individuals participate in political activities and remain active, including in times of crisis.<sup>34</sup> Daniel Gaxie has highlighted similar mechanisms within political parties: party members consider the organization a new family that embeds them within a new social network. Developing personal relationships within the party reinforces their commitment to the organization, as exit becomes socially and emotionally costly.<sup>35</sup> Following a similar logic, I trace how Chinese cadres' political networks come into being through their early political engagement, and how it feeds their commitment to a career in the party-state. Against the view that particularistic relationships binding people through affective and instrumental ties, or *guanxi* (关系),<sup>36</sup> have become less relevant for professional advancement in post-Mao China,<sup>37</sup> this work contributes to highlighting their enduring impact on cadres' careers, both as a basis for political commitment as well as resources to get ahead in the party-state hierarchy.<sup>38</sup>

Political commitment in democratic contexts is also based on the social role politicians embody when taking up their positions, and their attachment to this role.<sup>39</sup> Building on Goffman's analogy between everyday interactions and acting, a social role is here defined as a set of behaviors that make it palpable to others.<sup>40</sup> The role is made of what is publicly expected of someone in a given position and the individual's understanding of what the position implies. Newcomers progressively internalize their roles and transform their

---

34. Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Roger V. Gould, "Multiple Networks and Mobilization in the Paris Commune, 1871," *American Sociological Review* 56, no. 6 (December 1991): 716–29.

35. Daniel Gaxie, "Économie Des Partis et Rétributions Du Militantisme [Economic Analysis of Parties and the Militants' Incentives]," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 27, no. 1 (1977): 123–54.

36. Thomas Gold, Doug Guthrie, and David L. Wank, eds., *Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture, and the Changing Nature of Guanxi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Yanjie Bian, "The Prevalence and the Increasing Significance of *Guanxi*," *China Quarterly* 235 (2018): 597–621.

37. Douglas Guthrie, "The Declining Significance of *Guanxi* in China's Economic Transition," *China Quarterly* 154 (1998): 254–82.

38. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, "The Resilience of Guanxi and Its New Deployments: A Critique of Some New Guanxi Scholarship," *China Quarterly* 170 (2002): 459–76; Shih, Adolph, and Liu, "Getting Ahead in the Communist Party."

39. Jacques Lagroye, "Être Du Métier [Insiders]," *Politix* 7, no. 28 (1994): 5–15.

40. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

habitus.<sup>41</sup> I argue that in nondemocratic contexts as well, attachment to one's role, and the social prestige that goes with it, is critical in explaining long-term commitment to a political career.

One must learn how to behave like an official to become one. As the recruits conform to the role they aspire to, their behavior is progressively standardized. This could appear anecdotal, as most organizations have their own style that their members embody. Behavioral homogeneity is, however, particularly important for organizations that aim at cultivating a cohesive membership and mark their separation from the rest of society,<sup>42</sup> including communist parties.<sup>43</sup> A similar phenomenon can be found in military organizations: as Machiavelli noted, when a man becomes a soldier, he “changes not only his clothing, but he adopts attitudes, manners, ways of speaking and bearing himself, quite at odds with those of civilian life.”<sup>44</sup> Through their behavior, individuals signal their loyalty and obedience to the organization and its leadership. This echoes Andrew Walder's conceptualization of *biaoxian* (表现), roughly translated as *performance*. Focusing on factory workers during the Mao era, he showed how they had to exhibit the virtues and talents expected from their superiors to obtain promotions and benefits. More than conformity to an overarching ideology, it meant actively displaying one's obedience to the organization and its leaders.

This behavioral standardization results from the sponsored mobility that characterizes political selection in the Chinese party-state; some individuals are identified for elite status early on, in particular through the CCP's youth organizations.<sup>45</sup> For the officials I encountered during my inquiry, this process includes being selected early on by party cadres to become a CCP member and work in its youth organizations, taking part in a club social events that inducts the recruits within the officials' circles, developing close ties with senior officials who may become important sponsors, and internalizing the elite's code by learning how to behave and speak like a party-state official. I,

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41. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

42. Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, trans. Laretta C. Clough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

43. Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction*.

44. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Art of War*, trans. Christopher Lynch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

45. Ralph H. Turner, “Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System,” *American Sociological Review* 25, no. 6 (December 1960): 855–67.



for instance, discuss the *Henan clique*, which developed in Peking University, one of the country's best schools, and show how it provides an extreme example of this phenomenon. In the 2000s, a group of young officials created a system where they selected and groomed students to become student organization leaders and rise in the administrative hierarchy on campus. Most of them were from the same province, Henan, and they invited potential recruits to informal dinners to interview them and test their ability to navigate the world of officials. They would evaluate how deferential they were, their rhetorical style, and their ability to bond with cadres through leisure activities. The candidates perceived as the most adequate would then be chosen by the group's leaders and enjoy their sponsorship.

Sponsored mobility leads to the recruitment of individuals with similar backgrounds. First, just like most CCP members,<sup>46</sup> most youth organizations' cadres are from a white-collar background. I show specifically that children of officials are overrepresented among youth organization cadres, just like it has been noted for party leaders.<sup>47</sup> Second, most youth organization leaders have graduated from the country's best universities, as these students are provided with unique networking opportunities. Third, they are primarily men. Women are highly underrepresented among youth organization leaders. While they represent close to 50 percent of the Chinese Communist Youth League membership,<sup>48</sup> no woman has ever headed this organization.

The marginalization of women starts in youth organizations, which partly explains the gender imbalance characteristic of Chinese politics. Women make up 29 percent of CCP members,<sup>49</sup> and close to 38 percent of the membership of the party's most grassroots territorial units, the neighborhood and village committees. Their numbers, however, decrease dramatically as we move up the party-state hierarchy. Despite the institutionalization of gender quotas in the 2000s, women account for less than 9 percent of local leaders, and their representation is minimal at the central level. Throughout CCP history, only six women have been selected to join the CCP Politburo, and no

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46. Lance Gore, *The Chinese Communist Party and China's Capitalist Revolution: The Political Impact of the Market* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2011).

47. Stéphanie Balme, *Entre soi: l'élite du pouvoir dans la Chine contemporaine* [*Self-Segregation: The Power Elite in Contemporary China*] (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

48. "The Chinese Communist Youth League's Membership Reaches 78.59 million (中国共青团团员达到7858.8万名)," *China Youth Daily*, 4 May 2009, [http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2009-05/04/content\\_2648866.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2009-05/04/content_2648866.htm)

49. "2021 Report on Internal Chinese Communist Party Statistics."

woman has ever held a seat in the Politburo Standing Committee, the party's innermost circle.<sup>50</sup> Starting from their first appointments, they face discrimination and many institutional, social, and political barriers, as patriarchal gender expectations still characterize the party-state.<sup>51</sup> Echoing the literature on gendered relations in China, the male-centered socializing among officials, as exemplified by the aforementioned *Henan clique* meetings, strengthens women's marginalization, as it revolves around alcohol drinking and other forms of shared transgression.<sup>52</sup>

The clubbish nature of the recruitment and nurturing process strengthens commitment as well as behavioral homogeneity. It participates in converting heirs to their heritage and conforming the few individuals with a different background to the elite's habitus.<sup>53</sup> Yet this standardization process's performative and ritualistic aspects imply that homogeneity of behavior, and often background, does not necessarily lead to uniformity of thought.<sup>54</sup> The young cadres I met embodied the diversity of views and policy preferences found in the party-state more broadly, ranging from right-wing liberals to neo-Maoists.<sup>55</sup> I argue that the cadres' *undogmatic commitment* and behavioral

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50. Shen Lu, "Pretty Lady Cadres," *ChinaFile*, 21 December 2020, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/features/pretty-lady-cadres-china>

51. Leta Hong Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (London: Verso, 2018); Harriet Evans, "'Patchy Patriarchy' and the Shifting Fortunes of the CCP's Promise of Gender Equality since 1921," *China Quarterly* 248, no. S1 (2021): 95–115, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000709>; Xinhui Jiang and Yunyun Zhou, "Coalition-Based Gender Lobbying: Revisiting Women's Substantive Representation in China's Authoritarian Governance," *Politics & Gender* (2021): 1–33.

52. Matthew Kohrman, "Depoliticizing Tobacco's Exceptionality: Male Sociality, Death and Memory-Making among Chinese Cigarette Smokers," *China Journal* 58 (2007): 85–109; John Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China's New Rich* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Katherine A. Mason, "To Your Health! Toasting, Intoxication and Gendered Critique among Banqueting Women," *China Journal* 69 (2013): 108–33.

53. Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*.

54. Frank N. Pieke, "Party Spirit: Producing a Communist Civil Religion in Contemporary China: Party Spirit," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24, no. 4 (2018): 709–29.

55. David Shambaugh, "Coping with a Conflicted China," *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (February 2011): 7–27; Kerry Brown and Simone van Nieuwenhuizen, *China and the New Maoists*, Asian Arguments (London: Zed Books, 2016); Jude Blanchette, *China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Saich, *From Rebel to Ruler*.

homogenization are central to the party-state's ability to balance between cohesion and pluralism within its ranks, and to how it can ask from its officials to be both obedient and innovative. Diversity of views, and of personal networks as we will see in the next section, is possible due to the behavioral conventions and personal norms that cadres share and through which they signal their commitment and belonging. As we will see in the final sections of this book dedicated to the Xi Jinping era, this diversity can be threatened when the leadership emphasizes activism and asks more from cadres than simply showcase their commitment.

Another implication of taking the cadres' political commitment seriously is that it challenges the view that education, skill, and work performance are the main criteria for promotion within the Chinese party-state. Previous research has shown how party-state reforms in the post-Mao era have led to the rejuvenation of the cadres' corps toward a younger and more educated group. Starting from the 1980s, new entry and exit mechanisms, such as introducing a retirement system, were developed to accelerate turnover.<sup>56</sup> Contrary to the Mao era, class labels were no longer considered in recruitment and promotion; coming from a "red" social class, such as peasants, workers, soldiers, or cadres, was no longer necessary to rise in the party-state hierarchy. Instead, education became vital.<sup>57</sup> Besides, a civil service system, including an examination and evaluation structure, was established starting from 1993.<sup>58</sup> Studies have since highlighted that job performance directly impacts officials' promotion chances.<sup>59</sup>

Against this background, Daniel Bell has described the Chinese party-state as moving toward a "Chinese-style meritocracy," based on a system allowing for the selection of high-quality leaders, via exams, training programs, and evaluations.<sup>60</sup> Chinese authors such as Zhang Weiwei or Eric Li have also argued that the Chinese party-state's selection of talents based on

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56. Melanie Manion, *Retirement of Revolutionaries in China: Public Policies, Social Norms, Private Interests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

57. Hsi-sheng Ch'i, *Politics of Disillusionment: The Chinese Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping, 1978–1989* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1991).

58. Brødsgaard, "Cadre and Personnel Management in the CPC"

59. Zhiyue Bo, *Chinese Provincial Leaders: Economic Performance and Political Mobility since 1949* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002); Pierre F. Landry, Xiaobo Lü, and Haiyan Duan, "Does Performance Matter? Evaluating Political Selection Along the Chinese Administrative Ladder," *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 8 (2018): 1074–1105.

60. Bell, *The China Model*.

merit, as inspired by the tradition of imperial examinations, is a foundation of the regime's legitimacy.<sup>61</sup>

By contrast, I stress that political commitment, and the performance of this commitment, is highly valued by recruiters and allows the officials to rise in the hierarchy. While this configuration differs from what Susan Shirk calls "virtuocracy," a promotion system based on political virtue understood as the conformity to ideological ideas,<sup>62</sup> it still gives weight to political standards. This work hence contributes to the view that party-state careers have been deideologized, at least partially, but not depoliticized in post-Mao China.<sup>63</sup>

### *Diffuse Allegiance*

I also put forward an argument about the nature of elite cohesion in the Chinese context, based on the study of individual trajectories and the multiple relationships cadres develop throughout their careers. Throughout this book, I show that officials are integrated into complex networks, connecting them to many other officials from various localities and administrations, rendering difficult the establishment of autonomous subgroups. These networks are multidimensional and nonexclusive.<sup>64</sup> They are made of horizontal and vertical ties based on family or local connections<sup>65</sup> and shared university

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61. Daniel Bell and Eric Li, "In Defence of How China Picks Its Leaders," *Financial Times*, November 11, 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/903d37ac-2a63-11e2-a137-00144feabdc0>; Weiwei Zhang, "Opinion | Meritocracy Versus Democracy," *New York Times*, 9 November 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/opinion/meritocracy-versus-democracy.html>

62. Susan L. Shirk, *Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 11.

63. Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 230; Jérôme Doyon and Long Yang, "Shades of Red: Changing Understandings of Political Loyalty in the Chinese Communist Party, 1921–2021," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, OnlineFirst (2022).

64. Tang Tsou and Andrew J. Nathan, "Prolegomenon to the Study of Informal Groups in CCP Politics," *China Quarterly* 65 (1976): 98–117.

65. Balme, *Entre soi: l'élite du pouvoir dans la Chine contemporaine*; Ben Hillman, *Power and Patronage: Local State Networks and Party-State Resilience in Rural China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

experiences,<sup>66</sup> as well as created through on-the-job interactions<sup>67</sup> or training programs.<sup>68</sup> As everyone's network is unique and they are not integrated into delineated groups, this leads to the officials' "diffuse allegiance" to the party-state as a whole.

With this concept of *diffuse allegiance*, I contribute to discussions about how different forms of networks may affect elites' relationship with the state. It echoes Wang Yuhua's work showing that dispersed networks transcend parochial interests to align self-interested local elites with the national state.<sup>69</sup> Diffuse allegiance, however, runs counter to factional approaches to Chinese politics that see the Chinese party-state as constituted of delineated groups, based on shared characteristics such as family background, alma mater, or provincial origin.<sup>70</sup> This group-based approach is oversimplifying. It masks that the party-state is constituted of many types of networks, developed through the individuals' experiences as well as shaped by the institutions.<sup>71</sup>

The *diffuse allegiance* I conceptualize is the byproduct of the sponsored mobility system through which officials are inducted into the party-state. Two features of this system are key in explaining this phenomenon: the officials are *embedded* in political networks early on and they *cumulate* ties throughout their career.

First, from the first steps of political professionalization in youth organizations, cadres are *embedded* within an overarching hierarchical system with the CCP at the top. The same organizational framework incorporates student cadres who volunteer in the CCP's youth organizations while pursuing their studies, Youth League officials employed by universities or local administrations, and party-state officials more broadly. Students working for youth

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66. Cheng Li, "University Networks and the Rise of Qinghua Graduates in China's Leadership," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 32 (July 1994): 1–30; Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Xingmiu Liao, "The Impending Rise of the 'Tsinghua Clique': Cultivation, Transfer, and Relationships in Chinese Elite Politics," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 20 March 2019, 1–17.

67. Shih, Adolph, and Liu, "Getting Ahead in the Communist Party."

68. Jérôme Doyon and Franziska Barbara Keller, "Knowing the Wrong Cadre? Networks and Promotions in the Chinese Party-State," *Political Studies* 68, no. 4 (2020): 1036–53.

69. Yuhua Wang, "Blood Is Thicker Than Water: Elite Kinship Networks and State Building in Imperial China," *American Political Science Review*, First View (2022): 1–15.

70. Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*; Zhiyue Bo, *China's Elite Politics Political Transition and Power Balancing* (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2007).

71. Andrew G. Walder, *Fractured Rebellion the Beijing Red Guard Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

organizations not only spend a lot of time with officials due to the activities they organize or due to the club-like sociability previously mentioned, but they are also already part of the same hierarchical structure, as student societies are supervised by Youth League officials, themselves managed by party cadres. As a result, and despite the variety of personal trajectories, most of the relationships built in youth organizations, starting from college, translate into ties between party-state officials as they rise in the hierarchy.

The political importance of personal ties, especially those created during one's youth, is far from being exclusive to China. In the United Kingdom, for instance, Oxford and Cambridge are critical elite cultivation nexuses, and some organizations, such as the debating group Oxford Union Society, play a crucial role as networking platforms for future politicians.<sup>72</sup> Such functioning is common to elite schools in many countries.<sup>73</sup> Yet the integration of networks, from the top of the CCP's hierarchy down to student organizations, is linked to the unique level of concentration that can be found in Leninist party-states, where the party is the leading organ at every echelon of the polity, as well as in universities and other institutions.

Second, the officials' multiplicity of ties results from the various encounters they make throughout their careers. Party-state officials systematically rotate across administrative and geographical lines.<sup>74</sup> Through these transfers, they *cumulate* connections from the very start of their careers. I uncover the complexity of the personal networks they build by following the career of former youth organization cadres. The cadres they meet while at the bottom of the hierarchy can easily be pulled in different directions—including local and central administrations, universities, state-owned companies, etc.—leading to a diversified network.

In one chapter after the other, I highlight the various relationships forged

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72. David Walter, *The Oxford Union: Playground of Power* (London: Macdonald, 1984).

73. Shamus Rahman Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*, Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, trans. Laetitia C. Clough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Roderic Ai Camp, *Mexico's Mandarins: Crafting a Power Elite for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Chalmers A. Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925–1975* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982).

74. Yasheng Huang, "Managing Chinese Bureaucrats: An Institutional Economics Perspective," *Political Studies* 50, no. 1 (2002): 61–79.

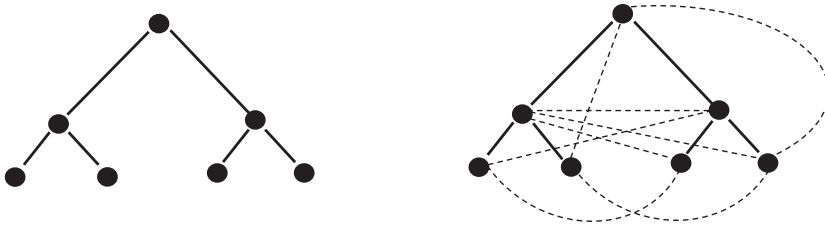


Fig. 1. Simple tree-like hierarchy (*left*) and structure complexified with nonhierarchical ties (*right*).

through choice and chance, including schoolmates, colleagues in youth organizations, sponsors in universities or local administrations, and superior-subordinate relationships. While part of the same overall structure, cadres have unique trajectories and therefore their networks never fully overlap. The resulting network structure is not a simple tree-like structure based on hierarchical ties. As figure 1 illustrates, they are connected via various hierarchical and nonhierarchical relations, based on shared experiences, comradeship, informal relations of influence, and formalized relations of domination.<sup>75</sup> These ties connect officials across hierarchical lines, which limits clustering.

This diversity of relationships is in apparent contradiction with the behavioral standardization previously mentioned. In reality, these two phenomena are mutually reinforcing: homogeneity facilitates networking, as they share practices and expectations regarding their roles as officials, and is strengthened by this form of solidarity. As noted by Mark Granovetter, ties within a closed, albeit extensive, clique tend to limit innovation and reinforce uniformity. These ties also facilitate solidarity.<sup>76</sup> Officials may have competing personal goals, but they have a shared interest in the overall survival of the current political system, which guarantees their position. This is where their allegiance lies. Commitment to their career translates into a commitment to the regime's survival.

75. David Knoke, *Political Networks: The Structural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

76. Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–80.



## Political Youth Organizations in Contemporary China

To study the transformation of the cadres' social role and circles, I focus on the first stages of their political careers in youth organizations. Authors such as Frank Pieke and Charlotte Lee have stressed the role of party schools in the training of Chinese political elites, yet youth organizations remain largely overlooked.<sup>77</sup> This is also true beyond the Chinese case, with only a few studies detailing these organizations' role in political selection.<sup>78</sup> They are, however, ideal observation points to study officials in the making and understand how officials develop both an *undogmatic commitment* to a political career and a *diffuse allegiance* to the party-state.

### *The Communist Youth League, a Weak Organization*

The Chinese Communist Youth League (Zhongguo gongchan zhuyi qingnian tuan, 中国共产主义青年团, hereafter CYL) is the CCP's leading youth organization. It is one of the most prominent political organizations in the world, similar in size to the CCP, with more than 73 million members by the end of 2021.<sup>79</sup> The CYL monopolizes the party-state's "youth work" and can be found at every level of the Chinese polity; it is particularly active in structures with many young people, such as schools and universities.<sup>80</sup> As the CYL commemorated its official 100 year anniversary in May 2022, CCP general secretary Xi Jinping celebrated the achievements of the "party's loyal assistant and reliable reserve force."<sup>81</sup>

77. Frank N. Pieke, *The Good Communist: Elite Training and State Building in Today's China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Charlotte P. Lee, *Training the Party: Party Adaptation and Elite Training in Reform-Era China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

78. Ettore Recchi, "Politics as Occupational Choice: Youth Self-Selection for Party Careers in Italy," *European Sociological Review* 15, no. 1 (1999): 107–24; Marc Hooghe, Dietlind Stolle, and Patrick Stouthuysen, "Head Start in Politics: The Recruitment Function of Youth Organizations of Political Parties in Belgium (Flanders)," *Party Politics* 10, no. 2 (2004): 193–212; Lucie Bargel, *Jeunes socialistes, jeunes UMP: lieux et processus de socialisation politique [Young Socialists and Young UMP: Sites and Processes of Political Socialization]* (Paris: Dalloz, 2009).

79. "Communist Youth League of China has Over 73.7 mln Members," *Xinhua*, 2 May 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220502/1302bbf3de954d3da36ae747d6964215/c.html>

80. Sofia Graziani, "Between Chinese Youth and the Party: The Communist Youth League's Revival and Adjustments in the Early Post-Mao Era," *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* 2 (2021): 83–125.

81. "The Ceremony Celebrating the Centenary of the Chinese Communist Youth League is Solemnly Held in Beijing (庆祝中国共产主义青年团成立100周年大会在京隆



The Youth League became early on the party's *assistant* (*zhushou*, 助手) in youth affairs. While the first cell of the then-named Socialist Youth League was created in 1920, it organized its first National Congress in 1922, a year after the establishment of the CCP.<sup>82</sup> That same year, the party issued a “Resolution on the question of the youth movement” to limit the league’s political autonomy and firmly link its fate to the CCP.<sup>83</sup> Despite some rivalry between the two organizations in the 1920s, the league rapidly became subordinated to the party.<sup>84</sup> It was first a vital tool in the CCP’s struggle for power and became a governing instrument for managing young people’s activities after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Seminal works on the pre–Cultural Revolution period have provided essential insights on the CYL’s functioning as one of the CCP’s key mass organizations, a “transmission belt” for party-state policies and a mobilization platform.<sup>85</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, the league turned out to be “guilty by association”: as the party was bypassed by rebel organizations, the league was accused of bourgeois revisionism and stopped its activities in 1966.<sup>86</sup>

After the Cultural Revolution, the CYL’s central structure was re-established in 1978, following its local units.<sup>87</sup> Studies on the early post-Mao era have stressed how the CYL’s core political indoctrination activities lacked appeal for a generation whose horizon was broadened by the liberalizing

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重举行), *People’s Daily*, 11 May 2022, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-05/11/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20220511\\_1-01.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-05/11/nw.D110000renmrb_20220511_1-01.htm)

82. Sofia Graziani, “Youth and the Making of Modern China,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 13, no. 1 (January 2014): 117–49.

83. Graziani, “Youth and the Making of Modern China,” 136.

84. Shensi Yi, “Brothers, Comrades or Competitors? The Communist Party and Youth League in Shanghai, 1925–1927,” *History* 107, no. 374 (January 2022): 121–42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.13196>

85. James R. Townsend, *The Revolutionization of Chinese Youth: A Study of Chung-Kuo Ch’ing-Nien* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Ronald Nicholas Montaperto, “The Chinese Communist Youth League and the Political Socialization of Chinese Youth” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1977); Tang Bo (唐勃), *Research on the Communist Youth League of the Chinese Communist Party* (中共共青团之研究) (Taipei: Youshi wenhua shiye gongsi, 1985); Klaus H. Pringsheim, “The Functions of the Chinese Communist Youth Leagues (1920–1949),” *China Quarterly* 12 (December 1962): 75–91; Victor Funnell, “The Chinese Communist Youth Movement, 1949–1966,” *China Quarterly* 42 (June 1970): 105; Paul Michael Healy, *The Chinese Communist Youth League, 1949–1979* (Nathan, Qld., Australia: School of Modern Asian Studies, Griffith University, 1982).

86. Shelah Gilbert Leader, “The Communist Youth League and the Cultural Revolution,” *Asian Survey* 14, no. 8 (August 1974): 700–715.

87. Healy, *The Chinese Communist Youth League*.

reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>88</sup> In the 1980s, party-state reformers thought that loosening CCP control was essential for the CYL to remain relevant to young people.<sup>89</sup> A reform project was put forward in 1988 to make the CYL more autonomous. But a year later, the Tiananmen student-led movement demonstrated the CYL's failure to channel young people. The league was criticized by party leaders as too indulgent toward the students and too loosely organized in the 1980s, and the reform project was set aside.<sup>90</sup>

After 1989, the CYL tried to remain attractive to young people by adapting its activities to the evolving socioeconomic situation. The Young Volunteers Operation launched in 1993, and still ongoing, exemplifies these efforts. Through this operation, the league has recruited millions of young volunteers and channeled them into various projects on poverty alleviation, education assistance, and environmental protection.<sup>91</sup> These volunteering activities have since expanded overseas.<sup>92</sup> According to a senior academic of the Central Youth League School who was active in the central organization of the CYL in the early 1990s, this operation has been seen since its inception as a clever way to attract more young people within the league's grasp. It mixes a liberal framing with classical references to socialist morality.<sup>93</sup>

The CYL also relies on affiliated organizations to expand its reach. Since 1949, it has established or reshaped youth organizations to target young people outside its core membership. A crucial one was the All-China Federation of Democratic Youth. As the Youth League targets the "politically advanced" youth, the CCP saw the need for a broader organization aiming at super-

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88. Stanley Rosen, "Prosperity, Privatization, and China's Youth," *Problems of Communism* 34 (1985): 1–28; Graziani, "Between Chinese Youth and the Party"; Thomas B. Gold, "Youth and the State," *China Quarterly* 127 (September 1991): 594–612.

89. Rosen, "Prosperity, Privatization, and China's Youth"; Gold, "Youth and the State"; Graziani, "Between Chinese Youth and the Party."

90. Merle Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China: Political Reform in the Deng Xiaoping Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

91. David A. Palmer and Rundong Ning, "The Resurrection of Lei Feng. Rebuilding the Chinese Party-State's Infrastructure of Volunteer Mobilization," in *Ruling by Other Means: State-Mobilized Movements*, ed. Grzegorz Ekiert, Elizabeth J. Perry, and Xiaojun Yan, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 314–44.

92. Antonella Ceccagno and Sofia Graziani, "Chinese Volunteering in Africa," *Annali Di Ca' Foscari. Serie Orientale* 52 (2016): 297–334.

93. Former CYL official, Central Youth League School, interview, 4 November 2014.

vising young people more broadly. Its first congress was held in Beijing in 1949 and it became in 1958 the All-China Youth Federation (Zhonghua qingnian lianhehui, 中国青年联合会, hereafter ACYF). The ACYF, and its local branches, form a consultative body for the CYL; it does not have an autonomous organizational life.<sup>94</sup> It is also an umbrella organization encompassing other youth groups, in particular the Young Pioneers of China (Zhongguo shaonian xianfeng dui, 中国少年先锋队), created in 1949 and dedicated to children from 6 to 14 years of age, and the All-China Students' Federation (Zhonghua quanguo xuesheng lianhehui, 中华全国学生联合会, hereafter ACSF). Despite being presented as the successor of pre-existing autonomous student organizations, the Student Federation was set up in 1949 as a CYL-led organization. It represents at the national level the student unions present in the different universities across the country.<sup>95</sup> The CYL is officially defined as the ACYF's "core" and directly manages the Pioneers and the ACSF.<sup>96</sup> In the post-Mao era, the CYL also became the parent organization of many other structures linked to youth affairs, which it relies on to diversify its activities and raise funds. The China Youth Development Foundation exemplifies this strategy. Founded in March 1989, it quickly launched the renowned "Project Hope" (*Xiwang gongcheng*, 希望工程), aimed at improving primary education in the poorest regions of China.<sup>97</sup> By 2021, Project Hope had raised close to 20 billion RMB in donations, provided financial aid to more than 6 million students, and helped build more than 20,000 Hope primary schools.<sup>98</sup>

The league's attempts to renew itself remain limited, however, as it has little autonomy. Moreover, since 1989 party-state leaders have been regularly calling for strengthening the CCP's supervision over it.<sup>99</sup> In a recent book compiling his comments on youth issues, Xi Jinping warned about the Youth League's weakness as a mobilizing channel and argued for more party con-

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94. Jérôme Doyon, "Low-Cost Corporatism: The Chinese Communist Youth League and Its Sub-Organizations in Post-Mao China," *China Perspectives* 2 (2019): 39–46.

95. Hu Xianzhong (胡献忠), *The CYL in a Transforming Society* (社会变革中的共青团) (Beijing: Chinese Society Press, 2013).

96. "Charter of the All-China Youth Federation (中华全国青年联合会章程)," Congress of the All-China Youth Federation, 18 August 2020.

97. Doyon, "Low-Cost Corporatism."

98. "White Paper: Youth of China in the New Era," The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 21 April 2022.

99. Gold, "Youth and the State."

trol.<sup>100</sup> In line with these criticisms, the CCP put forward a restructuring of the league in 2016.<sup>101</sup> By emphasizing party control, this reform amounts to a deepening of the status quo: CCP committees manage CYL committees at every level of the polity. The CCP supervises its budget and critical personnel decisions from the local to the central echelons.<sup>102</sup> All the CYL officials I interviewed stressed the league's "lack of power and funds" (*wuquan wuqian*, 无权无钱).

The league's organizational "juniority," as Konstantinos Tsimonis has put it, provides little autonomy to develop localized strategies for responsiveness or to innovate in youth policy. As a result, the CYL delimits youth as a constituency but without engaging directly with the need of young people, which limits its attractiveness.<sup>103</sup> This concept of juniority echoes the broader literature on youth organizations in authoritarian regimes as they struggle with the tension between controlling young people and co-opting their spontaneity and support.<sup>104</sup>

### *The Chinese Communist Party's Reserve Force*

The uniqueness of the Chinese case resides in the central role the CYL plays in political mobility, despite its organizational weakness. While the league

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100. Xi Jinping (习近平), *Compilation of Xi Jinping's Remarks on Youth and the Work of the Communist Youth League* (习近平关于青少年和共青团工作论述摘编) (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2017).

101. "Proposal on the Reform of the Central Communist Youth League (共青团中央改革方案)," CYL Central Office, 2 August 2016.

102. Jérôme Doyon, "The Strength of a Weak Organization: The Communist Youth League as a Path to Power in Post-Mao China," *China Quarterly* 243 (2020): 780–800.

103. Konstantinos Tsimonis, *The Chinese Communist Youth League: Juniority and Responsiveness in a Party Youth Organization* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

104. Gino Germani, "Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Regimes: Italy and Spain," in *Authoritarian Politics in Modern Society; the Dynamics of Established One-Party Systems*, ed. Samuel P. Huntington and Clement Henry Moore (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 339–79; Steven Lee Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Matthias Neumann, *The Communist Youth League and the Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1917–1932* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Jennifer Liu, "Indoctrinating the Youth: Guomindang Policy on Secondary Education in Wartime China and Postwar Taiwan, 1937–1960" (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2010); Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

follows the institutional blueprint of the All-Union Leninist Communist Youth League, or Komsomol, this Soviet equivalent never played as much of a role in the regime's elite renewal. Low-level positions in the Komsomol were often formative experience in the soviet cadres' careers, but the number of party leaders who had working experience in the Komsomol drastically decreased in the post-Stalin era, as the party-state emphasized the cooptation of professionals with technical skills rather than the recruitment of cadres cultivated through youth organizations.<sup>105</sup>

The CYL is officially defined as the party's official "reserve force" (*houbeijun*, 后备军).<sup>106</sup> As such, it plays a dual function regarding the recruitment and training of CCP members and officials. First, it recruits league members, young people of 14 to 28 years old. After being screened and trained, some of them eventually become CCP members. Second, the CYL employs young cadres who lead the organization. Many of them later pursue their careers in the party-state.

The vast majority of young Chinese become pioneers in primary school (the organization is for children from 6 to 14 years old); many of them join the CYL starting from middle school, after they turned 14. Once they are over 18, a selected few can become CCP members.<sup>107</sup> In the post-Mao era, the league has become the main channel for CCP membership with the instauration of the "recommendation of outstanding CYL members" system. First introduced in 1982, it was formalized in the following years so that anyone under 28 years old who wants to enter the party should be recommended by the CYL.<sup>108</sup> In 2010 for instance, almost half of the 3 million new party members were recruited from the CYL.<sup>109</sup>

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105. Frederic J. Fléron, "System Attributes and Career Attributes: The Soviet Political Leadership System, 1952 to 1965," in Carl Beck et al., *Comparative Communist Political Leadership* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1973), 43–85; Michael P. Gehlen, "The Soviet Apparatchiki," in *Political Leadership in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, ed. Barry R. Farrell (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), 140–56.

106. "Charter of the Chinese Communist Youth League (中国共产主义青年团章程)," Congress of the CYL, 29 June 2018.

107. Mette Halskov Hansen, *Educating the Chinese Individual: Life in a Rural Boarding School* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

108. "Opinion regarding further improving the recommendation of outstanding league members to become future party members (关于进一步做好推荐优秀团员作党的发展对象工作的意见)," CCP Organization Department, Document 18, 1992.

109. *Compilation of Internal Statistical Material of the Chinese Communist Party (1921-2010)* (中国共产党党内统计资料汇编 [1921-2010])," Organization

While essential to join the party, CYL membership is too widespread to provide any clear individual advantage in political mobility; the coverage has been maintained at above 20 percent of the 14-to-28-year-olds in the reform era,<sup>110</sup> and above 68 percent of university students since the 2000s.<sup>111</sup> Table 1 presents the evolution of CYL membership since the foundation of the PRC and how it compares with the CCP's. The CYL has expanded rapidly in the reform era and in particular under the Hu Jintao administration (2002–2012). It reached its peak in 2013 with 89 million members, while the CCP only had 85 million. Membership has decreased since, reaching 73 million in 2021.<sup>112</sup> This drop results from Xi Jinping's negative assessment of the Youth League's work,<sup>113</sup> and a stricter enforcement of the rule requiring those reached the age of 28 to leave the organization, except for its cadres.<sup>114</sup> Fearing that the CYL might overgrow and lose its vanguard feature, recruiters were asked to favor activism over large numbers of passive members. Yet despite stricter recruitment, the league still aims at enrolling widely: in 2016, new guidelines stated that by 2025 the number of CYL members should not exceed 30 percent of young people, which remains high.<sup>115</sup>

In contrast to mere membership, becoming a CYL cadre is an important first step toward political professionalization. Youth League cadres include volunteers as well as officials who are managed like civil servants and who are usually both CYL and CCP members. CYL full-time officials amounted to 220,000 in 2018.<sup>116</sup> They are the CYL's core workforce at all echelons of the polity, as well as in CYL units present in state-owned enterprises, universities, and other institutions. While this is not the only way into the party-state, as many leading officials have started their careers in low-level party-

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Department of the Chinese Communist Party (Beijing: Dangjian duwu chubanshe: 2011).

110. "The Communist Youth League's organizational building is very effective (共青团组织建设卓有成效)," Sina.com, 16 July 2003, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2003-07-16/0854387232s.shtml>; Healy, *The Chinese Communist Youth League, 1949–1979*.

111. *Educational Statistics Yearbook of China* (People's Education Press, 2000–2019).

112. "Communist Youth League of China has over 73.7 mln Members."

113. Xi, *Compilation of Xi Jinping's Remarks on Youth and the Work of the Communist Youth League*.

114. "Analysis: Premier Li is back, and so is 'Likonomics,'" *Nikkei Asia*, 19 May 2022.

115. "Opinion regarding the strengthening of the development and management of league members under new circumstances (关于加强新形势下发展团员和团员管理工作的意见)," CYL Central Office, Document 6, 2016.

116. He Junke (贺军科), "Work Report at the First Plenum (在第一次全体会议上的工作报告)," CYL Central Office, January 2018.

Table 1. CYL and CCP Membership (1949–2018), in Millions

CYL Congress (year)	6th 1949	7th 1953	8th 1957	9th 1964	10th 1978	11th 1982	12th 1988	13th 1993	14th 1998	15th 2003	16th 2008	17th 2013	18th 2018
CYL members	0.2	9	23	32	48	48	56	56	68	69	75	89	81
CCP members	4.5	6.4	11	18	36	39	47	53	61	68	75	85	90

Source: Central Communist Youth League website; Central CCP Organization Department (the figure reported at each CYL Congress reflects the situation of the organization at the end of the previous year).

state positions, technical roles in ministries, or as managers in state-owned enterprises,<sup>117</sup> it is a core recruitment channel for political positions. Since the CCP was established in 1921, around a third of its Central Committee members, the CCP's most senior officials, had previously worked for the CYL.<sup>118</sup> The CYL became increasingly important as a promotion channel after the 1980s in the context of the CCP's rejuvenation policy. My previous work and research by Kou Chien-wen and Alex Payette have quantitatively demonstrated the CYL's importance in the post-Mao era as a path to high-level party-state positions.<sup>119</sup>

I focus on CYL cadres to study how they become part of the party-state's elite. The CYL is also a perfect window from which to question the factional approach to Chinese politics, as it is widely seen as the cradle of one of the party-state's leading factions. According to this perspective, a Youth League Faction (tuanpai, 团派) was developed in the 1980s under Hu Yaobang, himself a former CYL leader who became CCP general secretary in 1980, and re-emerged in the 2000s, as Hu Jintao headed the party-state and promoted former CYL leaders, a position he had held in the 1980s.<sup>120</sup> This book challenges the assumption that CYL leaders constitute a cohesive faction by stressing the multifaceted feature of CYL cadres' networks.

117. Zang, *Elite Dualism and Leadership Selection in China*.

118. Yunzhe Chen, *The Relationship between the CCYL and the CCP 1920–2012: From Organizational Rival to Leadership Incubator* (UK Book Publishing, 2016), 4.

119. Doyon, "The Strength of a Weak Organization"; Chien-Wen Kou, "CYL Cadres Rising in the Era of Hu Jintao: Factional Considerations or Organizational Mission of Channeling Cadres," *Prospect Journal* 3 (2007): 77–116; Alex Payette, "Factional Pull: Measuring the 'Tuanpai Effect' on Elite Formation from 1992 to 2012," *International Journal of China Studies* 7, no. 3 (2016): 319–50.

120. Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*; Bo, *China's Elite Politics Political Transition and Power Balancing*.



## *University Student Cadres*

The CCP's youth organizations can be found throughout the educational system, starting from the Young Pioneers in primary school. Universities, however, have become the main arena in which to compete for political status and the launching pad for a career as an official. This results from the establishment in the 1980s of education-related requirements for recruitment in the bureaucracy, leading most officials to go through higher education.<sup>121</sup> Between 1979 and 1998, the percentage of officials with a higher education degree rose from 17.9 to 46.5 percent. Having a university degree eventually became a formal requirement for high-ranking officials.<sup>122</sup>

The CYL and affiliated youth organizations are particularly important in universities where they have control, socialization, and recruitment functions. While in the 1980s these organizations became “amphibious,” as some officials “captured student control institutions to spread nonconformist ideologies,”<sup>123</sup> eventually participating in the emergence of the Tiananmen movement,<sup>124</sup> they came back under the party's sway and retook control over students' activities after 1989. Student unions, the variants of the previously mentioned All-China Students' Federation in the different universities, have been essential in that regard, helping the CYL to manage extracurricular activities on campuses.<sup>125</sup>

Beyond the youth organizations' role in managing student activities, I observed during my inquiry how volunteering as a student cadre could deeply impact one's political future. Not only can student cadres easily become party members and are provided with unique career opportunities once they grad-

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121. Pieke, *The Good Communist: Elite Training and State Building in Today's China*.

122. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, “Management of Party Cadres in China,” in *Bringing the Party Back In: How China Is Governed*, ed. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard and Yongnian Zheng (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004), 70.

123. Dingxin Zhao, “Decline of Political Control in Chinese Universities and the Rise of the 1989 Chinese Student Movement,” *Sociological Perspectives* 40, no. 2 (January 1997): 170.

124. Xueliang Ding, *The Decline of Communism in China: Legitimacy Crisis, 1977–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Xinyong Liu, “Student Associations and Mass Movements,” in *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*, ed. Deborah Davis et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 362–93.

125. Xiaojun Yan, “Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China,” *China Quarterly* 218 (2014): 493–513.



uate, but through this experience they also transform their social circles and feed their political ambitions. Scholars such as Li Cheng, Tsai Wen-Hsuan, and Liao Xingmiu have stressed the importance of the university setting for political socialization and networking in post-Mao China,<sup>126</sup> yet no study has looked at the student cadre experience in detail. This book fills this gap.

“Student cadres” (*xuesheng ganbu*, 学生干部), are officially defined as students who work voluntarily for CCP and CYL organizations, for the student union, and student societies on campus.<sup>127</sup> They share common characteristics with the student “activists” (*jiji fenzi*, 积极分子) of the Mao era. From primary school to university, the student activists were the kingpin of the Maoist education system, serving as mediators between students and teachers. They were “progressive elements” on which the party relied to implement policies.<sup>128</sup> While the overall system of party-related organizations starting from primary schools has remained the same in the post-Mao era,<sup>129</sup> universities have become the main cradle for activism and the main starting point of a political career. In contrast to the fierce political competition that took place in Mao-era high schools, as political standing was a criterion to accessing higher education,<sup>130</sup> students at this level are now less focused on political status, and academic performance has become the chief criterion to enter university.<sup>131</sup> Reflecting this change, the term “activist” now generally refers to the more limited subset of people who have applied for party membership and are still in the first phase of selection, that is, the “activists entering the party.”

Despite these changes, early political socialization is still crucial for the party-state to attract recruits and maintain their commitment over time.

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126. Li, “University Networks and the Rise of Qinghua Graduates in China’s Leadership”; Tsai and Liao, “The Impending Rise of the ‘Tsinghua Clique’”; Hanzhang Liu and Yuhua Wang, “Becoming Political Candidates in China: Elite University Network and Selectorial Advantage,” Working Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3352051>.

127. “Plan for the Cultivation of University Student Cadres 2006–2010 (高校学生干部培养规划 2006–2010),” CYL Central Office, 29 August 2006.

128. Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985); Shirk, *Competitive Comrades*.

129. Hansen, *Educating the Chinese Individual*.

130. Shirk, *Competitive Comrades*.

131. Jonathan Unger, *Education under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960–1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

In that regard, the university student cadres have replaced the high school “activists” of the Mao era. A better understanding of these early experiences and how they transform the students’ social practices and outlook is key to apprehending how the party-state can attract them.

## Seeing like a Young Cadre

When analyzing contemporary Chinese politics, it is tempting to approach the CCP as a monolithic structure that imposes its will on its officials and to see its youth organizations as simple machines of indoctrination and control, manipulating passive young people. Apart from the recent literature on state-mobilized movements,<sup>132</sup> this is how official youth organizations in authoritarian contexts are generally depicted.<sup>133</sup> Against this background, young people are expected to be either indoctrinated or uninterested in official politics, expressing their agency and spontaneity outside of the system and in particular through alternative subcultures.<sup>134</sup>

In contrast to this top-down approach, I analyze youth organizations through the eyes of the individuals who inhabit them, and I stress their agency, without negating the effect of the institutions.<sup>135</sup> I emphasize the

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132. Grzegorz Ekiert, Elizabeth J. Perry, and Xiaojun Yan, eds., *Ruling by Other Means: State-Mobilized Movements*, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Julie Hemment, *Youth Politics in Putin's Russia: Producing Patriots and Entrepreneurs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

133. Denise F. Blum, *Cuban Youth and Revolutionary Values: Educating the New Socialist Citizen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Olga Dror, *Making Two Vietnams: War and Youth Identities, 1965–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Ljubica Spaskovska, *The Last Yugoslav Generation: The Rethinking of Youth Politics and Cultures in Late Socialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); Neumann, *The Communist Youth League and the Transformation of the Soviet Union*.

134. Alec Ash, *Wish Lanterns: Young Lives in New China* (London: Picador, 2016); Eric Fish, *China's Millennials: The Want Generation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Paul Clark, *Youth Culture in China: From Red Guards to Netizens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Stanley Rosen, “The Victory of Materialism: Aspirations to Join China’s Urban Moneyed Classes and the Commercialization of Education,” *China Journal*, no. 51 (2004): 27–52; Juliane Furst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Alan McDougall, *Youth Politics in East Germany: The Free German Youth Movement, 1946–1968*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004).

135. Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, “Embracing Uncertainty: Guerrilla Pol-

commitment-cultivation process itself rather than the organizations' ability to guarantee the actors' loyalty through ideological indoctrination or coercion. Moreover, I study their embeddedness in these structures as a product of the personal networks they develop through their individual trajectories and encounters, rather than a product of pre-existing groupings. In a nutshell, I argue that personal histories matter despite the regimented nature of the Chinese political system.

### *A Site-Intensive Methodology*

An actor-centered approach to Chinese politics implies going beyond organizational features and accessing the cadre's experiences and ambitions. To do so, I chose a site-intensive approach and spent fourteen months doing fieldwork in China between 2011 and 2015. A set of semistructured interviews with 92 actors, identified through snowball sampling, constitutes the foundation of this study. I interviewed current or former CYL officials (44) and student cadres (24). I targeted cadres of different ranks, from various echelons (from central to county level) and organizations (based in universities and state-owned enterprises in particular). The party-state's gender imbalance, which I described earlier, was reproduced in my interviews, as only 22 interviewees were female. The age range of my interviewees was broad, from 20-year-old student cadres to 80-year-old retired officials, so I could include individuals who experienced different periods within the post-Mao era. In addition to the cadres per se, I interviewed several academics (24) either from the Central CYL School, which oversees the training of CYL cadres, or from the different universities on which I focused. My fieldwork also allowed for limited participant observation. Some interviewees invited me to join them at official dinners or evaluation trips. These were unique opportunities to observe interactions among cadres and how they perform their role as officials.

For the sake of representativeness, my fieldwork focused on Beijing and two very different provincial capitals: Nanjing and Guiyang. Nanjing is the capital of Jiangsu Province—among the five most affluent provinces in the country according to official statistics—and Guiyang is the capital of

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icy Style and Adaptive Governance in China," in *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, ed. Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2011), 1–29.

Guizhou Province, which sits at the bottom of the list. Besides, I conducted complementary interviews regarding the situation of youth organizations in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, and Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei Province.

To study the student cadre experience more specifically, my fieldwork focused on four universities. First, the country's most elite institutions: Peking University and Tsinghua University. These universities provide the most party-state leaders and hence play a vital role in the sponsored mobility process.<sup>136</sup> These universities are, however, highly specific. They provide unique career prospects to their students, and are both in Beijing, close to the central administration. For the sake of comparison, I also focused on two universities outside Beijing: Nanjing University and Nanjing Normal University. While of different ranks, these four universities remain part of the "211 project," which includes the 100 or so best universities in the country,<sup>137</sup> and see many of their students becoming officials. In 2008, 46 percent of the graduates from "211 project" universities went directly into the public sector. By contrast, only 37 percent of graduates from non-211 universities did.<sup>138</sup> To widen the scope of the comparison, I also conducted complementary interviews in other universities in Beijing, Chengdu, and Guiyang.

The choice of a limited set of field sites was also linked to the difficulty of accessing information, as many officials are reluctant to talk about their careers with a foreign scholar. Yet what I lost in quantity, I believe I gained in quality. The repeated encounters with my interviewees favored the development of relationships based on trust and enabled me to go past the official discourse and get a sense of their ambitions.

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136. V. Shih, J. Lee, and D. Meyer, *The Database of CCP Elite* (San Diego: 21st Century China Center, 2021).

137. "Project 211 and 985," China Education Center Website, <http://www.chinaeducer.com/en/cedu/ceduproject211.php>

138. Cheng Changqun (成长群), "Research on the Issue of Employment of University Students: Survey on the Issue of Hubei University Student Employment as a Case (大学生就业问题研究:以湖北大学生就业调查为例)" (PhD diss., Wuhan University, 2010), 98.

## *Structure of the Book*

The book's structure reflects its actor-centered approach and the progressive nature of the commitment-cultivation process. It follows the young cadres' first steps in the CCP's youth organizations, looking first at university student cadres (chapters 2 to 4) and then at the ones starting their political career as Communist Youth League officials (chapters 5 to 7).

Chapter 2 focuses on how and why college students become *student cadres*. I argue that social circles have a crucial impact on the students' initial choice to become cadres. Their family background, as well as the behavior of their friends and classmates, are key pulling factors. Yet I show that becoming a student cadre is also linked to the career-related incentives associated with the experience. This combination of material and nonmaterial incentives drives their political commitment. Chapter 3 concentrates on what happens once they have been student cadres for a few years. Focusing on the student organizations' leaders, it shows how this experience changes them. They progressively transform their behavior as they interiorize how to present themselves as future cadres and exhibit their *party spirit*. Their social circles also change, revolving increasingly around other cadres, which separates them from the wider student body. This chapter shows how, starting from their experience in college, cadres begin to think of themselves as a distinct elite group bestowed with the party's organizational charisma. Chapter 4 looks in detail at the most elite of the student cadres: the student union leaders from Peking University and Tsinghua University. In the country's two most famous universities, student leaders have access to unique networking and career opportunities, which can crucially impact their political future. This case study shows the importance of sponsorship ties developed with university officials and shows how they are embedded into official circles very early. Through these chapters, I show how student cadres progressively cultivate an *undogmatic commitment* to a career in officialdom and develop embryonic political networks.

Starting with chapter 5, I turn to the next steps in the sponsored mobility process, looking at what happens after graduation from university. Chapter 5 focuses on the graduates who choose to stay on campus as university officials and potentially use this position to kick off a political career beyond campus. Getting to mechanisms behind the homogeneity of background among party-state state officials, this chapter stresses that only a minority—mostly male cadres from the country's top universities—leave a comfortable position

on campus to start a political career. Moving away from the university environment, I turn in chapter 6 to the experience of local and central CYL leaders. As key winners of the CCP's rejuvenation policy, CYL leaders are put on a fast promotion path within the party-state hierarchy. This experience turns young cadres into leaders. While the performative aspect of this transformation, emphasizing the performance of their roles as future party leaders over shared ideological belief, has allowed officials with different political views to get ahead, the emphasis put on activism under Xi Jinping threatens this diversity in the long run. Chapter 7 looks at the type of personal ties developed through the CYL and beyond, stressing their cumulative nature. As they move across administrations and localities, but also through training or evaluations, officials develop many relationships with superiors, colleagues, and underlings. This multifaceted network structure limits the cadres' integration in delineated groups and instead induces a *diffuse allegiance* to the party-state as a whole. This is, however, a dynamic configuration, which can be disturbed by changes to cadre management rules, which could lead to less turnover and *in fine* less diversified individual networks.

## CHAPTER 2

# Becoming a Student Cadre

In November 2014, I was introduced to Chen Feng (the name has been changed) by another student cadre. We met on the Renmin University campus, one of Beijing's most elite institutions, where he was pursuing his graduate studies. Chen's trajectory as a student cadre is revealing in its banality; it illustrates the pragmatic but also social aspects of this experience. Chen became a student cadre in 2009 as he entered college. He joined the Culture Department of his university's student union, in charge of organizing extra-curricular cultural activities. At that point, most students around him were doing the same thing, and he recalls that among the 3,000-odd first-year students, more than a thousand joined the student union at the university and faculty levels. This changed as years passed: only 80 remained involved in the university-level student union in the second year, 15 in the third year, and 9 in the fourth year.

Chen enjoyed the union's atmosphere and remained involved throughout his undergraduate studies. He progressively climbed the ranks in the union. In his second year, he became the Culture Department deputy director after an internal selection process. One year later, he was appointed by the union's leadership as the department's head. This new position gave him a seat at the university's student union standing committee. The student union copies the CCP's hierarchical structure, and the standing committee is its main decision-making body, generally made up of fewer than ten members.

As Chen rose through the ranks in the student union, the group of student cadres around him became smaller and tighter, and they all knew one another well. For a shy student like Chen, it quickly became his chief circle of friends on campus. At the same time, the union increasingly appeared to him as a "platform to show off to other students and university staff" in order to reap

potential benefits.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, he did not attempt to become the union's chairman. It was also too demanding for his taste. He was already spending most of his time working for the union, and as chairman, he would have had to dedicate even more time, including all his vacations. The way he presented it, he had already achieved his goal by joining the union's standing committee. He believed that this experience would help him after he graduated. The university awarded him a title as "excellent student cadre," which looked good on his CV. Moreover, such experience is particularly valued when taking the highly competitive civil service exam, which is the main route for entry-level government jobs. While Chen previously envisioned pursuing PhD studies abroad, he realized that it would mean losing the network and opportunities he cultivated as a student cadre, and he therefore decided to take this exam.

With a career in officialdom in mind, Chen had also recently joined the Chinese Communist Party. He surprisingly did not join the CCP while he was a student cadre, which is very common, and did so only in graduate school. This, he explained, was because of the limited interaction he had with his classmates, whereas as part of the recruitment process, further explained later in the chapter, he needed to be recommended by party members in his class. Students generally know their classmates very well; in addition to interaction during classes, they share their dormitories with some of them. But because Chen changed his major just after being assigned to a dormitory, he did not enjoy that extra layer of social interaction with classmates. As he put it, "I was too busy at the student union to spend meaningful time with my classmates outside classes. Also, I was not active enough in pursuing CCP membership."<sup>2</sup> Yet his experience in the student union appears to have channeled an initially hesitant Chen toward a career in officialdom.

Building on Chen's story and others, this chapter unveils the student cadre experience. What exactly is it about, and why do students volunteer? Instances of socialization such as family, friends, or roommates are central in explaining this choice, but career-related incentives are equally important. These incentives directly result from policies that aim to make the student cadre experience attractive, which can translate into a first step toward officialdom. They also result from the universities' student-management structure, which places the student cadres at the center of a clientelist network.

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1. Former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014.
  2. Former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014.



## Student Cadres at the Center of the Student-Management Apparatus

### *The Student-Management Apparatus*

On Chinese university campuses, student life outside the classroom is managed through a hierarchical system supervised by the CCP, whose structure parallels the university administration. This structure is divided into three echelons: the university level (*daxue*, 大学), the faculty level (*yuanxi*, 院系), and the class level (*banji*, 班级) made of people from the same cohorts within faculties. Student management is supervised by the university's CCP committee, with generally a deputy party secretary specifically in charge of student affairs.<sup>3</sup> It directly controls the university-level CYL committee and CCP committees of the various faculties and departments.

This structure is reproduced at lower levels. At the faculty level, a CCP deputy secretary also manages student affairs and the CYL. At the class level, the CYL branch is under the supervision of a university cadre, a "student counselor" (*xuesheng fudao yuan*, 学生辅导员) who serves as the class director and generally as the class-level CCP branch secretary.<sup>4</sup> "Student counselor" refers broadly to university staff members in charge of student welfare and management. In addition to the class level, they can be found at the faculty and university levels, where they hold leadership positions in the Youth League committees for instance. Chapter 5 is primarily devoted to student counselors.

The CYL is under the CCP's leadership, which selects its officials and controls its budget. The CYL is, in turn, in charge of supervising student organizations. At the university level, the CYL committee manages the student union and the graduate student union, which oversee extracurricular activities. As described in the previous chapter, the All-China Students' Federation is a national body representing the student unions that can be found in all universities. In the different schools, the student union's charter states that it "accepts the leadership (*lingdao*, 领导) of the university's party com-

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3. Xiaojun Yan, "Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China," *China Quarterly* 218 (2014): 493–513.

4. Dingxin Zhao, "Decline of Political Control in Chinese Universities and the Rise of the 1989 Chinese Student Movement," *Sociological Perspectives* 40, no. 2 (January 1997): 163.

mittee and the guidance (*zhidao*, 指导) of the university's CYL.<sup>5</sup> In practice, it is mainly the CYL that manages its daily activities. The student union is staffed by students, except of its office secretary (*mishuzhang*, 秘书长), who is a university CYL official.<sup>6</sup> This ensures the CYL's grip over the union. Also, the CYL controls the student union's funds and approves its primary activities.<sup>7</sup> Even if the students obtain sponsorship from outside organizations, the funds must go through the CYL. The CYL keeps a share of this money for its activities, for instance around 8 percent at Peking University.<sup>8</sup> The CYL's control over student organizations is reproduced at the lower echelons. Overall, in my interviews, the union is referred to as a mere "department" of the university CYL.

The basic structure of the student-management apparatus, schematized in figure 2, can be found in most universities, with local adjustments based on each university's history. It is the result of decades of evolution. Some universities developed Youth League branches very early, as soon as 1921 for Peking University, but most of them were set up under the control of the CCP after the founding of the PRC in 1949. Similarly, the current student unions were established under the power of the CCP and CYL after 1949.<sup>9</sup> Graduate student unions were established starting from the 1980s due to the increasing number of graduate students.

The reform policy opened the way to the liberalization of control on campus. In the 1980s, the CYL and related organizations were still key actors in universities but were increasingly autonomous from the CCP and more liberal in their activities. This went together with the emergence of many student societies related to sport, language learning, calligraphy, etc.<sup>10</sup> This relaxation of control was, however, short-lived, as from the party's perspec-

5. "Charter of Peking University Student Union (北京大学学生会章程)," Peking University Student Union, May 2010; "Charter of Tsinghua University Student Union (清华大学学生会章程)," Tsinghua University Student Union, December 2010.

6. Corinna-Barbara Francis, "The Institutional Roots of Student Political Culture: Official Student Politics at Beijing University," in *Chinese Education: Problems, Policies, and Prospects*, ed. Irving Epstein (New York: Garland, 1991), 398.

7. CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 5 February 2015; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013.

8. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014.

9. Lü Lili (吕丽莉), "Study on the Democratic Construction of College Student Organizations (高校学生组织的民主建设)" (PhD diss., Liaoning University, 2012).

10. Feng Shichang (冯世昌), *Local Record of the Nanjing Normal University 1902–1992 (南京师范大学志 1902–1992)* (Nanjing: Nanjing Normal University Press, 2002).

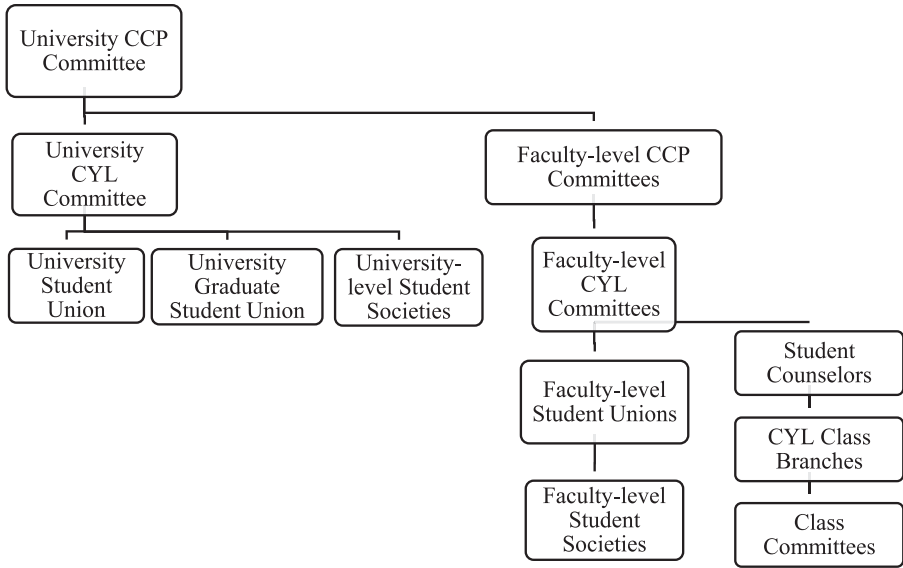


Fig. 2. The party-dominated control apparatus over youth organizations on campus.

tive it contributed to making the 1989 uprising possible.<sup>11</sup> Ding Xueliang, Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Lin Xinyong, and Corinna-Barbara Francis have stressed how in the 1980s, youth organizations on campus helped to enrich the students’ political culture and provided them with mobilization capabilities.<sup>12</sup>

The 1989 uprising triggered a long-term debate within the party-state on how to discipline students, through political education and military training,<sup>13</sup> and on how to improve its control over student organizations. This was first reflected in a central CYL circular published in August 1989 call-

11. Yan, “Engineering Stability.”

12. Xueliang Ding, *The Decline of Communism in China: Legitimacy Crisis, 1977–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Xinyong Liu, “Student Associations and Mass Movements,” in *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*, ed. Deborah Davis et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 362–93; Francis, “The Institutional Roots of Student Political Culture.”

13. Juliette Genevaz, “Defense Education in Chinese Universities: Drilling Elite Youth,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 117 (2019): 453–67.

ing for strengthening the Youth League's position within campuses.<sup>14</sup> In the years that followed, universities took different measures in that direction. At Peking University, for example, the CYL became more involved in the selection of student union leaders starting from 1989, and more precise rules were established in 1998 regarding the creation and funding of student societies.<sup>15</sup>

The CYL now supervises student societies through a dedicated department.<sup>16</sup> To create an association, students need to find a faculty member, generally a student counselor, to endorse it, and the CYL committee gives the final approval. The CYL supervises student societies' resources and grants them funds and campus resources, such as meeting spaces. Yet since the league is unable to monitor all of them, the student union generally assists it in supervising student societies.<sup>17</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, there were between 150 and 200 such societies in Nanjing University or Tsinghua University, and around 300 in Peking University.<sup>18</sup>

A series of later regulations have further strengthened student management. A 2005 central document laid out clear standards regarding the budget and staff of CYL cells on campus. It also formalized that at the university level, the student union and graduate student union secretaries must be CYL officials and not students.<sup>19</sup> Under the Xi Jinping administration, in power since 2012, new regulations have strengthened the role played directly by CCP cells in student control, including the supervision of extracurricular activities and the promotion of political education.<sup>20</sup> While the CYL is still a critical inter-

14. "Opinion Regarding CYL Work in Universities in the Current Period (关于当前高等学校共青团工作的几点意见)," CYL Central Office, 13 August 1989.

15. Peking University Youth League Committee, *The Communist Youth League in Peking University* (共青团在北大) (Beijing: People's Press, 2004), 157–59.

16. "Provisional Solution regarding the Management of Higher Education Student Societies (高校学生社团管理暂行办法)," Ministry of Education and CYL Central Office, 13 January 2016, [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/s5147/201601/t20160113\\_227746.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/201601/t20160113_227746.html)

17. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 December 2013; student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 15 June 2013.

18. Student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 15 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 3 July 2012; former CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 27 June 2013.

19. "Opinion Regarding the Strengthening and Improvement of the CYL Construction in Higher Education Institutions (关于进一步加强和改进高等学校共青团建设的意见)," Ministry of Education and CYL Central Office, Document 15, 8 April 2005.

20. "Opinions Regarding the Deepening of the Reform and Innovation of School Political Education Courses for a New Era (关于深化新时代学校思想政治理论课改革创新的若干意见)," CCP Central Office, 14 August 2019; "Regulations of the Communist Party of

mediary between the CCP and the student organizations, party organizations on campus are expected to revamp their operation in the traditional fields of propaganda and political work but also micromanage academic and student life on an unprecedented scale in the reform era.<sup>21</sup> To understand how these changes, which took place after my fieldwork, are implemented on the ground, I compared the 2006 Peking University's regulations for the management of student societies with the revised version of 2019. While the party was not mentioned in the 2006 document, the 2019 version repeatedly stresses the CCP's leadership and states that every student society should be headed by a student who is either a CYL or CCP member.<sup>22</sup>

The “partification” of universities<sup>23</sup> is in line with similar moves in other sectors of society, as the CCP charter was modified in 2017 to include that “Party, government, army, society and education, east, west, south and north, the party leads on everything.”<sup>24</sup> It also reflects how concerned the Xi Jinping administration is about the management of young people. In particular, Xi called for the party to focus on specific groups that could become a “negative force” if not appropriately managed, including actors of the new economy, young migrant workers, artists, and unemployed university graduates.<sup>25</sup> Against this background, the first focus of the 2017 “Mid-to Long-Term Plan for the Development of Youth” is the ideological and moral training of young people, before the improvement of their economic situation or health.<sup>26</sup>

Starting in the late 1980s, the CYL and student union on campus also

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China on the Work of Primary Organisations in Regular Colleges and Universities (中国共产党普通高等学校基层组织工作条例),” CCP Central Office, 23 April 2021, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2021-04/23/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20210423\\_1-03.htm#](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2021-04/23/nw.D110000renmrb_20210423_1-03.htm#)

21. Jérôme Doyon and Konstantinos Tsimonis, “Apathy Is Not Enough: Changing Modes of Student Management in Post-Mao China,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 7 (2022): 1123–46.

22. “Peking University's Regulations for the Management of Student Societies (北京大学学生社团管理条例),” 4 April 2006 (and the revised version from 8 May 2019).

23. Doyon and Tsimonis, “Apathy Is Not Enough.”

24. Nis Grünberg and Katja Drinhausen, “The Party Leads on Everything. China's Changing Governance in Xi Jinping's New Era,” *MERICs China Monitor Report*, 24 September 2019.

25. Xi Jinping (习近平), *Compilation of Xi Jinping's Remarks on Youth and the Work of the Communist Youth League* (习近平关于青少年和共青团工作论述摘编) (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2017).

26. “Mid to long-term plan for the development of youth (*zhongchangqi qingnian fazhan guihua 2016–2015 nian*, 中长期青年发展规划 2016–2025 年),” State Council, 13 April 2017.

started diversifying their action. In addition to classical political work, such as organizing classes for CCP applicants, they started arranging leisure activities. The CYL and the student union increasingly developed cultural events such as singing, sports, or poetry competitions on campuses. In 1989, the central CYL organized the first “challenge cup,”<sup>27</sup> a national competition for student science projects. It became prevalent and was later reproduced in universities, such as Peking University in 1994.<sup>28</sup> Along these lines, the CYL volunteering activities mentioned in the previous chapter were also conducted at the university level. Since the 1990s, college students have been mobilized to participate in the China Youth Development Foundation’s “Hope project,” which aims to develop primary education in the poorest provinces of China.<sup>29</sup> Student volunteers also take part in exceptional events at the local or national level. At the time of my fieldwork, for instance, Nanjing University sent 1,600 volunteers to participate in the Nanjing 2014 Youth Olympic Games.<sup>30</sup>

The CYL and student union also diversified their media of communication and, starting from the late 2000s, online tools became central.<sup>31</sup> This transition has accelerated in recent years as Xi Jinping has stressed the importance of the internet as a “battlefield” that cannot be ignored. Youth organizations have hence developed creative outreach methods, including the production of rap music videos or animated cartoons. The CYL even opened a Twitter account in 2017 to target Chinese speakers beyond national borders.<sup>32</sup> While these media productions and activities developed by the CYL and student union appear apolitical in content, they retain a clear political objective: to keep students busy and maintain a monopoly over student extracurricular activities.

Beyond changes to the control apparatus and extracurricular activities,

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27. Beijing Communist Youth League Committee (共青团北京市委员会), ed., *Records and Documents of Beijing's Youth Organizations* (北京青年组织志文稿) (Beijing: Beijing Press, 2007), 386.

28. Peking University Youth League Committee, *The Communist Youth League in Peking University*, 143.

29. Elizabeth J. Perry, “Citizen Contention and Campus Calm: The Paradox of Chinese Civil Society,” *Current History* 113, no. 764 (2014): 211–17.

30. “Description of the Prize-Giving Ceremony for the Volunteering Service of Nanjing University at the Youth Olympic Games (南京大学青奥会志愿服务颁奖盛典实况),” WeChat account of Nanjing University CYL, 29 October 2014.

31. CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 26 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013.

32. “How China’s Communist Party, Founded by Young People, Continues to Engage Youths,” *South China Morning Post*, 26 May 2021.

Table 2. Ratio of CCP and CYL Members among University Students (1956–2019)

	1956	1978	1980	1988	1992	2003	2013	2019
CCP membership	8.6%	10.8%	4.4%	2.9%	1.5%	6.7%	8.8%	5.0%
CYL membership	57.3%	60.4%	76.2%	86.9%	88.9%	68%	68.4%	80.1%

Source: *Educational Statistics Yearbook of China* (People's Education Press, 1993–2019)

the CCP also pushed for an increase in the recruitment of university students after 1989.<sup>33</sup> Tracing the percentage of university students who joined the party since the 1950s, table 2 shows that in contrast to the 1980s, membership grew rapidly in the 1990s and 2000s, despite the rapidly increasing number of overall students. By the early 2010s, it reached levels equivalent to the Mao era. Numbers have gone down, since the Xi administration appears less keen on co-opting students into the CCP. Comparable to what we have seen regarding CYL membership in the previous chapter, the party is more selective and now emphasizes the quality and activism of members and discourages token participation.<sup>34</sup>

When it comes to CYL membership among students, the trend appears to run in the opposite direction to that of CCP recruitments. As underlined by Rosen, CYL membership was exceptionally high in the late 1980s, there was little screening, and fewer students were transferring from CYL to CCP membership.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, we see an increasing percentage of CYL members among university students in recent years: Many of them joined the CYL when it was recruiting particularly broadly by the end of the Hu Jintao era (2002–2012) and stayed in the organization for a long time, as they are now faced with more restrictive criteria to transfer to the party.

Among these CYL and CCP members, some are particularly central to the student-management apparatus as they actively volunteer for the CCP's youth organizations on campus. This experience can become a formative political experience, and as we will see later in this chapter, it is highly intertwined with both CCP membership and CYL and CCP members in the early steps of political professionalization.

33. Stanley Rosen, "Students and the State in China: The Crisis in Ideology and Organization," in *State and Society in China: The Consequences of Reform*, ed. Arthur Lewis Rosenbaum (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 167–91.

34. Doyon and Tsimonis, "Apathy Is Not Enough."

35. Stanley Rosen, "The Effect of Post-4 June Re-Education Campaigns on Chinese Students," *China Quarterly* 134 (1993): 310–34.

### *What Is a Student Cadre?*

The student cadres' mission is to act as a link between students and university staff. The official definition of university student cadres includes the students who volunteer for the CCP and CYL organizations, the student union, and student societies.<sup>36</sup> While it is hard to obtain definitive figures for the number of student cadres in various universities, there were in 2013 around 2,000 student cadres among Tsinghua University's 15,000 undergraduate students.<sup>37</sup> According to a survey conducted among 3,000 students in 30 or so universities, 38.5 percent participated in student societies and 25.5 percent volunteered for the student union.<sup>38</sup>

As mentioned in the previous chapter, student cadres permeate the Chinese education system starting from primary school. This experience, however, takes a new meaning in college, as explained by a high school staff member I interviewed:

In middle or high school, we select as student cadres the ones who have good grades, are well-behaved, and not afraid to speak in public. We avoid boisterous ones. The students are mostly concerned with exams and not especially focused on such activities. Still, no one says no to the teacher. In universities it is different: they volunteer and then have to come up with their own activities to organize.<sup>39</sup>

This changes when they go to university. During the first weeks of the academic year, student counselors and student leaders advertise the student cadre positions in classes and dormitories to attract first-year students. They also directly target the new students they feel would make competent student cadres, based on their "eloquence" and "people skills." As a result of these recruitment efforts, many first-year students become student cadres. At Tsinghua University for instance, on average 50 percent of the 3,300 first-year students become student cadres.<sup>40</sup> While such large numbers are not needed, the CYL pushes for extensive recruitment in the organizations it controls.

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36. "Plan for the Cultivation of University Student Cadres 2006–2010 (高校学生干部培养规划 2006–2010)," CYL Central Office, 29 August 2006.

37. CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013.

38. Lü, "Study on the Democratic Construction of College Student Organizations," 45.

39. High school CYL official, interview, Nanjing, 25 June 2012.

40. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015.



Because there are too many for the work at hand, most student cadres are only given trivial tasks, such as moving tables for an event. A lot of them find it uninteresting and give up quickly. Most first-year students also try different organizations all at once, and they only start focusing on one or two the following year.<sup>41</sup>

The situation evolves during the second year of college. Those who keep on as student cadres can rise in the hierarchy. In most universities, they must take short written tests regarding the organization and the university and must go through a recruitment interview.<sup>42</sup> The CYL and the student union are the organizations that offer the most positions for students, and therefore the most opportunities for advancement. The student union is fully staffed by students, apart from its office secretary, who is a CYL official hired by the university. When it comes to the CYL, in most universities the leaders at the university and faculty levels are professional officials, but lower positions are held by students. These various student cadre positions are presented hierarchically in figure 3 below. This hierarchy is, however, not an official one and can change from one university to another.<sup>43</sup>

The few committed student cadres who remain active in their third and fourth years provide a pool of potential leaders for campus youth organizations. Among Tsinghua University's third- and fourth-year students, for instance, only two hundred student cadres remain active in the CYL and the student union.<sup>44</sup> Third-year students can, for example, be appointed by the faculty-level CCP to become CYL deputy secretary of their faculty. This is only possible if they are already CCP members. Another option is to head a department of the university student union or become chairperson of a faculty-level student union. While in that case being a CCP member is not mandatory, most of them are at least probationary members. The organization's chairperson selects university student union department directors, with the agreement of CYL officials.<sup>45</sup> At the faculty level, the selection pro-

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41. Student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 15 June 2013

42. CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013; student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 15 June 2013; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014.

43. CYL official, interview, Peking University, 19 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 13 June 2013; former CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 27 June 2013.

44. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 30 April 2015.

45. Student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 15 June 2013; CYL official, interview,

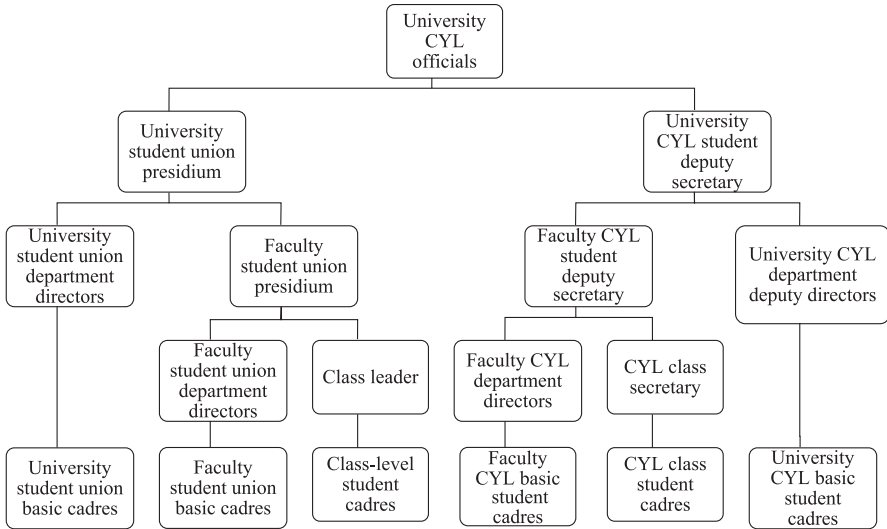


Fig. 3. Unofficial hierarchy of student cadres in the CYL and the student union.

*Source:* This figure is based on a cross-analysis of interviews with university officials and student cadres. The layers represent equality of rank from the cadres' perspective.

cess for the student union chairpersons varies around two primary mechanisms: appointment by the faculty CYL, or controlled elections.<sup>46</sup> At Nanjing University, for instance, the foreign languages faculty organizes direct elections for the student union chairperson. Both students and university staff members have the right to vote, yet, to guarantee staff control over the process, their votes count five times as much as the students.' By contrast, in the history faculty the student union chairperson is appointed by the CYL. There used to be elections, but after a candidate whom the CYL did not support was elected by students and was accused by league officials of mismanaging activities, the process was changed. All in all, the CYL exerts much influence over the faculty-level student union. Candidates for these positions have generally been student cadres for years and have good relationships with the faculty CYL officials.<sup>47</sup>

Peking University, 3 July 2012; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014; student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014, CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015.

46. Lü, "Study on the Democratic Construction of College Student Organizations," 33.

47. Student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 15 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 2 February 2015.

In their fourth year, only a handful of students remain cadres. They generally get top positions in youth organizations, such as chairperson or deputy chairperson of the university-level student union. For these posts, the overall selection process is laid out by the All-China Student Federation's charter. Every two years, a congress of student representatives is assembled. The different faculties send representatives according to their size. The faculty-level student union chairpersons generally select them. The representatives select a Presidium (*zhuxituan*, 主席团), composed of a chairperson and several deputy chairpersons, which manages the union for one year. A Standing Committee (*changwu daibiao weiyuanhui*, 常务代表委员会) is also formed, based on representatives sent from the different faculties. It supervises the union's work before its next congress.<sup>48</sup> The process appears systematic on paper, but it is less smooth in practice. Universities vary in the transparency of the election process. While the CYL screens the candidates, who in general must be CCP members, it also selects the winner in some universities, and the election only has a rubber-stamp function.<sup>49</sup> Even in cases where elections matter, student union congresses are assembled every two years while the union chairpersons rotate every year. Therefore, every two years, the union's leadership is selected by the Student Union Standing Committee after a preselection by the CYL.

Debates have emerged on how to democratize these selection processes, potentially coming back to the practice of the 1980s, when student union leaders were often directly elected by students.<sup>50</sup> Yet since 1989 only Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou experimented with direct elections. An election was held in 2008, but the experience was not pursued nor reproduced as university officials judged it disturbing for campus life.<sup>51</sup> Overall, university officials, particularly the CYL, profoundly influence the selection process. They can prevent students seen as unreliable from becoming union leaders, including those who are critical of the university administration or simply not obedient enough.

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48. "Charter of the All-China Students' Federation (中华全国学生联合会章程)," All-China Students' Federation, 25 August 2010.

49. Student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 15 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 3 July 2012; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014; student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014; CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015.

50. Francis, "The Institutional Roots of Student Political Culture," 307.

51. He Haining, "Full Record of the Student Union Chairperson Direct Election (学生会主席直选全记录)," *Southern Weekend*, 13 November 2008.

## Commitment Is Rewarded

Why would one become a student cadre and care about advancement in the CYL or student union? Student cadres do not get a salary, and, as shown by Chen Feng's story, it is a time-consuming activity that affects their studies and social life. They are also monitored continuously by CYL officials and go through intense screening. Pull factors include both elements linked to student cadres' social background, as illustrated by the overrepresentation of children of officials among them, as well as the career-related incentives tied to this experience. The career advantages student cadres enjoy are particularly valuable in a highly competitive environment. The dismantlement of the job assignment system for university graduates in the 1980s,<sup>52</sup> and the expansion of the number of college students since the late 1990s, have led to a tight job market and massive unemployment among young graduates.<sup>53</sup> While in 1999, the higher education system enrolled 8.8 million students, around 10.5 percent of the age cohort, in 2014, this figure rose to 29 million, 30 percent of the cohort.<sup>54</sup> In 2018, unemployment for graduates six months after they left university reached 26.4 percent.<sup>55</sup>

### *Class, Social Circles, and Student Cadre Recruitment*

Urban middle- and upper-class students, and in particular children of officials, are overrepresented among student cadres. According to a 2013 survey among university students, 19.7 percent of the sampled student cadres, for 8.4 percent of students, were children of "public sector managers" (which only amounted to 2.1 percent of the total population that same year).<sup>56</sup> The student cadres are a social elite within the already privileged minority that has access to university.<sup>57</sup>

52. Zhao, "Decline of Political Control in Chinese Universities," 170.

53. Limin Bai, "Graduate Unemployment: Dilemmas and Challenges in China's Move to Mass Higher Education," *China Quarterly* 185 (2006): 128–44.

54. Elizabeth J. Perry, "Higher Education and Authoritarian Resilience: The Case of China, Past and Present," in *Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series*, 2015, 14.

55. "The Growing Ranks of Unemployed Graduates Worry China's Government," *The Economist*, 1 August 2019.

56. Zhu Xinzhuo (朱新卓), Shi Junhua (石俊华), and Dong Zhihui (董智慧), "The Impact of Family Background on Occupying Student Union Cadre Positions (家庭背景对大学生担任学生会干部的影响)," *Journal of Higher Education* 4 (2013): 69.

57. Liang Chen (梁晨), Zhang Hao (张浩), and Li Zhongqing (李中清), *Silent Revolution* (无声的革命) (Beijing: Sanlian Library Ed., 2013).

The class background of student cadres reflects the elitist turn taken by the Chinese Communist Party. While peasants and workers accounted for more than 70 percent of the CCP's membership in the 1950s, they now account for less than 35 percent;<sup>58</sup> the overrepresentation of children of officials is also a continuation of the Mao era. In the 1950s and 1960s, students adapted their strategies to the opportunities offered to them based on their officially defined class labels. Students with a "good" class background—meaning over all the children of officials, soldiers, peasants, or workers—tended to maximize their political advantage and become student activists. This was especially true for cadres' children, who were the most privileged. Students from "bad" class backgrounds—broadly meaning the students with property-class origins—could generally not access the advantages of being an activist.<sup>59</sup>

How do we explain, now that class labels do not dictate political mobility anymore, the overrepresentation of children of officials among student cadres? The children of the urban elite, and in particular of public servants, are more likely to have aspirations and lifestyles that are aligned with the regime's objectives.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, socioeconomically advantaged groups can convert their social advantages into political ones.<sup>61</sup> Yet the influence of one's family background can be complex. According to my interviews, in Beijing's best universities student cadres are primarily from business families with no background in the administration, or families of low and midlevel officials.<sup>62</sup>

In the first case, their parents pushed them in that direction because they could develop valuable relationships for the family business if they became officials. In line with studies stressing the transmission of social capital within

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58. Lance Gore, *The Chinese Communist Party and China's Capitalist Revolution: The Political Impact of the Market* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2011); Nis Grünberg, "Who Is the CCP? China's Communist Party in Infographics," *MERICs Report*, 16 March 2021.

59. Susan L. Shirk, *Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Jonathan Unger, *Education under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960–1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

60. Jean-Louis Rocca, *The Making of the Chinese Middle Class: Small Comfort and Great Expectations*, Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Bryn Rosenfeld, *The Autocratic Middle Class: How State Dependency Reduces the Demand for Democracy*, Princeton Studies in Political Behavior (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

61. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–58.

62. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Tsinghua University, 19 November 2014.

families between generations that go into politics and others that go into business,<sup>63</sup> becoming a student cadre can be a substitute way to acquire political capital for those who did not directly inherit it. In the second case, their choice is nurtured by the family's taste for politics and by family connections. Echoing studies about political ambition in other contexts,<sup>64</sup> pre-existing networks open opportunities that plausibly enhance the incentive for becoming a student cadre, understood as a first step toward officialdom. The student cadre experience becomes akin to a consecration process for young people already socially predisposed to become part of the political elite. Such processes are central in converting heirs to their heritage and reproducing social and political inequalities.<sup>65</sup>

By contrast, the children of high-level officials tend not to become student cadres, either because they do not need this experience, as they can rely on their parents' network, or because they are bored with politics and use their family's influence to go into business.<sup>66</sup> Jia Ruixue et al. have shown that children of officials can use their parents' standing to become rich in the private sector.<sup>67</sup>

Beyond class and family background, friends and roommates are also crucial in the students' choice to become cadres. Students construe entry into the student union or the CYL as a collective experience and mutually reinforce each other's determination. The friends they make in their dormitories are central in that regard.<sup>68</sup> As Dingxin Zhao has highlighted, the dense dormitory environment can be crucial in the spread of political ideas and in the organization of students around their most charismatic roommates.<sup>69</sup> A student cadre I interviewed explained how he started on this path in Peking

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63. David S. G. Goodman, "The Localism of Local Leadership Cadres in Reform Shanxi," *Journal of Contemporary China* 9, no. 24 (2000): 159–83.

64. Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless, "To Run or Not to Run for Office: Explaining Nascent Political Ambition," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (2005): 642–59.

65. Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, trans. Lauretta C. Clough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

66. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Tsinghua University, 19 November 2014.

67. Ruixue Jia, Xiaohuan Lan, and Gerard Padró i Miquel, "Doing Business in China: Parental Background and Government Intervention Determine Who Owns Business," *Journal of Development Economics* 151 (2021): 102670.

68. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Tsinghua University, 19 November 2014.

69. Zhao, "Decline of Political Control in Chinese Universities."

University with two of his roommates. One of them was very charismatic and pulled the two others in that direction. During their third year, they even considered running together for student union elections. In case of victory, the most charismatic one would have become the student union chairman and the others deputy chairpersons. Yet because he was too outspoken and would openly criticize the student union's functioning, CYL officials doubted his obedience and discouraged him from running.<sup>70</sup> While the CYL's tight grip on the student union killed these students' initiative in the bud, this case illustrates the collective aspect of the student cadre experience.

### *Institutionalized Clientelism on Campus*

Beyond social pull factors, students become cadres also to obtain material perks. As brokers between students, officials, and professors, they have easier access than other students to university resources, from scholarships to graduate programs. They meet with staff members regularly to discuss activities or university policies. Through these meetings, staff members can provide student cadres with information about fellowships or field trips before it is made public. As they often rely on student cadres for administrative tasks, staff members also tend to channel such grants or trips toward them to return the favor and reward their commitment.<sup>71</sup> Their relationships with university staff members are probably the most critical resource student cadres gain from this experience. According to a survey among university students from Beijing, relationships with university staff members are perceived as the most important when looking for a job, even more than family ties.<sup>72</sup>

Besides these partial relationships, student cadres are at the center of an institutionalized reward system. They have, for example, more chances than other students to receive personal awards. Many such prizes exist in various organizations in China. In universities, generalist awards include, for instance, the “three goods students” award and the “excellent student” award. They reward a student's academic achievements but also moral standing and involvement in the school. Volunteering as a student cadre is a critical cri-

70. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 27 October 2014.

71. Academic staff member, interview, Renmin University, 15 March 2015; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 December 2012.

72. Wu Qing (吴庆), “2002 Report Regarding the Employment Situation for University Students in the Beijing Area (2002年北京地区大学生就业状况调查报告),” *Journal of China Youth College for Political Sciences* 22, no. 2 (2003): 26–31.



terion in the selection process. Moreover, specific prizes reward students based on their political activities. They can be granted to “excellent Communist Youth League members” or “excellent student cadres.” These awards are given at the faculty and university levels, but also at the local and national ones. The national-level awards are the most prestigious ones.<sup>73</sup> These prizes can be decisive in the selection to graduate school, and, more broadly, they are a positive element on a resume.

Student cadres also have a considerable advantage in the direct admission to graduate school system (*baoyan*, 保研). This scheme, created in the 1980s, allows some students to enter graduate programs directly, bypassing the extremely competitive National Graduate Entrance Examination for graduate schools; in 2021, it attracted more than 3.7 million candidates.<sup>74</sup> Most of the direct admissions to graduate school occur within a faculty, but the best students sometimes can apply for a graduate program in another one. The lists of directly admitted students must be approved by the Ministry of Education, but universities select the candidates internally according to their own procedures. In that process, all universities give weight to the candidates’ participation in political activities on campus.<sup>75</sup>

There are two main types of direct admissions to graduate school. The first one is chiefly based on the students’ academic performance, evaluated through their grades and often an exam internal to the university. This includes the “social practice” grade, which reflects the student’s involvement in university activities and is delivered in most universities by faculty-level CYL officials. CYL officials can use this mechanism to favor student cadres.<sup>76</sup> A student I interviewed who had the best overall grades in his cohort almost did not get selected for the direct admissions to graduate school because the CYL official in charge gave him the worst grade in social practice. He wanted

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73. Student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 10 June 2013, former student cadre, interview, Sichuan University, 10 May 2014; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 13 June 2013.

74. “2021 Investigation Report on the National Recruitment of Graduate Students (2021 全国研究生招生调查报告),” EOL, August 2021, [https://www.eol.cn/e\\_ky/zt/report/2021/catalog.html](https://www.eol.cn/e_ky/zt/report/2021/catalog.html)

75. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 20 December 2012; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014; CYL official, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 8 February 2015.

76. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 20 December 2012; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014; CYL official, Peking University, 3 July 2012.



to keep the slot for a student cadre with whom he worked closely. Professors had to raise the issue to higher-level university officials in order to allow this student to obtain a better social practice grade and get admitted.<sup>77</sup>

The second type of direct admissions to graduate school relates specifically to “student work” and is, therefore, especially relevant to student cadres. The students are still selected according to their academic performance (while the standards are lower than for the other form of direct admissions, they must not have failed any class for instance), but most importantly based on their political involvement on campus. The selection process is opaque and, while not stated explicitly, it is in practice reserved for student cadres.<sup>78</sup> Generally, the students who go through the “student-work direct admissions to graduate school” do not start graduate studies directly. They first must work for some time.

At Peking University, for example, two options are available: to serve for around two years as a student counselor, or to work for a year or so as a schoolteacher or local official in an underdeveloped region.<sup>79</sup> Some students prefer the second option as they can get on with the graduate program more quickly. My interviewees, however, underlined that staying on campus as a student counselor for two years was overall the most preferred option. Some students are not comfortable living for a year in a foreign and modest environment. More strategic students also want to stay on campus to strengthen their network within the university. As student counselors they are, indeed, in an excellent position to meet university leaders, and many of them manage to keep their job in parallel to their graduate program. These two years of working experience are also precious for students who want to take the civil service exam: two years of grassroots level work are required for most civil servant positions.<sup>80</sup> The choice between these two options also depends on the officials in charge of the selection process. The first type of “student-work direct admissions to graduate school,” which implies staying

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77. Former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 23 October 2014.

78. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 20 December 2012; academic staff member, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 6 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013.

79. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 20 December 2012; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014.

80. “Temporary Regulation Regarding Civil Servants (国家公务员暂行条例),” State Council, August 1993.

on campus for two years, is supervised by the university CYL. Student cadres who have strong ties with university-level CYL officials, such as university student union leaders, are therefore favored. The university's Student Work Department manages the second type. This department manages the student counselors, who populate the faculties, and is hence mostly in contact with the faculty-level student cadres.<sup>81</sup>

Repeated scandals have led to a gradual decrease in the number of "student-work direct admissions to graduate school." Especially at Peking University after a 2009 blog post criticized the opaqueness of these admissions. It underscored that some of the best students in Peking University's economics faculty did not get admitted, while two mediocre students did. More importantly, these students had failed several classes, which should have prevented them from being eligible. The blogger explained this preferential treatment by the family background of the two students in question. They were both children of city-level officials, and one of them was personally close to the Peking University leadership. The two students also had meaningful experiences as student cadres. The authorities quickly deleted the blog post, but during the 36 hours it was online it was viewed 120,000 times.<sup>82</sup> Before this scandal, Peking University did not follow the Ministry of Education's quota regarding these admissions. This case pushed the university to abide by them and limit recruitments. While in 2009 around a hundred students were recruited through the "student-work direct admissions to graduate school," fewer than fifty have been enrolled through this channel between 2010 and 2015.<sup>83</sup> In most universities, "student-work direct admissions to graduate school" now amounts to one or two students per cohort in each faculty.<sup>84</sup> While it has decreased in scale, selection to graduate school based on political activism can still be found throughout the country.

Political selection criteria to enter graduate school encourage students to

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81. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

82. "Shocking News: A Son of Official Who Did Not Pass Five Classes from Peking University's Economics Faculty Still Gets Direct Admissions to Graduate School! (骇人听闻: 官员儿子北大经济学院五门不及格照样保研!)" blog post by pku ecograde, October 2009 (the original post was deleted but it can now be found here: <http://www.boxun.com/news/gb/china/2009/10/200910192326.shtml>).

83. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

84. Academic staff member, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 15 December 2011; academic staff member, interview, Tsinghua University, 4 March 2015.

become student cadres. As Chen Wei, a Renmin University professor who wrote extensively on the student cadre system, puts it: “Some students have very little interest in student work, but as they reflect on the potentiality of a superior grade to enter a graduate program without taking an exam, they join the student union.”<sup>85</sup>

When this incentive disappears, the number of student cadres declines. There are, for instance, only a few student cadres in Peking University’s Yuanpei College, which functions similarly to a liberal arts college with no graduate program and therefore no direct admissions. Faculties that offer graduate programs have by contrast many more student cadres.<sup>86</sup> This favored selection for graduate school is the main advantage student cadres obtain on campus. Yet being a student cadre also positively impacts career prospects beyond the university walls.

### *A Valuable Experience for Admission to the Party*

Student cadres can become CCP members more easily than can their classmates, as involvement in party-related organizations is valued in the selection process.<sup>87</sup> This is particularly important as CCP membership is crucial in obtaining a position in the party-state bureaucracy or a state-owned enterprise (SOE). More broadly, CCP members earn on average better salaries than nonmembers.<sup>88</sup>

The process to become a CCP member is long and selective. Candidates must first express in writing their desire to become members to the relevant party branch, in their class for instance. They also need two letters of support from CCP branch members. If the candidates are CYL members,

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85. “Student Union: The Shadiest Part of University (学生会: 大学最阴暗的一角),” Chen Wei’s Blog, 12 September 2011, <http://www.21ccom.net/articles/zgyj/gqmq/2011/0912/45142.html>

86. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014.

87. Yanjie Bian, Xiaoling Shu, and John R. Logan, “Communist Party Membership and Regime Dynamics in China,” *Social Forces* 79, no. 3 (March 2001): 805–41.

88. Bruce J. Dickson and Maria Rost Rublee, “Membership Has Its Privileges: The Socioeconomic Characteristics of Communist Party Members in Urban China,” *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 1 (2000): 87–112; Bruce J. Dickson, “Who Wants to Be a Communist? Career Incentives and Mobilized Loyalty in China,” *China Quarterly* 217 (2014): 42–68; Joanne Song McLaughlin, “Does Communist Party Membership Pay? Estimating the Economic Returns to Party Membership in the Labor Market in China,” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 45, no. 4 (2017): 963–83.

the letters generally come from their CYL branch leaders.<sup>89</sup> As Chen Feng's story, detailed at the beginning of this chapter, illustrates, this phase is highly dependent on the candidates' relationships with the members of their CCP branch.

After that first stage, the recruits become "activists entering the party." They must then prove their commitment during a one-year trial period. They participate in the party branch's activities and follow party classes. They also regularly submit self-assessment reports to the CCP branch secretary. A couple of CCP branch members gather information about the activists and their social circles to evaluate their political reliability. After a year, a vote is organized in the CCP branch to determine if the activists can become "probationary members." The probationary members have the right to participate in CCP branch meetings, but not to vote. After a maximum period of one year, another vote takes place for them to become full members. The probationary members generally become full members at the end of the process, unless they commit major mistakes or fail to participate regularly in the branch's activities.<sup>90</sup>

While being a student cadre is a positive factor for gaining admission to the party, inversely CCP membership quickly becomes crucial to rise in the student cadre hierarchy, as explained in the next chapter. Being a student cadre and a CCP member are two mutually reinforcing political commitment processes.

### *A Valuable Asset on the Job Market*

Another incentive to becoming a student cadre is that potential employers value this experience. A 2009 survey showed that student cadres had a much higher "success rate" than other students: after graduation, 91.2 percent of them secured a job or enrolled in a graduate program, compared to only 53.2 percent of the other students. Student cadres were also more likely to find high-level jobs, particularly in the public sector.<sup>91</sup> As an SOE

89. Mathieu Duchâtel and Joris Zylberman, *Les nouveaux communistes chinois* [*The New Chinese Communists*] (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

90. Bian, Shu, and Logan, "Communist Party Membership and Regime Dynamics in China."

91. Zhang Yanan (张亚男), Wang Jianmin (王建敏), and Zhen Hua (甄华), "Analysis of Student Cadres' Employment Advantages (高校学生干部的就业优势分析)," *Journal of Guangxi Youth Leaders College* 24, no. 6 (December 2012): 34–37.

manager explained: “Good grades are not enough to be recruited. An experience as student cadre is valued because they are generally more efficient at their work. They have worked in teams before, organized activities, and have learned how to speak in public. They also have already encountered issues like the ones they could be confronted with on the job.”<sup>92</sup> Most student cadres think that this experience develops their skills, which is among the first reasons they mention for becoming cadres. The way they put it in interviews is that they learn to be “eloquent” as they regularly talk to officials and convince their fellow students to participate in the activities they organize. They also put forward their “organizational” and “coordination” skills developed while organizing activities or raising funds. An essential role of the student union is, in fact, to find external funding for extracurricular activities. In areas where universities are numerous, such as the Haidian District in Beijing, firms are highly solicited. As a result, students must be convincing to attract funding. They also often rely on personal or family relationships to get what they want, further developing their networking skills.<sup>93</sup>

Student cadres also have access to unique professional opportunities. In some universities, the CYL helps them find short-term internships in local-level governments during vacations.<sup>94</sup> The national “Plan for the training of university student cadres 2006–2010” organized for ten thousand student cadres to be sent to do such internships at the local level over these five years.<sup>95</sup> In addition to internships, companies regularly contact universities to scout for potential recruits among graduating students. This process often goes through the CYL, which tends to put forward student cadres.<sup>96</sup>

Student cadres are also in an excellent position to be recruited as university staff members when they graduate. They have experience in student work and contacts within the university. Some have close relationships with university officials, and the recruitment process is sometimes skewed in their favor. While it is mandatory to advertise these positions openly, the recruit-

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92. CYL official in a state-owned enterprise, interview, Nanjing, 10 June 2013.

93. Student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 10 June 2013; student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 15 June 2013; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014.

94. Student cadre, interview, Peking University, 19 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013.

95. “Plan for the Cultivation of University Student Cadres 2006–2010.”

96. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 20 December 2011; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 December 2012.

ment criteria can become so precise that only one or two student cadres fit the requirements. These opportunities are, however, highly competitive, as the number of graduates “staying on campus” (*liuxiao*, 留校) is limited and has decreased in the past years. At Peking University, only fourteen students could do it by 2013, while around forty a year were previously selected. At Nanjing Normal University, the number shrank from fourteen in 2011 to five in 2015. This is mainly due to limited turnover, itself provoked by rising unemployment on the job market.<sup>97</sup>

### *A First Step toward Officialdom*

In the end, it is when joining the civil service that student cadres are the most favored. Specific programs give them a unique advantage, and in particular three schemes I will now review: the “assigned graduates” system, the “university graduate village official” framework, and the “plan for university graduates voluntary service to the West.” Chinese scholars present these programs as ways to limit the pressure on the job market by providing selected graduates with exceptional opportunities.<sup>98</sup> Being all directed, explicitly or implicitly, toward student cadres, they encapsulate the unique advantages cadres have when joining the civil service, and they highlight that this selection is largely based on political grounds rather than academic ones.

1. The “assigned graduates” system (*xuandiaosheng*, 选调生) is a specific recruitment channel into the civil service, reserved for student cadres. This system allows new graduates to enter a trainee program that sends them to a grassroots position, such as CYL secretary of a township, for a few years before being promoted quickly in the administration. Such programs have been developed since the 1980s as part of the party’s rejuvenation policy, and were institutionalized after 2000.<sup>99</sup> A 2018 document went one step further in structuring the program, re-emphasizing its formative aspect with

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97. CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013; CYL official, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 8 February 2015.

98. Li Hongbo (李洪波), ed., *Theory and Practice of the University Youth League Work in the New Era* (新时期高校共青团工作理论与实践) (Jiangsu University Press, 2009), 161.

99. “Notice Regarding the Further Development of the Assignment of University Graduates to Grassroots Positions for Training (关于进一步做好选调应届优秀大学毕业生到基层培养锻炼工作的通知),” CCP Central Organization Department, January 2000.

the inclusion of compulsory training sessions, and limiting the number of recruits to 20,000 a year.<sup>100</sup>

The “assigned graduates” system is an alternative channel to become a civil servant. Candidates must take written and oral exams set up by the CCP Organization Department at the provincial or city level. While similar in content, focusing on public affairs and one’s ability to articulate their view based on a provided text passage, this exam is seen as less competitive than the civil service one. It also offers better prospects for promotion.<sup>101</sup> Between 2000 and 2014, 200,000 graduates have been through this program.<sup>102</sup> The number of yearly recruits has since been standardized, and around 10,000 graduates were recruited through this channel in 2018.<sup>103</sup>

This recruitment channel differs from the civil service exam in several ways. First, individual requirements are more specific. Beyond additional criteria linked to specific positions, one only needs to be less than 35 years old (40 for postgraduate degree holders) and have a higher education degree to take the civil service exam. By contrast, “assigned graduates” must be recent university graduates, at least probationary CCP members, and have volunteered as student cadres. Second, these positions are generally reserved for “221 project” university students (which include the 100-odd best higher education institutions in the country). In fact, following Tsinghua University, which initiated this program in 2009, elite universities have in past years signed agreements with local governments so they accept in priority their students.<sup>104</sup> Third, they have to be recommended by their university’s CCP committee, which is not necessary for civil service exam candidates.<sup>105</sup>

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100. “Opinion Regarding the Further Strengthening and Improvement of Assigned Graduates Work (关于进一步加强和改进选调生工作的意见),” CCP Central Organization Department, 12 April 2018.

101. CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 9 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Beijing, 18 November 2014.

102. Zheng Ruitong (郑瑞同), ed., “Preface,” in *Youth Is Blooming at the Grassroots* (青春在基层绽放) (Beijing: Intellectual Property Publishing House, 2014).

103. “Ten Major News on 2018 Assigned Graduates (2018年度选调生十大新闻),” Assigned graduates website, 10 April 2019, <http://www.xds.work/e/wap/show.php?classid=11&id=34468&style=0&bclassid=1&cid=11&cpage=>

104. Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Xingmiu Liao, “The Impending Rise of the ‘Tsinghua Clique’: Cultivation, Transfer, and Relationships in Chinese Elite Politics,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 120 (March 2019): 948–64.

105. “Notice Regarding the Assignment of Excellent University Graduates from 2016 to



Fourth, these graduates are generally sent for a short time to grassroots leading positions, as a village leader or local CYL secretary for example, either before taking up the job they were recruited for, if they lack such experience, or later on as a training exercise. Fifth, they are directly managed by the provincial- or city-level Organization Departments, rather than at the level of the recruiting units, and are explicitly considered as “reserve cadres” for local political leadership.<sup>106</sup> Chapter 6 expands on the notion of reserve cadre.

Despite its attractiveness, graduates underline the drawbacks of this program. It can be quite a “reality shock” for them when they get to a grassroots-level position in a remote province, and they might have difficulty adjusting to it.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, it is not always a channel toward high office despite the students’ expectations, which creates some frustration. As an interviewee put it: “It is a risky bet. You get to a grassroots position for a couple of years, and eventually, if you perform, you might be promoted. But this is not a done deal. You need connections to be sure to be promoted when you come back from the local level: you need a string to pull you back. The relationships developed as a student cadre are important in that regard.”<sup>108</sup>

2. Another program aims at sending young graduates to grassroots positions for training: the “university graduate village official” framework (*daxue-sheng cunquan*, 大学生村官). Similar programs have existed since the 1990s, but it was formalized in 2009. While the program is not restricted to student cadres, a 2009 document explicitly stated that the main targets are the CCP members under 30 and the “excellent student cadres.”<sup>109</sup> Applicants take an exam supervised by the CCP Organization Department in order to become local village officials for two to three years.<sup>110</sup>

This program is only short-term, and they are not considered civil servants. Still, the experience can be rewarding for young graduates, as it is valued when applying to graduate programs. It can also be particularly enticing

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Central Organs (中央机关2016年度选调应届优秀大学毕业生通知), State Administration of Civil Service, 3 October 2016, <http://ganzhou.offcn.com/html/2015/10/25466.html>

106. “Uncovering China’s Assigned Graduates System (揭秘中国选调生制度),” *Phoenix Weekly*, 8 April 2012.

107. “Uncovering China’s Assigned Graduates System.”

108. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014.

109. “Opinion Regarding the Establishment of a Long Term System for Selecting University Graduates to Be Appointed to Work in Villages (关于建立选聘高校毕业生到村任职工作长效机制的意见),” CCP Central Organization Department, 13 April 2009.

110. “This Is How the Village ‘Number One Leaders’ are Cultivated (村官‘一把手’这样炼成),” *China Youth Daily*, 2 June 2012.



to those who want to pursue a career in the administration, as it provides them with the two years of required grassroots experience.<sup>111</sup> From 2008 to 2014, 248,000 “university student village officials” were recruited. Among them, 92,000 (36.9 percent) later became civil servants.<sup>112</sup> This program has, however, been fading away since 2018, as the short-term nature of the assignments led to frustrations on the side of the graduates and the village authorities.<sup>113</sup>

3. A third program follows a similar pattern of sending young graduates as trainees in smaller localities: the “plan for university graduates voluntary service to the West” (*daxuesheng zhiyuan fuwu xibu jihua*, 大学生志愿服务西部计划). It was launched in 2003 by the CYL as part of its broader objective of promoting voluntary service.<sup>114</sup> Under this program, graduates must take an exam organized by the CYL, and, if successful, they are sent for one to three years to underdeveloped areas in western parts of the country. In contrast to the two other schemes I described, this is a volunteering program and not an actual job, even though recruits are financially compensated for their service.<sup>115</sup>

The “plan for university graduates voluntary service to the West” is very popular; between 2003 and 2022, 410,000 students participated in it.<sup>116</sup> This experience is indeed a plus when applying to graduate programs,<sup>117</sup> and it can also count as the two years of working experience needed to apply to most civil servant

111. CYL official, interview, Beijing, 18 November 2014.

112. “Nationally, Twenty Thousand University Student Village Officials Created a Business (全国2万多大学生村官创业),” Chinese government news website, 7 July 2015, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-07/07/content\\_2893239.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-07/07/content_2893239.htm)

113. CYL official, interview, Beijing, 2 July 2018; CYL official, interview, Beijing, 6 July 2018.

114. David A. Palmer and Rundong Ning, “The Resurrection of Lei Feng. Rebuilding the Chinese Party-State’s Infrastructure of Volunteer Mobilization,” in *Ruling by Other Means: State-Mobilized Movements*, ed. Grzegorz Ekiert, Elizabeth J. Perry, and Xiaojun Yan, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 314–44; Jérôme Doyon, “Low-Cost Corporatism: The Chinese Communist Youth League and Its Sub-Organizations in Post-Mao China,” *China Perspectives* 2 (2019): 39–46.

115. “Notice Regarding the Implementation of the Plan for University Graduates Voluntary Service to the West (关于实施大学生志愿服务西部计划的通知),” State Council, 6 June 2003.

116. “White Paper: Youth of China in the New Era,” State Council Information Office, 21 April 2022.

117. “Notice Regarding the Implementation of the Plan for University Graduates Voluntary Service to the West.”

positions.<sup>118</sup> Similar programs have also been developed at the local level starting in the 2000s.<sup>119</sup> Like the “university student village official” framework, the “plan for university graduates voluntary service to the West” is not explicitly directed toward student cadres, but the selection is managed by the CYL and having experience as a student cadre is highly valued in the recruitment process.<sup>120</sup>

### *To Reap Benefits at Home or Study Abroad?*

Working as student cadres pays off, especially if they wish to become officials. As one put it herself: “Because they do not want to waste their experience, they look for a job as an official.”<sup>121</sup> As a result, this experience can lead them to reconsider other paths that they may have contemplated, such as going abroad for further study. For many young Chinese, studying abroad has become an attractive pathway to high-quality educational opportunities and potentially gaining a competitive edge in the domestic job market. Since the 2000s, enrollment in foreign universities, especially American ones, has increased rapidly.<sup>122</sup> Like we have seen with Chen Feng at the very beginning of this chapter, many of the student cadres I interviewed struggled with this dilemma between potential opportunities abroad and the risk of losing what they built in their alma mater.

Some solved this tension by going abroad only for a short time, for example a one-year master’s program. Such an experience can increase their competitiveness in the job market,<sup>123</sup> and they will not lose the social capital they cultivated as student cadres.<sup>124</sup> By getting involved with Chinese student organizations abroad, which can have strong ties with the party-state through local consulates,<sup>125</sup> they can also develop new connections that might prove valuable back in China.

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118. CYL official, interview, Beijing, 14 March 2015; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 2 February 2015.

119. Palmer and Ning, “The Resurrection of Lei Feng.”

120. CYL official, interview, Beijing, 14 March 2015; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 2 February 2015.

121. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014.

122. Yingyi Ma, *Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

123. Zaichao Du et al., “Do Overseas Returnees Excel in the Chinese Labour Market?” *China Quarterly* 247 (September 2021): 875–97.

124. Former student cadre, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015.

125. Xiaojun Yan and Mohammed Al-Sudairi, “Guarding Against the Threat of a West-ernising Education: A Comparative Study of Chinese and Saudi Cultural Security Discourses and Practices Towards Overseas Study,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 131 (3 September 2021): 803–19.

Longer stays abroad are riskier, as not only the relationships students developed might fade away, but students also might be perceived, by peers and potential employers, as politically unreliable. While the effect of studying abroad is in reality much more complex—many opinion surveys have shown that the longer students stay abroad, the better their view of China<sup>126</sup>—student cadres often feel that after a long experience abroad they could be perceived as contaminated by foreign values, making it harder for them to join the civil service, especially in sensitive fields such as foreign affairs or national security.<sup>127</sup> This echoes the party-state's discourse on foreign subversion. Overseas students are presented as easy targets for ideological manipulation,<sup>128</sup> and officials whose immediate families live abroad, also known as “naked officials” (*luoguan*, 裸官), are said to be at risk of defecting or using their overseas connections to facilitate corrupt behavior.<sup>129</sup>

Since I finished my fieldwork, this atmosphere of distrust has only worsened. The changing international context, particularly tense US-China relations, has put Chinese students in Western countries in a difficult position. Abroad they are increasingly suspected of being CCP agents.<sup>130</sup> In 2018 for instance, the Trump administration imposed restrictions on students visas to limit the risk of espionage and intellectual property theft.<sup>131</sup> They also face pressure from Chinese media to be vocal patriots<sup>132</sup> and can be prosecuted when returning home for publicly criticizing the party-state.<sup>133</sup> This political context, together with the difficulties created by the COVID-19 pandemic,

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126. “Purdue Survey of Chinese Students in the United States: A General Report,” Center on Religion and Chinese University: Purdue University, 15 November 2016; Li Zhonglu, “Does Studying Abroad Make Chinese Students Less Patriotic?” *Sixth Tone*, 4 May 2018, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002214/does-studying-abroad-make-chinese-students-less-patriotic%3F>; “Conflicted Hearts and Minds,” *MERICs China Monitor*, 26 March 2020, <https://merics.org/en/report/conflicted-hearts-and-minds>

127. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 18 November 2014.

128. Yan and Al-Sudairi, “Guarding Against the Threat of a Westernising Education.”

129. “Notice Regarding Improving the Reporting of Leading Cadres’ Personal Matter (关于进一步做好领导干部报告个人有关事项工作的通知),” CCP Central Organization Department, December 2013.

130. “Conflicted Hearts and Minds.”

131. “Visa Restrictions for Chinese Students Alarm Academia” *New York Times*, 25 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/25/us/politics/visa-restrictions-chinese-students.html>

132. “Chinese Student Abused for Praising ‘Fresh Air of Free Speech’ in US,” *The Guardian*, 23 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/23/china-yang-shuping-free-speech-university-of-maryland-us-student>

133. “University of Minnesota Student Jailed in China over Tweets,” *Axios*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.axios.com/china-arrests-university-minnesota-twitter-e495cf47-d895-4014-9ac8-8dc76aa6004d.html>

led to a decrease in applications to study abroad and an increased interest in state-sector jobs, seen as a safer choice.<sup>134</sup> Against this background, becoming a student cadre can be a wise bet.

All in all, as Pierre Bourdieu put it, “the institution invests in the ones who invest in it.”<sup>135</sup> Being central to the student-management apparatus, student cadres are rewarded for their commitment through both informal perks and formalized incentives. This creates a self-reinforcing process where students who because of social and individual factors could be interested in civil service in the first place, volunteer in youth organizations, and the sunk investment in this experience further commits them to pursue a career as party-state officials. We will see in the following chapters that this is a long process and “student cadre” is not a status one can win once and for all. The commitment student cadres develop over the years, the relationships they build, and the status they obtain within their school define how the experience will influence their future. This overall experience highlights the centrality of both material and nonmaterial incentives in explaining the regime’s attractiveness for young recruits.

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134. “Why More Young Chinese Want to Be Civil Servants,” *The Economist*, 15 May 2021.

135. Pierre Bourdieu, “La Représentation Politique. Éléments Pour Une Théorie Du Champ Politique [Political Representation. Elements for a Theory of the Political Field],” *Actes de La Recherche En Sciences Sociales* 36, no. 1 (1981): 19.

## CHAPTER 3

# Student Leaders as a Rogue Minority

I interviewed Lei Lan (the name has been changed) in a café at Sichuan Normal University. After receiving an undergraduate degree in law, she had started a master's program in Marxism. Lei Lan had been a student cadre since college, an experience that impacted both her social circles and ambitions. Then a student counselor on campus, and thinking about pursuing a career as a party-state official, this is how she presented her trajectory: "I progressively decided to do that. I first had the opportunity to rise in the ranks as a student cadre and it appeared as a way to open doors, even though I am from a mediocre university. Then one thing led to another, and I really like what I do now."<sup>1</sup>

In her first year of college, Lei became a class leader. At that point, her class's student counselor, with whom she had a good relationship, suggested she became a low-level student cadre in the university CYL. She saw that as an opportunity to gain prestige within the school. Lei served as a junior administrator for the CYL and regularly interacted with the university's CYL staff, including its secretary. It proved to be a helpful platform and allowed her to be appointed to various positions within the university CYL and the student union during her second and third years. As a fourth-year student, she became the university's student union chairwoman. She was appointed by the CYL secretary, whom she knew quite well by then. As she put it, "student union elections are not very transparent in this university."<sup>2</sup> She had become the most highly ranked undergraduate student cadre in the university. Lei came across as a confident young woman in our conversation, and she stressed how this trajectory as a student cadre was instrumental in

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1. Student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014.
  2. Student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014.

changing the way she presented herself, less as a quiet straight-A student and more as a campus leader.

As the student union chairwoman of one of the province's top universities, Lei entered the leadership teams of the Sichuan Province Student Federation and the All-China Students' Federation (ACSF). Student leaders from the best schools in a province automatically make up the leadership of the provincial federation, and similarly at the national level. As a Student Federation leader, Lei regularly participated in activities with student leaders from the province and the whole country. She was invited to a training program organized by the ACSF, which consisted of a week of courses at the Central Party School and group trips to "red" sites linked to the party's revolutionary history. Group trips are an intense bonding experience for student cadres, and she remained in contact with most of the program's two hundred participants. After graduation, she again took part in this training program, but this time as an organizer. She was an intern for the summer at the central CYL's Student Affairs Department, which manages these activities.

After that summer, she went back to Sichuan Normal University and became a student counselor in parallel to her master's studies. She underscored that contrary to other universities, it is rare in hers to have graduate students as counselors, who are generally full-time staff members. This opportunity stemmed from her previous experiences as a student cadre. When we met, she was thinking about finding a job in the university after graduation, and as a party-state official after that.

Becoming a student leader is a gradual process, one that potentially culminates with important positions in the student union or the CYL on campus. Those who secure these positions during their last years of college are the most invested and have usually been student cadres since their first year. This chapter focuses on these student leaders, high-ranked student cadres in the CYL and the student union, to understand how their years as student cadres contribute to strengthening a commitment to a political career. The more they invest, the less likely they are to change paths since it would mean losing their previous investment. The social aspects of the student cadre experience, the transformation of their social circles and roles, is a key feature of this investment. They mix less and less with students who have not chosen the same path and they develop ties with other student cadres and officials. In addition to personal connections, the social role and status student leaders embody further shape their political commitment process. They adopt

certain behaviors and styles to make their “party spirit” visible to others and present themselves as officials in the making. This can be seen negatively by other students and contributes to setting them apart from their peers.

## Student Leaders’ Narrowing Social Circles

During the four years of college, student cadres’ social circles progressively narrow as only a handful stick to this path for that long. Several hundred freshmen join the university student union every year in large institutions such as the universities I studied. Fewer than a hundred are still part of the organization during their second year, and fewer than twenty remain among third- and fourth-year students. While for first-year students joining the student union can be a way to meet new people and widen one’s social circle on campus, this is less and less true as years go by. Student cadres spend most of their time either together or with university officials. They participate in many coordination meetings, which take up most of their time outside classes. University student union leaders, for example, interact among themselves every day, and meet at least once a week with CYL officials to keep them informed of their activities and discuss access to university resources.<sup>3</sup>

Most of my interviewees stressed that their commitment to their job as student cadres substantially impacted their friendly and romantic relationships. Between the management of the activities and the recurrent meetings, they have little time for socializing outside their organizations. As a result, some relationships fade away, especially with people who are not student cadres. They tend to pursue romantic relationships among cadres or to remain single during college. The issue is so widespread that it has become a matter of concern for the CYL, which publishes articles on “single student cadres.” A 2015 publication, for instance, put forward how hard it is for student cadres to develop romantic relationships as their task absorbs them. It stressed that student cadres must be fully committed to their position and be ready to cancel plans at the last minute if their superiors require them. This

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3. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 8 June 2013; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Tsinghua University, 19 November 2014.

article attempted to reassure student cadres about their personal situation by underlining how common this phenomenon is.<sup>4</sup>

Susan Shirk has noted that activists in the Mao era were cautious about the people with whom they spent time. They could not afford to be seen as close to politically unreliable people, politically backward students for instance.<sup>5</sup> To a certain extent, this is still the case with student cadres in the post-Mao era. It is not uncommon for them to stop spending time with fellow students to preserve their reputation among campus officials.<sup>6</sup> Similar phenomena have been described regarding young activists in other contexts. Focusing on contemporary youth political organizations in France, Lucie Bargel has stressed how friendship and romantic relationships take on a political meaning, as socializing within the organization is held as proof of one's loyalty to it.<sup>7</sup> In the Chinese case, this phenomenon is strengthened by the many activities organized for student cadres, in particular training programs or group trips that reinforce the bonds between them, as Lei Lan's story illustrates.

### *Training Programs and Selective Sociability*

Training programs for student cadres became increasingly common after the 1989 student movement and its repression. The government published a "Document 16"<sup>8</sup> on the issue in 2004 and put in place two years later a "Plan for the training of university student cadres (2006–2010)."<sup>9</sup> As part of this plan, the central CYL launched in 2007 the "Training program for young Marxists" (*qingnian Makesi zhuyi zhe peiyang gongcheng*, 青年马克思主义者培养工程). It set up a multilevel training structure, including ideological and practical elements, chiefly targeted at student cadres as well as CYL members and young people in the process of joining the party in state firms, villages,

4. "Student Cadre, Why Are You Single? (学生干部,你为什么单身?)," Central CYL WeChat Account, 11 November 2015.

5. Susan L. Shirk, *Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 120.

6. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014.

7. Lucie Bargel, *Jeunes socialistes, jeunes UMP: lieux et processus de socialisation politique* [*Young Socialists and Young UMP: Sites and Processes of Political Socialization*] (Paris: Dalloz, 2009).

8. "Opinion Regarding the Strengthening and Improvement of the Political Education of University Students (关于进一步加强和改进大学生思想政治教育的意见)," Document 16, State Council, 14 October 2004.

9. "Plan for the Cultivation of University Student Cadres 2006–2010 (高校学生干部培养规划 2006–2010)," CYL Central Office, 29 August 2006.



and social organizations. The program currently trains 200,000 students per year,<sup>10</sup> and by the end of 2021, nearly three million people had taken part.<sup>11</sup>

At the university level, the “Training program for young Marxists” deepened what had already existed since the 1980s. Taking Peking University as an example, it established a CYL school in 1982, when Li Keqiang, former Premier of the PRC, was the university’s CYL secretary. The CYL school organized training sessions for student cadres, as well as military drilling starting from 1988.<sup>12</sup> The training was further intensified after the publication of the 2004 Document 16. It led to the creation in 2005 of the “Peking University student union backbones training school,” a training program the CYL organizes five times a year for 100-odd student leaders.<sup>13</sup>

The Peking University CYL also initiated in 2006 the “Student backbones training camps,” which bring together around sixty student leaders for a one-week group trip. While in the beginning, the students were sent to train in a military camp,<sup>14</sup> it quickly turned into educational trips focused on the development of the country and current policy initiatives. In 2008, for the thirtieth anniversary of the reform and opening policy, they visited Shenzhen in Guangdong Province, presented as a symbol of China’s recent transformations. My interviewees who took part in this program described it as a good way to have fun with their classmates. It appeared to them more as a summer camp, where they could make friends, than an actual training program.<sup>15</sup> A CYL official in charge of similar group trips in Nanjing University stressed their leisurely nature and mentioned that they had to forbid alcohol as students would “drink too much and become unruly.”<sup>16</sup>

Similar programs can be found in most universities. For instance, Tsing-

10. “Opinion on Further Carrying out the Training Program for Young Marxists (关于深入实施青年马克思主义者培养工程的意见),” CYL Central Office, 5 June 2020.

11. “White Paper: Youth of China in the New Era,” The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 21 April 2022.

12. Peking University Youth League Committee, *The Communist Youth League in Peking University* (共青团在北大) (Beijing: People’s Press, 2004), 157–59.

13. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Tsinghua University, 19 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 8 June 2013.

14. “Peking University Holds the 2006 Student Backbones Training Camp (北大举办2006年学生骨干训练营),” Website of Peking University, 13 July 2006, <http://www.pkucet.com.cn/news.asp?id=1777&d=%B1%B1%B4%F3%D0%C2%CE%C5>

15. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 14 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

16. CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 2 February 2015.

hua established one in 2001 called “When you drink water, think of its source: serve society” (*Yinshui siyuan fuwu shehui*, 饮水思源服务社会). Around thirty students from different cohorts are selected every year to join this three-year program. While it is not explicitly for student cadres, they make up most of the participants since the selection is made by student counselors and CYL officials, who regularly work with them. The program features several training sessions each term, as well as study trips with CYL officials during the vacations. In line with the 2006 national plan, this program developed in 2007 a special section dedicated to student leaders.<sup>17</sup> Over these three years, the students get to know each other well.<sup>18</sup>

The “Training program for young Marxists” also entailed the creation of training programs at the national and provincial levels. It led to the establishment in 2007 of the “National university student backbones training school.” Every year, the central CYL and the ACSF bring together the student union chairpersons from the 100 or so best universities in the country. The program is made up of a one-week training program at the Central CYL School and one or two weeks of study trip, generally to famous revolutionary sites. It also sometimes includes a trip abroad. The central CYL secretaries participate in the training, and students are accompanied by central CYL officials in their study trips.<sup>19</sup> For instance, during the program’s 2014–15 edition, 204 students participated in a one-week study session at the Central CYL School in December 2014, and they had the opportunity to listen to Qin Yizhi, then CYL Central Committee first secretary and alternate member of the CCP Central Committee, as well as other CYL leaders. In August 2015, the students, together with central and provincial CYL officials, spent eleven days in Jiangsu Province.<sup>20</sup> This framework is reproduced at the provincial level; it brings together the student union leaders of the most highly ranked universities in the province.<sup>21</sup>

17. “Special Training Plans (专向培养计划),” Tsinghua University Website, <http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/xtw/4794/>

18. Former student cadre, interview, Tsinghua University, 19 November 2014.

19. Shen Jianping (沈健平), *A Political Science Approach toward the Communist Youth League* (政治学视野下的中国共青团) (Beijing: China Aerospace Press, 2009), 120.

20. “The National University Student Backbones Training School Eight Edition’s Week of Theoretical Training Comes to an End (中国大学生骨干培养学校第八期学员理论学习周活动结束),” *China Youth Daily*, 25 December 2014; “The National University Student Backbones Training School Eight Edition’s Practical Training in Jiangsu Comes to an End (中国大学生骨干培养学校第八期学员江苏实践锻炼活动结束),” *China Youth Daily*, 18 August 2015.

21. “Looking Back at the Marvels of the Beijing Student Federation in 2014–2015 (北

While provincial and national training programs might appear as a way for students to broaden their horizons, they further narrow their social circles. They indeed spend the little free time they have, including their vacations, with other cadres, and often with the same ones, as the student leaders who take part in the national programs are also generally invited to the provincial and university ones.<sup>22</sup>

During training sessions, student cadres are taught the basics of the contemporary Chinese approach to Marxism, and the party's narrative on the country's evolution. During the group trips, they are supposed to get a sense of the country's diversity and develop an "affection toward the popular masses."<sup>23</sup> In addition to shaping their social circles, these training programs participate in standardizing how the cadres express themselves on political topics and more broadly cultivating their role as officials-to-be.

## Cultivating Their Party Spirit

Through a first immersion in the world of officials, student cadres learn the rules of the political game, specific to the Chinese context, and what is expected from them as cadres. They also assimilate how to speak and behave as officials. Most importantly, they come to enjoy the status their position gives them on campus and distinguishes them from other students.

The function played by student cadres on campus, at the center of the student management structure, as well as their constant interactions with university officials, give them special status within the student body. The selection process they go through and the titles they are granted by the university's administration officially sanction this unique status. This "election effect"<sup>24</sup> marks that they have been initiated into the closed circle of cadres. This echoes what Jonathan Unger has described regarding student activists in the Mao era: as they joined the CYL, they were able to wear the badge and

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京学联2014–2015 年度精彩回顾,” WeChat account of the Beijing Student Federation, 28 April 2015.

22. Student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014; student cadre, interview, Guizhou Normal University, 16 January 2015.

23. “Implementation Outline for the Training Program for Young Marxists (青年马克思主义者培养工程实行纲要),” CYL Central Office, 16 October 2007.

24. Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, trans. Laetitia C. Clough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

learn the secrets of the organization, which provided them with prestige, setting them apart from the rest of the student body.<sup>25</sup>

By cultivating a specific role on campus, student cadres develop the premises of an identity as party-state officials. Several of my interviews mentioned how this experience gave them the feeling of being “like leaders.”<sup>26</sup> An academic I interviewed summarized it: “The student union is like a small government. They learn a lot about how to behave and speak like an official, how to exchange with superiors.”<sup>27</sup>

Interactions with university officials are crucial in this process. While student cadres are generally passive listeners in important university-level meetings, these meetings are an occasion for the student cadres to learn what is mainstream knowledge among officials, what are the usual topics of discussion, and what are the correct ways to address these issues. Student cadres are also invited to participate in informal gatherings with university officials. They take place in restaurants on campus or outside. In these settings, student cadres mimic their superiors, generally CYL officials. They learn where everybody should be seated depending on rank and what conversation and tone are proper, and they get used to officials’ drinking habits. They learn how to propose a toast, with whom, and in what order, depending on the respective ranks. Not used to drinking such amounts of alcohol in formal settings, students train themselves or find ways to limit the effects of alcohol: Some eat large quantities of yogurt before such dinners or use certain Chinese medicinal herbs to limit inebriation.<sup>28</sup> The drinking element is crucial for male cadres, who are expected to take part in these bonding practices, while female cadres tend to have a marginal role in these meetings, which, as we will discuss later, negatively affects their networking opportunities.

Student cadres understand over the years how to present themselves within the frame of their role. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this can become useful when looking for a job. This is clear when student cadres introduce themselves before an election. For instance, in a social media post listing the candidates for the Nanjing University Graduate Student

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25. Jonathan Unger, *Education under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960–1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

26. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 18 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

27. An academic, interview, Renmin University, 16 March 2015.

28. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014; student cadre, interview, Guizhou Normal University, 16 January 2015.

Union Presidium, the various contenders presented their accomplishments following formatted tables, in order to advertise their qualities and convince students to vote for them.<sup>29</sup> The selected categories were specific and were revealing of what is expected from student leaders: being experienced managers, good students, and efficient fund raisers. One of these tables is reproduced in figure 4.

The candidate's formatted resume includes eight categories, starting from the top-left cell:

- First, the number of positions she held at the various levels in the CYL and student union: she held six positions.
- Second, the number of activities she organized personally at the faculty or university levels: she organized four.
- Third, the number of appearances in media or social media platforms, within and outside campus: 600 appearances.
- Fourth, the number of cultural or academic exchanges she participated in, in other parts of the country or abroad: she did one.
- Fifth, the number of competitions won at the university level or above (provincial or central levels for instance): she won five.
- Sixth, the number of prizes and awards, such as the “excellent student cadre award,” that she received at the university level and above: she won twenty.
- Seventh, the amount of money she raised from outside donors for student union activities: 1,320,000 RMB.
- Finally, the number of research projects or papers she completed: 22.

In this post, the candidates pictured themselves as overachieving students who have acquired much experience in the student union and the CYL and who ultimately can deliver. They stressed their ability to gather large amounts of money, as well as to organize events. Overall, they presented themselves more as efficient and well-trained cadres than actual student representatives. One could imagine that representatives would put forward the concessions they obtained from the administration or more broadly what they did in favor of students rather than highlighting their own achievements.

Student cadres are also physically transformed by their experience in

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29. “Record of the Selection for the 2014 Teams of the Nanjing University Student Union and Graduate Student Union (2014年南京大学学生会、研究生会换届选举侧记),” Nanjing University Student Union WeChat account, 30 May 2014.



Fig. 4. Candidate presentation for the Nanjing University Graduate Student Union Chairperson elections. *Source:* Nanjing University Student Union WeChat account, 30 May 2014.

youth organizations. Being part of an elite group implies a specific bodily *hexis*, certain behaviors and tastes that display one's affiliation.<sup>30</sup> In the case of student cadres, those who remain on this path after several years and attain top positions start physically mimicking officials. It is, for instance, visible in the way student union election candidates present themselves in electoral handouts, such as the one reproduced in figure 5.

Figure 5 depicts a master's student running for the chairpersonship of a faculty-level graduate student union at Peking University. On the front page of the handout, he appears before Weiming Lake and its adjacent pagoda, symbols of Peking University. It is striking how he already looks like a party-state official, in contrast to most students who dress casually. He wears a white short-sleeved shirt with dark pants and belt, like almost every official

30. Pierre Bourdieu, "Les Rites Comme Actes d'institution [Rites as Acts of Institution]," *Actes de La Recherche En Sciences Sociales* 43, no. 1 (1982): 58–63.



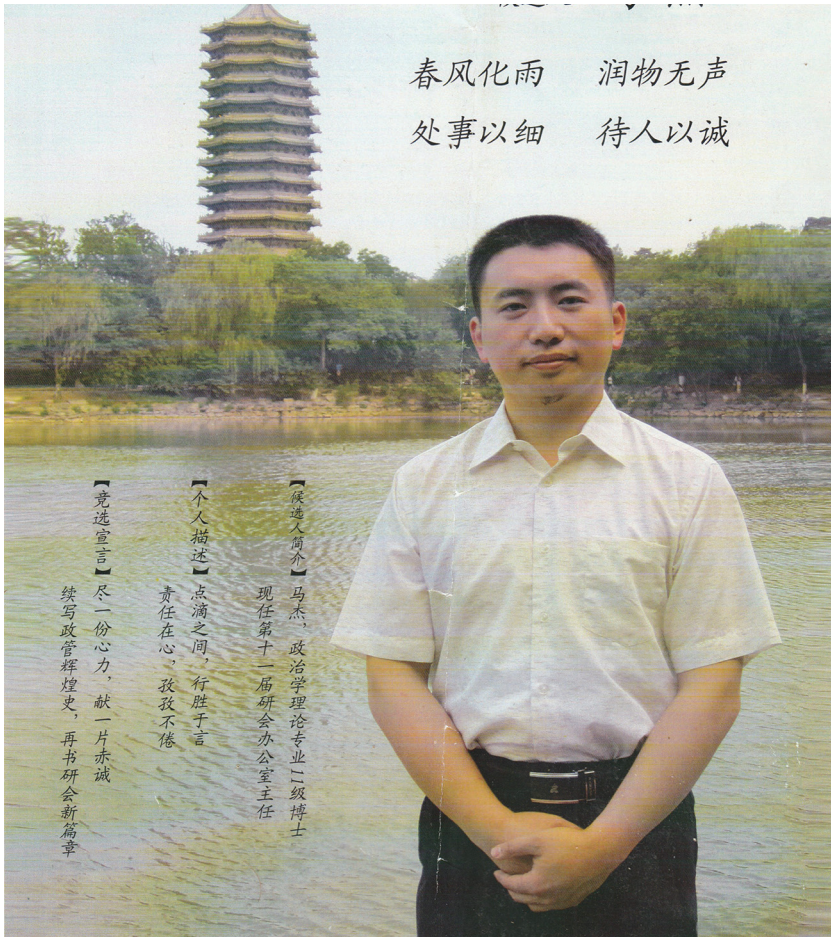


Fig. 5. Handout for the election campaign of a faculty-level graduate student union. *Source:* Handout gathered by the author (the candidate's name has been removed).

does in the summer. This parallel is apparent when looking at figure 6, a picture of Xi Jinping visiting Peking University in 2012, a few months before he became the leader of the CCP.

Coming back to figure 5, the text on the handout also reveals the way the student wants to advertise himself. Using four figurative expressions, he describes himself as the “product of his education” (*chunfenghuayu*, 春风化



Fig. 6. Xi Jinping (*in the middle*) visiting Peking University in 2012. *Source:* Ministry of Education website.

兩), “embellishing things discreetly” (*runwuwusheng*, 潤物無聲), “handling things delicately” (*chushiyixi*, 處事以細), and “treating people with honesty” (*dairenyicheng*, 待人以誠). In the remaining text, he briefly presents himself as the current student union office director and further develops his qualities and how he will positively influence the organization’s future. Among others, he highlights that he is “responsible at heart” (*zerenzaixin*, 責任在心) as well as “diligent and tireless” (*zizibujuan*, 孜孜不倦). Overall, he depicts himself as an efficient, moral, and humble servant of the organization, just like a party-state official ought to be.

The Chinese party-state has a certain tolerance for acting. During the Mao era, officials tended to believe that by performing acts and values deemed positive by the party, activists would eventually interiorize them.<sup>31</sup> The cultivation of specific patterns of behavior was therefore emphasized as a way to show one’s “party spirit” (*dangxing*, 党性). This notion emerged in the years

31. Unger, *Education under Mao*.



leading to the Yan'an rectification movement (1942–44) and was popularized through Liu Shaoqi's famous lectures on "how to be a good communist."<sup>32</sup> In the context of its struggle against the Kuomintang, the CCP had to expand and ensure its members' loyalty.<sup>33</sup> For Liu Shaoqi, their "party spirit" is firm when party members only have the party's interests at heart.<sup>34</sup> Performance of this devotion to the organization is central, since from a party rectification perspective, correct language and behavior are the main proxies for loyalty.<sup>35</sup>

The notion of party spirit was brought back after the Cultural Revolution, encapsulating the devotion that party members and officials must show to the organization and its leadership, with its ideological message and revolutionary mission becoming secondary.<sup>36</sup> It can hence be understood as the active display of one's recognition of the CCP's "organizational charisma," which according to Kenneth Jowitt is a key feature of Leninist parties and makes them worthy of loyalty and sacrifice from their members' perspective.<sup>37</sup> In fact, ideological devotion was not a topic of discussion for my interviewees. They never distinguished between "phony" and "genuine" cadres or activists, as was sometimes done in the Mao era,<sup>38</sup> nor between cynical student cadres and idealist ones. Most of my interviewees, being student cadres or university staff members, highlighted the career incentives linked to this experience without condemning it as an amoral goal. Rather than their motivations, what matters is the way they behave and display their commitment

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32. Christian Sorace, "Party Spirit Made Flesh: The Production of Legitimacy in the Aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake," *China Journal* 76, no. 1 (2016): 41–62; Frank N. Pieke, "Party Spirit: Producing a Communist Civil Religion in Contemporary China: Party Spirit," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24, no. 4 (2018): 709–29.

33. Jérôme Doyon and Long Yang, "Shades of Red: Changing Understandings of Political Loyalty in the Chinese Communist Party, 1921–2021," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, OnlineFirst (2022).

34. Liu Shaoqi, "How to Be a Good Communist (July 1939)," in *Selected Works of Liu Shaoqi*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), 107–68.

35. Hua Gao, *How the Red Sun Rose: The Origins and Development of the Yan'an Rectification Movement, 1930–1945*, trans. Stacy Mosher and Jian Guo (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2018); David E. Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

36. Pieke, "Party Spirit."

37. Kenneth Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

38. Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), 20; Shirk, *Competitive Comrades*, 13.

to their role as student cadres and their organization. For people outside the cadres' circles, this performance can, however, be perceived negatively, and student cadres often appear to their classmates as overplaying their role as officials-to-be.

## The “Bureaucratization” of Student Cadres

Commitment is not costless. An article by Qi Fujuan stressed the time and energy deployed by student cadres. They confessed to being tired and overwhelmed with the abundance of what they saw as useless tasks. They reported having meetings every day of the week, lasting from one hour to much more. During the weekend, they had to prepare the activities for the coming week and advertise them. This is all seen by students as a waste of time that could potentially impact their studies.<sup>39</sup> Most respondents (65 percent) in an opinion survey of student cadres in the city of Qinhuangdao, Hebei Province, believed that their work as student cadres had a substantial impact on their academic studies.<sup>40</sup> The difficulty of managing both academic pressure and their workload as cadres is, therefore, a significant reason for student cadres to withdraw from their positions. Numerous student cadres renounce after a year or two, just before they would have to get more seriously involved in the student union.<sup>41</sup>

According to my interviews, this is chiefly an issue for student leaders—the student union chairpersons and deputy chairpersons at the university level—but less so for most student cadres.<sup>42</sup> While they do not necessarily have major academic problems, student leaders rarely have the best grades

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39. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 23 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014.

40. Wang Xueting (王雪婷) et al., “Analysis on the Effective Role Played by Students Cadres (关于切实有效的发挥学生干部作用的调研分析),” in *Collected Works from the Eleventh Academic Congress on Chinese Youth Information and Management* (第十一届中国青年信息与管理学者大会论文集) (Chongqing, 2009), 75–83.

41. Qi Fujuan (戚甫娟), “Thoughts on the Phenomenon of Higher Education Student Cadres Asking to Withdraw (对高校学生干部告退现象的思考),” *Youth Studies* 4 (2001): 41.

42. Former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 23 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014.

among a cohort. They spend a lot of time on the job and therefore study less. As stressed by an interviewee, “every student has to choose between being part of the academic or the political circles” on campus.<sup>43</sup> Rising in the university-level student union is particularly stressful. Pressure can quickly increase if one falls under the supervision of ambitious department directors who want to be candidates for the chairpersonship and push their subordinates to their limits to show their efficiency. For these reasons, numerous student cadres limit their ambition, as we have seen with Chen Feng’s story in the previous chapter. Instead of trying to become university-level student leaders at any cost, they aim for Student Union chairperson or deputy chairperson in their faculty, a less stressful and time-consuming position.<sup>44</sup>

Student cadres can also incur a reputational cost. In a survey conducted in three universities, most students (53.9 percent) held negative opinions about student cadres.<sup>45</sup> This is particularly true of student leaders, depicted as bureaucratic and corrupt by fellow students. They consider themselves as different from lay students and are disliked for it. They behave as a separate group, having their own social activities and not mixing with other students. Besides, most students envy their privileged access to grants or graduate programs and consider it unfair.<sup>46</sup> As an academic I interviewed summarized, “The student union is a bureaucracy that cares about its own and is not at the service of students. It is mainly at the service of officials.”<sup>47</sup>

According to a survey implemented in Qinquangdao city, their bureaucratic behavior is the main reason why ordinary students dislike student cadres.<sup>48</sup> Like in other party-related organizations, hierarchy is firm within the student union. Students can rarely access the university student union

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43. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014.

44. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 23 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014.

45. Jiang Zhibin (江志斌), “A Research on the Instruction of College Student Cadres in the New Century (新时期高校学生干部队伍建设研究)” (PhD diss., Southwest University, 2011), 87.

46. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 20 December 2011; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 December 2012; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014.

47. An academic, interview, Renmin University, 16 March 2015.

48. Qi, “Thoughts on the Phenomenon of Higher Education Student Cadres Asking to Withdraw.”

chairpersons directly; they are expected to contact them through their subordinates and to show their respect when interacting with them. The chairpersons also easily give orders, without discussion, to other student cadres, sometimes unrelated to the organization, for instance asking subalterns to pick up and pay for their food or charge their phones.<sup>49</sup> The union's strong hierarchy can also affect relationships with people outside the campus, as this anecdote illustrates: "There is a rigorous hierarchy within the student union. Once, the father of a freshman, a quite high-level official, invited for dinner my friend, who was 21 years old and a department director in the university's student union. The official was very humble with him, as if he were his superior, because he wanted him to take care of his son."<sup>50</sup>

The "bureaucratization" of student cadres<sup>51</sup> is also linked to their use of bureaucratic jargon. Language is a strong sign of one's status on campus, and low-level student cadres often mention how their superiors tend to overperform their role as officials by using a specific tone or expressions such as "service to the people" and "affection for the masses."<sup>52</sup> Chen Wei, a professor at Renmin University who writes on the student union, describes one of his students who was "original and naïve" at first and who started to have "the mouth full of bureaucratic jargon" once he became Student Union chairman.<sup>53</sup>

The student cadres' social image is similar to what has been described regarding the relationship between activists and non-activists in Mao-era schools. Anita Chan has noted that already in primary school, activists behaved in a patronizing manner toward other students, and were vilified for being arrogant and acting as the teachers' pets.<sup>54</sup> In high schools, activists

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49. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 20 December 2011; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 December 2012; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014.

50. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014.

51. Bao Zhigang (包志刚) and Siriguleng (斯日古楞), "A Preliminary Discussion on the Existing Problems of the Student Union (浅谈高校学生会组织存在的问题)," *Intelligence* 8 (2013): 13.

52. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 23 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014.

53. "Student Union: The Shadiest Part of University (学生会:大学最阴暗的一角)," Chen Wei's Blog, 12 September 2011, <http://www.21ccom.net/articles/zgyj/gqm/2011/0912/45142.html>

54. Chan, *Children of Mao*.

were kept “at arm’s length” by other students, as Susan Shirk put it. Situated in between their professors and classmates, they generally took the professors’ side, whose opinion could have direct impact on their future as activists, and were strongly disliked for it.<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Unger has also highlighted that while some student activists were perceived as more loyal to their classmates, their overall image was negative. Consequently, some students chose not to become activists because they did not want to be ostracized from their peers.<sup>56</sup>

Like back then, being a student cadre today comes with a bundle of social costs. In addition to being portrayed as bureaucratic and university staff’s pets, student leaders are also perceived as corrupt by lower-level student cadres and the broader student body. At Peking University, for instance, student union leaders are often described by other students as “gangsters.” Such a low image is due to the corrupt practices sometimes associated with their positions. It is rumored that some student leaders accept different forms of petty corruption, such as getting invited for dinner, in order to speak in favor of a student to university officials. They can also be parochial, favoring students from their region over others.<sup>57</sup> Besides, rumors of vote buying surround the Peking University Student Union elections.<sup>58</sup> As a result, the student union has established rules to prevent voters from being bought with money or favors. During the campaign, candidates are not supposed to meet with representatives outside of the meetings set by the union, and the campaign budget has to be submitted to the union’s leadership. Nevertheless, the system is far from foolproof, and submitted budgets are rumored to be doctored.<sup>59</sup> Similar practices appear to also exist in other universities, but often on a lesser scale.<sup>60</sup> As developed in the next chapter, student union elections at Peking University are particularly competitive, creating more incentive for vote buying.

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55. Shirk, *Competitive Comrades*, 85.

56. Unger, *Education under Mao*.

57. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 20 December 2011; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 December 2012; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014.

58. Jin Ying, “An Election Campaign in Peking University (北京大学的一场选战),” *News Weekly*, 28 September 2004.

59. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

60. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 4 November 2014.

Student leaders are stigmatized for being arrogant, bureaucratic, and corrupt; other students see them as deviant. In his famous study of groups deemed as deviant, Howard Becker has shown how they learn to live with the stigma. At first, leisure activities and social interactions are essential to attract recruits. With time, the deviants' social practices become increasingly different from those of other groups, and they learn to accept and value their difference. Their deviance becomes self-reinforcing.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast to the groups studied by Becker, such as drug users, student cadres are not social outsiders and are in constant interaction with mainstream groups. They cannot isolate themselves from the students they are supposed to represent, and they regularly interact with them, even superficially, while organizing extracurricular activities and taking part in campus life. These interactions can paradoxically strengthen the negative image of student cadres as they signal their difference from the wider group, which results in closer bonds among student leaders and with officials. Comparable to what Andrew Walder has described regarding activist workers, they are a "lightning rod for dissatisfaction" and have become the focus of all the students' resentment toward officials.<sup>62</sup> Walder has highlighted how, in Chinese factories in the Mao era, a minority of workers were given specific status as activists and derived benefits and privileges from their clientelist relationship with management. Their unique status was regularly marked in public, in meetings and documents, which progressively drew the antagonism of other workers. Like with Walder's workers, the split between student cadres and other students is a direct consequence of the vertical links they develop with university officials, which provide them with unique perks and ultimately change their status and behavior. While making it socially costlier, the increased isolation of student cadres strengthens the importance they give to their specific role and status. In turn, the more they value their standing and publicly proclaim it, the more isolated they become.

The transformation of the student social circles and roles is crucial in explaining their investment in the student cadre path and a future political career. Through this process, student cadres start to identify with the party-

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61. Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

62. Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 25.

state establishment by opposition to the student body. The narrow social ties they develop reinforce the recruits' dedication, since choosing a different path would mean losing most of their friends and contacts. These are only the early steps in a long process of cadre cultivation.<sup>63</sup> Still, it highlights how they learn early to embody the party's organizational charisma, to perform their *party spirit*, and how it feeds their undogmatic commitment to the regime.

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63. Frank N. Pieke, *The Good Communist: Elite Training and State Building in Today's China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

## CHAPTER 4

# Sponsorship Networks in Elite Universities

Liu Kai (this is his real name) started in 2003 his undergraduate studies in philosophy at Peking University. He was a perfect recruit for the university's student union: He had been awarded several prizes by his home province of Henan as an excellent high school student and cadre and had already become a CCP member during his last year of high school.<sup>1</sup> As part of the Student Union Culture Department, he helped organize massive events on campus, such as the very popular yearly singing competitions. He also got noticed by the university's leadership for publishing articles on the history of Peking University's student organizations.<sup>2</sup> He therefore quickly rose in the student union's hierarchy and became its chairman in 2005. He was appointed at the same time as the All-China Students' Federation (ACSF) chairman. The ACSF chairpersonship changes every five years, alternating between Peking University's and Tsinghua University's student union chairpersons. Liu Kai hence became the most prominent student cadre in the country at the time.<sup>3</sup>

Using this experience as a springboard, Liu Kai has had, after graduation, a successful career in the party-state. His network has exerted a powerful influence over the student union since then. After college, Liu started in 2006 a master's program in Marxism and philosophy at Peking University. At the same time, he became the university's CYL secretary's assistant. After his graduate program, Liu became deputy secretary of the university's CYL. He then left the campus in 2010 to become CYL secretary of Chaoyang District in Beijing. A year later, he moved to Lingtai County in Gansu Province where

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1. "The 'Post-80' County Secretary Liu Kai Is to Be Promoted ('80后'县委书记刘凯将晋升);" *CapitalNews* Weibo Account, 12 August 2019, [https://news.sina.cn/gn/2019-08-12/detail-ihytcern0194420.d.html?vt=4&wm=2279\\_6140](https://news.sina.cn/gn/2019-08-12/detail-ihytcern0194420.d.html?vt=4&wm=2279_6140)

2. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

3. "The 'Post-80' County Secretary Liu Kai Is to Be Promoted."



he was appointed, at 28 years old, the country's youngest county leader.<sup>4</sup> County heads have a unique place in the Chinese system. They are based in the lower echelons of the territorial administration hierarchy, which includes from top to bottom: the center, provinces, cities/prefectures, counties, and townships. Yet due to the high level of decentralization, they are key actors in the local implementation of public policies.<sup>5</sup>

Even after he left the Peking University Student Union, Liu Kai retained influence over it. As a critical player in the university's CYL Committee, and thanks to his extensive network on campus, he held sway over the student union elections in the following years. He recruited potential candidates through personal ties and helped them get elected. My interviewees referred to his group as the "Henan clique," after Liu Kai's home province. Between 2007 and 2010, when Liu was working for the university CYL, he helped four chairmen from Henan get elected. Liu also helped another chairman to get elected in 2011 who was not from Henan but was introduced to him through a family friend.<sup>6</sup> Liu Kai became a crucial sponsor for ambitious student cadres during this period, and he assisted most of his protégés in obtaining direct admissions to graduate school via the process described in chapter 2.<sup>7</sup>

The case of Liu Kai's Henan clique illustrates how students' opportunities, inside and outside the university, can be shaped by the personal ties they inherit or develop. Vertical sponsorship ties with student leaders and university officials prove indispensable to rise in the student union hierarchy, and they can become helpful to start a career as an official after graduation. The political importance of sponsorship relationships, including those developed in universities, is far from specific to China. Camp showed, for instance, how the support of a mentor was decisive in starting a political career under the Institutional Revolutionary Party regime in Mexico (1929–2000). The mentor acted at the same time as a "recruiter," a "networker," and a "socializer." In addition to recruiting followers in universities, the mentor introduced them to influential friends and, ultimately, influenced the way they saw their own

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4. "The 28 Years Old Peking University PhD Liu Kai Is Appointed as Governor of Lingtai County in Gansu (28岁北大博士刘凯正式当选甘肃灵台县县长曾)," *People's Daily* website, 26 October 2011, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/10-28/3422832.shtml>

5. Pierre F. Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China: The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

6. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015.

7. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014.

future.<sup>8</sup> Similarly in the Chinese case, student cadres are embedded early on in political networks made of cumulative ties; the more student cadres rise in ranks, thanks to the support of an initial sponsor, the more they have access to additional avenues for networking. The student cadres are, as a result, offered unique professional opportunities upon graduation and can in turn become sponsors.

How do these ties among student cadres and university officials translate into political networks? To study how these relationships unfold, I focus on China's two best universities, Peking University and Tsinghua University. Tsinghua University specializes in natural sciences and is often described as the cradle of the "red engineers" that have populated the party-state leadership in the post-Mao era.<sup>9</sup> Peking University is oriented toward social science and humanities, and is seen as more liberal as a historical center for student protests.<sup>10</sup> As we have seen in chapter 1, many top party-state officials have graduated from these two universities, which provide rich networking opportunities for their students.<sup>11</sup> Former PRC premier Li Keqiang and CCP Organization Department director Chen Xi, a former classmate of Xi Jinping, are for instance prominent players in the political networks I analyze in this chapter.

## Clientelism at Peking University

In most universities, the CYL's influence over the student union forces ambitious student cadres to build strong ties with CYL officials. If they want to run for Student Union chairperson, they need the approval of the student union's office secretary, who is a CYL official. CYL officials have the power to push aside candidates they do not favor. This happened to one of my inter-

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8. Roderic Ai Camp, *Mexico's Mandarins: Crafting a Power Elite for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 27.

9. Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

10. Corinna-Barbara Francis, "The Institutional Roots of Student Political Culture: Official Student Politics at Beijing University," in *Chinese Education: Problems, Policies, and Prospects*, ed. Irving Epstein (New York: Garland, 1991), 394–415.

11. Hanzhang Liu and Yuhua Wang, "Becoming Political Candidates in China: Elite University Network and Selectorial Advantage," Working Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2019).

viewees; according to him, the office secretary was bribed by his competitors to remove him from the race.<sup>12</sup> Yet situations rarely reach that point because CYL officials usually manage early in the process to convince the students they deem inappropriate for the position not to run. In addition to officials, potential candidates need to build support among the student body, and especially student cadres, if they want a chance to be elected. This is particularly true at Peking University, where student union elections are competitive, despite the CYL's influence.<sup>13</sup> While the election process is similar, my interviewees noted that it mainly rubberstamps the CYL's choice in other elite institutions, such as Tsinghua University or Renmin University.<sup>14</sup>

### *Controlled Student Union Elections and Coalition Building*

A detour via Peking University Student Union's organizational structure is necessary to understand the strategies student cadres develop to win elections. Like other universities, the Peking University Student Union is composed of a school-wide congress of student representatives (*quanxiao xuesheng daibiao dahui*, 全校学生代表大会), a standing committee (*changwu daibiao weiyuanhui*, 常务代表委员会), and a presidium (*zhuxituan*, 主席团). The congress meets once every two years to review the union's work, amend the union's charter, and select the new leadership.<sup>15</sup> While it is the union's most important organ on paper, its involvement in day-to-day affairs is limited. It mainly plays a role in selecting the student union's leadership.<sup>16</sup> It approves the standing committee members sent by the faculties, and takes part in the selection of the presidium. The congress is constituted of about 300 representatives sent from the various faculties, based on their size.<sup>17</sup> The

12. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015.

13. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015; former student cadre, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

14. Former CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 27 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015; CYL official, interview, Renmin University, 1 July 2013.

15. "Charter of Peking University Student Union (北京大学学生会章程)," Peking University Student Union Congress, May 2010.

16. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

17. "Charter of Peking University Student Union."

faculties sending the most representatives are the Institute for Computer Science and Technology, and the Health Science Center. A sizeable medical school attached to Peking University since 2000, the Health Science Center has a specific status within the student union: it sends many representatives to the congress, and some leadership positions are reserved for its students. How representatives sent by the faculties are selected is opaque and varies from one faculty to another. They can be elected by the students or chosen directly by the faculty-level Student Union chairperson. In any case, they need to be approved by the faculty-level CYL secretary.<sup>18</sup>

As the congress is in session only once every two years, the union's standing committee oversees the union's daily work. Each faculty sends one of the 40 or so standing committee members. The faculty's Student Union chairperson selects the representatives, with the agreement of the faculty's CYL.<sup>19</sup> In most universities, the standing committee has mostly a secondary supervision function: it ensures that the union's leadership follows the rules established by its charter and audits the union's expenses. At Peking University, the standing committee elects its own leadership, in parallel to the presidium, which gives it more weight.<sup>20</sup> It is composed of a standing committee president and two or three vice presidents, including at least one from the Health Science Center. This is a unique feature of this university.<sup>21</sup> But even at Peking University, the standing committee has only limited powers and does not manage the union's activities. They can only investigate the union presidium's activity reports. In case of disagreement, the university CYL is the final judge, but the presidium retains the most power overall.<sup>22</sup>

The position of standing committee president was created in 1979 under pressure from Li Keqiang and his followers, the year when he ran for Peking University Student Union chairperson and lost. He became the first standing committee president. Most of my interviewees presented it as a political inno-

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18. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

19. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

20. Lü Lili (吕丽莉), "Study on the Democratic Construction of College Student Organizations (高校学生组织的民主建设)" (PhD diss., Liaoning University, 2012), 34.

21. "Charter of Peking University Student Union."

22. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014.

vation aimed at creating more checks and balances within the student union, pushed by students involved in the Democracy Wall movement (1978–79),<sup>23</sup> which advocated for political reforms.<sup>24</sup> These were “quite democratic times” at Peking University, as one of my interviewees put it.<sup>25</sup> Some also underlined that it was a way to provide a springboard to this promising student who had not been elected as union chairman.<sup>26</sup> As we will see, Li Keqiang in fact relied on the CCP’s youth organizations to climb the party-state hierarchy with great efficiency.

The student union presidium actually runs the organization. It comprises a chairperson and around six deputy chairpersons, including at least one from the Health Science Center. The presidium manages the various union departments that oversee routine work, such as propaganda or cultural affairs.<sup>27</sup> The different faculties suggest candidates for the presidium. They need to have previous experience as student cadres, and they are generally at least probationary CCP members. Their overall grades need to remain above a minimum level, and they cannot have failed any classes. According to my interviews, the required academic level is not hard to achieve, as more than 80 percent of the students reach such grades. Presidium members are elected every year through a complex system that alternates between “big elections” on the years the congress is gathered, and “small elections” when it is not. Every two years a “big election” takes place. It is organized in two rounds. During the first round, the congress and the standing committee select about seven people. They constitute the presidium. During the second round, the standing committee members choose a chairperson from among the newly elected members of the presidium. The six or so others become deputy chairpersons. A “small election” is organized when the congress is not assembled. In that case, the standing committee members vote in the two rounds, select-

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23. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 19 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013.

24. Jingsheng Wei, *The Courage to Stand Alone: Letters from Prison and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

25. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2014.

26. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 19 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013.

27. “Charter of Peking University Student Union.”

ing first the presidium and then the chairperson. In both cases, the presidium appoints, at a later stage, the department directors.<sup>28</sup>

There are generally around fifteen candidates for the union's presidium, and they campaign actively. The candidates put up posters on campus, distribute handouts introducing themselves and their objectives, and give campaign speeches in front of students. Candidates often organize in teams to maximize the chances of having at least some of them among the selected presidium members; the others could then become department directors. Since students mostly vote for their own, it is essential to include people from various faculties in the coalition, especially the Health Science Center, which sends many representatives to the congress. Alliances are generally formed to pass the first round of the election. Candidates might then turn against each other in the second round to secure a position as chairperson.<sup>29</sup>

With the student union elections in mind, ambitious student cadres can be strategic and build relationships with potential allies or sponsors starting from the first years of college. They hope that when comes the time to run for elections, the sponsors might solicit them to be part of their team:

In the student union, you have to choose carefully with whom to build an alliance. If you end up under a weak departmental director as a first-year student, you need to change department and find a more influential one. You can go through classmates or personal connections to get in touch with a stronger patron. You must become visible, show your popularity, your relationships. You should stand out through the activities you organize and impress the Student Union chairperson or deputy chairpersons. ( . . . ) The younger student cadres will often build relationships with the more senior ones, by buying them lunch for example, to try and become their deputy chairpersons when the time comes. The important thing is, when you are in your third year, to find someone to take you on their team. That is hard. ( . . . ) Some departments in the student union are better than others to show your skills and be noticed. The Liaison Department is a good one, as it is easy to show that you can raise funds for the union, using your skills and family connections.

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28. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

29. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

( . . . ) The Culture Department, or others in charge of organizing the union's main events, are also good platforms to show one's organizational abilities. On the contrary, the Propaganda Department is a bad choice because your contribution is not visible: it does not organize its own activities and mainly assists the others.<sup>30</sup>

### *The “Henan Clique”*

Coalitions have become so crucial in the Peking University Student Union's elections that one group has extended its web to include former chairpersons and CYL officials, thereby becoming hegemonic. Between 2005 and 2011, the aforementioned Henan clique, led by Liu Kai, has developed into a campus-wide clientelist network that could help selected student cadres to get elected to the presidium. In return, Liu Kai used the network to establish personal connections with ambitious young students who will probably have successful careers as officials. This clientelist network includes current and former student leaders. They recruit potential candidates starting from their first and second years in college. Candidates must be introduced through mutual personal relationships, generally through people coming from Henan.<sup>31</sup>

Henan's specificity as a province cannot explain the hegemonic nature of this network. While it is one of the country's most populous provinces and was a critical CCP stronghold during the revolutionary war,<sup>32</sup> it does not provide a specifically high number of CCP members or cadres.<sup>33</sup> Instead, provincial origin functions here as a proxy for mutual trust, as individuals are more easily embedded in overlapping social circles. Students from the same province tend to interact with each other, either based on pre-existing links, if they are from the same high school for example, or as they meet on campus, through associations for people from the same locale (*tongxiang hui*, 同乡会) for example.<sup>34</sup> The work of Cheng Li, and Victor Shih et al., has stressed

30. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 6 November 2014.

31. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015.

32. Odoric Y. K. Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

33. Daniel Koss, *Where the Party Rules: The Rank and File of China's Communist State*, Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 23.

34. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014.

that shared provincial affiliations can serve as bases for factionalism among the Chinese political elite.<sup>35</sup> Yet this is one form of tie among others that can serve a similar function. In the case at hand, some clique members are not from Henan but have been introduced through family or friends.

The clique's members put together leisure activities, such as sports or poker games, to get to know potential recruits. They also organize "high-level dinner parties" with the most important members of the network, and in particular Liu Kai.<sup>36</sup> These dinners are an excellent way to test recruits, to evaluate their family background and their ability to use personal connections. Also the recruits must show that they know how to behave, speak, and drink in formal settings. This way, they can signal that they have the necessary social skills to potentially become officials, and that they are a worthy bet. For instance, they can show that they know the rules of the game by paying the bill before anybody else. This gesture also highlights that money is not a problem for them, which is essential as union elections are not cheap: Leaving corruption aside, the printing of handouts and posters alone can cost around 4,000 RMB, which is not negligible for most students.<sup>37</sup> These dinner parties exemplify the male-centric socializing of student leaders, with female students marginalized. To my knowledge, all the Student Union chairpersons who emerged from the Henan clique were indeed men.

When the time is ripe, the Henan clique chooses a team to run for elections. Its members must be both loyal to the clique and relatively popular among students. They train them and, occasionally, support them financially. The clique uses its relationships within the CYL to benefit its candidates and push aside the main competitors. The Henan clique also establishes reliable connections with the incoming faculty-level Student Union chairpersons every year to ensure that the standing committee members they send to the university's student union will vote as instructed. Consequently, the clique holds tremendous sway over the selection process, especially during the

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35. Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016); Victor Shih, Wei Shan, and Mingxing Liu, "Gauging the Elite Political Equilibrium in the CCP: A Quantitative Approach Using Biographical Data," *China Quarterly* 201, no. 1 (2010): 79–103.

36. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014.

37. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 27 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 12 November 2014.



“small elections,” when the standing committee is all-powerful. During the “big elections,” the more numerous congress representatives are harder to control but can still be influenced through their faculties’ CYL leaders.

Because of this multilayered system, the university’s student union had to wait for 2012, when Liu Kai left the campus, to see someone outside the Henan clique elected: Dai Wei. It is hard to assess how much sway Liu Kai and the Henan clique currently retain on student union elections, but according to my interviewees they were still influential in 2015.<sup>38</sup> Dai Wei, the outsider from 2012, was all the more original because he did not come from the university-level student union but was the Business School Student Union chairman. Candidates who do not have previous experience in the university-level union are rare. According to one of my interviewees, Dai Wei found support in an unusual way: he met, through a classmate, a former Student Union deputy chairperson, who introduced him to his former chairperson. Thanks to the help of these former student leaders, who retained strong ties on campus, and his popularity among students, he won the “big election” against the clique’s candidate.<sup>39</sup>

Some students quickly accused Dai Wei of buying the student representatives’ votes and bribing the officials supervising the election. It is rumored that he spent more than 500,000 RMB.<sup>40</sup> Some of my interviewees had heard stories about his family wealth. They also heard that he had promised to offer iPads to the student representatives who would vote for him. They also noted, however, that corruption is prevalent in these elections, as mentioned in the previous chapter, and that the Henan clique probably orchestrated his denunciation.<sup>41</sup> After this scandal, Dai Wei did not pursue a political career. Instead, he founded the hugely successful bike-renting app OFO with four partners during his master’s studies.<sup>42</sup> It is difficult to know if his decision not to pursue a political career resulted from past accusations, or simply because other

38. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015.

39. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014.

40. Hu Lele (胡乐乐), “A Perspective on University Student Union Based on Vote Buying for Peking University Student Union Chairperson Elections (从北大学生会主席贿选看大学学生会),” Hu Lele’s Blog, 28 August 2012, <http://blog.sciencenet.cn/blog-604217-606752.html>

41. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015.

42. Dai Wei’s profile can be found here: <http://www.boaoforum.org/2017nhyjjb/30341.jhtml>.

opportunities arose. Dai Wei's trajectory illustrates the importance of campus networks and how, despite the regimented nature of the student cadre experience, individual trajectories can vary greatly.

Peking University's case is extraordinary, as the multiple ties linking student cadres and CYL officials to Liu Kai created a complex clientelist network that maintained its hegemony for several years. Structured clientelist networks like the Henan clique seem less common in other universities, where the administration controls student union elections even more closely. But developing sponsorship ties with strategic actors, particularly CYL officials, is vital in any university.<sup>43</sup> At Tsinghua University, for example, the university's CCP deputy secretary in charge of student affairs, Shi Zongkai at the time of the research, is deeply involved in selecting student leaders, and ambitious student cadres will make sure to develop relationships with him.<sup>44</sup> As I will now show, these sponsorship ties built on campus can also be decisive to finding a job outside the university.

## Chains of Sponsorship Ties in Elite Universities

The ties student cadres build on campus can become highly valuable if the students or officials they know get promoted to important positions. As the best universities in the country, Peking University and Tsinghua University provide many leading party-state officials. Focusing on these top schools (to which they add Renmin University), Wang Yuhua and Liu Hanzhang show through survey data that their students are more likely to pursue a political career than the ones from other universities.<sup>45</sup> This is mainly due to students perceiving their alumni networks as particularly strong in government. Looking at student leaders, I show how these networks are formed and expand. Student cadres who have established secure connections on campus can follow their sponsors throughout their careers and benefit from their influence. The aggregation of these dyadic ties can lead to chains of sponsorship in Chinese universities, and in the bureaucracy.

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43. Student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 15 June 2013; former student cadre, interview, Renmin University, 2 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 8 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 8 February 2015.

44. Former CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 12 May 2015; CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015.

45. Liu and Wang, "Becoming Political Candidates in China."

In Peking University's case, two former Student Union chairmen, Zhu Shanlu and Lu Hao, developed a solid bond. In 1982, Zhu Shanlu was elected Student Union chairman.<sup>46</sup> He then stayed on campus as a university official and became the Peking University CYL secretary from 1985 to 1988. Lu Hao was elected Student Union chairman in 1987.<sup>47</sup> As previously noted, the CYL maintains robust control over the union, and Lu Hao needed to have a positive relationship with Zhu to obtain this position. This relationship paid off when Lu Hao subsequently followed his sponsor Zhu Shanlu from one job to another. After several years spent working for SOEs, in 2001 Lu became CCP deputy secretary of Haidian District in Beijing, of which Zhu Shanlu had been the CCP secretary since 1998. In 2002, Zhu joined the Beijing CCP standing committee, and the following year Lu Hao was promoted deputy mayor of Beijing. Lu Hao eventually surpassed his sponsor and became a full member of the 18th CCP Central Committee in 2012, while Zhu Shanlu was only an alternate member. Lu's progression has been quite exceptional overall: he was among the fifteen officials born after 1965 who made it to a provincial CCP standing committee in 2013.<sup>48</sup>

The promotion of these two officials may also have been facilitated by the influence of another former student leader, Li Keqiang. After heading the Peking University Student Union standing committee, Li was appointed as the university's CYL secretary in 1982.<sup>49</sup> Li was still in this position when Zhu Shanlu was elected Student Union chairman, and hence he had to give his approval. Li also had the same graduate advisor as Lu Hao, Professor Li Yining.<sup>50</sup> Li Keqiang may have influenced their further promotions, as he had recently entered the CCP Politburo Standing Committee—the party's center of power—when, in 2008, Zhu Shanlu became mayor of Nanjing and Lu Hao became the first secretary of the central CYL, a position Li Keqiang himself had occupied ten years earlier.

In Tsinghua University's case, a similar sponsorship bond developed

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46. Zhu Shanlu's resume can be found here: [http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Zhu\\_Shanlu/career](http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Zhu_Shanlu/career)

47. Lu Hao's resume can be found here: [http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Lu\\_Hao|4863/career](http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Lu_Hao|4863/career)

48. "Already 15 Officials Born After 1965 Are Members of Party Provincial Standing Committees ('65后'省级党委常委已达15人)," *Xinhua Daily*, 7 June 2013.

49. Li Keqiang's resume can be found here: [http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Li\\_Keqiang/career](http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Li_Keqiang/career)

50. "The Economist Li Yining: He Had among His Students, Li Keqiang, Li Yuanhao and Others" (经济学家厉以宁: 学生中有李克强·李源潮等人)," *Chengdu Evening Post*, 13 April 2013.



Fig. 7. A sponsorship chain from Peking University. *Source for pictures:* Xinhua.net

between Chen Xi and Yang Yue. Yang Yue became Student Union chairman in 1990, under the sponsorship of Chen Xi, who was the university-level CYL secretary.<sup>51</sup> Chen Xi then became the university's CCP deputy secretary, and Yang Yue stayed on campus after graduation to work as a student counselor. As a key CCP leader on campus, Chen directly influenced Yang's promotion to university-level CYL secretary in 1997.<sup>52</sup> In 2002, Chen Xi became Tsinghua University's CCP secretary. As a close friend of Xi Jinping, whom he studied with at Tsinghua University in the 1970s and later assisted in obtaining a doctorate from the same university,<sup>53</sup> Chen Xi was later promoted to prominent positions in the central administration. He became in 2017 the Central CCP organization department director and a member of the CCP Politburo. As such, Chen was able to influence his protégé's career even beyond Tsinghua University, and indeed Yang Yue has had a successful political career. After becoming a local CCP official, Yang was appointed in 2005 executive secretary of the CYL Central Committee, and in 2011 he became the mayor of Fuzhou, capital of Fujian Province. When he entered the stand-

51. Chen Xi's resume can be found here: [http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Chen\\_Xi/career](http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Chen_Xi/career)

52. Yang Yue's resume can be found here: [http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Yang\\_Yue/career](http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Yang_Yue/career)

53. Zhiyue Bo, "The Rise of a New Tsinghua Clique in Chinese Politics," *The Diplomat*, 27 April 2015; Kerry Brown, *CEO, China: The Rise of Xi Jinping* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

ing committee of Fujian in 2008, he was the youngest member of a provincial CCP standing committee.<sup>54</sup>

Like the chain of sponsorship ties established between Li Keqiang, Zhu Shanlu, and Lu Hao, Yang Yue has himself become a sponsor for student cadres. He supported another student leader, Shen Yue, who became Tsinghua University Student Union chairwoman in 2000, while he was the university's CYL secretary.<sup>55</sup> Shen comes from Liaoning, the same province as Yang Yue. A charismatic student, Shen Yue also stood out for being one of the first Student Union chairwoman in the university's history. She attracted attention with a speech she delivered at the 90th anniversary of Tsinghua University in April 2001, before thousands of students and core national leaders, such as then PRC president Jiang Zemin and premier Zhu Rongji.<sup>56</sup> Shen became Tsinghua University's CYL deputy secretary in 2001, the highest-ranked position a student can secure in the CYL, while she was still a graduate student.<sup>57</sup> Later she moved to the Fengtai District CYL Committee in Beijing and became its secretary in 2007. In 2010, Shen became the director of the Beijing CYL Organization Department. She then moved to the Yangtze Three Gorges Technology and Economy Development Company, of which she has been the CCP secretary since 2013.

Interestingly, the chain of sponsorship ties did not stop there, as another student leader from Liaoning, Wang Songtao, followed the same path as Shen. After becoming Tsinghua University Student Union chairman in 2003, while Shen Yue was in the university's CYL, he too became Tsinghua University CYL deputy secretary. He was then appointed in 2008 as the Fengtai District CYL secretary, right after Shen left.<sup>58</sup>

While it is difficult to demonstrate empirically that the ties forged on

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54. "Already 15 Officials Born After 1965 Are Members of Party Provincial Standing Committees."

55. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015.

56. Former CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 12 May 2015; CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015.

57. Shen Yue's profile can be found here: <http://www.asyzone.com/m/index.php/cms/item-view-id-4405.shtml>

58. "The CYL Secretary of Fengtai District Wang Songtao Goes to the Fengtai District Education Commission in Order to Inspect CYL Work (丰台团区委书记王松涛赴丰台教委调研共青团工作)," Website of the Fengtai District government, 5 December 2011, <http://www.ftedu.gov.cn/2011NianXinWen/2011-12/11447.htm>

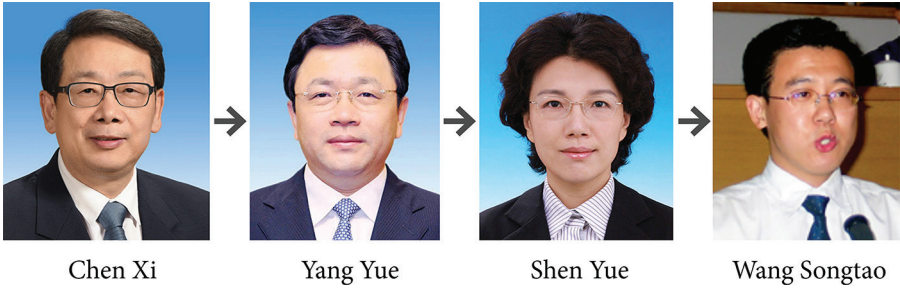


Fig. 8. A sponsorship chain from Tsinghua University. *Source of pictures: Xinhua.net*

campus shaped student leaders' trajectories, the way these individuals are connected and follow each other gives us an idea of how these sponsorship relationships function. These stories illustrate the exceptional networking resources at the disposal of student leaders hailing from Peking University and Tsinghua University, and how the ties developed on campus remain essential after graduation.

### An Elite within the Elite: The Political Career of Student Leaders from Peking University and Tsinghua University

Many student leaders from Peking University and Tsinghua University become party-state officials, and often at a high level. While it is difficult to obtain systematic career data on what student cadres do after they graduate, it was possible to find partial data for 45 of the 61 Student Union chairpersons from the two universities between 1978 and 2008. This data is based on online lists of Student Union chairpersons from the two universities and from official CVs. It shows that at least 28 of the 61 (46 percent) worked as officials at the university, local, or central level just after graduating. I stopped the analysis in 2008 as the Student Union chairpersons appointed after that are not senior enough to have risen to positions in the administration for them to have their CVs online. Data regarding the future careers of students from the two universities are not publicly available over the same period, but to give an idea of the difference with lay students' career advancement, in 2014 only 19.1 percent of Tsinghua's recent graduates who found a job were employed in an administration or a university (which also includes academic positions). The

figure was 17.9 percent in the case of Peking University in 2014.<sup>59</sup> The figure is almost the same (18 percent) for Peking University's graduates who are CCP members,<sup>60</sup> highlighting that the student cadre experience is valuable on its own, beyond the fact that most student leaders are also CCP members.

Such difference in the probability of becoming an official after graduation could be explained by the student cadres' unique interest in pursuing a political career. As highlighted in the previous chapter, they often behave and see themselves as officials even before they graduate. Yet compared with Student Union chairpersons from other institutions, who should value this path just as much, the ones from Tsinghua University and Peking University have a higher chance of becoming officials, which stresses the value of the networks students from these two schools can access.

Looking at the career data of the 140 All-China Students' Federation chairpersons and deputy chairpersons between 1979 and 2004, I could find official CVs for only 34 of them (24.3 percent) who became officials right after graduating, at the university, local, or central level. The others have either pursued a different path or have not risen high enough in the party-state hierarchy for their CVs to be found online. The ACSF leadership changes every five years and comprises the student union's or graduate student union's chairpersons from around thirty universities.<sup>61</sup> While China's nine best universities are always among them, the other seats rotate among "211 project" universities, which include the 100-odd best higher education institutions in the country.<sup>62</sup>

The figure of 24.3 percent is far below the 46 percent featured in the Tsinghua University and Peking University cases. These student leaders, however, still have higher chances of becoming officials than ordinary students from the same institutions. As an indication, in 2008 only 14 percent of the graduates from "211 project" universities directly secured a position in a

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59. "Report on the Employment of the 2014 Graduates of Tsinghua University" (清华大学2014年毕业生就业质量报告), Tsinghua University, December 2014.

60. "Annual Report on the Employment of the 2014 Graduates of Peking University (北京大学2014年毕业生就业质量年度报告)," Peking University, December 2014.

61. Li Yan (李艳) and Min Xiaoyi (闵小益), eds., *Compilation of Historical Documents from the Past Congresses of the All-China Students' Federation* (全国学联历次代表大会史料集), vol. 2 (Beijing: Chinese Literature and History Press, 2011).

62. Student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 13 June 2013; former CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 27 June 2013.



party-state administration or an academic institution, which includes both administrative and academic posts. The figure goes down to 13 percent for universities outside “211 project” and 5 percent for vocational higher education institutions.<sup>63</sup>

Beyond sheer numbers, student leaders from Tsinghua University and Peking University have particularly successful political careers in post-Mao China. Table 3 compiles the names of the former Student Union chairpersons from both universities who later reached ministerial or deputy-ministerial ranked positions in the party-state. The six cadres listed in table 3 graduated between the late 1970s and the early 1990s, in the wake of the CCP’s rejuvenation policy. While it became a more prevalent recruitment channel in post-Mao China, three of Tsinghua’s student leaders from the Mao era also became ministerial-level cadres or above: Zhu Rongji, who was Tsinghua University Student Union chairman in 1951 and premier of the RPC from 1998 to 2003; Zhang Fusen, who was Tsinghua University Student Union chairman in 1964 and became minister of justice in 2000; and Xu Rongkai, who was Tsinghua University Student Union chairman in 1965 and became governor of Yunnan in 2002. Furthermore, the student leader experience has remained highly valuable for ambitious young people since the 1990s, but the officials in question are too young to have reached ministerial-level positions. In table 4, I compiled the names of former student leaders from the 1990s and 2000s who have become leading cadres in local administrations and who are therefore in an excellent position to access high-level party-state positions later in their career.

Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the unique opportunities offered to student leaders from Tsinghua University and Peking University. They also stress interesting elements that question the existing literature on the effect of university choices on political careers. First, while Cheng Li has pointed out the existence of a “Tsinghua clique” at the top echelon of the party-state in post-Mao China<sup>64</sup> and Wen-Huan Tsai et al. have noted the better organization of the Tsinghua alumni network,<sup>65</sup> the data shows that student leaders from Tsinghua University do not have a clear advantage over student leaders from Peking University. Students from the two institutions are almost evenly represented.

63. Cheng Changqun (成长群), “Research on the Issue of Employment of University Students: Survey on the Issue of Hubei University Student Employment as a Case (大学生就业问题研究:以湖北大学生就业调查为例)” (PhD diss., Wuhan University, 2010), 98.

64. Cheng Li, “University Networks and the Rise of Qinghua Graduates in China’s Leadership,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 32 (July 1994): 1–30.

65. Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Xingmiu Liao, “The Impending Rise of the ‘Tsinghua Clique’: Cultivation, Transfer, and Relationships in Chinese Elite Politics,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 120 (March 2019): 948–64.



Table 3. Former Student Union Chairpersons from Peking University and Tsinghua University Who Reached Ministerial and Vice Ministerial Positions (Post-1978)

Name	Gender	University	Major	Year as Chairperson	Experience in the ACSF	Highest Position Reached By Late 2019
Yuan Chunqing	Male	Peking University	Law	1978	Deputy Chairman	Party Secretary of Shanxi Province
Zhu Shanlu	Male	Peking University	Philosophy	1982	none	Party Secretary of Peking University
Lu Hao	Male	Peking University	Economy	1987	none	Minister of Natural Resources
Lin Yanzhi	Male	Tsinghua University	Physics	1980	Chairman	Deputy Party Secretary of Jilin Province
Yang Zhenbin	Male	Tsinghua University	Engineering	1984	none	Party Secretary of Jilin University
Yang Yue	Male	Tsinghua University	Engineering	1990	Chairman	Vice-Governor of Jiangsu Province

Source: *ChinaVitae.com*

Second, the distribution of majors among student leaders follows the schools' respective traditions. There is no striking difference between the careers of those who studied natural science compared to those who studied humanities or social sciences. Peking University is renowned primarily for social sciences and humanities. Unsurprisingly, most of its Student Union chairpersons since 1978 come from these majors. On the contrary, Tsinghua University is famous for science majors, whose ranks produce the most significant number of Student Union chairpersons. Student leaders' majors simply reflect the specialty of their university and the relative importance of each faculty within it. Against the argument that majors have a powerful influence on party-state officials' political careers, Tsinghua University alumni who studied engineering and Peking University alumni who studied humanities have strikingly similar career trajectories.<sup>66</sup>

Another salient element is the number of student leaders who started

66. Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*.

Table 4. Former Student Union Chairpersons from Peking University and Tsinghua University Who Became Grassroots Political Leaders (Post-1990)

Name	Gender	University	Major	Year as Chairperson	Experience in the ACSF	Highest Position Reached By Late 2019
Du Huijiang	Male	Tsinghua University	Automotive Engineering	1997	Secretary	Deputy CCP Secretary of Tongliao City, Inner Mongolia
Shen Yue	Female	Tsinghua University	Civil Engineering	2000	Chairwoman	Organization Department Director, Beijing CYL Committee
Kong Lei	Male	Tsinghua University	Automotive Engineering	2001	none	Deputy Director of the Beijing Municipal Committee of Economy and Information Technology
Yang Bo	Male	Tsinghua University	Hydraulic Engineering	2002	none	Deputy Head of Tongzhou District in Beijing
Wang Songtao	Male	Tsinghua University	Geology	2003	none	CYL Secretary of Fengtai District in Beijing
Zheng Xiaobo	Male	Tsinghua University	Statistics	2004	none	Deputy Head of Shunyi District in Beijing
Chen Guanghao	Male	Peking University	Chinese Literature	1993	none	Director of the Sichuan Province Economic Information Center
Lü Chenfei	Male	Peking University	Management	1999	none	Deputy Head of Fangshan District, Beijing
Ruan Cao	Male	Peking University	Public Management	2002	none	Deputy Head of Yubei District, Chongqing
Liu Kai	Male	Peking University	Philosophy	2005	Chairman	CCP Secretary of Lingtai County in Gansu Province

*Source:* Compiled by the author based on official CVs.

their careers as officials on campus. Among the 28 former student leaders from Peking University and Tsinghua University who became officials after graduation (1978–2008), 17 did so on campus. This is hardly a surprise, as we already described the strong ties developed by student leaders within the university administration, which facilitates their recruitment. I come back to these first jobs as university officials in the next chapter to demonstrate how they can operate as career accelerators.

Many former student leaders have also worked as CYL officials. Among the 28 former Student Union chairpersons from the two universities who became officials after graduation, 12 were later appointed as CYL officials at the local or central level. This is also true of 8 of the 34 former All-China Students' Federation leaders who became officials. More specifically, the two youngest officials in table 3, Lu Hao and Yang Yue, were appointed in 2008 respectively as the CYL Central Committee first secretary and executive secretary, the two most important positions in the CYL. As stressed in chapter 6, young officials who become CYL leaders can use this position as a springboard toward leadership party-state positions.

The most notable feature in these two tables is the near absence of female student leaders. They represent only 22 of the 140 ACSF chairpersons and deputy chairpersons between 1979 and 2005 (15.7 percent). While well-represented among youth organizations members (between 45 and 50 percent of the membership of CYL members are female<sup>67</sup>), the imbalance becomes clear when the cadres rise in the hierarchy. This gender gap early in the cadres' professionalization process contributes to the gender imbalance characteristic of the Chinese political leadership.<sup>68</sup>

Female students might be less easily considered for student union leadership, as these positions are perceived as a springboard toward a male-dominated political scene. Yet according to my interviews it is mostly the male-centered socializing, exemplified by the Henan clique meetings revolving around alcohol drinking, poker, or sports, that pushes out the potential female candidates. These activities are presented, by student cadres and officials, as inappropriate for female students.<sup>69</sup> As a result, many network-

67. "The Chinese Communist Youth League's Membership Has Reached 78,588 million (中国共青团团员达到7858.8万名)," *China Youth Daily*, 4 May 2009, [http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2009-05/04/content\\_2648866.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2009-05/04/content_2648866.htm)

68. Shen Lu, "Pretty Lady Cadres," *ChinaFile*, 21 December 2020, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/features/pretty-lady-cadres-china>

69. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014.

ing venues remain closed to female students, which means they have fewer chances to become student leaders, and fewer opportunities more widely. This is in line with descriptions of party-state officials' socialization,<sup>70</sup> well-exemplified by this quote from a former professor at the Central Party School describing work dinners: "I was the only woman in the group. At dinner, the men gossiped and cracked jokes. I found the off-color, alcohol-fueled conversation vulgar and would always slink out after a few bites of food."<sup>71</sup>

The unique networking opportunities provided to male student leaders from the country's most elite university set them apart from other students. This advantage is particularly striking when these students access the ACSF's leadership.

### *The All-China Students' Federation as a Networking Platform*

The ACSF chairperson has chiefly a representation function, but student cadres value this position, as it provides national visibility and the opportunity to meet many senior officials. As a result, the elections held in the corresponding year in Peking University are particularly competitive.<sup>72</sup> This is how a CYL official and former student cadre I interviewed presents this position: "It has become a tradition for Student Union chairpersons from Peking University and Tsinghua University to head the All-China Students' Federation. It is a coveted position: while in office, they are as visible as a vice minister, and they meet most national leaders. It is an important platform."<sup>73</sup>

The All-China Students' Federation is a national body representing the different universities' student unions. Since 1956, its chairperson rotates every five years between Peking University and Tsinghua University.<sup>74</sup> Under this configuration, while the students remain chairpersons at the university level for only a year, they keep their position at the national level for five years. For

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70. Katherine A. Mason, "To Your Health! Toasting, Intoxication and Gendered Critique among Banqueting Women," *China Journal* 69 (2013): 108–33, <https://doi.org/10.1086/668804>

71. Xia Cai, "The Party That Failed," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 1 (2021).

72. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 June 2015.

73. Former CYL official, interview, Beijing, 26 June 2013.

74. Source for the name lists of the All-China Students' Federation Presidium since 1949: Li and Min, *Compilation of Historical Documents from the Past Congresses*.

instance, the ACSF chairman selected in 2005 was the Peking University Student Union chairman of the corresponding year, Liu Kai, and he stayed in this position at the national level until 2010, when a Tsinghua student replaced him. It is not a full-time position, and student chairpersons can pursue their studies or start a job while in office.

Student leaders from Peking University and Tsinghua University already have privileged access to national leaders. They accompany them when they visit their campuses,<sup>75</sup> and they can interact with them during specific ceremonies. I mentioned before how Shen Yue, then Tsinghua University Student Union chairwoman, could meet Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji at the occasion of the university's 90th birthday. Nevertheless, the ACSF chairpersons are the ones with the most straightforward and regular access. Throughout their five-year terms, they have many meetings with CCP and CYL leaders, about country-wide student work.<sup>76</sup> The CCP Central Committee general secretary, and other key CCP leaders, are, for instance, present at the ACSF congress, which takes place every five years. The elected chairperson is then introduced to them.<sup>77</sup> The CYL Central Committee first secretary, and other central CYL officials, interact with the student leaders more regularly, for example at the occasion of the yearly ACSF presidium meetings.<sup>78</sup> The ACSF chairperson is automatically appointed as the All-China Youth Federation deputy chairperson and therefore participates in similar assemblies within this other organization.<sup>79</sup>

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75. "Student Union: The Shadiest Part of University (学生会:大学最阴暗的一角)," Chen Wei's Blog, 12 September 2011, <http://www.21ccom.net/articles/zgyj/gqmq/2011/09/12/45142.html>

76. Former CYL official, interview, Beijing, 26 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 9 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Central CYL School, 25 June 2013; student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015.

77. "End of the 12th Congress of the All-China Youth Federation and of the 26th Congress of the All-China Students' Federation (全国青联十二届全委会全国学联二十六大大闭幕)," *China Youth Daily*, 26 July 2015.

78. "The 5th meeting of the 25th All-China Students' Federation Presidium Opens in Beijing (全国学联第二十五届主席团第五次会议在京召开)," WeChat account of Beijing CYL, 17 December 2014.

79. Former CYL official, interview, Beijing, 26 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 9 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Central CYL School, 25 June 2013; student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 29 April 2015.

ACSF chairpersons are embedded within central CYL networks. Over their five years in office, they generally spend one year working full-time for the ACSF as executive chairperson. As the federation's offices are part of the central CYL administration, this year equals an internship at the central CYL. Some All-China Students' Federation deputy chairpersons are also offered this opportunity.<sup>80</sup> Illustrating this embeddedness in CYL networks, four of the six ACSF chairpersons in my dataset (1978–2008) became, later in their career, CYL officials at the local or central level. Two of the most successful cadres I have mentioned, Yang Yue and Liu Kai, are among them. They were both ACSF chairmen, respectively in 1990–1995 and 2005–2010. As mentioned earlier, Yang Yue later became the CYL Central Committee executive secretary and then the youngest member of a provincial CCP standing committee nationwide. Liu Kai was appointed CYL secretary of Chaoyang District in Beijing after leaving Peking University in 2010. The following year, he moved to Lingtai County in Gansu and became the country's youngest county leader.<sup>81</sup>

This phenomenon is reproduced at the local level, albeit on a smaller scale. The Student Union chairpersons from the best universities in a province form the presidium of the provincial student federation. The position of chairperson is generally monopolized by the same university, the province's best one. For instance, the Nanjing University Student Union chairperson heads the Jiangsu Province Student Federation.<sup>82</sup> These student cadres have the opportunity to meet provincial leaders: A provincial CCP standing committee member, as well as the province's CYL secretary, are, for instance, present at the student federation congresses every five years.<sup>83</sup> Like at the national level, these student leaders also have the opportunity, along with the deputy chairpersons, to become provincial-level student federation executive chairpersons and intern at the provincial level CYL for a year.<sup>84</sup> While to a

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80. CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 9 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Central CYL School, 25 June 2013; former CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 27 June 2013; student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014.

81. "The 28 Years Old Peking University PhD Liu Kai Is Appointed as Governor of Lingtai County in Gansu."

82. CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 2 February 2015.

83. "The Jiangsu Student Federation Holds its 9th Congress (江苏学联第九次代表大会举行)," *China Youth Daily*, 29 August 2012.

84. CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 9 June 2013; student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014.

lesser degree than at the national level, having experience as a local student federation leader can hence be a valuable networking opportunity for student cadres.

### *Networks in Time of Crisis*

The networks developed by elite universities' student leaders can become particularly valuable during political crises. The 1989 uprising and its repression are a good illustration of this phenomenon. Peking University and Tsinghua University students were particularly active among the initiators, and as a result these elite institutions, and their student organizations' leadership, were heavily scrutinized in the aftermath.<sup>85</sup>

Xiao Jianhua, a financier who handled money for some of the nation's top political families and came to international attention in 2017 when mainland security forces kidnapped him from a hotel in Hong Kong,<sup>86</sup> was the Peking University Student Union chairman in 1989. While he never opposed the government, the demonstrations were a clear sign of failure, as his union could not prevent students from creating parallel organizations and mobilizing. Caught in the middle of these events, his nascent political career came to a halt. Yet his experience as a student leader ultimately paid off, as he could count on the university's support, as well as the connections he built with officials, to become a successful businessman working closely with CCP leaders.<sup>87</sup>

The stories of the CYL secretaries of Peking University and Tsinghua University at the time are also good illustrations of how campus-based networks can help to resume a career after a difficult start. After 1989, they both had to leave the country for some years and wait for the atmosphere to calm down. As heads of the CCP's youth organization in universities very active during the protests, they were seen as having failed at their job of managing students.<sup>88</sup> Zhang Laiwu, who was then the Peking University CYL secretary,

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85. Dingxin Zhao, *The Power of Tiananmen State-Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Student Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

86. "Chinese Billionaire Xiao Jianhua 'Abducted' from Hong Kong Hotel," *The Guardian*, 1 February 2017.

87. David Barboza and Michael Forsythe, "With Choice at Tiananmen, Student Took Road to Riches," *New York Times*, 3 June 2014.

88. CYL official, interview, Central CYL School, 25 June 2013; an academic, interview, Central CYL School, 14 June 2013.

left for the United States for five years as a graduate student. When he came back, he first found a job at Peking University and later became a local cadre in Ningxia Province. In 2008, he was appointed deputy minister of science and technology.<sup>89</sup> The case of Chen Xi, who was the Tsinghua University CYL secretary at the time, is more exceptional. He still managed to have a particularly successful political career, probably in part due to his close relationship with Xi Jinping mentioned earlier. After a two-year visiting fellowship at Stanford University (1990–1992), most likely organized by Tsinghua University, he returned to his alma mater as a university official and rose up the ranks within the institution. As we have seen earlier, he was appointed as the Tsinghua University CCP secretary in 2002. He then became a leading official in the Ministry of Education and in 2013 was appointed CCP Organization Department executive deputy director, a significant position in the party apparatus. In 2017, he was promoted to head of the Organization Department, as well as a Politburo member.<sup>90</sup>

Student leaders' long-term professional trajectories are influenced by the ties they develop on campus. Sponsorship ties are indispensable to get to the top of the student cadre hierarchy on campus, and their accumulation can lead to the emergence of extensive clientelist networks. These relationships then shape the students' opportunities after graduation, benefiting those with better access to networking opportunities, which are predominantly male students from elite schools. These embryonic political networks, in which recruits are embedded very young, hence participate in the homogeneity of the party-state elite. As we will further explore in later chapters, they also contribute to elite cohesion as the cadres' multiple personal loyalties translate into a diffuse allegiance to the regime.

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89. Zhang Laiwu's resume can be found here: [https://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Zhang\\_Laiwu/career](https://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Zhang_Laiwu/career)

90. Chen Xi's resume can be found here: [https://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Chen\\_Xi/career](https://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Chen_Xi/career)



## CHAPTER 5

# Starting a Political Career on Campus

When I met Wang Xiaofei in June 2012 (the name has been changed), she worked for the Nanjing University CCP Committee. After graduating from Nanjing University in 2004, she “stayed on campus” (*liuxiao*, 留校) and was recruited by the university’s Student Work Department as a student counselor, a low-level official in charge of student management. As a Nanjing University graduate and a former student cadre (she was the university’s Student Union deputy chairwoman during her last year of college), she was given priority in the recruitment process. Moreover, her experience as a student cadre proved useful when taking the exam to be recruited by the university. She could draw on her student-management experience to answer interview questions and she was used to interacting with university officials. In 2008, she became the university’s CYL deputy secretary, thereby reaching the top levels of the student-management hierarchy. She stayed four years in that position before being promoted to the university’s CCP Committee, following an in-depth review of her past work and inquiries among her colleagues. She seemed to have enjoyed her time at the CYL, where she oversaw human resources and volunteering activities. She liked that despite being herself a university official, she could remain in constant contact with students and had the opportunity to organize many cultural and welfare activities. While she seemed nostalgic of that time, her party position being “more bureaucratic and hierarchical,” she also saw it as a step up, with more power and responsibilities.<sup>1</sup>

Building on her experience as a student cadre, and later a CYL official on campus, as well as the contacts that go with it, Wang built a career as a respected university official. Her trajectory illustrates how staying on campus

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1. University official, interview, Nanjing University, 26 June 2012.

as a counselor can be an attractive career option for many former student cadres, particularly those fit for the job.

The term “counselor” designates various profiles depending on the universities: They can be in their twenties and still graduate students, but also older than 30 and full-time officials. Yet these entry-level university officials are, across the board, critical elements of the student-management system. Like resident tutors in many Western universities, they deal with students’ day-to-day issues and offer academic advice. But they also have key political responsibilities, such as managing class-level CCP activities or monitoring the students’ behavior to identify the problematic ones.<sup>2</sup> This chapter highlights the crucial role counselors play on campus, as well as how this position can be a formative experience leading toward high-level positions as officials on campus and beyond. Staying on campus to work for the university’s administration can indeed be a strategic move for ambitious graduates who want to become party-state officials. It can be a more rewarding strategy than taking the civil service exam after graduation and starting as an entry-level party-state cadre.

The experience of counselor also provides an interesting lens to analyze nascent political ambition. Wang Xiaofei’s story shows that while having experience as a counselor and campus CYL official can be a springboard toward a political career outside campus, only some follow this path and take the risk of leaving a comfortable position on campus.

Political ambition is of course a highly subjective matter, yet two elements profoundly affect the choice to leave campus or not: the university of origin and gender. Officials from different universities have unequal access to a future political career. Moreover, female officials tend to tone down their political ambitions compared to their male counterparts. This is clear in Wang’s case: she noted that many of her male colleagues who followed a similar path pursued a career in the party-state outside campus, but she did not want to become a party-state official for now. She described her job as stable, and according to her, such positions take too much time: “you cannot have a private life as you have to work continuously on your relationships (*guanxi*, 关系).”<sup>3</sup> This reaction is common among the young women cadres I

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2. Xiaojun Yan, “Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China,” *China Quarterly* 218 (2014): 493–513.

3. University official, interview, Nanjing University, 26 June 2012.

interviewed and echoes the pressure women officials feel more broadly.<sup>4</sup> Such self-selection further deepens the gender imbalance that we saw in the previous chapter regarding student leaders. In line with the sponsored mobility framework, political promotion opportunities are hence tweaked in favor of a few individuals—male student cadres from the country’s best universities—and feed their political commitment and ambition to rule.

## The Counselor System

In 1952, the Ministry of Education called for developing a system of “political counselors” in pilot higher education institutions.<sup>5</sup> Tsinghua University was the first school to establish a counselor system, starting in 1953. New graduates, who were also CCP members, were selected to stay on campus after graduation and become political counselors. Their primary duty was to manage the student body and student organizations. They generally became at the same time CYL secretaries in their respective faculties. Jiang Nanxiang, who headed Tsinghua University from 1952 to 1966, was active in creating the counselor system.<sup>6</sup> His idea was to cultivate a group of young talents capable of “carrying with both shoulders,” meaning that they would be both technical experts and political leaders.<sup>7</sup> Many counselors from Tsinghua University later became high-level officials within the university and beyond,<sup>8</sup> among them former PRC President Hu Jintao (2003–13).

The counselor system lasted until 1966 in Tsinghua University and was

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4. Shen Lu, “Pretty Lady Cadres,” *ChinaFile*, 21 December 2020, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/features/pretty-lady-cadres-china>

5. “Instructions Regarding the Higher Education Institutions Which Importantly Will Experiment with a Working System of Political Counselors (关于在高等学校有重点的试行政治工作制度的指示),” Ministry of Education, 28 May 1952.

6. Cheng Li, “University Networks and the Rise of Qinghua Graduates in China’s Leadership,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 32 (July 1994): 1–30.

7. Research team on the political counselors system (学生政治辅导员制度研究课题组), “Looking Back and Investigating 40 Years of the Political Counselors System (学生政治辅导员制度四十年的回顾与探索),” *Tsinghua Journal of Education* 1 (1993): 3–7.

8. Li, “University Networks and the Rise of Qinghua Graduates”; Xie Zheping (谢喆平) and Wang Sunyu (王孙禹), “Student Political Instructors and Governance of China by ‘Red Engineers’ (学生辅导员制度与‘红色工程师治国’),” *Tsinghua Journal of Education* 6 (2013): 18–29.

later resumed in 1977 after the Cultural Revolution.<sup>9</sup> It was then endorsed by Deng Xiaoping and became universal across higher education institutions.<sup>10</sup> While the position became less attractive for young graduates in the 1980s because of the decreasing importance of political control in universities, this changed after 1989. Following the student mobilizations, the party-state increased its control over student activities, as seen in chapter 2. To do so, it further developed the counselor system and increased the status of political workers.<sup>11</sup>

Since the 1990s, the counselor system has been institutionalized and expanded to universities across the country. Following a 2000 central-level meeting on the matter,<sup>12</sup> the Ministry of Education issued a document laying out some shared rules to standardize the political counselor system nationwide. It emphasized the position's training function and, in order to guarantee turnover, established age limits (40 years old) as well as term limits for counselors (four to five years for full-time positions).<sup>13</sup> Since then, the counselor system has been gradually formalized through additional rules. Document 16 of 2004 established, for example, that every class should have a dedicated counselor, who should be at the same time the class director. It also changed the terminology to "student counselors" to underline the diversification of their role beyond classic political control and their increased influence on students' daily life.<sup>14</sup> Document 24 of 2006 (later updated in 2017<sup>15</sup>) then

9. Fang Huijian (方惠坚) and Zhang Sijing (张思敬), eds., *Local Records of Tsinghua University (Qinghua daxue zhi, 清华大学志)*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2001).

10. Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

11. Dingxin Zhao, "The Decline of the System for Controlling Students in Universities," in *The Power of Tiananmen State-Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Student Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 101–22.

12. Gong Chunlei (龚春雷), "Study on the Professionalization and Specialization of College Student Affairs Administrators in China (高校辅导员职业化专业化问题研究)" (PhD diss., East China Normal University, 2011).

13. "Opinion on Further Strengthening the Construction of Political Work Teams in Higher Education Institutions (关于进一步加强高等学校学生思想政治工作队伍建设的若干意见)," Ministry of Education, 3 July 2000.

14. "Opinion Regarding the Strengthening and Improvement of the Political Education of University Students (关于进一步加强和改进大学生思想政治教育的意见)," Document 16, State Council, 14 October 2004.

15. "Regulation on the Building of Corps of Political Instructors in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions (普通高等学校辅导员队伍建设规定)," Document 43, Ministry of Education, 21 September 2017.

clarified the counselors' recruitment criteria and stressed that they should be under the supervision of their faculty's CCP committee as well as managed by the university's Student Work Department. It also added that there should be at least one counselor for every 200 students in universities.<sup>16</sup> In 2008, there were 91,808 full-time and 29,329 part-time counselors nationwide.<sup>17</sup>

Tsinghua University's system remains unique as the role of counselors is still taken by graduate students rather than by full-time university employees. Every year, around a hundred graduate students are selected to become counselors, amounting to a total of about 400 working at the same time. They must be CCP members and have satisfactory grades to be recruited. Staff members from different faculties recommend them, and the University Party Committee Postgraduate Work Department makes the final selection. As a result, former student cadres are often in the best position to be recruited, especially those who benefited from a direct admission to graduate school. For instance, each year, the fourth-year undergraduate student selected as the Student Union chairperson automatically becomes a counselor upon graduation.<sup>18</sup>

In other universities as well, most counselors are student cadres who stay on campus because they must be CCP members and have student-management experience.<sup>19</sup> Existing ties in the university give student cadres the upper hand in the recruitment process, which implies a written exam organized by the university and interviews. This preference for student cadres sometimes takes obvious forms: "While they still have to take the exams and go through interviews, the ads to recruit counselors are sometimes specifically drafted for a few student cadres that are soon to graduate. They are so specific, regarding the type of experience in the student union the candidates need to have, that only one or two people fit."<sup>20</sup> Overall, this is a crucial advantage for student cadres, as counselor positions are seen as an excellent first step toward officialdom and competition for them is keen.

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16. "Regulation on the Building of Corps of Political Instructors in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions (普通高等学校辅导员队伍建设规定)," Document 24, Ministry of Education, 23 July 2006.

17. Gong Chunlei, "Study on the Professionalization and Specialization."

18. Former CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 27 June 2013; former CYL official, interview, Peking University, 18 November 2014; CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015.

19. "Regulation on the Building of Corps of Political Instructors in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions," 2017.

20. Student cadre, interview, Nanjing University, 15 June 2013.

## Counselors as Officials in Training

### *Getting Promoted on Campus*

A position as a counselor is an excellent training ground for university officials and party-state cadres more broadly. In addition to being trained on the job, the counselors have many opportunities to develop their skills further. The universities set up training programs for them on a regular basis. Tsinghua University has been, for example, organizing an annual program reserved for counselors since 1960.<sup>21</sup> Regulations issued in 2017 further formalized this aspect, as universities must ensure that full-time counselors go through a minimum of sixteen hours of training per year and once every five years join a provincial or national-level training program.<sup>22</sup>

The counselors also have unique opportunities in pursuing academic studies, as the state has officially pushed to further their education. For instance, the “2006–2010 plan for the training of counselors in ordinary higher education institutions” put forward a four-year program for 1,000 counselors to pursue master’s programs in political education across 30 universities.<sup>23</sup> A similar program was initiated in 2008 at the PhD level.<sup>24</sup> Even beyond these specific plans, counselors can easily pursue graduate programs while they work. Due to their positions as university officials, they can enroll without taking the national admission exam for graduate schools. Universities set up their own admission criteria for these specific admissions: in most cases they just go through an interview.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to offering training options for young graduates, positions as counselors also provide an advantageous administrative ranking. Administrative jobs in universities, which are public-sector service units, follow the same ranking and salary system as the party-state administration. Following

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21. Xie Zheping and Wang Sunyu, “Student Political Instructors and Governance of China.”

22. “Regulation on the Building of Corps of Political Instructors in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions,” 2017.

23. “2006–2010 Plan for the Training of Counselors in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions (2006–2010 年普通高等学校辅导员培训计划),” Ministry of Education, 30 July 2006.

24. Gong, “Study on the Professionalization and Specialization,” 24.

25. Former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 20 December 2011; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 8 February 2015.

this hierarchical framework, counselors start high in the official ranking system despite their young age. According to a survey conducted in 2010 among 61 higher-education institutions in Shanghai, 56 percent of the 4,868 counselors who responded were less than 30 years old. Also, the vast majority of them (68 percent) were appointed at the deputy section director level (*fu keji*, 副科级), the first rank for leading officials and the equivalent of a township's deputy head (see the appendix for more details on bureaucratic ranks).<sup>26</sup>

As the youngest officials on campus, counselors can often become CYL secretaries of their faculty.<sup>27</sup> At Tsinghua University, for instance, around 70 of the 400 counselors are also CYL leaders.<sup>28</sup> The counselors who are at the same time CYL officials do not receive any additional salary, but they can use these positions to rise in the university administration's hierarchy. In "211 project" universities, faculty CYL secretaries are ranked section director (*keji*, 科级), the equivalent of a township head. They can then become directors of university-level CYL departments, which have the same rank but lead to more opportunities than staying at the faculty level. They can also stay at the faculty level as a CCP deputy secretary or aim for leading positions in the university-level CYL. The most successful ones then become CCP secretary at the faculty level or university-level CYL secretary, a crucial position on campus, generally ranked as division director (*chuji*, 处级), the equivalent of a county head.<sup>29</sup>

University-level CYL leadership positions are particularly competitive. A CYL congress is organized every five years on campus, and, following the framework of the CYL national congress, every faculty sends representatives. While these representatives ostensibly elect the CYL secretary and deputy secretaries, they are selected beforehand by the university's CCP standing committee. The CYL congress simply validates the CCP leadership's choice. Moreover, most appointments happen without the congress's intervention, as Youth League leaders often stay less than five years in office. Appointments as university-level CYL secretary are selective: candidates should be in their early thirties, already be ranked deputy division director, and have previous

26. Gong, "Study on the Professionalization and Specialization," 56.

27. "Regulation on the Building of Corps of Political Instructors in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions," 2017.

28. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015.

29. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 8 February 2015; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013.

working experience in the CYL. Moreover, they need to have a graduate diploma, often a Ph.D., which they generally obtain while working as officials on campus.<sup>30</sup>

CYL officials on campus enjoy further unique training opportunities on top of the ones provided to counselors. Since 1989, the central CYL has emphasized the training of CYL officials on campus.<sup>31</sup> They are granted the opportunity to follow training programs in the CYL schools, which include theoretical and more practical modules. A specific program for university CYL secretaries takes place at the Central CYL School several times a year. In addition to practical training, they are briefed on new policies and laws. These programs also create networking opportunities with CYL officials from other universities and central-level CYL leaders.<sup>32</sup> They are reproduced at the local level: The Beijing Municipal CYL Committee has, for instance, developed an annual four-day training for CYL leaders of the city's best universities.<sup>33</sup>

Being less than thirty years old and already ranked as a leading cadre is promising for one's future career. In only a few years, counselors can then rise to key positions on campus. Their trajectories are rapid compared to their equivalent outside campus: they can often be promoted every two or three years, which is rarer in party-state administrations.<sup>34</sup> This is especially true at Tsinghua University, where positions as counselors are particularly val-

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30. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 30 April 2015; former CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 12 May 2015.

31. "Opinion Regarding CYL Work in Universities in the Current Period (关于当前高等学校共青团工作的几点意见)," CYL Central Office, 13 August 1989; "Opinion Regarding the Strengthening and Improvement of the CYL Construction in Higher Education Institutions (关于进一步加强和改进高等学校共青团建设的意见)," Document 15, Ministry of Education and CYL Central Office, 8 April 2005.

32. "The 2015 First Special Training Class for University CYL Secretaries to Study the Essence of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Series of Important Speeches Is Held in Beijing (2015年首期高校团委书记学习习近平总书记系列重要讲话精神专题培训班在北京举行)," *China Youth Daily*, 17 March 2015.

33. "The Training Class for the CYL Secretaries of the Capital's Universities Was Held Successfully (首都高校团委书记培训班成功举办)," WeChat account of the Beijing CYL, 28 October 2014.

34. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 8 February 2015; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013.



ued. According to an internal study, in 1993 45 percent of university officials ranked division directors and above used to be counselors; and among the twelve most highly ranked university officials, nine had such an experience.<sup>35</sup>

### *Leaving Campus as a Leading Official*

Student cadres who stay on campus can become counselors, and some manage to rise quickly in the CYL hierarchy at the faculty and university levels. Many use this fast track to leave campus and get directly appointed as local leading cadres, avoiding the civil service exam. When recruited, university officials take an exam organized by the university—widely seen as more accessible than the civil service exam—and are considered officials in a service unit. They are already part of the overall party-state system, and as such they can, once ranked as at least deputy division director (as university CYL deputy secretary for example), transfer directly to an equally ranked position outside campus without taking an additional exam.<sup>36</sup>

Yang Yue, mentioned in the previous chapter as part of a sponsorship chain at Tsinghua University, provides an example of such a successful trajectory. He was the Tsinghua University Student Union chairman in 1990–91. After graduating from Tsinghua University, Yang stayed on campus as a counselor while doing his graduate studies. Ten years later, he became the CYL secretary of the university and was then transferred to a leadership position in a Beijing district. He later pursued his career going back and forth between CYL and CCP posts. In 2008, he became the youngest official seated at a provincial-level CCP standing committee.<sup>37</sup> In practice, however, Yang Yue is an exceptionally successful case, and only a minority of campus officials transfer to local party-state positions. Why don't more officials use this fast track?

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35. Research team on the political counselors system, "Looking Back and Investigating 40 Years," 6.

36. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 8 February 2015; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013; CYL official, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 8 February 2015.

37. "Already 15 Officials Born After 1965 Are Members of Party Provincial Standing Committees ('65后'省级党委常委已达15人)," *Xinhua Daily*, 7 June 2013.

## Starting a Political Career outside the University

### *A Difficult First Experience*

Many campus cadres who want to pursue a career outside the university are first “temporarily transferred” (*guazhi duanlian*, 挂职锻炼) to local party-state positions for a limited time. Under this framework, which has been progressively formalized at all party-state echelons since the 1990s,<sup>38</sup> a dispatching unit transfers a cadre to a receiving unit for a certain period, generally a year.<sup>39</sup> The goal is to train the official in a different environment. If the receiving unit’s leaders are satisfied with their work, they can be formally appointed in the position at the end of the temporarily transferred duty.<sup>40</sup> The CYL is particularly active in organizing such transfers; every year, various universities select CYL officials to be sent to leadership positions in county-level CYL committees, often rural ones, for at least a year.<sup>41</sup> In 2012, for example, 2,473 university CYL officials were temporarily transferred to county-level CYL committees.<sup>42</sup>

Temporarily transferred duty can be a challenging experience for young cadres and can lead them to realize how harsh the job of a local official can be and how protected they are on campus. This is particularly evident with officials transferred to impoverished regions of China.<sup>43</sup> The Youth League is very much aware of this phenomenon. A 2012 piece by the CYL’s leading newspaper, the *China Youth Daily*, highlighted the difficulties of university

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38. “Notice Regarding the Issues Concerning the Training of Cadres Through Temporary Transferred Duty (关于干部挂职锻炼工作有关问题的通知),” CCP Central Organization Department, 29 September 1994; “Program Regarding the Deepening of the Reform of the Cadre Personnel System (深化干部人事制度改革纲要),” CCP Central Organization Department, 23 June 2000.

39. Chien-wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, “Sprinting with Small Steps’ Towards Promotion: Solutions for the Age Dilemma in the CCP Cadre Appointment System,” *China Journal* 71, no. 1 (2014): 153–71.

40. CYL official, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 8 February 2015.

41. “Notice Regarding the 2015 Selection of University CYL Cadres and Young Teachers to Be Sent for Temporary Transferred Duty in County Level CYL Committees (关于2015年全国高校选派团干部和青年教师到县级团委挂职工作的通知),” CYL Central Office, 12 June 2016.

42. Central Communist Youth League, *Yearbook of the Chinese Communist Youth League 2012* (中国共青团年鉴 2012) (Beijing: China Youth Press, 2013), 198.

43. CYL official, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 8 February 2015.

CYL officials sent from the wealthy province of Jiangsu to become grassroots officials in rural areas. In addition to not being accustomed to rural life and the lack of comfort, they realized that local CYL work could be much more demanding than what they experienced on campus.<sup>44</sup> Such situations lead some to rethink their ambitions, to remain in the university's administration or look for another public-sector job seen as not too demanding. The temporarily transferred duty framework is, therefore, a useful way to test their commitment to a career in the party-state.

### *Unequal Access to Political Careers*

Working in the university's administration is a popular option among young graduates. It is seen as stable and relatively well-paid. These positions have become increasingly valued due to rising unemployment among college graduates. As we have seen, some may also use this experience as a springboard for a future career in the party-state apparatus. Yet the ability to do so is unequally distributed.

Most female interviewees were more interested in keeping a university job rather than transferring to the local level. This was also the case of some male interviewees. They put forward how stable and comfortable a job on campus is and how working with students is much less stressful than dealing with local administrations, and they highlighted the material advantages linked to these positions: enjoying university vacations or being able to send one's children to the affiliated kindergarten. They also have easier access to university-affiliated primary schools and high schools, which, in the case of elite universities, are considered among the best in the country. Thus holding a position as a counselor is widely viewed as a perfect situation in which to have children.<sup>45</sup> As an official put it, "Female officials tend to stay in university jobs; it is indeed perfect to start a family."<sup>46</sup>

Many female interviewees also stressed that local officials must regularly move from one place to another to advance their career, which is difficult for a woman in a social context, where she is pressured to get married and

44. "The Jiangsu University CYL Cadres Enjoy a 'Sudden Maturation' at the Grassroots (江苏高校团干基层享受'成长突击')," *China Youth Daily*, 1 January 2012.

45. CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 9 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014.

46. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015.

follow her husband wherever his job takes them rather than the other way around. They also mentioned that they would have fewer promotion opportunities than their male colleagues.<sup>47</sup> As a result, women cadres on campus tend to curb their political ambitions. This contributes to the limited number of women at the higher echelons of the party-state hierarchy.

This phenomenon echoes what has been described regarding women cadres more broadly, stressing that their marginalization begins early in their careers. They face discrimination and harassment as well as a patriarchal official discourse that confines them to traditional gender roles and stresses their housework responsibilities. The phrase “pretty lady cadres,” frequently used by Chinese media to refer to young women officials, exemplifies how they are relegated to an inferior status compared to male colleagues.<sup>48</sup> In a system widely dominated by male cadres, they also have fewer chances of promotion despite the formalization of gender quotas since the early 2000s.<sup>49</sup> Against this background, the few women who manage to become leading officials tend to be assigned to traditionally female-dominated areas, such as welfare, education, or the All-China Women’s Federation.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to gender disparities, university officials are confronted with very different opportunities depending on the university they are from. Officials from elite universities directly managed by the Ministry of Education, rather than by a provincial government, have more transfer opportunities. They have direct contacts with the Central CCP Organization Department and have more opportunities to meet relevant officials. Among the universities I focused on, this is the case of Peking University, Tsinghua Univer-

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47. CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 9 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015; former student cadre, interview, Peking University, 10 October 2014; student cadre, interview, Sichuan Normal University, 6 December 2014.

48. Shen Lu, “Pretty Lady Cadres”; “China: Female Civil Servants Face Discrimination, Harassment,” Human Rights Watch, 8 November 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/08/china-female-civil-servants-face-discrimination-harassment>

49. “Opinion Regarding the Improvement of the Training and Promotion of Female Cadres and the Development of Female CCP Members (关于进一步做好培养选拔女干部、发展女党员工作的意见),” CCP Central Organization Department, 2001.

50. Stanley Rosen, “Women and Political Participation in China,” *Pacific Affairs* 68, no. 3 (1995): 315–41; Jude Howell, “Women’s Political Participation in China: In Whose Interests Elections?,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 15, no. 49 (2006): 603–19; David J. Bulman and Kyle A. Jaros, “Loyalists, Localists, and Legibility: The Calibrated Control of Provincial Leadership Teams in China,” *Politics & Society* 48, no. 2 (2020): 199–234.

sity, and Nanjing University.<sup>51</sup> By contrast, my interviewees from Nanjing Normal University emphasized how rare it was for their officials to become local cadres.<sup>52</sup>

Even among leading universities, Peking University and Tsinghua University stand out as many of their cadres become local party-state officials. This is particularly true for CYL officials: Of the 25 CYL secretaries the two schools had altogether between 1978 and 2012, 15 became local officials right afterward, mainly in Beijing.<sup>53</sup> Their schools' status gives the CYL secretaries from Tsinghua University and Peking University automatic membership to the CYL Central Committee. They can therefore meet the most important CYL leaders who also sit on the committee and can be valuable contacts to find a job outside campus.<sup>54</sup> Thus, 8 of the 25 CYL secretaries from these two schools (1978–2012) got positions in the CYL, in Beijing or at the central level, later in their career. By comparison, Nanjing University's CYL secretaries have fewer networking opportunities in the CYL organization, as they are only members of the Jiangsu Province CYL Committee.<sup>55</sup> More broadly, in line with previous research,<sup>56</sup> my interviewees highlighted the unique networking opportunities officials from Peking University and Tsinghua University can access: they can tap into the vast community of alumni from these universities who are already party-state officials.<sup>57</sup> Tsinghua University has

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51. CYL official, interview, Tsinghua University, 26 May 2015; CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 8 February 2015; CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013.

52. CYL official, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 8 February 2015; former student cadre, interview, Nanjing Normal University, 8 June 2013.

53. This data is based on online lists of CYL leaders from the two universities and on the career data that can be retrieved from official CVs published on Xinhua.cn, or official media reports. The analysis starts at 1978, when the CYL organization was being redeveloped on campus. I stopped in 2012 since at the time of the analysis no CYL secretary from either school had been transferred since then to another position.

54. "Previous Sessions of the Central CYL (历届团中央)," Chinese government news website, [http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-01/27/content\\_173796\\_6.htm](http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-01/27/content_173796_6.htm)

55. CYL official, interview, Nanjing University, 26 June 2012.

56. Hanzhang Liu and Yuhua Wang, "Becoming Political Candidates in China: Elite University Network and Selectorial Advantage," Working Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2019).

57. CYL official, interview, Peking University, 10 July 2013; CYL official, interview, Hai-rou district in Beijing, 18 November 2014; CYL official, interview, Shunyi district in Beijing, 12 May 2015.

been especially active in structuring its alumni network, through regular exchanges between alumni, counselors, and students.<sup>58</sup>

Working on campus as a counselor and CYL official can become a springboard toward a future political career. Counselors are trained and progressively inducted into the party-state elite, which further feeds their political ambition. Yet among student cadres, who are already a socially distinct group as we have seen, the ones who obtain a campus position after graduation and take the risk to leave it to start a political career outside the university are from an even more specific group: mostly men who graduated from the country's top universities.

This process contributes to the wider gender gap that plagues the party-state. In addition to the lesser networking venues already visible among student cadres, women cadres on campus are faced with limited professional opportunities in the context of the traditional gendered roles promoted by the state. As a result, they tend to lower their political ambitions. This process also plays a part in making student leaders from the countries' best universities particularly successful in getting ahead in the party-state hierarchy. Not only can they access powerful networks, as we have seen in the previous chapter, but they also have access to unique training and promotion opportunities when working on campus and transferring to local party-state leadership positions. Overall, the cadre-cultivation process on university campuses, and self-selection in starting a political career outside, add to the homogeneity of officials' social background.

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58. Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Xingmiu Liao, "The Impending Rise of the 'Tsinghua Clique': Cultivation, Transfer, and Relationships in Chinese Elite Politics," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, 120 (March 2019): 948–64.

## CHAPTER 6

# Youth League Officials as Future Party-State Leaders

When I met Lü Yuhua (the name has been changed) in June 2015, she was a county-level CYL secretary in Hebei Province. Originally from the province, she studied at Hebei Normal University, where she worked as a student cadre. When she graduated in 2003, she joined the CCP and took the provincial “assigned graduates” exam, described in chapter 2. After successfully passing the exam, she was posted as a village-level CCP official. She was then quickly promoted to the county government, working first for the Legal Affairs Department and then the Finance Department. In 2011, she took a written exam and interviewed to be recruited as the county’s CYL leader.

When I asked her to compare her current job with her previous experiences in the party-state administration, she highlighted two critical features of the CYL. First, as a CYL secretary she could access a much broader network than in her previous positions, which led to the development of potentially useful personal ties:

The CYL has more organizational links. In previous positions, I hardly knew the county leaders whereas now I meet them regularly. I also have ties with CYL leaders from the upper levels, especially the province, as we coordinate our efforts for major activities such as the “Project Hope” [a massive league-affiliated education relief program]. As my CYL committee was recognized by the national authorities as an “excellent CYL committee” for its performance, I also had the chance to meet national party leaders, in particular Li Yuanchao [Vice President of the PRC]. There were around 130 CYL cadres at the meeting, and I was among the six who addressed him. These are opportunities that do not exist elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

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1. CYL official, interview, Shijiazhuang, 11 June 2015.

Second, she described her position as particularly demanding:

The CYL has no funds and no power, and we still have to organize many activities. This is excellent for training cadres. We must keep looking for solutions and sometimes external funding. We must be creative. Also, CYL leaders do not have office secretaries to write speeches or reports for them, yet we must address many different issues in speeches or writing. Like CCP leaders, we are generalists and may have to talk about different topics from one day to the next. As a result, we develop writing and rhetorical skills.<sup>2</sup>

When I asked about the next step in her career, Lü Yuhua noted that as a CYL leader she was in an excellent position to be promoted to local party-state leadership, for example as head of a township within the county. Lü Yuhua presented herself as a party-state leader in the making. As a local CYL secretary she developed strong ties with the local leadership, and she learned how to speak, write, and behave like a political leader.

After analyzing the first steps of the political career on campus, both before and after graduation, I now turn to the experience of local and central CYL leaders. These positions can constitute a crucial step in the political sponsored mobility system: because of the CCP's rejuvenation policy, many CYL leaders are promoted to top party-state positions at the central or local level. These positions are also critical for cultivating their commitment to a lifelong political career as they develop a role as future party-state leaders. Through their embodiment of this role, CYL leaders show that they are fit for the job and part of the political elite.

## The Perfect Reserve Cadres

### *The 'Third Echelon' of Cadres*

In 1980, Deng Xiaoping called for the rejuvenation of the party-state cadres corps by promoting "revolutionary, younger, more educated, and more technically specialized" officials.<sup>3</sup> The party-state then implemented new

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2. CYL official, interview, Shijiazhuang, 11 June 2015.

3. Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), *Deng Xiaoping Selected Works* (邓小平文选) (Beijing: People's Publishing House: 2014), 2:326.



recruitment and promotion rules. The establishment of a retirement system<sup>4</sup> was followed by the development of new regulations concerning the age of leading cadres, detailed in the appendix.<sup>5</sup> As highlighted by Kou Chien-Wen and Tsai Wen-Hsuan, age limits developed into a unique and complicated system that affects promotions at all levels of the polity and leads to regularized elite turnover.<sup>6</sup> Yet together with the implementation of regulated periods for cadre tenure as well as step-by-step promotions,<sup>7</sup> this system created a glass-ceiling effect that rendered appointments to highly ranked positions almost impossible. Kou and Tsai illustrated this phenomenon with an imaginary young university graduate recruited at 30 years old as a deputy section director, the lowest leading cadre position, and promoted at every step in their later career. Following the rules, this cadre will never reach the deputy-minister level due to the age ceiling. To get to top positions, cadres must therefore start their career very young and find shortcuts.<sup>8</sup>

In parallel to these institutional changes, a new policy to promote a “third echelon” of cadres was implemented in the early 1980s, to ensure the rejuvenation of the cadre corps. The “third echelon” policy diverged from previous CCP personnel policies in the way it was meticulously organized and scheduled. The idea was for young cadres to be promoted to leadership positions at all levels and to make them cooperate with the older leaders until 1985, when

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4. Melanie Manion, *Retirement of Revolutionaries in China: Public Policies, Social Norms, Private Interests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

5. Leading cadres are the highest-ranked party-state figures at every level of the polity. The distinction between leading and nonleading cadres takes form within a structured ranking system. Leading cadre positions start at the section leadership level (科级), the equivalent of a township leader, and go all the way to the state leadership level (国家级). See the appendix for a list of ranks. There are currently around two million leading cadres in the Chinese party-state (Hon S. Chan and Jie Gao, “The Politics of Personnel Redundancy: The Non-Leading Cadre System in the Chinese Bureaucracy,” *China Quarterly* 235 (2018): 622–43).

6. Chien-wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, “Sprinting with Small Steps’ Towards Promotion: Solutions for the Age Dilemma in the CCP Cadre Appointment System,” *China Journal* 71, no. 1 (2014): 153–71.

7. “Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres (党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例),” CCP Central Office, 9 February 1995.

8. The age of 30 is based on the idea that it takes around 8 years after graduation from college to reach the rank of deputy section director (Kou and Tsai, “Sprinting with Small Steps,” 157).

they would retire. The plan was to promote 130,000 young leaders by 1985.<sup>9</sup> Youth Cadre Bureaus affiliated with the CCP Organization Department were established at every level of the polity to supervise the implementation. They created lists of potential candidates to be trained and eventually promoted to leadership positions. This led to the establishment of the “reserve cadre system,” which is still in place today under the supervision of the party’s Organization Department. In 2010, the reserve cadre lists included 50,000 officials at the different administrative levels.<sup>10</sup>

With the CCP’s rejuvenation policy, the CYL’s role as the party’s “reserve force” was strengthened. This official function of the organization, which had been removed from the CYL charter in 1957 to emphasize the CCP’s superiority over the CYL, was brought back in 1982.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the CYL mirrored the party and in 1982 established age limits for its leading cadres,<sup>12</sup> stressing that CYL leaders could not be much older than league members (age limits for party-state and CYL leading officials are listed in the appendix). This transformed the CYL into a shortcut to avoid the glass-ceiling effect created by age limits.<sup>13</sup> Being both young, due to these age limits, and highly ranked as the leaders of a critical mass organization, CYL officials have since been in a perfect position to be selected as reserve cadres for party-state leadership positions.

### *Training Programs for Youth League Officials*

Being a reserve cadre goes together with unique training opportunities unavailable to other officials. It includes the “young cadre training courses” (*zhongqingnian ganbu peixunban*, 中青年干部培训班) created by the Central Party School in 1980 for provincial-level reserve cadres. This six-month-to-two-year program focuses on the cadres’ understanding of central policies

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9. Hsi-sheng Ch’i, *Politics of Disillusionment: The Chinese Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping, 1978–1989* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1991), 77.

10. Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Chien-Wen Kou, “The Party’s Disciples: CCP Reserve Cadres and the Perpetuation of a Resilient Authoritarian Regime,” *China Quarterly* 221 (March 2015): 1–20.

11. Zhang Hua (张华), *Studies on the Functions of the Communist Youth League of China* (中国共产主义青年团职能研究) (People’s Press, 2013).

12. “Opinion Regarding the Question of the Age of the CYL Committee Leading Cadres at the Different Levels (关于各级团委领导干部年龄问题的意见),” CCP Organization Department, 14 May 1982.

13. Jérôme Doyon, “The Strength of a Weak Organization: The Communist Youth League as a Path to Power in Post-Mao China,” *China Quarterly* 243 (2020): 780–800.

Table 5. Study Sessions for the CYL Central Committee Secretariat in 2014

Date	Sessions' Main Topics	Main Speakers
10 January 2014	Studying the Third Plenum of the 18th CCP Central Committee	Yang Weimin, Central Finance Small Leading Group Office Deputy Director
24 March 2014	Studying the cadre handbook, "Fifty Years of International Socialism"	Gu Hailiang, National Academy of Education Administration Chairman and editor of "Fifty Years of International Socialism"
11 April 2014	Studying the cadre handbook, "Ten Speeches from Marxist Philosophy"	Yang Geng, Beijing Normal University Deputy Chairman and coauthor of "Ten Speeches from Marxist Philosophy"
26 May 2014	Theory and practice of the socialist core values	Dai Mucai, Deputy Director of the Research Institute on Political Thinking of the Propaganda Department.
30 June 2014	Studying the second central-level meeting on Xinjiang affairs	Li Zhao, Deputy Director of the Central Coordination Group for Xinjiang Affairs
30 July 2014	Youth in a society in transition	Lian Si, University of Foreign Trade's Graduate School Deputy Director
8 October 2014	Studying the CYL's changing role in implementing government policies	Wang Yukai, Professor in the National Academy of Education Administration
1 December 2014	Studying the Fourth Plenum of the 18th CCP Central Committee	Zhang Laiming, Deputy Director of the Development Research Center of the State Council

Source: Compiled by the author based on *China Youth Daily* articles, January–December 2014.

and the development of their managerial skills.<sup>14</sup> Many CYL officials take part in such Central Party School programs. Only partial information is publicly available on the matter, yet at least 19 of the 49 central-level CYL secretaries appointed between 1982 and 2013 did follow these programs.<sup>15</sup>

14. Charlotte P. Lee, *Training the Party: Party Adaptation and Elite Training in Reform-Era China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jérôme Doyon and Franziska Barbara Keller, "Knowing the Wrong Cadre? Networks and Promotions in the Chinese Party-State," *Political Studies* 68, no. 4 (2020): 1036–53.

15. Central CYL secretaries' names can be found here: "Previous Sessions of the Central CYL (历届团中央)," Chinese government news website, [http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-01/27/content\\_173796\\_6.htm](http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-01/27/content_173796_6.htm). Their CVs can be found on Xinhua.cn.

The CYL also organizes special study sessions for its leaders. At the central level, it follows the CCP Politburo study sessions' template,<sup>16</sup> putting them in the shoes of top party-state leaders. The sessions take place every one or two months and focus on a timely topic, generally presented by an external speaker. In addition to central-level CYL secretaries, the leaders of central CYL departments and some subsumed units, such as the Central CYL School, also join. As examples of the studied topics and invited speakers, table 5 lists the study sessions that took place in 2014.

The Central Youth League School is also active in training CYL officials. It was established in 1948, and the training has accelerated since the late 1980s with the party-state's emphasis on rejuvenating the cadres corps.<sup>17</sup> A 1991 Central CYL document provided clear targets to be met: 50 provincial-level CYL secretaries and deputy secretaries were to be trained every year, as well as 400 city-level CYL leaders.<sup>18</sup> These targets were later revised: the "2006–2010 National plan for the education of Youth League cadres" stressed that 50 provincial-level and 1,000 city-level CYL leaders should be trained in the Youth League and party schools every year.<sup>19</sup>

Training in the CYL schools followed the same evolution as party schools and administration institutes.<sup>20</sup> Since the reform and opening policy, the programs became shorter and the content evolved. While ideological content is still part of the curriculum, the schools give increasingly important weight to practical skills.<sup>21</sup> Following a business school model, they provide modules based on case studies and emphasize management as well as negotiation skills.<sup>22</sup>

16. Alice Miller, "Politburo Processes under Xi Jinping," *China Leadership Monitor* 47 (July 2015): 10.

17. Central Communist Youth League School, ed., *Records of the Central CYL School 1948–1998* (共青团中央团校志 1948–1998) (Beijing: Reform Press, 1998).

18. "Opinion Regarding the Strengthening of the Training of Cadres at the Central Youth League School (关于加强中央团校干部培训工作意见)," CYL Central Office, 4 January 1991.

19. "2006–2010 National Plan for the Education of Youth League Cadres (2006–2010年全国团干部教育培训规划)," CYL Central Office, 15 January 2007.

20. Emilie Tran, "École du parti et formation des élites dirigeantes en Chine [Party School and Ruling Elite Training in China]," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 122, no. 1 (2007): 123–44; David Shambaugh, "Training China's Political Elite: The Party School System," *China Quarterly* 196 (2008): 827–44; Alessia Lo Porto-Lefebvre, *Les Mandarins 2.0: Une Bureaucratie Chinoise Formée à l'américaine [Mandarins 2.0: A Chinese Bureaucracy Trained the American Way]* (Paris: Sciences les presses Po, 2020).

21. *Records of the Central CYL School 1948–1998*.

22. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 26 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Shijiazhuang, 11 June 2015.

### *The Communist Youth League as a Fast Track toward Leadership Positions*

CYL officials have emerged as the ideal reserve cadres in the reform era. As an example, to become a reserve cadre for a bureau director position, such as the mayor of a medium-sized city, the minimum requirement is generally for this cadre to be a rank below and be less than 45 years old.<sup>23</sup> Provincial CYL committee secretaries are in a perfect position to be on the list: They are already ranked as bureau directors and are generally in their late thirties. As a result, most local CYL secretaries are transferred to party-state leading positions.<sup>24</sup>

This is also true at the central level. While during the Mao era only a handful of former central CYL leaders reached the CCP Central Committee later in their career, it has become widespread since the late 1970s. In fact, 30 of the 45 central CYL secretaries (67 percent) appointed between 1978 and 2013 became CCP Central Committee members. In that regard, the league's situation is very different from other mass organizations. Looking at the careers of former All-China Federation of Trade Unions chairpersons and vice chairpersons from 1978 to 2013, only 25 percent of them eventually made it to the CCP Central Committee. CYL leaders have hence a brighter future despite being of lesser rank than trade union leaders. The CYL Central Committee first secretary is a ministerial-level official, whereas the trade union chairperson is generally a Politburo member with a rank of deputy state leader. The CYL has therefore become a regularized promotion channel to top party-state positions in post-Mao China.<sup>25</sup>

This advantage, however, does not apply to all league officials. By contrast to the organization's leading officials who are managed by the CCP at the same level, lower-ranked CYL officials are administered by the league. They cannot rely on the CCP leadership to promote them. Most of their promotion options are within the CYL itself, and when they reach the age limits for CYL positions, they need to transfer to another organization. The league lacks the means to help them look for another post, thus they must rely on themselves. The CYL fast track, therefore, only functions for leading cadres. In line with the elite-dualism literature, which describes how only a few party-state officials are "pulled" to the top,<sup>26</sup> the result is a dual track within

23. Pan Teng (潘腾), "A Cohort of Young CCP Officials (中国年轻干部梯队)," *Phoenix Weekly* 6, no. 463 (2013).

24. Doyon, "The Strength of a Weak Organization."

25. Doyon, "The Strength of a Weak Organization."

26. Alex Payette, "Factional Pull: Measuring the 'Tuanpai Effect' on Elite Formation

the CYL with only some cadres being selected for cultivation in a sponsored mobility framework.

## Cultivating a Role as Leaders-to-Be

### *The League's "Lack of Power and Money"*

Like Lü Yuhua, the CYL officials I interviewed highlighted the league's "lack of power and funds" (*wuquan wuqian*, 无权无钱). First, the league is dependent on the party: the CCP controls its agenda and selects its leaders at every echelon of the organization. Moreover, CYL leaders are always party members, as well as CYL members, and therefore fall under the scope of its disciplining apparatus. The league also follows the party's organizational blueprint. At the central level, a congress is gathered every five years and proceeds to the election of the CYL Central Committee and its Standing Committee. At that point, the Central Committee formally selects a Secretariat, the organization's main decision-making body. Despite this formal process, CYL secretaries are in practice selected by CCP leaders. This configuration is reproduced at the lower levels of the organization.<sup>27</sup>

Second, the CYL has few sources of revenue. At every echelon, the CYL premises and staff salaries are funded by the state, comparable to a government office. Along with public funds, the CYL can rely on the dues paid by its members. Grassroots units collect dues and transmit them to upper units, up to the central CYL. The amount of CYL membership dues depends on the member's salary.<sup>28</sup> An actual figure for the total amount collected every year is hard to estimate, but it remains a funding channel of lesser importance than the money coming from the state.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the CYL can collect additional resources for specific activities. It can, for instance, obtain additional

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from 1992 to 2012," *International Journal of China Studies* 7, no. 3 (2016): 319–50; Xiaowei Zang, *Elite Dualism and Leadership Selection in China* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

27. "Charter of the Chinese Communist Youth League (中国共产主义青年团章程)," Congress of the CYL, 29 June 2018.

28. "Regulation Regarding the Payment and Management of the CYL Membership Dues (关于团费缴纳和管理使用的规定)," CYL Central Office, 8 March 1994.

29. Central CYL project team (团中央课题组), "Opportunities and Reactions Faced by the CYL Organization in a Liberalizing Economy (市场经济条件下共青团基层组织面临的机遇、挑战与对策)," *China Youth Studies* 1 (2001): 39–46.

public funds to organize major activities, such as recruiting volunteers for the 2008 Olympic Games, or it can raise private sponsorship through affiliated charities.<sup>30</sup> Yet the CYL remains an underfunded organization by comparison with other mass organizations. The 2015 budget of the central CYL (583 million RMB) was only 26.4 percent of the 2015 budget of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (2 billion RMB).<sup>31</sup>

CYL officials entertain a certain pride in the weakness of their organization. It shows that they can do a lot with little means, despite their young age and frequent lack of technical skills. To compensate for their limited experience, they stress their enthusiasm and ability to innovate, such as being active on social network websites.<sup>32</sup> Overall, they depict the CYL as a perfect training ground: “CYL officials learn how to implement projects in difficult situations. They have less money than the party, the government, or the trade union. And this is on purpose as the party wants them to train themselves, become more entrepreneurial, and be able to get things done.”<sup>33</sup> CYL officials thus learn how to develop valuable relationships across a variety of organizations and sectors: “The organization has no power and no money, and as CYL officials we have to learn how to convince other officials to support us in developing activities. This contrasts with the local party authorities, who can simply command people.”<sup>34</sup> Along with actually organizing activities, they have to find funding for their various projects, from the public or private sector, and to advertise them.<sup>35</sup> These partners may then perceive this occasion to collaborate with CYL officials as an investment: The CYL leaders they help by funding their activity might become important officials able to return the

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30. Jérôme Doyon, “Low-Cost Corporatism: The Chinese Communist Youth League and Its Sub-Organizations in Post-Mao China,” *China Perspectives* 2 (2019): 39–46.

31. “2015 Budget of the Central CYL (共青团中央2015年部门预算),” Central CYL Office, 17 April 2015, [http://www.ccy.org.cn/notice/201504/t20150417\\_738048.htm](http://www.ccy.org.cn/notice/201504/t20150417_738048.htm); “Budget of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (工会部门预算),” All-China Federation of Trade Unions, 17 April 2015, <http://www.acftu.org/template/10041/file.jsp?cid=809&aid=90506>

32. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 16 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Nanjing, 8 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Chengdu, 6 December 2014; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 19 January 2015.

33. Central CYL School academic, interview, Beijing, 26 June 2013.

34. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 16 June 2012.

35. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 16 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Nanjing, 8 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Chengdu, 6 December 2014; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 19 January 2015.



favor in the future. By extension, CYL officials can still take part in corrupt behavior even though they do not hold “fat positions” that would provide many avenues for corruption, for instance those linked with infrastructure projects or administrative licenses.<sup>36</sup>

This reliance on external actors is particularly apparent in less wealthy parts of the country, such as Guizhou Province, or for cadres working in grassroots CYL committees, where funding is low.<sup>37</sup> A cadre in the Guiyang City CYL Committee, for example, stressed how, despite organizing far more activities, they had a smaller budget than the local residents’ committees<sup>38</sup> (officially defined as self-governing mass organizations, these committees serve as agents of the government in the day-to-day management of urban neighborhoods<sup>39</sup>). Though it is an extreme example of the training aspect of CYL positions, working in complex settings is, however, perceived as a good experience that can help a person get promoted.<sup>40</sup> This echoes previous research on the promotion of party-state officials from remote provinces.<sup>41</sup>

### *Individual Tactics to Stand Out*

CYL officials also learn to please their superiors. Although since the 1980s, the cadre management system has progressively integrated precise criteria in evaluating officials’ performance,<sup>42</sup> this has been much less the case for CYL officials. Against this background, CYL officials must mainly satisfy their superiors, to make their work look convincing in their eyes.

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36. Gu Yali (古雅丽), “On the Passive Corruption of Youth Leaders: Some Issues (浅议基层共青团干部的消极腐败问题),” *Journal of Guangxi Youth Leaders College* 20, no. 4 (August 2010): 43–46.

37. CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 19 January 2015; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 20 January 2015.

38. CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 20 January 2015.

39. Judith Audin, “Governing through the Neighbourhood Community (*shequ*) in China. An Ethnography of the Participative Bureaucratisation of Residents’ Committees in Beijing,” *Revue française de science politique* 65, no. 1 (2015): 85.

40. CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 19 January 2015; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 20 January 2015.

41. Zang, *Elite Dualism and Leadership Selection in China*.

42. Maria Edin, “State Capacity and Local Agent Control in China: CCP Cadre Management from a Township Perspective,” *China Quarterly* 173 (2003): 35–52; Ning Leng and Cai (Vera) Zuo, “Tournament Style Bargaining within Boundaries: Setting Targets in China’s Cadre Evaluation System,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 133 (2022): 116–35.



CYL officials are evaluated based on annual objectives regarding the projects and activities of the organization. They must report on their work twice a year. The leaders of a CYL committee, the secretary and deputy secretaries, are evaluated by the CCP leadership at the corresponding level. Lower CYL cadres report to their superiors within the CYL. Beyond the organization of the activities themselves, however, no clear criteria are set concerning the impact of these activities. The only figure they can use is how many people turned out to the different events organized by the CYL, but this does not say much about their actual impact. The performance targets for CYL cadres are therefore far less clear than in the case of party leaders. In addition, CYL leaders often rotate so quickly to another position that they cannot be evaluated on the impact of their projects a few years later, as they are not in their place anymore.<sup>43</sup>

My interviewees stressed the subjective nature of evaluation and the importance of showcasing one's own work efficiently. They put forward the importance of rhetorical and writing skills, as well as "charisma."<sup>44</sup> As one official put it, "the most important is to speak and write well; to learn to defend your work. When you have no power and no funds, you have to be a sweet talker."<sup>45</sup>

CYL officials need to be noticed by their superiors in order to be in a good position for further promotion. In the case of CYL leaders, the relationship they develop with the CCP leadership at the corresponding level is particularly important, as its members would decide their further promotions within the locality.<sup>46</sup> One of my interviewees put it this way: "CYL leaders have objectives and they submit annual reports to CCP leaders on how they attained them. However, party leaders barely read them. The evaluation is very subjective; what is essential is to know how to manage the boss and his

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43. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 16 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Nanjing, 8 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Chengdu, 6 December 2014; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 19 January 2015; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 20 January 2015.

44. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 16 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Nanjing, 8 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Chengdu, 6 December 2014; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 19 January 2015.

45. CYL official, interview, Nanjing, February 2015.

46. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 16 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Nanjing, 8 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Chengdu, 6 December 2014; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 19 January 2015.

feelings toward you. You have to make yourself useful to him.”<sup>47</sup> As Andrew Walder described regarding workers’ evaluation in the Mao era, the cadres must understand clearly what their superior is expecting and “display” their obedience and zeal, which includes making a good personal impression.<sup>48</sup>

CYL officials organize massive events to catch their superiors’ eyes. The “Youth Volunteers Operation” (*qingnian zhiyuanzhe xingdong*, 青年志愿者行动), launched in 1993 and still running, exemplifies this phenomenon. This project was put forward by Li Keqiang when he was the Central CYL first secretary. In 1994, the China Youth Volunteer Association (*Zhongguo qingnian zhiyuanzhe xiehui*, 中国青年志愿者协会) was established under the CYL’s supervision to manage the operation.<sup>49</sup> With this project, the league recruits young volunteers and channels them toward various educational, social, or environmental projects. In addition to day-to-day activities, it also mobilizes volunteers for significant events: 1.7 million volunteers took part in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. All in all, from 2001 to 2013 the CYL recruited 40 million volunteers at different levels.<sup>50</sup> The Youth Volunteers Operation gained momentum with the emphasis on building a “Harmonious Society” and welfare policies in the 2000s.<sup>51</sup> Overall, CYL officials praise this operation as one of Li Keqiang’s critical successes.<sup>52</sup> In 2010, Central CYL first secretary Lu Hao talked about it in these terms: “Youth volunteering is an extremely valuable working brand created by the Communist Youth League.”<sup>53</sup>

47. CYL official, interview, Guiyang, April 2015.

48. Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

49. David A. Palmer and Rundong Ning, “The Resurrection of Lei Feng. Rebuilding the Chinese Party-State’s Infrastructure of Volunteer Mobilization,” in *Ruling by Other Means: State-Mobilized Movements*, ed. Grzegorz Ekiert, Elizabeth J. Perry, and Xiaojun Yan, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 314–44.

50. “Report on the 20 Years of the China Young Volunteers Operation (中国青年志愿者行动20年报告),” *China Youth Daily*, 5 December 2013.

51. Konstantinos Tsimonis, *The Chinese Communist Youth League: Juniority and Responsiveness in a Party Youth Organization* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

52. Former CYL official, interview, Central CYL School, Beijing, March 2015; CYL official, interview, Beijing, June 2012.

53. Quoted in Ying Xu, “Chinese Communist Youth League, Political Capital and the Legitimising of Volunteering in China,” *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 17, no. 2–3 (2012): 98.

Because they provide visibility to CYL leaders, large-scale projects can lead to competition among CYL organs. During my fieldwork, the Nanjing CYL spearheaded the organization of the Nanjing 2014 Youth Olympic Games. It set up a special office employing around 400 temporary staff members, and it managed around 20,000 volunteers for the event.<sup>54</sup> The Jiangsu Province CYL Committee, however, tried to win control of the event to share the spotlight.<sup>55</sup>

Organizing projects is not enough. CYL officials also have to publicize their work to make sure their efforts are noticed. Here is how a CYL official replied when I asked him why he published so many articles in local official media and internal party publications: “Rather than content, the most important is to show that you are active, as you have to put yourself forward to be promoted. You must use the media or any channel through which the local and central leaders can hear about you. It also gives you things to say to your boss in meetings, and you can show that you understand correctly the directives coming from the top.”<sup>56</sup> By contrast to Daniel Bell’s emphasis on the meritocratic features of the Chinese party-state,<sup>57</sup> Hui Li and Lance Gore have stressed the importance of pleasing one’s superior to get promoted.<sup>58</sup> For CYL officials, the lack of clear evaluation criteria further strengthens their dependence on their superiors’ judgment. By learning how to perform for their superior, they also assimilate how to present themselves as leaders-to-be.

### *Behaving like Future Leaders*

CYL leaders already behave like party-state leaders. The role they embody could appear disproportionate compared with their organization’s limited power and means, but in practice, they are already seen as leaders-to-be by their colleagues. Through their behavior, they showcase their party spirit, just

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54. “Volunteering Work for the Nanjing Youth Olympics Advances Steadily (南京青奥会志愿者工作稳步推进),” *China Youth Daily*, 4 June 2016.

55. CYL official, interview, Nanjing, 2 February 2015; CYL official, interview, Nanjing, 6 February 2015.

56. CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 14 January 2015.

57. Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

58. Hui Li and Lance L. P. Gore, “Merit-Based Patronage: Career Incentives of Local Leading Cadres in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 109 (2018): 85–102.

as we have seen regarding student leaders in chapter 3, but they also personify the symbolic power of the party-state, which gives presence to the institutions and legitimates their own position of power, or future position.<sup>59</sup> It propagates the idea that they are legitimate to rule.

Through their daily interactions with party-state leadership, CYL leaders learn to imitate them. They become experts in reflecting the organizational hierarchy through their behavior. I could observe during official dinners how the hierarchy was structured from where people were seated around the table, but also from how they interacted with each other, apart from the discussion itself. The younger and lesser-ranked officials were placed farther away from the leader and had little interaction with him. They mostly talked to the leader when drinking to his health. The intermediate-level cadres sat next to the leader and constantly interacted with him. It showed how close they were to him but also stressed their subordination, as they filled his glass or lit his cigarette. The leader himself was often the most comfortable with the situation.<sup>60</sup>

CYL officials also learn to master the bureaucratic jargon through meetings with other cadres, training programs, and official documents, which highlights their status as future leaders.<sup>61</sup> The cadres' comprehension of the bureaucratic jargon underlines both their ability to follow political trends and their capacity to speak in the name of the group, to act as representatives of the party-state. Among cadres, such language is essential to situate themselves and showcase their loyalty. Michael Schoenhals stresses how cadres show their commitment to the current party line by abiding by a highly formalized language.<sup>62</sup> Using the proper ideological terminology is a way to display that they understand what is expected from them, their compliance rather than actual belief.

Beyond compliance with the party line, bureaucratic jargon is also a way for cadres to signal their status to colleagues or outsiders. Through socialist references and symbols, they allude to the regime's founding legitimacy,

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59. Pierre Bourdieu, "La Délégation et Le Fétichisme Politique [Delegation and Political Fetishism]," *Actes de La Recherche En Sciences Sociales* 52, no. 1 (1984): 49–55.

60. Observation at dinners with officials in Nanjing in February 2015 and Shijiazhuang in July 2016.

61. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 16 June 2012; CYL official, interview, Nanjing, 8 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Chengdu, 6 December 2014; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 19 January 2015; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 20 January 2015.

62. Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies*, China Research Monograph 41 (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992).

which contributes to the prestige attached to their position.<sup>63</sup> By using a specific tone and vocabulary, they exhibit that they represent more than themselves.<sup>64</sup> CYL officials refer, for instance, to what is suitable for the “masses,” meaning people outside the party-state, and what they do to serve them.<sup>65</sup> In this way, they position themselves apart from the masses and as representatives of the ruling elite.

Among smaller groups of colleagues, the use or misuse of bureaucratic jargon is a sign of one’s position within the group. During the dinners with officials I attended, only the most highly ranked officials took the liberty to explain specific official expressions and mottos and even to laugh about it. Their subordinates would not dare take the initiative. The “Mass line educational campaign” (*qunzhong luxian jiaoyu shijian huodong*, 群众路线教育实践活动), launched in 2013 and which aimed at transforming the officials’ work style, was, for example, a major discussion topic at the time of my fieldwork.<sup>66</sup> The CYL leaders discussed to what extent it actually concerned the masses or not, which could appear unorthodox to someone from outside their circles.<sup>67</sup> One’s ease in handling bureaucratic jargon displays one’s position in the hierarchy. As Perry Link observed, playing with the jargon is often a sign that the speaker accepts its rules and masters them.<sup>68</sup> Through their use of bureaucratic jargon, the CYL leaders therefore mark their position in the hierarchy and their potential future as party-state leaders.

Such performance seems artificial. Various observers of authoritarian regimes stressed that this conformism, attached to political symbols that

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63. Frank N. Pieke, “Party Spirit: Producing a Communist Civil Religion in Contemporary China: Party Spirit,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24, no. 4 (2018): 709–29; Yves Chevrier, “L’État chinois entre formation et déformation [The Chinese State between Formation and Deformation],” *Revue Tiers Monde* 37, no. 147 (1996): 703–12; Vivienne Shue, “Regimes of Resonance: Cosmos, Empire, and Changing Technologies of CCP Rule,” *Modern China* OnlineFirst (January 2022).

64. Bourdieu, “La Délégation et Le Fétichisme Politique.”

65. CYL official, interview, Huairou district in Beijing, 18 November 2014; CYL official, interview, Central CYL School, Beijing, 25 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Shunyi district in Beijing, 19 November 2014; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 19 January 2015; CYL official, interview, Shijiazhuang, 11 June 2015.

66. Jérôme Doyon, “The End of the Road for Xi’s Mass Line Campaign: An Assessment,” *China Brief*, 23 October 2014.

67. Observation at dinners with officials in Nanjing in February 2015 and Shijiazhuang in July 2016.

68. Perry Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

have partially lost their original meaning, is a source of weakness, as officials, and at times the population more broadly,<sup>69</sup> live in a permanent lie.<sup>70</sup> Yet, this “hegemony of form,” as Alexei Yurchak calls it, allows for various interpretations of this symbolism, largely detached from policy and ideological content.<sup>71</sup> As a result, the regime can expand its recruitment base and take in cadres with diverse viewpoints, including, in our case, through the CYL. Via my conversations with CYL officials I could certainly witness their wide range of views, on social, economic, and political issues.

### *Activism under Xi Jinping*

The balance between the codified performance of their party spirit and the diverse ways in which officials may interpret it is fragile. It can be easily compromised when the top leadership expects from them more than a passive acceptance of ideological references and symbols. The Xi Jinping administration’s focus on activism and devotion to the party and its objectives in fact challenges this equilibrium.<sup>72</sup>

In a book compiling his comments on youth issues, and again at the occasion of the CYL’s 100 years anniversary, Xi Jinping warned the league against “empty slogans” and the risk of becoming an “empty shell.”<sup>73</sup> In the context of the massive anti-corruption campaign launched by Xi Jinping in 2013, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the party’s highest internal monitoring organ, also accused the CYL of being increasingly “bureaucratic,

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69. Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” *International Journal of Politics* 15, no. 3/4 (1985): 23–96; Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

70. David Shambaugh, “The Coming Chinese Crackup,” *Wall Street Journal*, 6 March 2015.

71. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

72. Jean Christopher Mittelstaedt, “Rebuilding Authority: The Party’s Relationship with Its Grassroots Organizations,” *China Quarterly* 248, S1 (September 2021): 1–21; Jérôme Doyon and Konstantinos Tsimonis, “Apathy Is Not Enough: Changing Modes of Student Management in Post-Mao China,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 7 (2022): 1123–46.

73. Xi Jinping (习近平), *Compilation of Xi Jinping’s Remarks on Youth and the Work of the Communist Youth League* (习近平关于青少年和共青团工作论述摘编) (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2017); “The Ceremony Celebrating the Centenary of the Chinese Communist Youth League Is Solemnly Held in Beijing (庆祝中国共产主义青年团成立100周年大会在京隆重举行),” *People’s Daily*, 11 May 2022, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-05/11/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20220511\\_1-01.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-05/11/nw.D110000renmrb_20220511_1-01.htm)

administrative, aristocratic and entertainment-oriented.”<sup>74</sup> This development echoes the many studies showing how this campaign expands beyond anti-corruption per se and relies on political rectification to ensure greater obedience from the rank and file.<sup>75</sup> Against this background, the CYL has been asked to keep its cadres in check, especially those who are only committed to the party’s mission on the surface and who joined for careerist reasons, to “become officials.”<sup>76</sup>

This is in line with a broader push for activism within the CCP, encapsulated by Xi Jinping’s call on party members and officials to “stay true to the party’s original aspiration and founding mission.”<sup>77</sup> It translates into an increased importance given to political criteria in cadre management.<sup>78</sup> The Civil Service Law amended in 2018 and the 2019 version of the Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres put forward “political quality” (*zhengzhi suzhi*, 政治素质) and “political standard” (*zhengzhi biaoazhun*, 政治标准) as the most essential criteria for cadre recruitment and evaluation. By contrast, recruitment and promotion criteria linked to job performance are criticized as artificial.<sup>79</sup>

Under Xi Jinping, the party’s basic framework of “democratic centralism”

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74. “The 2nd Central Inspection Team Gives Feedback Regarding the Circumstances of the Special Inspection of the Central Communist Youth League (中央第二巡视组向共青团中央反馈专项巡视情况),” CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, 4 February 2016.

75. Ling Li, “Politics of Anticorruption in China: Paradigm Change of the Party’s Disciplinary Regime 2012–2017,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 115 (2019): 47–63; Samson Yuen, “Disciplining the Party: Xi Jinping’s Anti-Corruption Campaign and Its Limits,” *China Perspectives* 2014, no. 3 (2014): 41–47; Andrew Mertha, “‘Stressing Out’: Cadre Calibration and Affective Proximity to the CCP in Reform-Era China,” *China Quarterly* 229 (2017): 64–85.

76. He Junke (贺军科), “Work Report at the First Plenum (在第一次全体会议上的工作报告),” CYL Central Office, January 2018.

77. Xi Jinping, “Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China,” *Xinhua*, 1 July 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c\\_1310038244.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm)

78. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, “China’s Political Order under Xi Jinping: Concepts and Perspectives,” *China: An International Journal* 16, no. 3 (2019): 1–17; Jérôme Doyon, “Clientelism by Design: Personnel Politics under Xi Jinping,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 3 (2019): 87–110; Holly Snape, “A Shifting Balance between Political and Professional Responsibility: Paradigmatic Change in China’s Civil Servant and Cadres Management Systems,” *Mapping China Journal*, no. 3 (2019): 1–24.

79. “Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres” (党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例), CCP Central Office, 17 March 2019.



is interpreted in a way that emphasizes top-down orders and limits intraparty debates.<sup>80</sup> The practice of criticism and self-criticism sessions for officials, called “democratic life meetings” (*minzhu shenghuo hui*, 民主生活会), has been revived since the “Mass line educational campaign” launched in 2013.<sup>81</sup> Recent regulations forbid officials to “openly express viewpoints and opinions that run counter to the lines of theories, guiding principles, and policies, as well as the implementation of major decisions of the party center.”<sup>82</sup> Cadres are also expected to “unswervingly implement the party’s basic line” and cannot have an “ambiguous,” “aloof or indifferent” stance on ideological issues.<sup>83</sup> In that context, cadres have to demonstrate more than passive or performative obedience as they run the risk of being accused of “fake loyalty” or of being “two-faced individuals.”<sup>84</sup> Such an intraparty rectification drive puts much pressure on officials and leads to considerable anxiety and stress rather than genuine mobilization.<sup>85</sup>

Since the 1980s, a formalistic approach to ideological discourse and the performance of loyalty has allowed officials with various political views to take up important positions within the party-state. Despite the relative homogeneity of background we previously discussed, the CYL cultivates officials with different policy preferences who can become valued reserve cadres for the party-state. As long as they learn to act as future leaders and please their superiors, they are provided with unique training and promotion opportunities. In times of political rectification campaigns, the emphasis on activism threatens this diversity. While diverse views still coexist within the CYL and the party-state more broadly under Xi Jinping,<sup>86</sup> they have less and less space to be expressed. Over time, this may further restrict the party-state’s capacity to represent Chinese society and its attractiveness for new recruits.

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80. Patricia M. Thornton, “Of Constitutions, Campaigns and Commissions: A Century of Democratic Centralism under the CCP,” *China Quarterly* 248, no. S1 (November 2021): 52–72.

81. Doyon, “The End of the Road for Xi’s Mass Line Campaign.”

82. “The Chinese Communist Party’s Regulations on the Protection of Party Members’ Rights (中国共产党党员权利保障条例),” CCP Central Office, 4 January 2021.

83. “Code of Conduct for Intraparty Political Life under New Circumstances (关于新形势下党内政治生活的若干准则),” CCP Central Office, 27 October 2016.

84. “Opinion on Strengthening the Party’s Political Construction (关于加强党的政治建设的意见),” CCP Central Office, 31 January 2019.

85. Mertha, “Stressing Out.”

86. Xia Cai, “The Party That Failed,” *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 1 (2021).



## CHAPTER 7

# Toward a Diffuse Allegiance to the Party-State

One chapter after another, I have highlighted the diverse personal ties young officials form through the first steps of their careers. The network developed by Yang Yue in youth organizations illustrates well this cumulative phenomenon. Yang Yue (whom I already mentioned as a critical link in a sponsorship chain at Tsinghua University) became in 1990 Tsinghua University Student Union chairman, as well as All-China Students' Federation (ACSF) chairman. We have seen in chapter 4 how this national post can be a platform to jump-start one's career. His status as a student leader made it possible for Yang to stay on campus after graduation as a student counselor. He became the university's CYL secretary in 1997 and, after three years he transferred to a local leadership post. He was then appointed as central-level CYL secretary. Yang eventually became a provincial party leader in 2008, while he was not yet 40 years old, and four years later he was selected as a CCP Central Committee alternate member. His career has however stagnated since, likely as a result of elite rivalries, illustrating that political success is always fragile in the Chinese Party-state.<sup>1</sup>

To illustrate the diversity of Yang's network once he became a provincial leader, I examined what positions his former youth organization colleagues were holding in 2008. Figure 9 maps out this network based on the data openly accessible regarding Yang's former colleagues from the ACSF (student leaders who were part of the ACSF's leadership together with him), Tsinghua University (student leaders or CYL officials who worked directly with him), and the central CYL (the other members of the secretariat during his term). It only includes the ones who became party-state officials and whose CVs are accessible online. Yang of course met and collaborated with many more officials in youth organizations, but these are the ones we can know for sure he encountered. As figure 9 shows, the various officials Yang Yue worked with at

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1. Yang Yue's resume can be found here: [http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Yang\\_Yue/career](http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Yang_Yue/career)

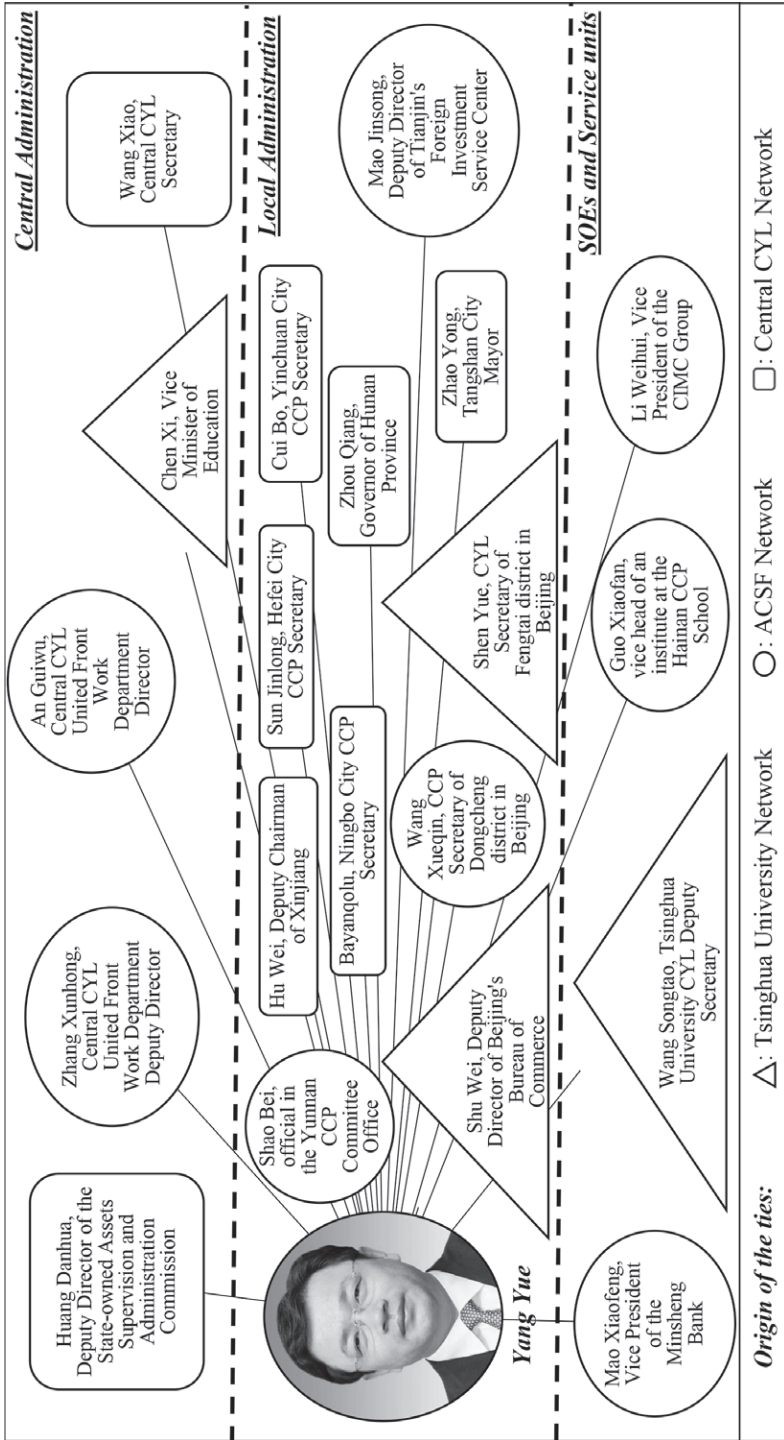


Fig. 9. Yang Yue's youth organizations network (where the cadres he met in youth organizations were posted in 2008, when he joined the CCP Central Committee).

the student union or the CYL ended up in very different positions throughout the party-state hierarchy. By 2008, they worked in different central administrations, local governments spanning many provinces, and state-owned enterprises or universities. We should also note that only one of them is a woman (Shen Yue, who was already mentioned as part of the Tsinghua University sponsorship chain in chapter 4), illustrating the male-centric nature of the Chinese nomenklatura.

The diverse network officials develop through youth organizations is the product of the sponsored mobility framework created by the Chinese party-state. Young officials are *embedded* early on within the party-state hierarchy and most of them pursue a lifelong political career. As we have seen in chapter 4, the connections made early on are essential for their future political careers. Their networks then expand as they rotate from one position to another: with each posting they develop vertical (sponsorship ties on campus or beyond, as well as hierarchical relations) and horizontal links (comradeship or friendship among student cadres or league officials, and professional relationships with colleagues).

Since the foundation of the PRC, the CCP has used its power over personnel assignment to rotate officials across localities and administrations. This practice, inspired by the imperial “rule of avoidance,” according to which officials should not be posted in their own region, has been recycled by the party-state and formalized in the post-Mao era.<sup>2</sup> Huang Yasheng and Zeng Qingjie have analyzed the disciplining role of this cadre rotation system, as it prevents officials from developing long-term ties with local business elites, which may facilitate corruption.<sup>3</sup> But the effect of this practice on the diversification of the cadres’ networks within the party-state, and hence on political elite cohesion, remains overlooked. I fill this gap by stressing the diversity of ties developed by Youth League officials and how they expand their networks moving from one position to another. I argue that this *cumulation* of ties is at the origin of the cadres’ “diffuse allegiance” to the party-state. By contrast to a factional perspective on Chinese politics, which sees the CYL as the cradle of one of the CCP’s main factions, I show that officials accumulate many

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2. John Fitzgerald, “Cadre Nation: Territorial Government and the Lessons of Imperial Statecraft in Xi Jinping’s China,” *China Journal* 85 (2021): 26–48.

3. Yasheng Huang, “Managing Chinese Bureaucrats: An Institutional Economics Perspective,” *Political Studies* 50, no. 1 (2002): 61–79; Qingjie Zeng, “Cadre Rotation and Campaign Mobilization in China’s Anticorruption Enforcement,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017): 167–90.

nonexclusive personal ties, making it difficult to organize in cohesive and autonomous groups within the party-state.

## Each Posting Entails Diverse Personal Ties

### *Hierarchical Ties: All Party Leaders Have Their Tuanpai*

As we have seen in the previous chapter, many former CYL officials have been promoted to top party-state positions. Scholars such as Cheng Li and Bo Zhiyue explain this phenomenon by the rise of a Youth League Faction, or *tuanpai* (团派), first under Hu Yaobang—former Central CYL first secretary (1952–66) and general secretary of the CCP (1980–87)—and then under Hu Jintao, also former Central CYL first secretary (1982–85) and CCP general secretary (2002–12).<sup>4</sup>

Cheng Li describes the *tuanpai* as a group of like-minded officials competing for power with the “elitist” princelings, the offspring of party and military leaders from the Mao era.<sup>5</sup> The assumption that all CYL leaders since the 1980s constitute a cohesive faction with a shared foe remains, however, unproven. Some princelings may have been competing with CYL affiliates for positions. Yet several CYL affiliates also have a princeling background. This was true of former Politburo member Liu Yandong, who was the Central CYL executive secretary (1982–91) before joining the CCP’s United Front Work Department, and previously of Chen Haosu and He Guangwei, who were both CYL secretaries in the early 1980s, and transferred, respectively, to the Vice-Mayorship of Beijing and the National Tourism Administration Vice-Directorship.<sup>6</sup> Although a statistical account of the CYL officials’ family background is missing, several of the cadres I interviewed noted that since the 2000s, an increasing number of high-ranked officials’ children have started to work for the CYL, especially at the central level.<sup>7</sup> Taking these overlaps into account and the difficulty distinguishing these groups’ competing political

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4. Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016); Zhiyue Bo, *China’s Elite Politics: Political Transition and Power Balancing* (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2007).

5. Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*.

6. Bo, *China’s Elite Politics*.

7. Former CYL official, interview, Central CYL School, Beijing, March 2015; ICYL official, interview, Beijing, June 2012.

agendas, we should question the dichotomy between a “populist” *tuanpai* and a group of “elitist” children of officials.<sup>8</sup>

With these limitations in mind, Kou Chien-wen has argued that both factional and organizational effects are at play in the rise of CYL affiliates. For Kou, the CYL produces a pool of talents from which the *tuanpai* can recruit followers.<sup>9</sup> Kou’s argument applies to the CYL Andrew Nathan’s point about factions developing on organizations like on “trellises.” For Nathan, external factional networks, based on clientelist ties, can attach themselves to, or emerge from, organizations. This facilitates the development of the faction, which uses the organization’s communication flows and can recruit among its members.<sup>10</sup>

The trellis configuration requires the organization to have some autonomy from other political structures. Yet in the Youth League’s case, its leaders are selected by the party leadership and not the league itself. Moreover, the Youth League lacks internal coherence, as upper-level CYL units have only a supervisory function, with little power over lower-level league officials.<sup>11</sup> As explained by a Central CYL School staff member, “A significant problem for the CYL is that it cannot have an integrated work plan. The central CYL policies are only partially implemented at the local levels as the upper echelons have no power over officials’ promotions. (. . .) If a local CYL committee must choose between conflicting orders given by the upper-level CYL committee and by the local CCP committee, it will follow the party.”<sup>12</sup> Chinese specialists of the CYL widely share this diagnosis. Zheng Changzhong, a former CYL official turned academic, warns that the CYL is “marginalized” at the local level as it lacks resources and because its officials do not adequately follow central CYL instructions.<sup>13</sup> Overall, the CYL’s lack of autonomy and coherence prevents it from becoming a separate nexus of power.

Instead of an autonomous Youth League faction, the CYL’s organizational

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8. Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era*.

9. Chien-Wen Kou, “CYL Cadres Rising in the Era of Hu Jintao: Factional Considerations or Organizational Mission of Channeling Cadres,” *Prospect Journal* 3 (2007): 77–116.

10. Andrew J. Nathan, “A Factionalism Model for CCP Politics,” *China Quarterly* 53 (1973): 34–66.

11. Jérôme Doyon, “The Strength of a Weak Organization: The Communist Youth League as a Path to Power in Post-Mao China,” *China Quarterly* 243 (2020): 780–800.

12. Central CYL School staff, interview, Beijing, June 2013.

13. Zheng Changzhong (郑长忠), “The Political Logic behind the Restructuring of Social Spaces (关系空间再造的政治逻辑),” *Contemporary Youth Research* 1 (2008): 21–28.

dependence on the party leads to close relationships between CYL and CCP leaders at the same echelon. CYL leaders can join CCP Standing Committee meetings as observers,<sup>14</sup> and they report to the party leadership regularly. A local CYL cadre I interviewed summarized this relationship: “As a CYL secretary, you can meet local CCP leaders daily. You can talk to the CCP secretary, regularly exchange with him. He therefore knows you well, your skills and qualities. This is the most unique feature of being a CYL leader.”<sup>15</sup> The relationship with CCP leaders at each echelon is particularly significant, as in a decentralized polity they have a high degree of discretion in selecting their subordinates.<sup>16</sup> They appoint CYL leaders, evaluate their work, and may eventually promote them to party-state positions within their jurisdiction.<sup>17</sup> For example, a provincial-level party secretary can appoint the provincial CYL secretary as deputy mayor of a middle-sized city within the province.

As a result, CCP secretaries at all levels use the CYL to promote their affiliates. They may appoint as a CYL leader someone with whom they already have a personal tie, to further cultivate it, or someone with whom they want to build a relationship. When CCP heads appoint cadres as CYL leaders, they grant them a career advantage over their colleagues due to the age limits described in the previous chapter. They also develop their network within the party-state, as these protégés might rise to high positions in the future. All party leaders can then build their own Youth League faction, or *tuanpai*.<sup>18</sup>

### *Weak Ties across Youth League Units*

The strong ties between CCP and CYL officials at the same echelon contrast with the relatively weak ones across the different levels of the league itself. Yet, league cadres from different echelons or localities meet often, and the ties they develop can be significant for information sharing and future pro-

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14. “Charter of the Chinese Communist Youth League (中国共产主义青年团章程),” Congress of the CYL, 29 June 2018.

15. CYL official, interview, Nanjing, February 2015.

16. Pierre F. Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China: The Communist Party’s Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Qingjie Zeng, “Democratic Procedures in the CCP’s Cadre Selection Process: Implementation and Consequences,” *China Quarterly* 225 (2016): 73–99.

17. Zeng, “Democratic Procedures in the CCP’s Cadre Selection Process.”

18. Doyon, “The Strength of a Weak Organization.”

motion.<sup>19</sup> At the minimum, they meet during the CYL congresses and CYL committee plenums at the different echelons. The CYL National Congress, for instance, brings together every five years around 1,500 representatives sent by CYL units in localities and other structures, such as universities or SOEs. They select a CYL Central Committee, which includes around 200 full representatives and 120 alternate ones.<sup>20</sup> CYL Central Committee members then meet at least once a year for the plenums.<sup>21</sup> These gatherings are reproduced at the lower hierarchical levels, creating similar links within locales. More specific meetings are also organized at the league's various levels, bringing together different categories of officials. The central level CYL sets up, for example, summits for the youngest CYL officials or CYL provincial secretaries, as well as functional meetings on a timely topic, which bring together propaganda officials to talk about internet policies, or united front ones regarding ethnic and religious affairs.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the CYL committees organize ceremonies to commemorate specific events: as an illustration, the central CYL brought together many league cadres for the 90th anniversary of the organization in 2012.<sup>23</sup>

Along with these meetings, CYL officials from different echelons meet during evaluations. Upper-level CYL units evaluate the work of lower-level ones yearly, which can imply local visits and inquiries. For example, Lu Hao, then CYL Central Committee first secretary, visited the Guizhou Province CYL Committee for five days in 2009. In addition to meeting with the provincial CYL leaders, he toured districts, villages, SOEs, and universities.<sup>24</sup>

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19. Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–80.

20. "The 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Youth League (中国共产主义青年团第十七次全国代表大会)," Central CYL Website, [www.gqt.org.cn](http://www.gqt.org.cn)

21. "The Fifth Plenum of the 17th Congress of the CYL (共青团十七届五中全会闭幕)," *China Youth Daily*, 18 January 2016.

22. "The Central Administration of the CYL Held the 38th Study and Discussion Meeting for Young Cadres (团中央机关举办第三十八次年轻干部学习交流会)," *China Youth Daily*, 29 September 2012; "A Meeting on the CYL United Front Work Is Convened in Beijing (共青团统战工作会议在京召开)," *China Youth Daily*, 19 April 2012.

23. "The Commemorative Ceremony for the 90th Anniversary of the CYL Is Solemnly Held in Beijing (纪念中国共产主义青年团成立90周年大会在京隆重举行)," *China Youth Daily*, 5 May 2012.

24. CYL Committee of Guizhou Province, ed., *History of the Youth Movement in Guizhou (1998–2009)* (贵州青年运动史 1998–2009) (Guiyang: Guizhou People's Press, 2010), 197–203.



Upper-level CYL units also deliver prizes to CYL committees and CYL branches, as well as to CYL officials.<sup>25</sup> These evaluations and commendations are not determinant for the local cadres' careers, as their professional fate is in the hands of local CCP leaders rather than upper-level CYL units. Yet their reports can sometimes influence the CCP leaders.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond these punctual meetings, training programs, which run for weeks or months, are an essential platform for CYL officials to expand their network. As reserve cadres, CYL officials have access to various training options in the CCP and CYL schools. Research on the party schools has stressed how strong ties are often developed among officials who spend months of training together.<sup>27</sup> During these programs, officials stay in dormitories and go home only on weekends. They also spend most of their daytime with one another, either in class or team-building activities. Studies on party schools also stressed how important is the networking aspect of the training programs from the cadres' own perspective. Citing her interviewees, Emilie Tran suggested that the secret wish of any official when going to a party school was to be in the same cohort as cadres that it might be useful to know in the future.<sup>28</sup>

Training programs designed explicitly for CYL officials are also important for networking. The Central CYL School organizes, for example, a one- to two-month program for county-level CYL leaders and other CYL cadres of similar rank, such as CYL leaders from schools and small SOEs. Another program of equivalent length is designed for city-level CYL leaders and other CYL cadres of similar rank, and a shorter one of ten days is for provincial-level CYL secretaries.<sup>29</sup> Through these different training programs, local CYL

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25. Central Communist Youth League, *Yearbook of the Chinese Communist Youth League 2012* (中国共青团年鉴 2012) (Beijing: China Youth Press, 2013), 246–48.

26. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 16 February 2012; CYL official, interview, Shijiazhuang, 11 June 2015.

27. David Shambaugh, "Training China's Political Elite: The Party School System," *China Quarterly* 196 (2008): 827–44; Jérôme Doyon and Franziska Barbara Keller, "Knowing the Wrong Cadre? Networks and Promotions in the Chinese Party-State," *Political Studies* 68, no. 4 (2020): 1036–53; Emilie Tran, "From Senior Official to Top Civil Servant: An Enquiry into the Shanghai Party School," *China Perspectives*, no. 46 (2003): 27–40.

28. Emilie Tran, "École du parti et formation des élites dirigeantes en Chine [Party School and Ruling Elite Training in China]," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 122, no. 1 (2007): 137.

29. Central Communist Youth League School, ed., *Records of the Central CYL School 1948–1998* (共青团中央团校志 1948–1998) (Beijing: Reform Press, 1998), 129.



officials can get to know one another as well as attract the interest of central level CYL leaders, who chair sessions.<sup>30</sup> My interviewees stressed how these programs made them feel like they belonged to the same organization, which does not always happen in their daily work, and also led to developing significant personal ties. These relationships are often maintained via social media and yearly reunion dinners.<sup>31</sup>

While the league's lack of coherence across echelons is a good illustration of the Chinese party-state's fragmented nature,<sup>32</sup> with local hierarchical ties being more potent than functional ones with upper-level CYL units, the many connections CYL officials develop among themselves further embeds them within the party-state networks. Beyond their daily work, they spend most of their time with other officials, in ceremonies, meetings, or training programs. This is cumulative, as their network becomes denser as they go from one position to another. While rotation is frequent in the Chinese political system, it can be particularly swift for young officials who can use various organizational shortcuts to move across posts.

## Turnover and the Multiplication of Personal Networks

Since the 1980s, the formalization of promotion mechanisms for officials, described in the previous chapter, raised the issue of cadre renewal. Deng Xiaoping 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.”<sup>33</sup> The strict ranking and step-by-step promotion system did make it very difficult for young officials

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30. “The Training Class for Newly Appointed City CYL Secretaries Is Held (新任职地市级团委书记培训班举办),” *China Youth Daily*, 4 September 2012.

31. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 16 February 2012; CYL official, interview, Hairou district in Beijing, 18 November 2014; CYL official, interview, Shijiazhuang, 11 June 2015.

32. Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

33. Melanie Manion, “The Cadre Management System, Post-Mao: The Appointment, Promotion, Transfer and Removal of Party and State Leaders,” *China Quarterly* 102 (1985): 203–33.

to reach high-level positions. To solve this issue and promote elite renewal, shortcuts for rapid promotion were institutionalized in parallel to the standard rotation system, leading to the rapid advancement of selected young and ambitious individuals.<sup>34</sup>

As we saw in chapter 6, the CYL is one of these fast tracks toward leadership positions. It indeed sees rapid turnover: CYL leaders often come from outside the league, generally from a local CCP leadership position, and get transferred to another party-state unit after a few years in their place. This was the case for the last three central CYL first secretaries: Hu Chunhua, appointed in 2006; Lu Hao, appointed in 2008; and Qin Yizhi, appointed in 2013. The current CYL first secretary, He Junke, transferred to the league from an aerospace SOE and will most likely follow in his predecessors' footsteps. It is uncommon for CYL leaders to have spent a long and continuous period in the organization. In that respect, Li Keqiang or Jiang Daming, former members of the Central CYL Secretariat between 1993 and 1998, stand as exceptions.

Another avenue for rapid promotion was introduced in the 2000s: the "open selection" (*gongkai xuanba*, 公开选拔) mechanism. Formalized by the "Work regulation for the promotion and appointment of leading party and government cadres" of 2002, this recruitment method involves the public announcement of vacant positions, open procedures for candidates to submit job applications, and written as well as oral exams.<sup>35</sup> The requirements to apply generally include a maximum age, a minimum level of education, a minimum administrative rank (this selection process only applies to individuals already in the system), and a minimum professional experience. Any cadre who fulfills the criteria can apply. Ambitious young officials can thus use open selections to circumvent step-by-step promotions and accelerate their careers. For example, young officials can be eligible via the open selection process for a division-director-ranked position, even though they might have only worked for a year or two in a deputy division director position, rather than the regular five years per rank.<sup>36</sup> CYL officials, being young and

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34. Chien-wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, "'Sprinting with Small Steps' Towards Promotion: Solutions for the Age Dilemma in the CCP Cadre Appointment System," *China Journal* 71, no. 1 (2014): 153–71.

35. Yan Sun, "Cadre Recruitment and Corruption: What Goes Wrong?," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 49, no. 1 (February 2008): 61–79; Kou and Tsai, "Sprinting with Small Steps."

36. Kou and Tsai, "Sprinting with Small Steps."

often highly ranked for their age, are in a perfect place to use this organizational shortcut.<sup>37</sup>

Other party-state regulations can be used strategically to accelerate one's career. One is recruitment quotas that have been institutionalized since the early 2000s.<sup>38</sup> There are quotas related to gender, ethnicity, and non-CCP members.<sup>39</sup> They can shape individual tactics, as illustrated by one of my interviewees: "As a female and *hui* cadre [member of a Muslim ethnic minority], it is not a good strategy for me to become a CCP member. Instead, I can play the *WuZhiShaoNu* (无知少女) card [meaning being a non-CCP member, an intellectual, from an ethnic minority background, and female]."<sup>40</sup> She, therefore, applied for membership in one of the eight "democratic parties" to better fit the quotas and get easily appointed as an official. These eight parties operate under the supervision of the CCP's United Front Work Department and traditionally aim to recruit members from constituencies outside the CCP's reach. Their members, including state officials, do not count as CCP members and can therefore fill this quota.<sup>41</sup> All in all, this testimony illustrates how cadres can use rules to their advantage.

Some officials climb the party-state hierarchy so rapidly that they attract public attention. Sun Jingjing's "rocket promotion" is a good example. She was just 25 years old when she became deputy CYL secretary of Taizhou City in Jiangsu in 2009, a deputy division director position she reached after only two years of working experience. She used all the organizational shortcuts at her disposal to get this post. After graduating from college in 2006 she passed the "assigned graduates" exam, which I discussed in chapter 3. Under this specific trainee program, she was sent to work in a township administration, and, after a few months, she was promoted as county-level deputy CYL

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37. Former CYL official, interview, Haidian district in Beijing, 16 February 2012; CYL official, interview, Huairou district in Beijing, 18 November 2014; CYL official, interview, Nanjing, 8 June 2013; CYL official, interview, Chengdu, 19 November 2014; CYL official, interview, Guiyang, 19 January 2015.

38. "Opinion Regarding the Improvement of the Training and Promotion of Female Cadres and the Development of Female CCP Members (关于进一步做好培养选拔女干部·发展女党员工作的意见)," CCP Central Organization Department, 2001.

39. Victor Shih, Christophe Adolph, and Mingxing Liu, "Getting Ahead in the Communist Party: Explaining the Advancement of Central Committee Members in China," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (February 2012): 166–87.

40. Former student cadre, interview, Beijing, 10 June 2013.

41. Gerry Groot, *Managing Transitions the Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism, and Hegemony* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

secretary. She eventually became the county's CYL secretary and from there applied via an open selection process for the position of Taizhou City CYL Committee deputy secretary. The job description listed that the applicant had to be less than 30 years old, female, posted in Jiangsu Province, and ranked as deputy section director or above. Sun checked all the boxes.<sup>42</sup>

Sun's case attracted much attention online. The discussion revolved around Sun's limited professional experience and the limits of the selection process itself. Internet users stressed that she was promoted before completing the minimum of two years of traineeship, which was part of the "assigned graduates" framework. Besides, she was selected for the Taizhou position from among 20 candidates even though she only got the fifth-best mark on the written exam. The oral interview, which counts for 60 percent of the overall grade, brought her to the top of the list. Internet users questioned the interviewers' objectivity. Yet some defended her on forums, highlighting that there was no evidence of grave manipulation. They also stressed that the selection committee interviewed her former colleagues to know more about her work and had appointed her after a thorough process.<sup>43</sup>

Beyond public scrutiny, rocket promotions can become the target of internal discipline inquiries. This happened in the case of Chang Junsheng, who became deputy CYL secretary of a county in Anhui Province at 22 years old. He got appointed in 2013 through an open selection process only six months after graduating from college. His case also attracted public attention, which unveiled that he did not have the necessary working experience listed in the job description and that his father was a midlevel official in the same county. Internet users were hence instrumental in revealing apparent nepotistic practices, leading to Chang's demise.<sup>44</sup> These extreme cases show how young officials can use organizational shortcuts, and sometimes personal ties, to rotate quickly across positions and accelerate their careers. They also highlight the limits of these mechanisms, which are increasingly criticized.

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42. "The Whole Story of the Appointment of a 25-Year-Old as a Deputy Division Director (25岁副处长任职始末)," *China Youth Daily*, 4 February 2009.

43. "The Whole Story of the Appointment of a 25-Year-Old as a Deputy Division Director."

44. "The Discipline and Inspection Commission Investigates the Selection Process of a Cadre Born after 1990 in Wangjiang County (纪委调查望江90后干部选拔经过)," *China Youth Daily*, 16 May 2013.

*Restrictions to Elite Turnover under Xi Jinping*

Under Xi Jinping, avenues for rapid promotions have been progressively curtailed, including the CYL's role as a promotion channel.<sup>45</sup> Since the league is dependent on the party's leadership, its status as a path to power is fragile, as reflected in its restructuring put forward by the CCP Politburo Standing Committee in August 2016. The "Proposal on the Reform of the Central Communist Youth League" underscored the party's control over the league and initiated a reform of its principal organs. The expression "shrinkage at the top and replenishment below" (*jianshang buxia*, 减上补下), summarizes the reform's critical organizational feature. It implies a drastic decrease in CYL full-time personnel at the central and provincial levels, partially replaced by part-time and temporarily transferred cadres, and a parallel increase in personnel at the county level.<sup>46</sup> Between 2016 and 2018, the central CYL workforce decreased by 30 percent, and the overall number of full-time cadres went from 250,000 to 220,000.<sup>47</sup>

Echoing Xi Jinping's remarks on the league being detached from young people and the careerism of its cadres,<sup>48</sup> the reform's goal is to strengthen the league's grassroots mobilization capabilities and the CCP's control over it, while weakening its cadre recruitment function. The appointment in 2017 of former CYL first secretary Qin Yizhi as deputy director of the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine, symbolized this change. This position is less important than the provincial party-state leadership positions to which CYL heads are usually transferred.<sup>49</sup>

The 2016 reform went along with a further weakening of the organization. First, the central CYL's budget was cut almost in half between 2015 and

45. Jérôme Doyon, "Clientelism by Design: Personnel Politics under Xi Jinping," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 3 (2019): 87–110.

46. "Proposal on the Reform of the Central Communist Youth League (共青团中央改革方案)," CYL Central Office, 2 August 2016.

47. He Junke (贺军科), "Work Report at the First Plenum (在第一次全体会议上的工作报告)," CYL Central Office, January 2018; Li Yuanchao (李源潮), "Speech at the First Plenum of the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Youth League (在共青团十七届一中全会上上的讲话)," *China Youth Daily*, 24 June 2013.

48. Xi Jinping (习近平), *Compilation of Xi Jinping's Remarks on Youth and the Work of the Communist Youth League (习近平关于青少年和共青团工作论述摘编)* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2017).

49. "China Communist Youth League Boss Faces Demotion, Sources Say, as Influence of Once Powerful Group Wanes," *South China Morning Post*, 7 September 2017.

2016 as it lost authority over some of its main volunteering activities and the associated funding.<sup>50</sup> Second, the central CYL has been losing control over several of its associated structures. In particular, the China Youth University of Political Studies' core programs, comanaged by the CYL and the Ministry of Education, have been absorbed into the newly founded University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.<sup>51</sup>

The CYL reform takes place in a broader context of limiting cadre turnover. The current administration has relaxed the age-based promotion system discussed in the previous chapter. Since 2014, new guidelines have noted that age limits should be "implemented with flexibility."<sup>52</sup> This is reflected at the top level, with officials close to Xi Jinping staying in powerful positions despite their age, and Xi himself challenging orderly succession mechanisms through a constitutional change that allows him to remain the head of state for a third term.<sup>53</sup> It also expands to the grassroots; several of my interviewees have noted that since 2014 age limits have been less and less implemented at the local level.

Beyond age rules and term limits, avenues facilitating the rapid promotion of young officials have been restructured under Xi.<sup>54</sup> The previously mentioned "open selection" mechanism has, for example, been impeded. This scheme made it easier for young officials not to follow tenure regulations, and it became a well-known fast track for young officials to get ahead in the party.<sup>55</sup> The scope for "open selection" has been restricted starting from 2014 with the publication of a revised version of the "Work regulations for

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50. "2016 Budget of the Central Communist Youth League (共青团中央2016年部门预算)," CYL Central Office, 15 April 2016, [http://www.ccyll.org.cn/notice/201604/t20160415\\_757233.htm](http://www.ccyll.org.cn/notice/201604/t20160415_757233.htm)

51. "The Bachelor Degrees of the China Youth University of Political Science to Be Transferred to the University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (中国青年政治学院本科划转至中国社会科学院大学)," *Xinhua*, 19 May 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2017-05/19/c\\_1121003341.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2017-05/19/c_1121003341.htm)

52. "Development Program Concerning the Establishment of a National Party and State Leadership Group for 2014–2018 (2014–2018 年全国党政领导班子建设规划纲要)," CCP Central Office, 25 December 2014.

53. Susan L. Shirk, "The Return to Personalistic Rule," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 22–36; Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, "Has Xi Jinping Made China's Political System More Resilient and Enduring?," *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2 January 2022): 225–43.

54. Doyon, "Clientelism by Design."

55. Kou and Tsai, "Sprinting with Small Steps."

the promotion and appointment of leading party and government cadres.” According to this regulation, it can only be used when the local unit cannot find suitable candidates internally. It is also no longer possible to transfer candidates across provinces for positions at the division director level and below, which includes most leading officials under 40 years old.<sup>56</sup> These regulations were further revised in 2019. Going one step further in dismantling the “open selection” mechanism, the regulations state that it should be used for appointments to deputy positions rather than full-ranked leading officials.<sup>57</sup>

The official goal behind these regulatory changes is to constrain the rapid promotion of inexperienced and unfit cadres, as well as the abuses linked to specific appointment methods as illustrated by the case of Chang Junsheng mentioned above.<sup>58</sup> Yet by limiting institutional avenues for cadre turnover, these changes risk accelerating the aging of the party-state elite. Illustrating this trend, the CCP Central Committee selected at the 19th Party Congress was the oldest in decades, with an average age of 57, compared to 56.1 in 2012 and 53.5 in 2007.<sup>59</sup>

### *The Accumulation of Personal Ties*

While exceptional promotions become rarer, and thus careers similar to Yang Yue’s are bound to be increasingly unique, the overall cadre cultivation and rotation system remains in place. Regarding the CYL, the 2016 reform mainly affected the CYL’s upper levels and only partially impacted its role in the recruitment and training of young officials during the first steps of professionalization. As a senior official mentioned in a media interview from mid-2021, “There’s no alternative organization for cultivating Party elites,” and young talents are for now still promoted through this channel.<sup>60</sup>

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56. “Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres” (党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例), CCP Central Office, 15 January 2014.

57. “Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres” (党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例), CCP Central Office, 17 March 2019.

58. “The Selection of Young Cadres Becomes More Severe! (选拔年轻干部, 严了!),” *China Youth Daily*, 22 August 2014.

59. “Why Chinese Communist Party’s Largest Elite Body Now Has a Lot of New Members But Not Many Young Ones,” *South China Morning Post*, 13 November 2017.

60. “Rising Stars Give Hope to China’s Marginalized Youth League Faction,” *Nikkei Asia*, 10 August 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Rising-stars-give-hope-to-China-s-marginalized-Youth-League-faction>

With less turnover, the process might be slower, but as officials move across administrations and localities, they still accumulate a variety of horizontal and vertical ties with their superiors and coworkers and through training or evaluations. As we have seen with CYL officials, they form strong relations with the CCP leadership at the same echelon as well as weak ties with other cadres. These diverse personal networks strengthen the cadres' commitment to their career in the party-state by making exit costlier; leaving the organization often means losing the personal network that goes with it.<sup>61</sup>

The complexity of the networks that individual cadres develop through their careers, made of crosscutting and nonexclusive ties, leads to an overall high level of cohesion throughout the network.<sup>62</sup> These multiple ties and attachments link cadres to one another, but they also make it harder for them to organize in cohesive groups. While they are imbricated, cadres' networks never overlap entirely, as they result from unique individual careers. They might have competing personal goals, but cadres have a common interest in the survival of the political system, as their position depends on it.<sup>63</sup> Commitment to their own career hence results in a *diffuse allegiance* to the party-state.

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61. Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

62. John Levi Martin, *Social Structures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

63. Yuhua Wang, "Blood Is Thicker Than Water: Elite Kinship Networks and State Building in Imperial China," *American Political Science Review*, First View (2022): 1–15.



# Conclusion

## *Commitment and Allegiance*

This book is about elite renewal and cohesion. It was prompted by an initial puzzle: How does the Chinese party-state manage to attract recruits and maintain their commitment over time, when ideology does not structure recruitment anymore, and a liberalized employment market provides alternative career options? By contrast with studies analyzing the CCP as a monolith maintaining loyalty through ideology and coercion, I examine the cadres' perspective and how their ambition is transformed through the first steps of political professionalization.

I focus on the experience of cadres within the CCP's youth organizations. While the Communist Youth League, and its affiliated organizations, are not the only paths toward officialdom,<sup>1</sup> they are an excellent observation point to study officials-to-be, and they are more accessible than the party itself. I start my inquiry at the college level since now that most officials go to university, political activities on campus have become an essential channel toward developing a commitment to a career in the party-state. I unveil how formative experiences as a student cadre transform the political recruits and set them apart from the main student body, which feeds their ambition and ultimately affects their career. I then turn to professional officials in the Communist Youth League, both on university campuses and beyond, and unpack how they are cultivated for leadership positions in the party-state.

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1. Xiaowei Zang, *Elite Dualism and Leadership Selection in China* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

## Summary of the Argument

Youth organizations' cadres alter their behavior and the way they envision their future, developing political ambitions. They are integrated into a sponsored mobility process channeling them toward party-state positions. As opposed to a framework relying on competition, either based on merit or ideological correctness, sponsored mobility favors a more controlled selection, with some individuals being selected early on and cultivated for elite status. Under this system, only some recruits—mainly male and from the country's best universities—are provided with unique training and career opportunities by the party-state, propagating the notion that they are legitimate to rule and overall reinforcing elite reproduction. Following the initial steps of this sponsored mobility process, among university students and just after they graduate, this book puts forward two central arguments on the nature of elite cohesion in post-Mao China.

1. I argue that solidary and symbolic elements, and in particular changes in their social circles and social roles, are central to explaining party-state officials' political commitment. Their early professional experience narrows their social circles down to their peers. Through daily work interactions, meetings, training programs, or informal gatherings, they spend most of their time with other cadres. They also change how they present themselves: through standardized behavior, how they dress, drink, or talk, cadres perform their *party spirit* and embody a social role as leaders-to-be. Their behavior can isolate them from other young people: student union leaders, for example, are often seen by other students as arrogant and corrupt bureaucrats-to-be. Isolation further strengthens their appreciation for the prestige they attach to their role. These social factors bolster the young officials' *undogmatic commitment* to their political careers.

The recruits who exhibit such forms of commitment—by being diligent student cadres or CYL officials who catch their superiors' attention, socializing with bosses and colleagues, and more generally by investing in their role—are provided with unique training and career opportunities. The regime relies on both solidary and utilitarian incentives to attract recruits and maintain their commitment over time, rather than purposive incentives based on ideology. Far from a fully meritocratic system, political commitment is rewarded in the Chinese party-state.

2. My study also unpacks the implication on elite cohesion of the fragmented nature of the Chinese system.<sup>2</sup> I argue that officials are embedded in complex networks of personal ties that accumulate through their career, leading to their *diffuse allegiance* to the party-state as a whole, rather than to specific groups within it. The diffuse nature of this attachment is linked to cadres being embedded in political networks early on, and to the cumulation of noncompetitive ties throughout their careers. This argument not only relates to how their commitment is produced, but also specifies to whom, or what, they are committed.

This diffuse allegiance is based on two features of the sponsored mobility system. First, recruits are *embedded* early on within networks of party-state officials. Starting from their volunteering as student cadres, they are part of CCP-led organizations, such as the CYL and student union. They develop personal ties with their superiors, who are CYL and CCP officials, and with other student cadres who have a good chance to become officials as well. Most of the relationships built within youth organizations on campus will therefore translate into ties between party-state officials in the future.

The political socialization role of universities is far from being specific to China,<sup>3</sup> yet the PRC's uniqueness resides in the level of integration between political networks inside and outside campuses. The party's youth organizations play a vital role in integrating these networks; from first-year student cadres to central CYL leaders, they are all part of a unified hierarchical structure. Albeit at different stages of the process, they are all included in a highly managed system of political mobility. This remains true as they rise in the hierarchy, becoming university officials or youth organizations leaders, and making denser their networks within the party-state hierarchy.

Second, cadres' networks are *cumulative* and expand through rotations and transfers. Throughout their careers, officials develop multilayered personal networks. In addition to existing familial, friendship or dorm-based relationships, student cadres develop multiple ties on campus, within student organizations but also with professors and university officials. The picture becomes even more complicated when young officials are appointed as local

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2. Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

3. David Walter, *The Oxford Union: Playground of Power* (London: Macdonald, 1984); Roderic Ai Camp, *Mexico's Mandarins: Crafting a Power Elite for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

or central CYL leaders and develop relationships both inside and outside the organization. These ties are formed through on-the-job interactions, meetings, and training programs, as well as through more casual encounters.

These various personal links are critical to the cadres' careers, and the more they rise in the ranks, the more networking avenues they access. Student cadres rely on sponsorship relationships with older student leaders and CYL officials on campus to rise in the campus hierarchy. The accumulation of such ties can lead to sponsorship chains, affecting several generations of student cadres, or even structured clientelist networks dominating campus politics. CYL officials outside universities also need personal connections to get ahead. They cultivate strong links with CCP leaders at the corresponding echelon, and they are the ones deciding their appointments and future promotions. They endeavor to catch their superior's eyes by organizing massive activities and advertising their achievements in media outlets. They also develop weaker links with their colleagues from other echelons of the CYL, which can also affect their career prospects by providing them with information on potential openings. Women cadres tend to be marginalized in these networks, which negatively impacts their political future and often leads them to limit their ambitions.

These diverse relationships also establish the cadres' allegiance to the party-state. Against a factional approach, viewing Chinese politics as a struggle between separate elite groups,<sup>4</sup> I stress the non-exclusive nature of these ties. Officials develop many cross-cutting personal links, resulting from their complex trajectories across administrations and locales. This multiplicity of allegiances does not prevent officials from forming partnerships for specific purposes, but it makes it harder to organize in clearly defined and exclusive groups.<sup>5</sup> These ties, which spread throughout the party-state hierarchy, lead to high levels of elite cohesion as they result in a *diffuse allegiance* to the overall network rather than the development of unified factions, which could endanger the survival of the regime.

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4. Andrew J. Nathan, "A Factionalism Model for CCP Politics," *China Quarterly* 53 (1973): 34–66.

5. Tang Tsou and Andrew J. Nathan, "Prolegomenon to the Study of Informal Groups in CCP Politics," *China Quarterly* 65 (1976): 98–117; Franziska Keller, "Moving beyond Factions: Using Social Network Analysis to Uncover Patronage Networks among Chinese Elites," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 16, no. 1 (March 2016): 17–41; Joseph Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

## Implications for the Study of Authoritarian Politics

The mechanisms this book puts forward are applicable beyond the Chinese case. They inform an approach to elite cohesion focused on individual actors, contributing to our understanding of authoritarian resilience. A wide-ranging literature has stressed the institutional levers that single-party states can rely on to maintain elite cohesion, through co-optation, distributing rents, and structuring power-sharing coalitions.<sup>6</sup> These institutional factors are central in explaining the resilience of one-party regimes.<sup>7</sup> The focus on institutions tends, however, to oversimplify the perspective of the individuals who are the target of these co-optation strategies. Political recruits are generally depicted as purely interested in material gain and power, yet most remain too low in the hierarchy to reap these perks. By contrast, I highlight the importance of nonmaterial incentives, symbolic and social ones, in feeding the officials' commitment to a political career. I also show how their sociability is shaped by institutions, leading to specific network configurations, which can positively or negatively affect overall elite cohesion.

Nonmaterial incentives are central, alongside material ones, in maintaining elite cohesion in authoritarian contexts. Solidary elements are essential: The more one invests in relationships within one group, the more costly the exit becomes. In that regard, the mechanisms at the basis of the individuals' commitment to the regime are similar to what has been described in various

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6. Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Beatriz Magaloni, "Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 4–5 (2008): 715–41; Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Benjamin Smith, "Life of the Party: The Origins of Regime Breakdown and Persistence under Single-Party Rule," *World Politics* 57, no. 3 (2005): 421–51.

7. Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115–44; Andrew J. Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 6–17; Martin K. Dimitrov, "Understanding Communist Collapse and Resilience," in *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*, ed. Martin K. Dimitrov (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2013), 3–39.

other organizations, ranging from military<sup>8</sup> to religious<sup>9</sup> or democratic political structures.<sup>10</sup>

Symbolic incentives are also crucial. The officials' dedication is, in part, linked to their positions' social status. This means that even when shared ideological beliefs are not a fundamental basis for political recruitment, alluding to the regime's origin and mission can remain important to fuel its members' moral identity and status. Despite the apparent disconnect between the lesser importance given to ideological beliefs and the constant references to revolutionary symbols, the latter ultimately help to maintain elite cohesion through prestige, even after the founding generation is gone.<sup>11</sup> Through their behavior and discourse, the officials embody the regime's organizational charisma. The emphasis on this performative aspect, rather than shared beliefs, allows for wide-ranging recruitment: Officials with different political views can rely on the same references to reinforce their own status as political leaders serving the people. This remains, however, a subtle equilibrium that is easily challenged when the regime asks cadres to actively prove their alignment with the party line beyond simple references to political symbols.

This book also shows how personal ties between elite members can help sustain authoritarian systems. Certain institutions, tied to the decentralization of political selection and regularized rotations, lead to personal networks made of multidimensional and largely noncompetitive personal ties. Personal allegiances then translate into organizational ones, leading to a high level of elite cohesion. This configuration is, however, also fragile and can be weakened by changes to political selection policies toward less rotation. In the long run, a decrease in vertical and horizontal circulation can give rise to separate clusters of elites with less cross-regional or cross-sectorial ties.<sup>12</sup> Para-

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8. Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1948): 280–315.

9. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, "Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 6 (1980): 1376–95.

10. Daniel Gaxie, "Économie Des Partis et Rétributions Du Militantisme [Economic Analysis of Parties and the Militants' Incentives]," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 27, no. 1 (1977): 123–54.

11. Adrienne Lebas, *From Protest to Parties: Party-Building and Democratization in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

12. Gerald Easter, *Reconstructing the State: Personal Networks and Elite Identity in*

doxically, policies aiming at regimenting officials and stabilizing their careers could hence limit generational renewal but also decrease overall cohesion.

By taking the perspective of political recruits in authoritarian contexts seriously, this book goes beyond functionalist perspectives that view subjective aspects of political life, such as the role of symbols and interpersonal relationships, as running counter to the efficient functioning of these regimes. It focuses on how interactions between such informal elements and formal institutional rules shape individual officials' trajectories, their political commitment, and allegiance to the regime. Doing so allows for a dynamic approach to elite cohesion and a fuller understanding of the drivers behind the long-term survival of authoritarian regimes, as well as the mechanisms that may contribute to their demise.

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*Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).





## APPENDIX

Table A1. Age Rules for Party-State and CYL Leading Cadres

Leading cadre ranks	Example of corresponding party-state position	Age of ineligibility for promotion in the party-state	Age of ineligibility for promotion in the CYL
State Leader ( <i>zheng guoji</i> , 正国级)	Premier	67	<i>none</i>
Deputy State Leader ( <i>fu guoji</i> , 副国级)	State Counselor	67	<i>none</i>
Minister ( <i>zheng buji</i> , 正部级)	Provincial Governor	63	45
Deputy Minister ( <i>fu buji</i> , 副部级)	Provincial Vice Governor	58	45
Bureau Director ( <i>zheng tingji</i> , 正厅级)	City Mayor	55	40
Deputy Bureau Director ( <i>fu tingji</i> , 副厅级)	City Deputy Mayor	52	38
Division Director ( <i>zheng chuji</i> , 正处级)	County Governor	50	35
Deputy Division Director ( <i>fu chuji</i> , 副处级)	County Vice Governor	45	32
Section Director ( <i>zheng keji</i> , 正科级)	Township Head	40	30
Deputy Section Director ( <i>fu keji</i> , 副科级)	Township Deputy Head	40	28

*Source:* Chien-wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, “Sprinting with Small Steps’ Towards Promotion: Solutions for the Age Dilemma in the CCP Cadre Appointment System,” *China Journal* 71, no. 1 (2014): 157–61.

*Note:* The age of ineligibility for promotion to party-state positions can vary locally; this table provides an average based on Kou and Tsai’s calculations.



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## INDEX

*Note:* Entries in *italics* refer to figures; entries in **bold** refer to tables.

- 211 project universities, 28, 55, 95, 111  
1989 student movement. *See* Tiananmen movement  
2008 Olympic Games, 127, 130
- academic performance, 48, 74–75  
activism, 22, 30, 50, 134  
activists (*jiji fenzi*), 25–26, 45, 52, 64, 76–78  
age limits, 108, 121–22, 150–51  
All-China Federation of Democratic Youth. *See* All-China Youth Federation (*Zhonghua qingnian lianhehui*; ACYF)  
All-China Federation of Trade Unions, 125, 127  
All-China Students' Federation (*Zhonghua quanguo xuesheng lianhehui*; ACSF)  
  chairperson of, 100–102, 137  
  CYL and, 19, 33–34  
  leadership of, 24  
  Liu Kai and, 80  
  political careers and, 95, 99–100  
  student cadres and, 43  
  student leaders and, 62  
  training programs and, 66  
All-China Women's Federation, 116  
All-China Youth Federation (*Zhonghua qingnian lianhehui*; ACYF), 18–19, 101  
allegiance. *See* diffuse allegiance  
alliances, 86–87  
All-Union Leninist Communist Youth League. *See* Komsomol
- alumni, 90–94, 96, 117–18  
ambition, political, 106–7, 116, 118, 146, 153  
anti-corruption. *See* corruption (and anti-corruption)  
assigned graduates system (*xuandiao-sheng*), 54–56, 147–48  
authoritarian regimes, 3–4, 6–7, 20, 26, 157–59
- Bargel, Lucie, 64  
Becker, Howard, 78  
behavioral standardization, 8–11, 15, 73–74, 88, 133–34, 154  
Beijing, China, 27–28, 93  
Beijing Municipal CYL Committee, 112  
Bell, Daniel, 11, 131  
Bo Zhiyue, 140  
Bourdieu, Pierre, 60  
bureaucracy, 6, 74–79, 132–33  
business families, 45–46
- cadres. *See* student cadres (*xuesheng ganbu*)  
career advancement  
  Chinese Communist Party and, 2–5  
  class background and, 45–46  
  CYL and, 20–23  
  elite universities and, 117  
  open selection and, 146–48  
  student cadres and, 44, 52–54, 61–62

- career advancement (*continued*)
- student counselors and, 112–13
  - of student union chairpersons, 94–96
  - study abroad programs and, 58–60
  - university administration and, 115–16
- CCP Central Committee
- ACSF chairperson and, 101–2
  - age of members and, 151
  - CYL and, 91–92
  - CYL committee and, 141
  - CYL membership and, 23
  - CYL officials and, 125
  - universities and, 28
  - Yang Yue and, 137
- CCP officials
- authoritarian regimes and, 156–58
  - children of, 44–46, 148
  - CYL officials and, 117, 126, 129–34, 142–44, 152, 153
  - political careers and, 154
  - political recruitment and, 155
  - rejuvenation policy and, 120–22
  - rotation system and, 139
  - student cadre interactions and, 67–72
  - student counselors and, 106
  - student leaders and, 94–96, **97**
  - temporary transfers and, 114–15
  - university officials and, 113
- CCP Organization Department, 55–56, 82, 104, 116, 122
- CCP Politburo, 9–10, 28, 91–92, 104, 124, 149
- Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, 134
- Central CYL School, 18, 27, 66, 112, 124, 144
- Central Party School, 62, 122–23. *See also* party schools
- chairpersons
- of ACSF, 100–102
  - Henan clique and, 81, 87–89
  - political careers of, 94–96, **97**, **98**, 125
  - reputational cost and, 75–76
  - sponsorship and, 91–93
  - student counselors and, 109
  - student union elections and, 70, 84–86
  - of student unions, 41–43
  - women as, 105
  - workload of, 74–75
- Chan, Anita, 76
- Chang Junsheng, 148, 151
- Chaoyang District, Beijing, 102
- Chen Feng (interview subject), 31–32
- Chen Haosu, 140
- Chen Wei, 51, 76
- Chen Xi, 82, 92, 94, 104
- Cheng Li, 87–88, 96, 140
- Chengdu, China, 28
- China Youth Daily*, 114
- China Youth Development Foundation, 19, 38
- China Youth University of Political Studies, 150
- China Youth Volunteer Association (*Zhongguo qingnian zhiyuanzhe xiehui*), 130
- Chinese Communist Party (CCP)
- ACSF chairperson and, 101–2
  - activism and, 135
  - assigned graduates system and, 55
  - CYL and, 16–23, **23**
  - CYL dependence on, 126–27, 149–50
  - CYL promotion and, 125
  - elites and, 8–9, 45
  - evaluation of CYL officials and, 129–31
  - hierarchical structure of, 13–14
  - ideology and, 153
  - party spirit and, 73
  - political recruitment and, **39**, 155
  - relational networks and, 5–7
  - rotation system and, 139
  - sponsorship networks and, 91–93
  - student cadres and, 32, 41–43, 51–52
  - student counselors and, 109, 111, 113
  - student union elections and, 85
  - student-management apparatus and, 33–39

- third echelon cadres and, 121–22
- youth and, 1–5
- Youth League Faction and, 141–42
- youth organizations and, 24
- Chinese Communist Youth League (CYL)
  - ACSF chairperson and, 101–2
  - cadre interviews and, 27–28
  - CCP control and, 16–20
  - CCP membership and, 23, 51–52
  - evaluation of CYL officials and, 128–31
  - graduate school admission and, 49–50
  - Henan clique and, 87–90
  - lack of power and funds and, 126–28
  - Liu Kai and, 80–81
  - Peking University and, 82–83
  - personal ties and, 119
  - plan for university graduates voluntary service to the West and, 57–58
  - political advancement and, 20–23
  - political recruitment and, 39
  - promotion and, 125
  - reforms and, 149–51
  - social practice grades and, 48
  - sponsorship networks and, 91–93
  - student cadre relationships and, 63–64
  - student cadres and, 42, 44, 61–62, 153
  - student counselors and, 111–13
  - student leaders and, 30, 99
  - student union elections and, 84
  - student union leadership and, 43
  - student unions and, 40–42
  - student-management apparatus and, 33–39, 105
  - temporary transfers and, 114–15
  - training programs and, 64–67
  - universities and, 24–25
  - weak ties within, 142–45
  - women and, 9–10
  - Xi Jinping and, 134–35
  - Youth League Faction and, 140–42
- civil service employment, 1–4, 11–12, 24, 54–58
- civil service exams, 1, 32, 49, 113. *See also* examinations
- Civil Service Law, 135
- class background, 44–46
- clientelism, 47–50, 82, 87–90, 104, 141, 156
- collective action, 6–7
- commitment. *See* undogmatic commitment
- commitment-cultivation process, 29
- conformism. *See* behavioral standardization
- Congress of students (*quanxiao xuesheng daibiao dahui*), 43, 83–86, 89, 102
- co-optation, 157
- corruption (and anti-corruption), 77, 89, 128, 134–35
- COVID-19 pandemic, 59
- crises, political, 103–4
- Cultural Revolution, 17, 73, 108
- cumulative networks. *See also* networks
  - of CYL officials, 144–45
  - diffuse allegiance and, 139, 155
  - personal ties as, 14–15
  - of student cadres, 30, 82, 137, 139
- CYL Central Committee, 99, 101–2, 117, 123, 125, 126, 143
- CYL committees, 20, 36, 114, 128–31, 141, 143–44
- CYL Congress, 111, 143
- CYL leaders. *See also* CYL secretaries
  - career advancement and, 125
  - networks and, 155–56
  - party-state leaders and, 131–34
  - promotion and, 129–31, 145–47
  - sponsored mobility and, 120
  - training programs and, 112, 144–45
- CYL officials. *See also* CYL secretaries
  - ACSF chairperson and, 102
  - age limits and, 122
  - bureaucratic language and, 132–33
  - CCP leaders and, 141–42
  - CYL committee meetings and, 143–44

- CYL officials (*continued*)
- CYL's lack of power and funds and, 126–28
  - Henan clique and, 90
  - party-state officials and, 117
  - performance evaluations and, 128–30
  - personal ties and, 119–20, 152
  - promotion and, 125, 140, 145–47
  - social practice grades and, 48
  - sponsored mobility and, 155–56
  - student cadres and, 44, 82–83
  - student leaders and, 99–101
  - temporary transfers and, 114–15
  - training programs and, 66, 112, 122–24, 144–45
  - Youth League Faction and, 140–42
- CYL plenums, 143
- CYL secretaries. *See also* CYL officials
- career advancement and, 137
  - CCP and, 126
  - CCP officials and, 117
  - CYL leaders and, 111–12
  - networks and, 103–4
  - performance evaluations and, 129–31
  - promotion and, 147–48
  - promotion to party-state officials and, 125, 146
  - student counselors and, 107
  - training programs and, 66, 124, 144–45
  - Youth League Faction and, 140
- Dai Wei, 89–90
- Democracy Wall Movement (1978–1979), 85
- democratic centralism, 135–36
- democratic life meetings (*minzhu sheng-huo hui*), 136
- Deng Xiaoping, 108, 120, 145–46
- deputy section director (*fu keji*), 111, 113
- deviance, 78
- diffuse allegiance
- cadres and, 152
  - cumulative networks and, 139
  - elite cohesion and, 12–15
  - sponsored mobility and, 155
  - student cadres and, 26–27, 30
  - youth organizations and, 16
- Ding Xueliang, 35
- diversity, 14–15, 136
- division director (*chuji*), 111
- Document 16, 64–65, 108
- Document 24, 108–9
- drinking, 10, 68
- education, 11, 35, 110
- elections
- Henan clique and, 88–89
  - at Peking University, 77, 81–83
  - strategies for winning and, 86–87
  - student leaders and, 68–72, 70, 71
  - student union leadership and, 42–43
  - student union organizational framework and, 83–85
- elites
- bureaucratic language and, 132–33
  - Chinese Communist Party and, 3–5
  - cohesion of, 5, 153, 155–59
  - CYL membership and, 23, 151
  - diffuse allegiance and, 12–13
  - networks and, 103–4
  - personal ties and, 14
  - promotion and, 125, 146
  - sponsored mobility and, 154
  - student cadres and, 29, 44–46
  - student counselors and, 118
  - Youth League Faction and, 140–41
  - youth organizations and, 8–10
- embeddedness, 13–14, 29, 82, 102, 139, 155
- employment, 52–54
- ethnic minorities, 147
- examinations, 11–12, 55, 57, 110. *See also*
- civil service exams
- extracurricular activities
- CYL and student union control of, 33, 36, 38–39
  - evaluation of, 129–31
  - funding for, 127–28

- organizational skills and, 53
  - student cadre relationships and, 64
  - student leaders and, 69
- factions, 23
- faculties, 40–43, 50, 83–85, 111
- family connections, 46, 140, 148
- Fengtai District, Beijing, 93
- France, 64
- Francis, Corinna-Barbara, 35
- Fujian Province, China, 92–93
- funding, 126–28, 149–50
- fundraising, 69
- Fuzhou, China, 92
- Gaxie, Daniel, 7
- gender. *See also* sexism; women
  - Henan clique and, 88
  - imbalance in cadres and, 27
  - imbalance in party-state and, 118
  - political ambition and, 106–7
  - recruitment quotas and, 147–48
  - sponsored mobility and, 154
  - student cadres and, 68
  - student leaders and, 93, 99–100
  - university administration and, 115–16
  - youth organizations and, 9–10
- General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine, 149
- Goffman, Erving, 7
- Gore, Lance, 131
- Gould, Roger, 6
- graduate school
  - direct admission to, 48–51, 81
  - plan for university graduates voluntary service to the West and, 58
  - student counselors and, 62, 110–12
  - student unions and, 33–34, 70–72, 71
  - university graduate village official framework and, 56–57
- graduate students, 106, 109
- Granovetter, Mark, 15
- grassroots positions, 54–57, 98, 128, 150
- group trips, 62, 65–67
- Guiyang, China, 27–28
- Guiyang City CYL Committee, 128
- Guizhou Province, China, 28, 128
- He Guangwei, 140
- He Junke, 146
- Health Science Center, 84–85
- Hebei Normal University, 119
- Hebei Province, China, 28, 119
- hegemony of form (Yurchak), 134
- Henan clique, 9–10, 81, 87–90
- Henan Province, China, 87
- hierarchical structures, 15
  - administrative positions and, 110–11
  - bureaucratic language and, 132–33
  - diffuse allegiance and, 13–15
  - sponsorship and, 81–82
  - of student cadres, 41, 42
  - of student unions, 31, 75–76
  - student-management apparatus and, 33–34, 35
  - Youth League Faction and, 141
  - of youth organizations, 155
- Hu Chunhua, 146
- Hu Jintao, 5, 22, 39, 107, 140
- Hu Yaobang, 23, 140
- Huang Yasheng, 139
- Hui Li, 131
- ideology, 136, 153, 158. *See also* revolutionary ideology
- incentives, 6, 32, 47–49, 60, 157–58. *See also* material perks
- individuals, 157
- Institute for Computer Science and Technology, 84
- institutional factors, 157
- Institutional Revolutionary Party (Mexico), 81
- institutionalized clientelism. *See* clientelism
- internships, 53, 62, 102

- interview subjects  
 Chen Feng, 31–32  
 Lei Lan, 61–62  
 Liu Kai, 80–81  
 Lü Yuhua, 119–20  
 Wang Xiaofei, 105  
 investment, 62, 78–79
- jargon. *See* language, bureaucratic
- Jia Ruixue, 46  
 Jiang Daming, 146  
 Jiang Nanxiang, 107  
 Jiang Zemin, 93, 101  
 Jiangsu Province, China, 27, 66, 147–48  
 Jiangsu Province CYL Committee, 131  
 Jiangsu Province Student Federation, 102  
 Jowitt, Kenneth, 73  
 juniority, 20
- Komsomol, 21  
 Kou Chien-wen, 23, 121, 141
- lack of power and funds (*wuquan wuqian*),  
 126–28, 141
- language, bureaucratic, 76, 132–33  
 Lee, Charlotte, 16  
 Lei Lan (interview subject), 61–62  
 leisure activity, 38, 88  
 Li, Eric, 11  
 Li Cheng, 25  
 Li Keqiang  
 as CYL secretary, 65  
 Peking University and, 82  
 promotion and, 146  
 sponsorship and, 91–93, 92  
 youth organizations and, 5, 84–85  
 Youth Volunteers Operation and, 130  
 Li Yining, 91  
 Li Yuanchao, 119  
 Liao Xingmiu, 25  
 Liaoning Province, China, 93  
 liberalization, 34–36  
 Lin Xinyong, 35  
 Link, Perry, 133  
 Liu Hanzhang, 90  
 Liu Kai, 80–81, 87–90, 101–2  
 Liu Shaoqi, 73  
 Liu Yandong, 140  
 local officials, 114–15, 117, 119–20  
 loyalty, 136  
 Lu Hao, 91, 92, 93, 99, 130, 143, 146  
 Lü Yuhua (interview subject), 119–20
- Machiavelli, Niccolo, 8  
 majors, 97, 97  
 Mao era (1949–1978), 1–2, 25–26, 72. *See also* post-Mao China  
 Marxism, 67  
 mass line educational campaign (*qunzhong luxian jiaoyu shijian huodong*), 133, 136  
 masses, 133  
 material perks, 32, 47–49, 78, 157. *See also* incentives  
 McAdam, Doug, 6  
 media, 38, 131. *See also* social media  
 meetings, 47, 68, 101, 143  
 mentorship, 81–82. *See also* sponsored mobility  
 meritocracy, 11–12  
 Mexico, 81  
 Mid-to Long-Term Plan for the Development of Youth, 37  
 military, 8, 35  
 Ministry of Education, 50, 104, 107–8, 116, 150
- Nanjing, China, 27, 91  
 Nanjing 2014 Youth Olympic Games, 38, 131  
 Nanjing Normal University, 28, 117  
 Nanjing University, 28, 65, 68–70, 102, 105, 117  
 Nathan, Andrew, 141  
 National Graduate Entrance Examination, 48  
 National university student backbones training school, 66

- networks. *See also* cumulative networks; personal ties; professional ties (*guanxi*); relationships  
 ACSF chairperson and, 102  
 cadres and, 152  
 cumulation and, 14–15, 137, 139  
 CYL officials and, 112  
 diffuse allegiance and, 12–14  
 diversity of, 11  
 elite cohesion and, 157–58  
 elite universities and, 117–18  
 family connections and, 46  
 gender and, 99–100  
 Henan clique and, 87–90  
 political advancement and, 82  
 political careers and, 95  
 relationships and, 5–7  
 sponsorship and, 81–82, 90–94  
 of student cadres, 26–27, 29, 53, 155–56  
 of student leaders, 103–4  
 study abroad programs and, 58–59  
 training programs and, 144–45  
 Yang Yue and, 138  
 Youth League Faction and, 142
- nonhierarchical relations, 15, 15
- officials. *See* CCP officials; CYL officials; university officials
- open selection (*gongkai xuanba*), 146–48, 150–51. *See also* promotion
- organizational frameworks, 13–14, 15, 126, 132, 141
- party schools, 124, 144. *See also* Central Party School
- party spirit (*dangxing*), 63, 72–74, 79, 131–34
- party-state  
 activists and, 25–26  
 CYL and, 119–20  
 CYL officials and, 145  
 diffuse allegiance and, 155  
 elite cohesion and, 157  
 foreign subversion and, 59  
 loyalty and, 136  
 networks and, 13–14, 156  
 power of, 132–33  
 sponsored mobility and, 139  
 student cadre identification with, 78–79  
 student cadres and, 30, 51, 68  
 student leaders and, 94, 99  
 student-management apparatus and, 36–37  
 university administration and, 115–16
- patriarchy, 10
- Payette, Alex, 23
- peasants, 45
- Peking University  
 ACSF chairperson and, 100–102  
 clientelism and, 82–83  
 CYL and, 34, 36–37  
 graduate school admission and, 49–50  
 Henan clique and, 9, 87–90  
 Liu Kai and, 80–81  
 sponsorship and, 82, 90–91, 92, 94  
 student cadres and, 28–29  
 student leader careers and, 94–97, 97, 98, 99  
 student leaders and, 77  
 student union elections and, 83–86  
 Tiananmen movement and, 103–4  
 training programs and, 65  
 university officials and, 116–17  
 Xi Jinping and, 71, 72
- People's Republic of China (PRC), 17, 22.  
*See also* party-state
- performance (*biaoxian*), 8, 72–74, 133–34
- performance evaluations, 128–31, 143
- personal ties. *See also* networks; professional ties (*guanxi*); relationships  
 accumulation of, 151–52  
 authoritarian regimes and, 158  
 cumulative networks and, 14–15  
 CYL and, 119  
 diffuse allegiance and, 155  
 diversity of, 137, 139  
 political careers and, 155–56  
 promotion and, 142

- personal ties (*continued*)  
 “rocket promotions” and, 148  
 sponsorship and, 81–82  
 student cadres and, 29–30, 31–32, 46–47, 53  
 student leaders and, 62  
 training programs and, 144–45
- Pieke, Frank, 16
- plan for university graduates voluntary service to the West (*daxuesheng zhiyuan fuwu xibu jihua*), 54, 57–58
- Politburo Standing Committee, 10
- political ambition. *See* ambition, political
- political careers  
 behavioral standardization and, 8  
 deideologization of, 12  
 education and, 11  
 elite universities and, 90  
 gender and, 99–100  
 graduate school admission and, 48–49  
 impact on academic performance and, 75  
 Liu Kai and, 80  
 networks and, 103–4  
 sponsored mobility and, 139  
 sponsorship networks and, 91–94  
 of student cadres, 29–30, 78–79  
 student counselors and, 106, 118  
 of student leaders, 62–63, 94–96  
 undogmatic commitment and, 5–7
- political involvement, 49–51
- political professionalization, 4, 153
- political quality (*zhengzhi suzhi*), 135
- political recruitment. *See also* professional recruitment  
 behavioral standardization and, 10–11  
 CCP and, 39, 39  
 CYL and, 21–23, 51–52  
 elite cohesion and, 158–59  
 Henan clique and, 87–88  
 ideology and, 153  
 nonmaterial incentives and, 157  
 promotion and, 146–48  
 reforms and, 149–51  
 sponsorship and, 81–82  
 student cadres and, 1–5, 32, 41, 105  
 student counselors and, 107–9  
 Tsinghua University and, 96  
 undogmatic commitment and, 8, 11–12, 154  
 universities and, 24–25  
 university administration and, 99  
 youth organizations and, 5
- political socialization, 25–26, 155
- political standard (*zhengzhi biao zhun*), 135
- post-Mao China. *See also* Mao era (1949–1978)  
 cadre rotation system and, 139  
 cadres and, 27  
 CYL and, 17–19, 21–23  
*guanxi* and, 7  
 political careers in, 96  
 power, 3, 132, 140–42, 157  
 presidium (*zhuxituan*), 43, 83–86, 87, 102  
 primary school, 21, 24–25  
 princelings, 140  
 private sector, 45–46, 127–28  
 prizes, 47–48, 69, 144  
 professional recruitment, 53. *See also* political recruitment  
 professional ties (*guanxi*), 7, 88, 90–94, 106, 142–45, 158. *See also* networks; personal ties
- Project Hope (*Xiwang gongcheng*), 19, 38, 119
- projects, 127–31
- promotion. *See also* open selection (*gongkai xuanba*)  
 CCP officials and, 125  
 of CYL leaders, 142, 145–46  
 performance evaluations and, 129–31  
 rejuvenation policy and, 121–22  
 “rocket promotions” and, 147–48  
 of student cadres, 30  
 turnover and, 150–52
- “Proposal on the Reform of the Central Communist Youth League,” 149–50
- provincial federations, 62, 102



- Qi Fujuan, 74  
 Qin Yizhi, 66, 146, 149  
 quotas. *See* recruitment quotas
- recruitment quotas, 147–48  
 reforms, 17–18, 34–37, 85, 149–51  
 rejuvenation policy, 120–22  
 relationships. *See also* networks; personal ties; professional ties (*guanxi*)  
   assigned graduates system and, 56  
   between cadres and staff, 47–49  
   with CCP branch, 52  
   diversity of, 137  
   elite youths and, 8–9, 12–13  
   impact of hierarchical structures on, 76  
   networks and, 14–15  
   political careers and, 5–7  
   sponsorship and, 81–82  
   student cadres and, 29–30, 46–47  
 Renmin University, 31, 51, 90  
 reputational cost, 75–78  
 reserve force cadres (*houbeijun*), 21, 56, 122, 125, 144. *See also* student cadres (*xuesheng ganbu*)  
 resumes, 69  
 retirement system, 11  
 revolutionary ideology, 1–4, 6, 158. *See also* ideology  
 Rosen, Stanley, 39  
 rule of avoidance, 139
- scandals, 50  
 Schoenhals, Michael, 132  
 scholarships, 47  
 Schurmann, Franz, 1  
 section director (*keji*), 111  
 self-criticism. *See* democratic life meetings (*minzhu shenghuo hui*)  
 self-interest, 2  
 self-presentation, 68–72, 71  
 sexism, 9–10, 106–7, 116, 118. *See also* gender; women  
 Shen Yue, 93, 94, 101, 139  
 Shenzhen, China, 65  
 Shi Zongkai, 90  
 Shih, Victor, 87–88  
 Shijiazhuang, China, 28  
 Shirk, Susan, 11–12, 64, 77  
 Sichuan Normal University, 61–62  
 Sichuan Province, China, 28  
 Sichuan Province Student Federation, 62  
 single-party states, 157  
 skill development, 52–53, 120, 122–24, 127–28. *See also* training programs  
 social circles  
   class background and, 44  
   of party-state officials, 154  
   political careers and, 16, 157  
   provincial origins and, 87–88  
   of student cadres, 78–79  
   student cadres and, 29, 63–64  
   training programs and, 67  
 social media, 68–69, 131, 145. *See also* media  
 social practice grades, 48–49  
 social roles, 5–7, 62  
 social ties. *See* relationships  
 Socialist Youth League, 17. *See also* Chinese Communist Youth League (CYL)  
 socializing, 10, 32, 63–64, 99–100  
 Soviet Union, 21  
 sponsored mobility  
   behavioral standardization and, 8–9  
   CYL officials and, 120  
   diffuse allegiance and, 13, 155  
   diverse networks and, 139  
   Henan clique and, 81–82  
   at Peking University, 92  
   political ambition and, 107  
   professional ties and, 81–82, 90–94, 137  
   promotion and, 125–26  
   student cadres and, 29, 104, 154–56  
   student union elections and, 86–87  
   universities and, 28  
 staff, university, 42, 47–50, 53–54, 61, 109  
 standing committee (*changwu daibiao weiyuanhui*), 43, 83–85, 88–89, 91, 93, 102

- standing committee president, 84
- Stanford University, 104
- state. *See* party-state
- state-owned enterprise (SOE), 51–53, 91, 144
- stress, 74–75
- Student Affairs Department, 62
- Student backbones training camps, 65–66
- student cadres (*xuesheng ganbu*). *See also* student leaders
- ACSF chairperson and, 100–102
  - admission to CCP and, 51–52
  - agency and, 26–27
  - bureaucratic language and, 132–33
  - bureaucratization of, 74–79
  - career advancement and, 44, 52–54
  - CCP leaders and, 141–42
  - civil service employment and, 54–58
  - class background and, 44–46
  - CYL officials and, 105–6
  - defined roles of, 25–26, 40–43
  - diffuse allegiance and, 5
  - graduate school admission and, 48–51
  - Henan clique and, 87–90
  - incentives and, 32, 60
  - interactions with officials and, 67–72
  - interviews of, 27–28
  - Liu Kai and, 80–81
  - management of, 135–36
  - networks and, 7, 14–15, 154–56
  - open selection and, 146
  - personal ties and, 152
  - political career advancement and, 21–25, 29, 94–96, 118, 153
  - rejuvenation policy and, 120–22
  - relationships with staff and, 47–48
  - social circles and, 63
  - sponsored mobility and, 8–9, 139
  - sponsorship and, 81–82, 90–94
  - student counselors and, 109, 112–13
  - student union elections and, 82–86
  - study abroad programs and, 58–60
  - temporary transfers and, 114–15
  - training programs and, 64–67
  - undogmatic commitment and, 10–11
  - university trajectory and, 31, 61–62
  - weak personal ties and, 142–45
- student counselors (*xuesheng fudaoyuan*)
- establishment and standardization of, 107–9
  - graduate school admission and, 49–50
  - as officials in training, 110–13
  - political careers and, 118
  - student cadres and, 66, 105–6
  - student leaders as, 61–62
  - student management and, 33
  - university administration and, 115–16
- student leaders. *See also* student cadres
- ACSF chairperson and, 101–2
  - bureaucracy and, 75–76
  - career advancement and, 99, 137
  - elections and, 68–72, 70, 71
  - as future party-state officials, 94–96, 97, 154
  - as grassroots leaders, 98
  - Henan clique and, 87–89
  - Liu Kai and, 80–81
  - networks and, 103–4
  - political careers of, 62–63
  - reputational cost and, 76–78
  - sponsorship networks and, 90–94
  - student union elections and, 83–86
  - training programs and, 65–67
  - workload of, 74–75
- student societies, 34–36, 40
- Student Union Culture Department, 31, 80
- Student Union Standing Committee, 43
- student union
- ACSF chairperson and, 100–102
  - bureaucracy and, 75–77
  - CYL and, 4–5, 33–35, 38
  - elections to, 61–62
  - graduate school admission and, 51
  - Henan clique and, 87–89
  - hierarchical structure of, 42
  - interactions with officials and, 68, 70–72
  - Liu Kai and, 80–81
  - organizational structure of, 83–86

- at Peking University, 82–83
  - political crises and, 103
  - social circles and, 63
  - sponsorship and, 91–93
  - stress and, 75
  - student cadres and, 24–25, 31–32, 40–44
  - student societies and, 36
- student work, 49–51
- Student Work Department, 50, 105, 109
- student-management apparatus, 33–39, 35, 60, 67–68, 105–6
- students
  - ACSF and, 19
  - behavioral standardization and, 8–9
  - Chinese Communist Party and, 2
  - CYL and, 17–18
  - CYL membership and, 39
  - CYL officials and, 105
  - embedding of, 13–14
  - student cadres and, 29–30, 40–43, 60, 67–68
  - student union elections and, 83–86
  - views on student cadres and, 75–78
  - youth organizations and, 24–25
- study abroad programs, 58–60
- Sun Jingjing, 147–48
- Sun Yat-Sen University, 43
- superiors, 68, 128–31
- Svolik, Milan, 3
  
- Taizhou City, China, 147–48
- temporary transfer (*guazhi duanlian*), 114–15
- term limits, 108, 150
- third echelon cadres, 121–22
- thought, diversity of, 10–11
- Tiananmen movement, 18, 24, 35, 103–4
- time management, 74–75
- Training program for young Marxists (*qingnian Makesi zhuyi zhe peiyang gongcheng*), 64–66
- training programs. *See also* skill development
  - CYL and, 120
  - CYL Central Committee and, **123**
  - CYL officials and, 122–24, 144–45
  - student cadres and, 64–67
  - student counselors and, 108, 110–13, 118
  - temporary transfers and, 114–15
- Tran, Emilie, 144
- Trump administration, 59
- Tsai Wen-Hsuan, 25, 121
- Tsimonis, Konstantinos, 20
- Tsinghua University
  - ACSF chairperson and, 100–101
  - assigned graduates system and, 55
  - sponsorship and, 82, 90–94, 94
  - student cadres and, 28–29, 40–41
  - student counselors and, 107, 109, 110–13
  - student leader careers and, 94–97, **97**, **98**, 99
  - Tiananmen movement and, 103–4
  - training programs and, 65–66
  - university officials and, 116–18
  - Yang Yue and, 137
- Tsinghua University Student Union, 93, 96, 101, 113, 137
- turnover, 145–46, 150–52
  
- undogmatic commitment, 5–12, 16, 29, 79, 154
- Unger, Jonathan, 67, 77
- United Front Work Department, 140, 147
- United Kingdom, 14
- universities
  - CYL officials and, 105–6
  - graduate school admission and, 49–50
  - interviews and, 28
  - political ambition and, 106–7
  - political careers and, 95–96, 153
  - political socialization and, 155
  - prizes and, 47–48
  - student cadres and, 29–30, 40–43, 67–68
  - student counselors and, 107–9
  - student-management apparatus and, 33–39
  - youth organizations and, 24–26

- university administration, 33, 43, 99, 106, 110–12, 115–16
- university graduate village official framework (*daxuesheng cunquan*), 54, 56–58
- University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 150
- university officials
  - examinations and, 113
  - opportunities for, 116
  - student cadres and, 52–53, 67–68, 78
  - student counselors and, 106
  - student leaders and, 99
- University Party Committee Postgraduate Work Department, 109
- university trajectory, 31, 61–62
- US-China relations, 59
  
- values, foreign, 59
- virtuocracy (Shirk), 12
- volunteers, 38, 57, 130–31
  
- Walder, Andrew, 8, 78, 130
- Wang Songtao, 93, 94
- Wang Xiaofei (interview subject), 105–6
- Wang Yuhua, 13, 90
- Wasserstrom, Jeffrey, 35
- Wen-Huan Tsai, 96
- women. *See also* gender; sexism
  - networks and, 156
  - political ambition and, 106–7, 118
  - as student leaders, 99–100, 105
  - student union leadership and, 93
  - university administration and, 115–16
  - in youth organizations, 9–10
- Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres, 135, 150–51
- workers, 45, 78
- workload, 74–75
  
- Xi Jinping
  - activism and, 30, 134–36
  - Chen Xi and, 104
  - CYL and, 16, 19–20
  - CYL reforms and, 22, 149–50
  - political recruitment and, 39
  - self-presentation of, 71, 72
  - sponsorship and, 92
  - student-management apparatus and, 36–37
- Xiao Jianhua, 103
- Xu Rongkai, 96
  
- Yan'an rectification movement, 73
- Yang Yue
  - as CYL leader, 99, 102
  - networks of, 137, 138, 139
  - promotion and, 151
  - sponsorship networks and, 92–93, 94, 113
- Yangtze Three Gorges Technology and Economy Development Company, 93
- Young Pioneers of China (*Zhongguo shao-nian xianfeng dui*), 19, 21
- Young Volunteers Operation, 18
- youth, 1–5, 16–18, 37, 134, 149
- Youth Cadre Bureaus, 122
- Youth League Faction (*tuanpai*), 23, 111, 114, 140–42
- youth organizations
  - cadres and, 29, 153, 154
  - CYL and, 18–19
  - elites in, 8–9
  - embedding and, 13–14
  - gender and, 99
  - liberalization and, 33–36
  - media and, 38
  - networks and, 137, 138, 139
  - political mobility and, 155
  - political recruitment and, 5, 16–17
  - student cadres and, 41–43
  - transformation of student cadres and, 69–70
  - universities and, 24

- Youth Volunteers Operation (*qingnian zhiyuanzhe xingdong*), 130
- Yuan-pei College, 51
- Yurchak, Alexei, 134
- Zang, Xiaowei, 3
- Zeng Qingjie, 139
- Zhang Fusen, 96
- Zhang Laiwu, 103–4
- Zhang Weiwei, 11
- Zhao Dingxin, 46
- Zheng Changzhong, 141
- Zhu Rongji, 93, 96, 101
- Zhu Shanlu, 91, 92, 93



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