

# 4

## **Controlling the cadres: Dual elite recruitment logic and political manipulation under Xi Jinping**

Chien-wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai<sup>1</sup>

Political development in China seems to show signs of a step backward from the ‘institutional layering’ introduced under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (Kou, 2010, pp. 79–91).<sup>2</sup> Many scholars have noticed a tendency towards autocracy since Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012 (S. Lee, 2017, pp. 325–36). Xi has disregarded norms set by his predecessors (Minzner, 2018), particularly in elite recruitment (Shirk, 2018, pp. 29–30). How can we better understand the way Xi is strengthening his power and ability to rule through adaptations of the cadre recruitment policy? How do these institutional changes affect Chinese politics? This chapter aims to answer these questions.

A great deal of research has been carried out into the CPC’s cadre management systems. Some scholars argue that the CPC manages its cadres through characteristics such as their level of education or whether they occupy posts in the party or the government system (Walder, 1995; Zang,

---

1 This chapter is a revised and updated version of the article that first appeared as C.W. Kou and W.H. Tsai (2021) ‘Dual elite recruitment logic and political manipulation under Xi Jinping,’ *Issues and Studies* 57(4), Article 2150015. doi.org/10.1142/S1013251121500156. Reprinted with permission.

2 In the period 2000–12, most scholars believed that China’s political system was going to be institutionalised (Bo, 2004, pp. 70–100; Zang, 2005, pp. 204–17).

2004). Landry, Lü and Duan (2018) identify two dimensions of economic performance and political loyalty, and they hold that the CPC has adopted a dual strategy in the management of its cadres. For local cadres who hold lower-level positions, performance in managing the local economy plays a greater role in their advancement in the party. For the recruitment of higher-level cadres, however, political connections and political allegiance become more important (Landry, Lü and Duan, 2018). These scholars have found that the CPC's cadre recruitment is based both on the nature of the jobs they hold and their political performance and connections.

Given the valuable opinions on elite recruitment in the CPC put forward by Landry, Lü and Duan (2018), we further argue that like his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping prefers to recruit his trustees to important positions. He has done so however by disrupting the system and particularly by not complying with age requirements for the appointment and removal of cadres.<sup>3</sup> This has mainly occurred in two situations: when cadres are appointed to important positions despite their exceeding the age limits and when they are allowed to continue in their posts despite having reached retirement age. These practices have resulted in a rise in the average age of senior officials.

As Landry, Lü and Duan (2018) suggest, the CPC attaches great importance to the performance of leading cadres in government at the grassroots level. Compared with previous leaders, Xi Jinping has paid more attention to local governance and the recruitment of grassroots cadres. He has repeatedly emphasised the need to recruit young and talented cadres as a way of strengthening the party's governance at the grassroots level.<sup>4</sup> However, these leading grassroots cadres have often become a 'tool' of governance. Although they might have been rapidly promoted to county-level leadership positions at an early age, they appear to stay at this level indefinitely. Even if they

---

3 Dictators typically recruit and appoint capable and loyal cadres to key positions. This study places special emphasis on the age factor in discussing the recruitment and appointment of senior cadres because, from the 1980s onwards, cadre rejuvenation has been a significantly critical criterion for personnel changes at all levels of Chinese elite politics. However, Xi Jinping has violated this principle in the recruitment and appointment of senior cadres and this bears relatively significant political implications. For relevant discussions on how dictators conduct political recruitment and appointment, please refer to Egorov and Sonin (2011).

4 The quality Xi Jinping values most in grassroots cadres is ability. This does not mean that Xi does not value their loyalty but that he considers grassroots cadres to be less important than senior cadres for the consolidation of his power. In this light, for the recruitment and appointment of grassroots cadres, this chapter argues that Xi wishes to promote young and capable cadres to county-level leadership positions to handle local governance properly. We will discuss this topic in the second section.

have a chance of being promoted to higher-level posts such as those at the department level (厅级, *tingji*), they might have ceased to be competitive in terms of age at this point. In other words, there might not be a strong correlation between experience as a grassroots cadre and the chance of promotion to a high-level post later in one's career.

To better capture the above characteristics of cadre management under Xi Jinping, we propose the concept of 'dual elite recruitment logic'. Here, 'dual' refers to political elites,<sup>5</sup> both at and above the provincial/ministerial level (senior cadres) and those at the grassroots and particularly the county level (县级, *xianji*).<sup>6</sup> During a speech on governance delivered in 2015, Xi stressed the importance of a 'key minority' (关键少数, *guanjian shaoshu*) of officials—provincial/ministerial level (省部级, *shengbuji*) leaders and county party secretaries—and the need to keep an eye on their recruitment and appointment to positions (Xinhua Net, 2020). The two sets of elites dealt with in this paper—high-level and grassroots officials—are exactly within the scope of this key minority. Therefore the concept of a key minority is critical for the study of contemporary CPC political elites.

The research methods used in this chapter are as follows. When discussing senior cadres, the main unit of analysis is the provincial/ministerial level official. The figures show that the average age of cadres at this level is indeed increasing under Xi Jinping. This paper also finds that under Xi, senior cadres do not fully abide by the age norms established under Hu Jintao. In other words, there are some cases where cadres who are unqualified in terms of age are promoted and those at the official retirement age do not retire. When discussing grassroots cadres, the main unit of analysis is the county party secretary. Since Xi came to power, many cadres have been appointed to this post while younger than 40, which was a rare occurrence

---

5 The concept of 'dual' has a particular meaning in the study of contemporary Chinese political elites. Walder (1995) put forward a theory of dual elite selection in which political credentials (party membership) are taken as an important variable. Zang (2004) identified a difference in the source and process of selection and the replenishment of party and government cadres as 'elite dualism'. In Landry, Lü and Duan (2018), the high/low administrative levels are used in a study of dual elite recruitment. Using an approach similar to that of Landry, Lü and Duan, this chapter discusses the differences in the selection process of senior and grassroots cadres.

6 The sources of senior cadres are mainly elites with special political advantage, such as the second-generation reds (红二代, *hongerdai*), leaders' secretaries, cadres of state-owned enterprises, or cadres of the Communist Youth League during the Hu period. The grassroots cadres are mainly elites who are promoted by means of civil service examinations. However, if these people do not have special political advantage or credit, it is difficult to be promoted to senior cadre positions at the provincial and ministerial levels. In other words, the sources of recruitment for senior and grassroots cadres may be different.

during the Hu Jintao period. From the 2015 list of ‘National Outstanding County Party Secretaries’ (全国优秀县委书记, *quanguo youxiu xianwei shuji*), we find that the cadres who received this award did not have age advantages over the others. This indicates that being officially recognised as an outstanding county party secretary does not guarantee promotion to a high-level post. This is likely due to a wish of the authorities to see county-level leading cadres contributing to grassroots governance for a comparatively long period.

This chapter is organised as follows. In the section ‘The political functions of the two categories of cadres and Xi’s manipulation’, we discuss the political functions of these two categories of cadres and the adjustments that have been made to the ‘rejuvenation’ principle under Xi Jinping’s leadership, proposing the concept of ‘dual elite recruitment logic’. In the section ‘Disregarding age limits and the rising average age of high-ranking officials’, we show how Xi has disregarded age norms in the recruitment of high-level cadres and that the average age of high-level cadres is rising. In the section ‘Xi Jinping’s personal experience and the importance he attaches to the selection of grassroots cadres’, we attempt to discern why Xi is emphasising the importance of grassroots governance. In the section ‘County party secretaries: “Tools” for use in governing the grassroots?’, we explore the function of the county party secretary and argue that for the CPC, grassroots cadres are being used as ‘tools’ for grassroots governance. Cadres with work experience as a county party secretary are not guaranteed a better chance of promotion to high-level positions. We then draw our conclusions.

## **A concept of analysis: Dual elite recruitment logic**

In relation to the concept used in our analysis, we will discuss three issues in the following subsections. First is the way in which the two categories of elites—senior and grassroots cadres—serve to strengthen political power at the centre and the grassroots, respectively. Second is the way in which Xi Jinping has changed the method of recruitment for these two categories of political elites in a bid to achieve his goals of strengthening his personal political power and enhancing local governance. Finally, we conclude that Xi has adjusted the norms governing the rejuvenation of the cadre body according to a ‘dual elite recruitment logic’.

## The political functions of the two categories of cadre and Xi's manipulation

Provincial/ministerial level cadres and county party secretaries, the 'key minority' particularly valued by Xi, are the elites discussed in this chapter. These two categories of cadre possess different political attributes and perform different functions.

Promotion to a provincial/ministerial-level post indicates that a cadre has entered the inner circle of CPC politics. The paramount leader's main source of power is the 'selectorate', composed mainly of members of the CPC Central Committee, the majority of whom are cadres at or above the provincial/ministerial level (Shirk, 1993, pp. 86–7).

Cadres at or above the provincial level are required to have an overall view of political work. Professional qualifications are not the party centre's major concern when it is promoting cadres to these positions. It is more a matter of their 'comprehensive qualities' (综合素质, *zonghe suzhi*), including their overall views (全局观, *quanjuguan*). Under Xi, a 'sense of alignment' (看齐意识, *kanqi yishi*)—that is, whether their attitude is aligned with Xi's own—is highly valued as part of their 'comprehensive qualities' (Lin, 2020).

In order for high-level and grassroots cadres to fulfil their respective functions as outlined above, Xi Jinping has manipulated cadre recruitment rules. His current obsession with consolidating his political power may have its roots in the Cultural Revolution in which he was a target of 'political struggle' (T. Lee, 2018, pp. 473–97; Torigian, 2018, pp. 7–15). Xi's other goal is to 'modernise the national governance system and governance capabilities'. This might explain his enthusiasm for grassroots governance, which exceeds that of his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Xi's pursuit of these two goals has caused him to change the policy of 'rejuvenating' the regime's cadres, which has gradually evolved since Jiang Zemin's time in office (Kou, 2010, pp. 269–309). As such, the current criteria for selecting senior and grassroots cadres differ from those of the past.

When appointing cadres to full provincial/ministerial-level posts, Xi pays particular attention to political loyalty as it is essential for the consolidation of his power (Wang & Zeng, 2016, pp. 470–81). A large number of Xi's confidants have been recruited to positions at this level, and his excessive emphasis on political loyalty has resulted in many cadres nearing retirement

age either remaining in office or being promoted. Rejuvenation has been halted, and the principle of age limits for promotion is no longer being adhered to.

County-level leading cadres, on the other hand, function differently. They are in charge of grassroots governance and situated far from the political power struggles of the CPC central leadership. In grassroots governance, county-level leaders have more discretionary power than provincial or prefecture-level city leaders. Governments above the county level are usually involved in laying down more abstract guiding principles, which county-level governments have to follow when they are devising detailed policies suited to local needs (Fan, 2008, p. 10; Heberer & Schubert, 2012, pp. 228–31).

Xi also wants to create a new cohort of grassroots cadres to strengthen local governance. To accelerate the promotion of grassroots cadres, several measures for ‘exceptional promotions’ (破格提拔, *pogē tībā*) have been adopted. ‘Exceptional promotion’ refers to promotions within two years of appointment to a post (Hu, 2020). One common practice is the ‘selected and transferred graduate’ (选调生, *xuandiao sheng*) system under which local governments sign contracts with universities to select talented graduates on an annual basis for posts in grassroots governments. This system came into operation in 1986. *Xuandiao sheng* usually start their careers in section-level posts handling important tasks such as poverty alleviation and economic development. For grassroots cadres, serving as *xuandiao sheng* is a fast track to promotion. *Xuandiao sheng* take a relatively shorter time to be promoted from section-level to county-level positions compared to other civil servants.

Although the *xuandiao sheng* system was not established during the Xi Jinping era, Xi encouraged local governments to increase the number of *xuandiao sheng* serving as public officials through the assistance of Chen Xi (陈希), head of the CPC Central Organisation Department and a close confidant of Xi. Through this *xuandiao sheng* mechanism, Xi promoted a large number of outstanding and young cadres to serve in county-level leadership positions (Xiao, 2012). This has been a critical promotion avenue for grassroots cadres during the Xi era that enables them to advance to county-level positions at relatively younger ages. The CPC has recruited a large number of university graduates since Xi came to power to work at the grassroots level through such channels (Tsai & Liao, 2019).

Under Xi Jinping, detailed regulations have been formulated governing the ‘exceptional promotion’ (破格提拔, *pogē tībā*) of grassroots cadres.<sup>7</sup> The aim is to cultivate a cohort of talented cadres to strengthen grassroots governance. In 2014, the CPC revised the ‘Regulations on the Selection and Appointment of Leading Cadres of the Party and Government’ (党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例, *dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong gongzuo tiaoli*, hereafter referred to as ‘the Regulations’) (‘Zhonggong Zhongyang Yinfā’, 2019). Standards for ‘exceptional promotions’ are mentioned in Article 9 of the 2014 version. These specify that cadres who accomplish important tasks can be swiftly promoted or even leapfrog over people above them:

[Cadres] who can withstand the test, have outstanding performance and make great contributions at critical moments or when they are undertaking urgent and risky tasks; those with outstanding work performance in regions or units with difficult conditions, in complex environments or in backward areas; and those who work earnestly and dutifully in their positions and whose work performance is particularly remarkable.

## Rejuvenation of cadres revisited

In the above discussion, we have attempted to clarify the logic of cadre recruitment under Xi Jinping. The relevant policies introduced after Xi took office have indeed brought about major changes in the operation of Chinese politics (Brødsgaard, 2018; Doyon, 2018). To achieve his goals—namely, the consolidation of his political power and the strengthening of grassroots governance—Xi has changed the promotion criteria for both senior and grassroots cadres. The pace of rejuvenation has been slowed for cadres at or above the full provincial/ministerial level, and, by ignoring the rules on terms of office, Xi has sought to consolidate his power by promoting his confidants. For grassroots cadres (particularly county party secretaries), he has mandated the selection and promotion of young and talented officials and subjected them to rigorous exposure and training. This dual elite recruitment logic for cadres under Xi Jinping is summarised in table 4.1.

7 Some other ‘exceptional promotion’ methods have been adopted, such as that of ‘college graduate village officials’ (大学生村官, *daxuesheng cun guan*) (G. He & Wang, 2017) who occupy temporary positions (挂职, *guazhi*) (Tsai & Liao, 2020, pp. 52–5).

**Table 4.1: Dual elite recruitment logic under Xi Jinping**

	Priority goals	
Argument from the literature	Consolidating power among the political elite	Strengthening grassroots governance
Landry, Lü and Duan's suggestions	Political allegiance prioritised in the recruitment of high-ranking cadres	Administrative ability prioritised in the recruitment of grassroots cadres
Supplementary point of view argued by the authors	To senior cadres, Xi disregards age norms to promote his associates; Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao had basically adhered to age norms to promote their associates	To grassroots cadres, Xi Jinping strengthened the use of 'exceptional promotions' to appoint young cadres as county party secretaries seen as 'tools' for governance and not necessarily intended for further promotions

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Landry, Lü and Duan (2018).

Xi Jinping prioritises political allegiance when recruiting cadres to provincial/ministerial-level posts, and in doing so he has to some extent disregarded age norms. As a result, the process of rejuvenation at this level has slowed and a large number of cadres from Xi's faction have been appointed. Through these practices, Xi aims to consolidate his power among the political elite. Concerning the system for recruiting county-level elites (this chapter mainly investigates the appointment of county party secretaries, 县委书记, *xianwei shuji*), the CPC aims to promote and train more competent young cadres (Schubert & Ahlers, 2012, pp. 67–86). In contrast to the situation under Hu Jintao, some cadres born since 1980 (the post-1980s generation who were younger than 40 in 2020) have been appointed to county party secretary posts. However, these young cadres are probably being used as tools by Xi. They are useful for improving governance at the grassroots but are likely to remain in county-level leadership posts for a long time without being offered promotions to provincial-level posts.

This dual elite recruitment logic on the one hand reflects the CPC's recent perception that 'rejuvenationism' (唯年轻化, *wei nianqinghua*) for senior cadres has gone too far and, on the other hand, Xi's desire to carry out 'modernisation of the national governance system and governance capabilities' (国家治理体系与治理能力现代化, *guojia zhili tixi yu zhili nengli xiandaihua*) (Xia, 2019). To consolidate his position in the party central and ensure the continuation of his political line, Xi has promoted cadres to full provincial/ministerial-level posts chiefly on the basis of their political loyalty. At the grassroots level, however, Xi recognises the necessity



of training up a cohort of young, vigorous cadres capable of reinforcing the CPC's hold on local governance and responding to the demands of society (Oi et al., 2012, pp. 649–75).

## Disregarding age limits and the rising average age of high-ranking officials

The main political function of high-ranking officials is to consolidate the power of the paramount leader. This has prompted paramount leaders throughout the history of the CPC regime to reserve provincial/ministerial-level posts for their associates. Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have all appointed trusted political cronies to key positions in the leadership, although they differ in their degree of adherence to age limit norms. There are two age limits: the mandatory retirement age and the age at which a cadre becomes ineligible for further promotions.<sup>8</sup> When cadres reach their mandatory retirement age, they are expected either to retire or to be transferred to 'second-front' posts. Both of these age limits originate from Deng Xiaoping's reform of the cadre system in the early 1980s, which involved the abolition of life tenure for leading posts (废除领导干部终身制, *feichu lingdao ganbu zhongshenzhi*) and the promotion of 'more revolutionary, younger, better educated and more professionally competent' (革命化, 年轻化, 知识化, 专业化, *geminghua, nianqinghua, zhishihua, zhuanqiyehua*) cadres. This system developed and became customary under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

Jiang and Hu promoted their close associates—members of the Shanghai clique in Jiang's case and cadres with a Youth League background in Hu's—to leading posts, but they did so in line with the above-mentioned age limits. In contrast, Xi Jinping is prepared to disregard these age limits, and the limits have lost their binding force for this reason. We examined records of 268 civilian cadres with CPC membership who were holding full ministerial or deputy state leader positions in central or provincial party organs or governments between November 2012 and October 2020. We found that 13 of these were in breach of the mandatory retirement age and that 40 had been promoted in violation of the age limit for promotion (see table 4.2). There have been more cases of the violation of age limits since Xi came to power than there were under Hu Jintao. For example,

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of changes in age limits since the 1980s, see Kou (2010, pp. 138–40, 188–91, 194–6, 271–3). For more discussion of the age at which cadres become ineligible for promotion, see Kou and Tsai (2014, pp. 156–7).

Wang Qishan (王岐山, born July 1948) retired from the CPC Politburo Standing Committee in October 2017 but was elected vice president of the PRC in March 2018. He would have been expected to retire at the age of 68.

**Table 4.2: Retirement and promotion age limits for CPC cadres and violations of those limits, November 2012–October 2020**

Position/rank	Age of ineligibility for promotion	Violation cases*	Mandatory retirement age	Violation cases*
State leader (正国, <i>zhengguo</i> )	n/a	n/a	68**	1 (0, 1)
Deputy state leader (副国, <i>fuguo</i> )				
Minister (正部, <i>zhengbu</i> )	64	0	65	10 (0, 10)
Deputy minister (副部, <i>fubu</i> )	58	41 (6, 35)	60	2 (0, 2)

\* A case is defined as a violation if the cadre is promoted 12 months after reaching the age of ineligibility for promotion or remains in power 12 months after reaching the mandatory retirement age. The first number within the parentheses in the violation cases cell represents the number of violations during the Hu era, while the second number refers to cases during the Xi era.

\*\* A leader should no longer seek re-election after the age of 68, although they can remain in office until the end of their term.

Source: Kou (2012). Cases were calculated and tabulated by the authors.

Under Xi Jinping, there have been 10 cases of cadres remaining in a provincial/ministerial post beyond the mandatory retirement age of 65. In late 2019, Luo Huining (骆惠宁, born October 1954) was appointed as deputy head of the Finance and Economic Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress, having previously been the party secretary of Shanxi Province. This is a typical personnel arrangement for newly retired cadres of full ministerial rank. However, his appointment as director of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in Hong Kong in January 2020 violates the age limit of 65 years. He Yiting (何毅亭, born 1952) continued to serve as executive vice president of the CPC Central Party School until December 2020 despite being over 65. No executive presidents of the Central Party School violated this rule while Hu Jintao

was in power.<sup>9</sup> In another example, Chen Hao (陈豪, born February 1954) retired as party secretary of Yunnan province in November 2020 when he was approaching 67.

The mandatory retirement age for cadres at the deputy provincial/ministerial level is 60. However, Lin Duo (林铎, born March 1956) advanced to full ministerial rank as party secretary of Gansu province at the age of 61 in March 2017 after having previously held a deputy ministerial rank. Liu Kun (刘昆, born December 1956) retired as deputy minister of finance in December 2016 at the age of 60 and was transferred to the National People's Congress. In March 2018, however, he came out of retirement to take up a front-line position as minister of finance.

The rules on age limits for promotion have been significantly weakened since Xi Jinping came to power. For example, Fu Zhenghua (傅政华, born March 1955) was promoted to full ministerial rank in March 2015 as executive deputy head of the Ministry of Public Security. Yu Weiguo (于伟国, born October 1955) was appointed governor of Fujian province in January 2016, his first full ministerial-level post. These promotions all violate the age limit of 58 years for cadres at the deputy ministerial level. Other close associates of Xi Jinping have also been promoted in violation of the age limits, including Cai Qi (蔡奇), Liu He (刘鹤), Liu Cigui (刘赐贵), Wang Xiaohong (王小洪), Yang Xiaodu (杨晓渡) and Ying Yong (应勇).

The average age of full ministerial-level cadres has also risen under Xi Jinping compared to his predecessors. We have examined the age distribution of full provincial/ministerial-level cadres (including leaders of provincial party committees, provincial governments and the State Council) at the beginning of their terms of office over the past two decades. There are a total of 363 cases (see table 4.3). Another 42 individuals are excluded from the analysis because they concurrently held a post at deputy state leader level. For example, Beijing party secretaries are also members of the CPC Politburo. Their mandatory retirement age is 68 rather than 65, so they are older on average than their full provincial/ministerial-level colleagues.

The ages in these 363 cases averaged at 58.2 in 2003, 57.9 in 2008, 59.0 in 2013 and 59.8 in 2018. This means that ranking cadres in the Hu era could remain in service for seven years on average after advancing to full

9 Yu Yunyao (虞云耀) and Li Jingtian (李景田) both retired at age 65. Su Rong (苏荣) left the post and became party secretary of Jiangxi province before he was 65 years old.

ministerial rank, whereas they served for an average of five to six years under Xi Jinping. Two additional findings reveal an increase in the average age of ranking cadres. From the Hu era to the Xi era, the number of cases in the age range of 61–65 steadily increased from 2003 to 2018 while those in the age range of 56–60 decreased. The number of cases under 55 years of age also decreased under Xi Jinping. These findings are displayed in table 4.3.

**Table 4.3: The ageing of full ministerial-level cadres from the Hu era to the Xi era**

Year	Age range						Cases	Average	Minimum	Maximum
	41–45	46–50	51–55	56–60	61–65	66–70				
2003	2	6	8	54	26	0	94	58.2	46.3	64
2008	0	2	19	37	32	0	92	57.9	44.8	64
2013	0	6	10	42	35	1	90	59.0	46.1	67.4
2018	0	1	12	29	44	1	87	59.8	49.1	65.5

\*The ranking cadres under analysis are provincial party secretaries, governors and leading officials of full ministerial rank in the General Office of the State Council, constituent departments of the State Council (国务院组成部门, *guowuyuan zucheng bumen*), special organisations directly under the State Council (国务院直属特设机构, *guowuyuan zhishu teshe jigou*), organisations directly under the State Council (国务院直属机构, *guowuyuan zhishu jigou*) and the administrative offices of the State Council (国务院办事机构, *guowuyuan banshi jigou*).

\*\*The data were accessed on 1 August 2003, 2008, 2013 and 2018. Forty individuals have been counted two or three times in different age ranges owing to the length of their terms of office.

Source: Kou (2012). The cases were calculated and tabulated by the authors.

## Xi Jinping's personal experience and the importance he attaches to the selection of grassroots cadres

Another level of leadership discussed in this chapter consists of grassroots cadres whose political function lies mainly in local governance. Here we pay particular attention to the recruitment of county party secretaries. Xi Jinping has emphasised the importance of governance at the county level, something that might be attributable to his early experience as an official in Ding County, Hebei (河北定县, Hebei Dingxian) in the 1980s. A decade later, Xi penned an article on the importance of county party secretaries in which he wrote the following:

I once served as a county party secretary and whenever I talked with my colleagues, we always complained in much the same way: our ranks were not high, but neither were our responsibilities small. If the country is compared to a net, then the three thousand or so counties are like the knots (纽结, *niujie*) in this net. Once the ‘knots’ get loose, political unrest will occur in the country; if the ‘knots’ are strong and reliable, the political situation will be stable. No state decrees and ordinances would fail to be thoroughly implemented through the counties. Therefore, in view of the relationship between the whole and the part, the rise or fall and the safety or danger, of the country depends on whether work at the county-level is good or bad. (Study Group, 2015, p. 64)

An article on the People’s Net website also underlines the importance that Xi Jinping attaches to the functions of the county party secretary (*Renmin Wang* [人民网], 2015a). Jiao Yulu (焦裕录) is one such party secretary who served in Henan province in the 1960s. He has been held up by Xi Jinping as a model (Zhongguo Gongqingtuan, 2016). Xi has been quoted as saying, ‘to serve as a county party secretary, one has to be a Jiao Yulu–style county party secretary’. Xi launched a movement to learn from Jiao Yulu in 2014, and he is convinced that the experience a cadre gains while serving as a county party secretary forms the cornerstone of one’s career.

Xi is opposed to party and government leaders rising to power through the Communist Youth League. In 2016, he issued regulations stipulating that Youth League cadres must have ‘a clear orientation of not “becoming an official”’. Xi has therefore limited the role of the league, making it refocus on youth work so that it will never again serve as a springboard for career advancement.<sup>10</sup> Instead, cadres aspiring to rise through the ranks should first hone their governing skills through work as county party secretaries.

The Central Party School organised a series of ‘county party secretary workshops’ (县委书记研修班, *xianwei shuji yanxiuban*) in 2014, and by the end of 2017, every county party secretary in the country had attended this two-month course taught by heads of central government departments and commissions as well as by regular lecturers. One compulsory set text was *Xi Jinping on the Governance of China* (习近平谈治国理政, *xi jinping tan zhiuguo lizheng*), and Xi personally delivered an address at every graduation

---

10 Before Xi Jinping came to power, Communist Youth League cadres had to be transferred to party and government departments before they reached a certain age. As a result, when league cadres were transferred, they were usually younger than non-league cadres of the same level.

ceremony (Chu, 2015). Xi tried to make the acquaintance of as many outstanding county party secretaries as possible so that he would know who should be later promoted (*Renmin Wang*, 2015a).

Xi also values national awards for outstanding county party secretaries. These awards were introduced by the Central Organisation Department in 1995, although they lapsed after the first year. Xi revived them in 2015 when around a hundred outstanding county party secretaries were commended. Since then, he has presented the awards in person each year. In his speech at the 2015 award ceremony, Xi said that ‘peace will descend on the country when the prefectures and counties are in order’ (郡县治，天下安, *junxian zhi, tianxia an*) and that ‘county party committees are the “first line of command” (一线指挥部, *yixian zhibuibu*) of our party in governing and rejuvenating our country and county party secretaries are the “first-line commanders-in-chief”’ (*Renmin Wang*, 2015b).

There are presently several cadres who were born after 1980 (80后, *ba ling hou*) serving as county party secretaries. There were fewer cadres in their thirties holding similar positions under Hu Jintao (Tsai & Liao, 2019, pp. 951–4) or under Jiang Zemin (see table 4.4).

**Table 4.4: County party secretaries in their thirties under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping**

Leader Cadre	Hu Jintao	Xi Jinping
Name, year of appointment, age	Dong Yuyi, 2012, 31	Yang Zunfeng, 2012, 32; Zhang Hui, 2013, 33; Zhou Senfeng, 2013, 33; Zhou Mi, 2014, 32; Li Teng, 2014, 32; Liu Kai, 2015, 32; Jin Li, 2015, 35; Wang Xiwei, 2016, 35; Yao Ning, 2019, 34; Zheng Shao, 2019, 39; Qiu Ling, 2019, 37; Su Jianjun, 2019, 38; Huang Xiuhang, 2020, 39; Ma Ju, 2020, 39; He Yefang, 2020, 34; Li Ming, 2020, 38; Hu Haiyang, 2020, 39; Hanxu, 2020, 38
Number	1	18

Source: Search engines Google and Baidu.

It is reasonable to expect that there are even more cadres in their thirties or even younger who presently serve as county governors or township leading cadres. Owing to a lack of data, we cannot precisely conclude that the average age of county-level leading cadres has been lower under Xi Jinping than when Hu Jintao was the CPC general secretary. What can be said with certainty is that more county party secretaries in their thirties have

been singled out as model cadres in the Xi era and that this has encouraged regional governments to actively recruit younger cadres as county-level leaders (Zhang, 2016).

## County party secretaries: ‘Tools’ for use in governing the grassroots?

While the CPC’s emphasis on grassroots governance under Xi Jinping has encouraged the appointment of younger cadres to positions as county party secretaries, we argue that these cadres are not necessarily being promoted to higher-ranking posts. In short, the CPC is treating them as ‘tools’ for grassroots governance. As mentioned above, Xi Jinping has underlined their importance with the example of Jiao Yulu, a county party secretary from the 1960s. He has, however, asked cadres to ‘focus on your contribution to the people instead of pursuing high-ranking posts’ (*Renmin Wang*, 2020). In other words, he expects county party secretaries to dedicate themselves to grassroots governance instead of using their county posts as a springboard for promotion.

Cadres named as ‘National Outstanding County Party Secretaries’ tend to be older than expected (see table 4.5). No cadres in their thirties received the award in 2015; the average age is 50.21. Twenty-seven of the recipients were in their forties, including Zhang Xiaoqiang (张晓强, 40), Meng Lingxing (孟令兴, 41), Chen Junlin (陈俊林, 41, whereabouts uncertain), Zhang Xia (张霞, 42, female and an ethnic minority), Ji Jianjun (吉建军, 43), Zhang Dingcheng (张定成, 43), Hu Qisheng (胡启生, 44), Ren Houming (任厚明, 44), Yang Fasen (杨发森, 44), Chen Xingjia (陈行甲, 44, who later transferred to the private sector), Lin Hongyu (林红玉, 45), Li Junxia (李君霞, 45), Liao Guisheng (廖桂生, 45), Xiong Zhengyu (熊征宇, 45), Wang Xiaojiang (王晓江, 46), Sun Juxian (孙巨先, 46), Sun Jingmin (孙京民, 47), Liao Junbo (廖俊波, 47, later deceased), Zeng Yu (曾瑜, 47, female), Wang Hongbin (王洪斌, 48), Zheng Guangquan (郑光泉, 48), Nan Pei (南培, 48 and an ethnic minority), Li Jianfeng (李建锋, 49), Liu Xianwei (刘先伟, 49), Zhou Xin (周新, 49), Jiang Gang (蒋刚, 49) and Feng Zhendong (冯振东, 49, suspended from duty for corruption).

**Table 4.5: Data on recipients of the National Outstanding County Party Secretaries Award, 2015**

Rank in 2020 Content	County level	Deputy department level	Department level	Deputy provincial/ministerial level	Other
Number of people	4	62	16	9	Suspended: 8 Deceased: 1 Transferred to the private sector: 1 Whereabouts uncertain: 1
The average age in 2015	50.21				

Source: Huanqiu Wang (2020); Google and Baidu.

Of the recipients of the award, nine now hold deputy ministerial-level posts. They are, however, relatively old, with one being 63, one 60, two 59, one 58, two 57, one 56 and one 55. Indeed, the recipients tended to be older than several other young deputy provincial/ministerial-level cadres in 2020, such as vice chair of the Tibet Autonomous Region Ren Wei (43); vice governor of Jiangxi province Wu Hao (48); vice chair of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Lai Jiao (48); vice governor of Zhejiang province Liu Xiaotao (50); or Zhou Hongbo of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (50). The youngest award recipient in 2015, Zhang Xiaoqiang (now 45), is the department-level party secretary of Shantou. He was not competitive in terms of age compared to other young department-level cadres in 2020, such as the general manager of the Lu'an Company, Liu Junyi (39), or party secretary of the Henan Province Communist Youth League Wang Yi (40, female).

Judging from the above, we suggest that the CPC uses county party secretaries as 'tools' for governing the grassroots and does not necessarily consider them as candidates for high-ranking posts. Although they might have been fast-tracked into county party secretary posts, their subsequent careers have generally slowed or even stagnated, indicating that the CPC plans to keep these cadres in low-level posts for the long term.

Another example of a county party secretary whose career has stalled is Zhou Senfeng (周森锋), a selected and transferred graduate (*Renmin Wang*, 2019) who was appointed to a deputy division-level leading cadre post at 28, promoted to the division head level at 29 and had become a district



party secretary (equivalent to a county party secretary) by the age of 33. As of 2020, Zhou (40 years old) had been at the county party secretary level for six years. This is further proof that the CPC intends this group of cadres to continue in grassroots governance. As they are younger, they have the ability to remain in their posts until they achieve results. What is of greater importance is that these cadres might not be candidates for leading positions at or above the ministerial level. In particular, they are unlikely to be seen as future political successors (H. He, 2015, pp. 36–8).

## Conclusion

Xi Jinping is trying to consolidate his power among senior cadres and strengthen grassroots governance using a new cadre recruitment policy shaped by dual elite recruitment logic. He has slowed down the rejuvenation of the leadership at or above the full provincial/ministerial level, interrupting the terms of office of cadres to prevent high-level ones from developing power bases and threatening his authority. In this way, Xi will be able to extend his term as general secretary beyond the 20th Party Congress, and, in an effort to strengthen grassroots governance, he has overseen the selection and promotion of young and spirited cadres to serve as grassroots leaders, particularly county party secretaries. However, it has been observed that while many county party secretaries were younger than 40 when they were appointed, they are unlikely to achieve a swift promotion to such positions as division head or bureau director. This seems to indicate that Xi wishes to keep them at the grassroots to solve local social and economic problems. Will these selected and transferred graduates be promoted to higher positions in the future? It is difficult to answer this question as Xi's cadre recruitment system began less than a decade ago, and more time must be devoted to observing its future development.

Xi Jinping's adoption of a dual elite recruitment logic may largely be explained by his determination to modernise China's governance system during his term of office. Although Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao emphasised the importance of grassroots governance, they did not quickly promote a large number of outstanding young people to serve as county-level leaders in the way that Xi Jinping did, breaking certain conventions. In other words, a difference in the degree of intensity may be identified between Xi and his predecessors regarding the speed with which outstanding young people are selected to serve as grassroots leaders. In his recruitment policy

for senior cadres, Xi Jinping acts fundamentally differently from Jiang and Hu. Xi Jinping values cadre loyalty above other factors, such as age. Xi Jinping has recruited some who are close to him, despite their being near or past retirement age, to important positions. This did not occur under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintou.

Xi Jinping's particular practice has also caused Chinese politics under his administration to take a different path from the way it has tended to go in the past. Unlike Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, who are willing to give subordinates more power, Xi Jinping has a near monopoly on political authority. One factor influencing Xi's decision to dispense with the previous recruitment system has been his reluctance to make arrangements for a successor by allowing other leaders to share some of his power as his predecessors Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin did. Some authorities hold that dictators seek to gain support from their colleagues by sharing power (Magaloni, 2008, pp. 715–41). However, this theory has been challenged in present-day China. Xi intends to extend his rule beyond the 20th Party Congress and purge any cadres who oppose him, thus treading a winner-takes-all path.

What, then, are China's political prospects? At least in the short run, the regime is likely to exhibit the characteristics of authoritarian resilience (Nathan, 2003, pp. 6–17; Shambaugh, 2008). However, if there arise serious unforeseen problems such as a threat to Xi's life or a deterioration in his health, the lack of an appointed successor could spark an intense power struggle at the top. Even if grassroots-level cadres perform exceptionally well, the overall political situation in China will still be seriously affected if the central leadership is destabilised. As Xi appears to have dispensed with the conventions and regulations governing political succession so that he can concentrate power in his own hands, his greatest mistake has perhaps been his failure to institutionalise any new procedures for succession.

## References

- Bo, Z. (2004) 'The institutionalisation of elite management in China.' In  *Holding China Together: Diversity and National Integration in the Post-Deng Era*, ed. B.J. Naughton & D.L. Yang, pp. 70–100. Cambridge University Press
- Brødsgaard, K.E. (2018) 'China's political order under Xi Jinping: Concepts and perspectives.' *China: An International Journal* 16(3): 1–17. doi.org/10.1353/chn.2018.0022

- Chu, X. [储信艳] (2015) 'Jiemi zhongyang dangxiao xianwei shuji yanxiuban' [揭秘中央党校县委书记研修班, Revealing the secret of the County Party Secretary Workshop of the Central Party School]. Xinhua Net [新华网], January. [www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-01/14/c\\_127385318.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-01/14/c_127385318.htm)
- Doyon, J. (2018) 'Clientelism by design: Personnel politics under Xi Jinping.' *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47(3): 87–110. [doi.org/10.1177/186810261804700304](https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261804700304)
- Egorov, G., & Sonin, K. (2011) 'Dictators and their viziers: Endogenizing the loyalty-competence trade-off.' *Journal of the European Economic Association* 9(5): 903–30. [doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-4774.2011.01033.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-4774.2011.01033.x)
- Fan, H. [樊红敏] (2008) *Xianyu Zhengzhi: Quanli Shijian Yu Richang Zhixu* [县域政治：权力实践与日常秩序, County politics: The practice of power and order of the day]. China Social Sciences Press
- He, G., & Wang, S. (2017) 'Do college graduates serving as village officials help rural China?' *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 9(4): 186–215. [doi.org/10.1257/app.20160079](https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20160079)
- He, H. [贺海峰] (2015) '100 ming xian wei shuji de 20 nian' [100名县委书记的20年, 20 years of 100 County Party Secretaries]. *Juece* [决策, Decision-Making], Z1: 36–8
- Heberer, T., & Schubert, G. (2012) 'County and township cadres as a strategic group: A new approach to political agency in China's local state.' *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 17(3): 221–49. [doi.org/10.1007/s11366-012-9200-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-012-9200-8)
- Huanqiu Wang (环球网, 2020) 'Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu guanyu biao Zhang quanguo youxiu xianwei shuji de jue ding' [中共中央组织部关于表彰全国优秀县委书记的决定, The CPC Central Organisation Department's decision on honoring national outstanding county party secretaries]. 4 November. [china.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJMBck](http://china.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJMBck)
- Kou, C.W. [寇健文] (2010) *Zhonggong Jingying Zhengzhi De Yanbian: Zhidubua Yu Quanli Zhuanyi 1978–2010* [中共菁英政治的演变：制度化与权力转移1978–2010, The evolution of CPC elite politics: Institutionalisation and the transfer of power, 1978–2010]. Wunan
- (2012) *Zhonggong Zhengzhi Jinying Ziliaoku* [中共政治菁英数据库, Chinese political elite dataset]. Retrieved from National Chengchi University: [cped.nccu.edu.tw/](http://cped.nccu.edu.tw/)
- Kou, C.W., & Tsai, W.H. (2014) "Sprinting with small steps" towards promotion: Solutions for the age dilemma in the CCP cadre appointment system.' *China Journal* 71: 155–75. [doi.org/10.1086/674558](https://doi.org/10.1086/674558)

- Landry, P.F., Lü, X., & Duan, H. (2018) 'Does performance matter? Evaluating political selection along the Chinese administrative ladder.' *Comparative Political Studies* 51(8): 1074–105. doi.org/10.1177/0010414017730078
- Lee, S. (2017) 'An institutional analysis of Xi Jinping's centralisation of power.' *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(105): 325–36. doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2016.1245505
- Lee, T. (2018) 'Can Xi Jinping be the next Mao Zedong? Using the big five model to study political leadership.' *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23: 473–97. doi.org/10.1007/s11366-018-9540-0
- Lin, Q. [林巧婷] (2020) 'Xi Jinping zai shengbuji zhuyao lingdao ganbu zhuanqi yantaoban shang fabiao jianghua' [习近平在省部级主要领导干部专题研讨班上发表讲话, Xi Jinping's address to the special subject class of provincial level leading cadres]. Zhongyang Zhengfu Menhu Wangzhan [中央政府门户网站, Central Government Portal], 15 December. www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-02/02/content\_2813544.htm
- Magaloni, B. (2008) 'Credible power-sharing and the longevity of authoritarian rule.' *Comparative Political Studies* 41(4/5): 715–41. doi.org/10.1177/0010414007313124
- Minzner, C. (2018) *End of an Era: How China's Authoritarian Revival is Undermining Its Rise*. Oxford University Press
- Nathan, A. (2003) 'China's changing of the guard: Authoritarian resilience.' *Journal of Democracy* 14(1): 6–17. doi.org/10.1353/jod.2003.0019
- Oi, J.C., Babiarz, K.S., Zhang, L., Luo, R., & Rozelle, S. (2012) 'Shifting fiscal control to limit cadre power in China's townships and villages.' *China Quarterly* 211: 640–75. doi.org/10.1017/S0305741012000823
- Renmin Wang* (人民网, 2015a) 'Anhui shengwei fushuji Li Jinbin jieren Anhui daishengzhang' [安徽省委副书记李锦斌接任安徽代省长, Deputy Anhui Party Secretary Li Jinbin takes office as acting governor of Anhui]. June. politics.people.com.cn/BIG5/n/2015/0609/c70731-27123060.html
- (2015b) 'Xi Jinping: Junxian zhi, tianxia an' [习近平：郡县治，天下安, Xi Jinping: Peace will descend on the country if the prefectures and counties are in order]. 1 July. society.people.com.cn/n/2015/0701/c136657-27233342.html
- (2019) 'Dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong gongzuo tiaoli' [党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例, Regulations on the selection and appointment of leading cadres of the party and government]. 18 March. cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2019/0318/c419242-30980036.html

- (2020) ‘Xi Jinping: Buqiu “guan” you duoda, dan qiu wukui yu min’ [习近平：不求「官」有多大，但求无愧于民, Xi Jinping: Focus on your contribution to the people instead of pursuing high-ranking posts]. 23 November. theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0705/c40531-22087040.html
- Schubert, G., & Ahlers, A.L. (2012) ‘County and township cadres as a strategic group: “Building a new socialist countryside” in three provinces.’ *China Journal* 67: 67–86. doi.org/10.1086/665740
- Shambaugh, D.L. (2008) *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation*. University of California Press
- Shirk, S.L. (1993) *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China*. University of California Press
- (2018) ‘China in Xi’s “new era”: The return to personalistic rule.’ *Journal of Democracy* 29(2): 22–36. doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0022
- Study Group [学习小组] (2015) ‘Xi Jinping: Guanyu xianwei shuji de “yi er san si” [习近平：关于县委书记的「一二三四」, Xi Jinping: Some things concerning county party secretaries]. *Xianfeng* [先锋] 6: 64
- Torigian, J. (2018) ‘Historical legacies and leaders’ worldviews: Communist Party history and Xi’s learned (and unlearned) lessons.’ *China Perspectives* 2018 (1–2): 7–15. doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.7548
- Tsai, W.H., & Liao, X. (2019) ‘The impending rise of the “Tsinghua clique”: Cultivation, transfer and relationships in Chinese elite politics.’ *Journal of Contemporary China* 28(120): 948–64. doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1594106
- (2020) ‘Mobilising cadre incentives in policy implementation: Poverty alleviation in a Chinese county.’ *China Information* 34(1): 45–67. doi.org/10.1177/0920203X19887787
- Walder, A. (1995) ‘Career mobility and the communist political order.’ *American Sociological Review* 60(3): 309–28. doi.org/10.2307/2096416
- Wang, Z., & Zeng, J. (2016) ‘Xi Jinping: The game changer of Chinese elite politics?’ *Contemporary Politics* 22(4): 470–81. doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1175098
- Xia, J. [夏锦文] (2019) ‘Guojia zhili tixi he zhili nengli xiandaihua de Zhongguo tansuo’ [国家治理体系和治理能力现代化的中国探索, A Chinese exploration of the modernisation of the national governance system and governance capability]. *Renmin Wang* [人民网], 29 November. cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2019/1119/c430519-31462903.html

- Xiao, G. [肖桂国] (2012) Xuan Diaosheng: Zhongguo Tese Ganbu Houbei Liliang [选调生：中国特色干部后备力量, Selected and transferred students: The strength of cadre reserves with Chinese characteristics]. World Book
- Xinhua Net (2020) 'Xi Jinping yanzhong de "guanjian shaoshu" you shenme teshu hanyi' [习近平眼中的「关键少数」有什么特殊含义, What are the implications of the 'key minority' put forward by Xi Jinping]. 17 November. [www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-02/03/c\\_1117976900.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-02/03/c_1117976900.htm)
- Zang, X. (2004) *Elite Dualism and Leadership Selection in China*. Routledge Curzon
- (2005) 'Institutionalisation and elite behaviour in reform China.' *Issues and Studies* 41(1): 204–17
- Zhang, Q. [章强] (2016) '80 hou xianwei shuji xianzhang hen hanjian? Hubei yijing you zheme duo le' [80后县委书记县长很罕见？湖北已经有这么多了, Are county party secretaries and county governors born after 1980 rare? There have already been this many in Hubei]. Sohu Wang [搜狐网]. [www.sohu.com/a/116378076\\_355684](http://www.sohu.com/a/116378076_355684)
- Zhongguo Gongqingtuan [中国共青团, Chinese Communist Youth League] (2016) Gongqingtuan zhongyang gaige fangan [共青团中央改革方案, Reform plan for the Communist Youth League], August. [www.gqt.org.cn/notice/201608/P020160809382774540571.pdf](http://www.gqt.org.cn/notice/201608/P020160809382774540571.pdf)

This text is taken from *Political and Social Control in China: The Consolidation of Single-Party Rule*, edited by Ben Hillman and Chien-wen Kou, published 2024 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/PSCC.2024.04](https://doi.org/10.22459/PSCC.2024.04)