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“Sprinting with Small Steps” Towards Promotion: Solutions for the Age Dilemma in the CCP Cadre Appointment System

Chien-Wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai

ABSTRACT

Within the operational procedures of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cadre appointment system, age restrictions hinder cadre promotion. As a result, three different methods have emerged to bypass these restrictions, allowing officials to attain faster promotion. These three methods are the Communist Youth League route, temporary transferred duty and non-regulation promotion. This article will explain the age restriction system, and then outline the three methods and discuss their impact on the appointment system as a whole. The examples of Zhou Qiang and Lu Hao, rising political stars, demonstrate how these methods are used to gain substantial age advantages for successful career progression.

Since the 1980s, Western scholars have been applying the Soviet concept of *Nomenklatura* to analyses of the CCP cadre appointment system,¹ revealing how this Chinese institution emulates the Soviet model by emphasizing the role of superior supervising units in selecting officials for appointment to important government or Party positions. Top-down appointment systems may not be a unique mechanism of Soviet-style regimes; heads of government in democratic countries also have the right to select many of their civil servants. However, the crucial difference is that in China each and every rank and type of official has been appointed through a system of top-down appointment. The CCP introduced this system during the Yan'an era in order to put into practice the principle of Party control of cadres (*dang guan ganbu* 党管干部);² the system was reformulated after

1. *Nomenklatura* refers to the top-down appointment of cadres at every rank in order to maintain a system in which the Party is in complete control of cadre personnel management. For more on this topic, see John P. Burns, “China’s *Nomenklatura* System”, *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (September–October 1987), pp. 36–51; Melanie Manion, “The Cadre Management System, Post-Mao: The Appointment, Promotion, Transfer and Removal of Party and State Leaders”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 102 (June 1985), pp. 212–19; Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, “Management of Party Cadres in China”, in Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard and Zheng Yongnian (eds), *Bringing the Party Back In: How China is Governed* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004), p. 74.

2. Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers* (New York: Harper, 2010), p. 73.

the founding of the PRC in 1949, but has nevertheless continued to the present. Despite reforms, serious institutional shortcomings remain in the system, including nepotism and favoritism, issues particularly prevalent in the 1980s.³

There is another less prominent but equally challenging problem with the CCP's appointment mechanism. The need to maintain order and stability within this rigid system is at odds with the Party leadership's desire for increased rejuvenation and vitality. This contradiction results in an "age dilemma" within the promotion track of CCP cadres. As a result of systemic flaws, in particular the introduction of age limits on promotion after the 1980s, ambitious CCP cadres are compelled to seek promotion as rapidly as possible, to avoid premature and permanent career stagnation. In 2011, the *Southern Daily* newspaper printed the intriguing headline: "Open Nomination Allows Young Cadres to Sprint with Small Steps [Towards Promotion]".⁴ "Sprinting with small steps" (*xiao bu kuai pao* 小步快跑) is not merely a snappy media buzzword. Cadres who fail to get into the "fast track" for promotion early on end up trapped in lower positions for the remainder of their careers. Thus, within the CCP system, mechanisms have already emerged to assist younger cadres in their race for promotion, allowing them to sprint ahead through a series of progressive small steps. This phenomenon is breaking the tradition of seniority within the CCP, allowing talented young cadres to reach high positions quickly.

Of course, the fact that officials strive for promotion is nothing out of the ordinary. However, within Western democratic bureaucracy, the clean split between political appointees and civil servants helps to avoid the age dilemma. While the civil service certainly does involve step-by-step promotion similar to that of the CCP cadre appointment system, meaning that age could become a hindrance to career development, political appointees are chosen through elections, and both their entrance into and exit from the political sphere are dictated by the public. This relative flexibility means that there is little need to standardize the ages for promotion or retirement for political appointees, allowing ambitious hopefuls to take their time and accrue experience before potentially taking huge leaps in their career. Within the CCP system, the concept and role of the "cadre" (*ganbu* 干部) encompasses aspects of both civil servants and political appointees,⁵ and

3. John P. Burns, "The Chinese Communist Party's *Nomenklatura* System as a Leadership Selection Mechanism: An Evaluation", in Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard and Zheng Yongnian (eds), *The Chinese Communist Party in Reform* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 53.

4. "Gong xuan rang nianqing ganbu 'xiao bu kuai pao'" (Open Nomination Allows Young Cadres to "Sprint with Small Steps"), *Nanfang ribao* (Southern Daily), 15 July 2011, AIII 2.

5. In recent years, the CCP has begun to make use of the term *guojia gongwuyuan* (national civil servant), a concept ostensibly modeled on Western-style civil service. In fact, it remains the equivalent of the more traditional term *ganbu* (cadre). The CCP's *gongwuyuan* remain very different from Western civil servants. For some discussion of the *guojia gongwuyuan* reform, see John P. Burns and Wang Xiaoqi, "Civil Service Reform in China: Impacts on Civil Servants' Behaviour", *The China Quarterly*, No. 201 (March 2010), pp. 58–78.

lacks the flexibility of the electoral mechanism. As a result, the age dilemma has emerged within the system.

This article attempts to paint a true picture of the race for promotion within official circles of the CCP. It will firstly explain the age dilemma in detail, and then move on to outline each of the three main mechanisms for invigorating the CCP’s cadre management system, through which cadres are enabled to attain faster promotion and circumvent the dilemma. These three methods are the Communist Youth League route (*Gongqingtuan tujing* 共青团途径), temporary transferred duty (*guazhi duanlian* 挂职锻炼) and non-regulation promotion (*poge tiba* 破格提拔). Two of these, the Communist Youth League (CYL) route and temporary transferred duty, are mechanisms rooted in Maoist history which have now been tweaked to meet current needs.⁶ Non-regulation promotion, the third mechanism, emerged during the post-Mao period.⁷

THE AGE DILEMMA IN CADRE PROMOTION: YOUTHFUL REJUVENATION VS. REGULATED TENURE

Age contradictions permeate the appointment system. On the one hand, the CCP has emphasized the necessity of rejuvenation and the promotion of youth by advancing younger cadres and restricting the promotion of aging officials.⁸ On the other, the Party has also simultaneously established strict, stabilizing provisions for lengths of official tenure in order to ensure gradual, step-by-step career progression⁹ and avoid the unregulated and disorderly promotion seen during the Cultural Revolution. Although young cadres may strive to get ahead, they are

6. The literature points out that many of today’s CCP institutions are closely related to the Party’s historical traditions. Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, “Embracing Uncertainty: Guerrilla Policy Style and Adaptive Governance in China”, in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds), *Mao’s Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, distributed by Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 1–29.

7. In addition to these three key methods, there is another notable way in which cadres may accrue an age advantage. Some high-flying state-owned-enterprise cadres or academics from outside the system are able to transfer to high ranks within the Party; as the fields of business and academia are not subject to age restrictions (apart from retirement age), it is thus possible to achieve an age advantage in this way. However, those able to reach the pinnacle in a state-owned enterprise or in the academic world possess considerable expertise and are by no means run-of-the-mill. The three key methods discussed in this article are available to all cadres and are within the limits of the Party system. For more on transfers into the upper Party ranks from outside fields, see Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, “Politics and Business Group Formation in China: The Party in Control?”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 211 (September 2012), pp. 624–48.

8. See Bo Zhiyue, *China’s Elite Politics: Governance and Democratization* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), pp. 19–47; Yongnian Zheng, “The 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party: Institutionalization of Succession Politics”, in Weixing Chen and Yang Zhong (eds), *Leadership in a Changing China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 16–18.

9. Kou Chien-Wen, *Zhonggong jingying zhengzhi de yanbian: zhidu hua yu quanli zhuan yi 1978–2012* (The Evolution of Elite Politics in the CCP: Institutionalization and Power Shift 1978–2012) (Taipei: Wunan Press, 2012), p. 269.

restricted by the system's over-emphasis on regulated, lengthy periods of tenure. The age dilemma in the cadre promotion system occurs as a result of the concurrent operation of these two conflicting principles.

CCP cadres are divided into ten ranks,¹⁰ which are in turn managed by authorities at different levels. In general, cadres from the ranks of State Leadership to Deputy Ministry are managed or appointed by the Central Organization Department and are thus known as Centrally Managed Cadres (*zhong guan ganbu* 中管干部).¹¹ Bureau and Deputy Bureau levels, handled by Provincial Party Committee Organization Departments, employ Provincially Managed Cadres (*sheng guan ganbu* 省管干部). Division levels employ Municipally Managed Cadres (*shi guan ganbu* 市管干部), and finally, officials at the level of Section Head are County Managed Cadres (*xian guan ganbu* 县管干部). The ranks are shown in the left-hand columns of Table 1.

“Youthful rejuvenation” of cadres is a particularly important principle for successful renewal of official personnel.¹² Age requirements or restrictions can represent a clear index by which to monitor the progress of cadre rejuvenation. In addition to establishing an official retirement age, the CCP has also moved in recent years to introduce upper age limitations on cadres eligible for promotion at every rank.¹³ Thus far, these new norms vary locally; that is to say, the regulations are still under development and each region has adopted slightly different age ranges.¹⁴ This research has processed the evidence of regional differences in order to establish an orderly arrangement of general averages through which to

10. “Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo gongwuyuan fa” (PRC State Civil Service Law), Xinhua net, 27 April 2005, http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2005-04/27/content_2886656.htm, accessed 29 May 2012.

11. Zhao Lei, “Zhong zubu qian buzhang zhiyan gaoguan guanli” (Central Organization Department Former Minister Frankly Interprets Management of Senior Officials), *Dangzheng luntan* (Party and Government Forum), No. 1 (2007), p. 12.

12. While the CCP did not place emphasis on youthful rejuvenation of cadres before the 1980s, the age of cadres was one crucial consideration for promotion. Ideology and political participation were far more significant factors, meaning that some “model” workers were able to jump rapidly through the ranks. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, when Mao Zedong espoused the importance of peasant populism, the model farmer Chen Yonggui was appointed as Vice-Premier of the State Council and Politburo member, despite the considerable obstacle that he was illiterate. See Lawrence R. Sullivan, *Historical Dictionary of the Chinese Communist Party* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), p. 56.

13. Currently, most literature relating to the age of cadres focuses specifically on retirement age, or the regulation that each rank of high officials must fill a certain quota of young cadres. However, thus far academic literature has not touched upon the system of maximum age restrictions on eligibility for promotion. For more age-related literature, see Hong Yung Lee, *From Revolutionary Cadres to Party Technocrats in Socialist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 235–46; Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard, “Management of Party Cadres in China”, pp. 80–81.

14. As the aim of rejuvenation is a relatively new concept, the introduction of age limitations has developed slightly differently across different localities, especially at the township level, but the existence of the age dilemma is ubiquitous. This article has calculated averages of these regional differences as they stand; it is likely that a clear-cut standardization of ages will occur in the near future as the principle of rejuvenation becomes more prominent.

Table 1. Youthful rejuvenation vs. regulated tenure: the age dilemma in the CCP cadre management system

	Position Rank	Age of Ineligibility for Promotion	Expected Age of Promotion under Regulated Tenure
<i>zheng guo</i> (正国)	State Leader	67	75
<i>fu guo</i> (副国)	Deputy State Leader	67	70
<i>zheng bu</i> (正部)	Minister	63	65
<i>fu bu</i> (副部)	Deputy Minister	58	60
<i>zheng ting</i> (正厅)	Bureau Director	55	55

<i>fu ting</i> (副厅)	Deputy Bureau Director	52	50
<i>zheng chu</i> (正处)	Division Head	50	45
<i>fu chu</i> (副处)	Deputy Division Head	45	40
<i>zheng ke</i> (正科)	Section Head	40	35
<i>fu ke</i> (副科)	Deputy Section Head	40	30

Note:

a) The dotted line represents the cut-off point of the age dilemma. Cadres will not be eligible for promotion to any rank above this dotted line unless they have successfully avoided the dilemma.

b) The age dilemma and ages supplied in the table are calculated according to the legislative guidelines (Interim Provisions for Party and Government Leading Cadre Tenure) originally laid down by the CCP regarding periods of cadre tenure. However, as this article argues, regardless of the Party’s dictates, in practice cadres do whatever is in their power to avoid strict adherence to these formal guidelines.

demonstrate the common upper age limitations on promotion at each administrative level.

These age limitation averages can be seen in the column labeled “Age of Ineligibility for Promotion” in Table 1. A cadre becomes automatically ineligible for promotion to the next rank once he or she reaches the ages shown. For example, a Section Head cadre aged 40 cannot be promoted to the rank of Deputy Division Head. As can be seen in the table, cadres are no longer eligible for promotion to the ranks of Section Head, Division Head and Bureau Director once they reach the ages of 40, 50 and 55 respectively.¹⁵ At Deputy Section Head and Deputy Division Head ranks, the ages of ineligibility are 40 and 45.¹⁶ Cadres

15. Du Fengjiao, “Shitu ‘tianhuaban’” (A Career Under the “Glass Ceiling”), *Renmin luntan* (People’s Forum), No. 23 (2009), p. 17.

16. “Zhonggong Shijiazhuang xueyuan weiyuanhui guanyu zhongceng ganbu huan jie gongzuo de anpai yijian” (Shijiazhuang College CCP Committee’s Opinions on Selection Arrangements for Middle-Ranking Cadres), *Shijiazhuang College Party Organization Department*, 21 May 2012, <http://210.31.249.11/zzb/bencandy.php?fid=56&id=963>, accessed 20 June 2012.

cannot be promoted to the rank of Deputy Minister once they reach 58 years of age, and to the rank of Minister once they turn 63.¹⁷ Finally, cadres will not be eligible for promotion to either Deputy State or State Leadership once they turn 67.¹⁸ Once cadres reach the upper age limit for their rank, they will be required to remain in their current position until retirement. The sole exception is through transfer to a non-leading cadre position (*gai fei* 改非), after which further promotion is also exceedingly difficult. Cadres trapped in this way are known collectively as “ceilinged cadres” (*tianhuaban ganbu* 天花板干部).

In addition to youthful rejuvenation, the CCP attaches great importance to another principle: regulated periods of cadre tenure.¹⁹ As Table 1 demonstrates, this principle comes into conflict with the ideal of youthful rejuvenation. According to Article 3 of the “Interim Provisions for Party and Government Leading Cadre Tenure” (*dangzheng lingdao ganbu zhiwu renqi zanxing guiding* 党政领导干部职务任期暂行规定) promulgated by the central Party authorities in 2006, cadres must fulfill a five-year term in each position.²⁰ After gaining entrance into the civil service, it takes roughly nine years for a cadre to reach the position of Deputy Section Head.²¹ If a cadre enters the civil service immediately upon graduation from university, he or she can expect, under normal circumstances, to reach Deputy Section Head at age 30. Even if, from that point onwards, the cadre is successfully promoted every five years in line with the prevailing regulations, he or she can still expect to encounter the age dilemma.²²

The far right-hand column of Table 1 visually demonstrates this dilemma. If a cadre is promoted every five years as stipulated in the regulations for periods of tenure, then the cadre would theoretically be promoted to the position of Bureau Director at the age of 55. However, the age of ineligibility for promotion to Bureau Directorship is also precisely 55 years of age; only cadres aged 54 and under can be promoted to this rank. In other words, if all cadres followed the official regulations of the cadre appointment system to the letter, not a single one would be eligible for promotion to Bureau Director, abruptly cutting off their

17. Kou Chien-Wen, *Zhonggong jingying zhengzhi de yanbian*, p. 272.

18. “Zhengzhi jiaofei yi feichang zhiduhua” (Political Handover Already Highly Institutionalized), *Lianhe zaobao* (United Morning Daily), 13 July 2011, p. 18.

19. Kou Chien-Wen, *Zhonggong jingying zhengzhi de yanbian*, pp. 283–96.

20. “Dangzheng lingdao ganbu zhiwu renqi zanxing guiding” (Interim Provisions for Party and Government Leading Cadre Tenure), *people.net*, 7 August 2006, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/4671266.html>, accessed 26 May 2012.

21. “Chaozhou Xiangqiao dapo ganbu xuanyong chuantong” (Xiangqiao District, Chaozhou, Breaks Cadre Selection Traditions), *Nanfang ribao*, 12 April 2012, A11.

22. This article calculates cadre promotion ages as they “ought to be” according to the legislative guidelines originally laid down by the CCP regarding periods of cadre tenure. These guidelines were brought in to maintain stability with regard to cadre tenure; they provide that cadres ought to spend five years in each position. Of course, as this article demonstrates, cadres often spend fewer than five years in one role. Pierre Landry calculated in 1990 that the average time spent in the role of city mayor was just 3.2 years; this figure may be even lower today. Pierre F. Landry, “The Political Management of Mayors in Post-Deng China”, *Bringing the Party Back In*, pp. 149–50.

access not only to this rank, but also to all higher positions. This crucial flaw in the system constitutes the “age dilemma”. The cut-off point at which cadres would become trapped is represented by the dotted line in Table 1.

To resolve this predicament, cadres must steer their career into the fast lane and accrue as large an age advantage as possible before getting caught on the horns of the age dilemma at the rank of Bureau Director. The greater the discrepancy between a cadre’s age and the ages of promotion according to regulated tenure, the greater the “age advantage”. Thus, rather than adhering to the guideline of five years in each position, cadres instead attempt to sprint through the ranks in a series of small, rapid steps by way of certain institutional mechanisms. Within the system of cadre management, adjustments have been made which allow cadres to make use of the three different mechanisms discussed here, to boost their age advantage.

It is important to point out that sprinting with small steps only works below Ministerial rank. In recent years, the CCP has come to see Ministerial experience as a vital stepping stone for the cultivation of future State Leaders, and so adheres far more stringently to the stipulations for minimum periods of cadre tenure at this level than at lower ranks. In fact, cadres are often required to serve two separate terms at Ministerial rank in order to augment their administrative experience, which represents a long stretch of time in which even large age advantages can be whittled away.²³ It thus becomes all the more important that cadres have accrued a “safety net” of youth by the time they reach Ministerial rank.

THE COMMUNIST YOUTH LEAGUE ROUTE: GAINING AGE ADVANTAGE THROUGH REASSIGNMENT

Of all the mechanisms employed by cadres, the CYL route is perhaps the most remarkable. After serving in the CYL, cadres are required to undergo reassignment to regular government and Party positions under strict—and low—maximum age limitations. These low age requirements mean that reassigned cadres are able to secure a massive age advantage.

The main reason behind the CCP’s initial establishment of the Communist Youth League in 1921 was to train a “reserve army” for the Party.²⁴ A CYL document states that the League’s leadership should be like “running water”:²⁵ that is to say, as they get older, cadres should be progressively transferred out and reas-

23. Kou Chien-Wen, “Mai xiang quanli kexin zhi lu: 1987 nian yihou zhonggong wenren lingxiu de zhengzhi liudong” (Paths to the Top: The Political Mobility of Chinese Civilian Leaders after 1987), *Zhengzhi kexue luncong* (Political Science Review), No. 45 (September 2010), pp. 10–12.

24. Klaus H. Pringsheim, “The Functions of the Chinese Communist Youth Leagues (1920–1949)”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 12 (October–December 1962), pp. 75–91; Victor C. Funnell, “The Chinese Communist Youth Movement, 1949–1966”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 42 (April–June 1970), pp. 105–30.

25. “Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu zhuanfa tuan zhongyang ‘Guanyu geji tuanwei lingdao ganbu nianling wenti de yijian’” (CCP Central Organization Department Forwards CYL Central Secretariat’s “Opinions

signed to the ranks of the regular Party leadership, allowing new waves of young cadres into the CYL leadership.²⁶ In the post-Mao period, the CCP thus dictated that strict maximum age limits for reassignment be placed upon all ranks of CYL cadre leadership. In 1982, the CCP further codified regulations regarding the upper age limits for reassignment at each rank.

The left-hand side of Table 2 lays out the age limits for reassignment from the CYL to the Party's regular cadre system. The Secretaries of the CYL Central Secretariat (the First Secretary's status is equivalent to Ministerial rank, and that of Executive Secretaries is equal to Deputy Ministerial rank) cannot be older than 45, and are thus reassigned to regular but equivalent rank cadre positions before this age. Provincial CYL Secretaries (Bureau Director rank) cannot be older than 40 years of age, and their deputies (Deputy Bureau Director rank) 38. Prefectural CYL Secretaries (Division rank) must be no more than 35 years old and deputies (Deputy Division rank) no more than 32. County CYL Secretaries (Section Head) cannot be older than 30 and deputies (Deputy Section rank) no more than 28.²⁷ State and Deputy State Leadership ranks do not exist within the CYL framework, as can be seen in Table 2.

Under these regulations, CYL cadres who have been transferred and reassigned to the regular cadre system are often far younger than non-CYL cadres in equivalent positions. This phenomenon is also shown in Table 2. For example, a CYL cadre at the equivalent rank of Bureau Director must leave his position before 40 years of age. Supposing that the cadre is reassigned to the regular cadre system at the absolute maximum age possible (40 years old), remaining at the rank of Bureau Director, he or she will still be 15 years below the age of ineligibility for promotion to the next rank—55 years old. This 15-year discrepancy as a result of the reassignment mechanism is what affords the CYL route its "age advantage."²⁸ In many cases, CYL cadres are transferred before the maximum age, meaning that they gain even greater age advantages. Table 2 displays the potential advantage available to CYL cadres from Deputy Section Head up to

on Issues of Leading CYL Cadre Ages at All Ranks"), *China Youth Net*, 14 May 1982, <http://www.gqt.org.cn/search/zuzhi/documents/1982/820514a.htm>, accessed 17 February 2012.

26. Before 1982, the CCP set no limits on the age of reassignment for CYL cadres. As a result, some cadres remained in CYL positions until relatively advanced ages, resulting in the serious problem of aging within the CYL. As the CYL is specifically intended to promote communication between the Party and the country's youth, it is more effective to employ relatively young cadres who are able to connect with youth more easily. With this in mind, the CCP established the reassignment age limits to oblige older cadres to leave the CYL and make way for their younger counterparts. Thus, even though the CYL has become an obvious channel for those seeking rapid promotion, the CCP maintains the age restrictions in order to prevent the re-emergence of the aging problem.

27. "Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu zhuanfa tuan zhongyang 'Guanyu geji tuanwei lingdao ganbu nianling wenti de yijian'".

28. If this CYL cadre were to be simultaneously re-assigned *and* promoted to Deputy Ministerial rank, he would earn an enormous 18-year age advantage (maximum age of eligibility for promotion to Deputy Ministerial rank [58] minus age for reassignment of a CYL cadre [40]).

Table 2. Age advantages of CYL cadres after reassignment

Position Rank	Maximum Age of Reassignment	Age of Ineligibility for Promotion	CYL Cadre Age Advantage	Average Age of State Leaders at Promotion	CYL Cadre Age Advantage
State Leader		67			
Deputy State Leader		67			
Minister	45	63	18	54	9
Deputy Minister	45	58	13	54	9
Bureau Director	40	55	15	44	4
Deputy Bureau Director	38	52	14	41	3
Division Head	35	50	15	39	4
Deputy Division Head	32	45	13	38	6
Section Head	30	40	10		
Deputy Section Head	28	40	12		

Note:

a) The age advantage is calculated by subtracting the cadre’s age on appointment from the stipulated maximum age for promotion eligibility at each administrative rank;

b) Regarding the column labeled “Average Age of State Leaders at Promotion”, this research has taken into account information for 33 sample individuals in the Politburo Standing Committee (State Leadership rank) and Politburo (Deputy State Leadership rank) at both the 16th and 17th National Party Congresses, in order to calculate the average age at which these leaders took up positions at each rank throughout their career. As the majority of the members of the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee before and during the 15th National Party Congress began their careers during the Cultural Revolution or the introduction of post-Mao reform policies, when cadre appointment and advancement were highly irregular, no samples have been taken from these earlier Congresses. Furthermore, due to the incomplete and somewhat patchy nature of data on these sample individuals’ careers at the ranks of Section and Deputy Section Head, this research also does not provide calculations for these two lowest stages.

Ministerial rank, clearly demonstrating that considerable advantages are obtainable at each and every level of reassignment.

In addition to comparison with the regulation of ineligibility for promotion, Table 2 also offers another indication to clarify further the huge advantage of the CYL route: the average age of state leaders at promotion (including both State and Deputy State Leaders). By direct comparison it can be seen that the maximum ages of reassignment stipulated by CYL regulations are still far lower

than the average ages of recent and current State Leaders at promotion, at all ranks. This clearly demonstrates that CYL cadres have increased opportunities to achieve promotion to State Leadership rank in their future career, due to the safety net of their considerable age advantage. This advantage may go some way towards offering an institutional explanation for the rise of the “CYL Clique” (*tuan pai* 团派) within the CCP in recent years.

CYL cadres who have re-entered the regular Party and government cadre system are often referred to as the “CYL Clique”. Current literature suggests that the recent rise of this faction is due to CYL cadres’ previous professional contact with former CYL First Secretary, President Hu Jintao, leading him to rely on and favor the appointment of cadres hailing from CYL ranks.²⁹ Although such connections are almost undoubtedly a factor, if we take into consideration the age advantage gained through reassignment the CYL Clique’s rise in modern Chinese politics may be seen as less exclusively related to Hu Jintao, and rather more institutional in nature. The strict age limitations put in place for reassignment mean that CYL cadres entering the Party and government cadre system are far younger than colleagues in equivalent positions. In addition to assisting them to circumvent the age dilemma and avoid becoming trapped in low-ranking positions, the age advantage obtained by former CYL cadres after reassignment allows them to take time experiencing more extensive and varied training in a variety of fields, thus expanding their professional skill base and facilitating their rise to higher positions.³⁰

The systematic age advantage proffered by the modern CYL has attracted many ambitious, career-minded officials, who are more than willing to enter the organization for a period of training before being reassigned—invariably with a considerable age advantage as a result. The motivations for cadre participation in the CYL may thus be highly opportunistic.³¹

TEMPORARY TRANSFERRED DUTY: EARNING PROMOTION THROUGH ONE YEAR OF EXTERNAL TRANSFER

Another notable and important method to beat the age dilemma is that of “temporary transferred duty” (*guazhi duanlian* 挂职锻炼). This concept first arose during the Rectification Movement of 1957, and originally referred to the transfer of cadres by central or provincial Party Committee members to remote locations

29. Cheng Li, “Hu’s Policy Shift and the Tuanpai’s Coming-of-Age”, *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 15 (July 2005), <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/7962>, accessed 2 July 2012.

30. Chien-Wen Kou, “The Rise of Youth League Affiliates and their Paths to the Top”, in Chien-Wen Kou and Xiaowei Zang (eds), *Choosing China’s Rulers* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 142–64.

31. Bai Hongyi, “‘Tuan gan’ zhuanye chao” (Wave of CYL Cadres Transfer Occupations), *Xiaokang* (Prosperity Journal), No. 12 (2005), p. 64.

or hardship postings for the purpose of exposure and training. After one year in a hardship posting, cadres would often be rewarded with promotion upon return to their dispatching unit. In June 2000, the Central Organization Department issued a formal document outlining its “System of Temporary Transferred Duty for Cadres”.³² Article 66 of the State Civil Service Law also mentions that cadres may be permitted to undertake temporary transferred duty as necessary.³³ Though temporary transferred duty is a noteworthy aspect of the cadre management system, academic discussion of this mechanism is still rare.³⁴

“Temporary transferred duty” includes cadres being assigned by their original unit (dispatching unit [*paichu danwei* 派出单位]) to a different, external unit (receiving unit [*guazhi danwei* 挂职单位]). The responsibility for human resources supervision and payment of a salary to the transferred cadre lies with the dispatching unit. Temporary transferred duty can fall into one of three categories: transfer to a lower authority (“downwards transfer”, *xia gua* 下挂); to a higher authority (“upwards transfer”, *shang gua* 上挂); and finally, to a unit of equal status (“horizontal transfer”, *ping gua* 平挂).³⁵

The duties of the temporarily transferred cadre are often considered to fall into one of two types. The first is regarded as “empty” duty, such as working as the assistant of an administrative official; the second type is “meaningful” duty, which mostly involves taking a position as local Deputy Head, such as a Deputy Secretary or Deputy Magistrate.³⁶ Downwards transfer is largely designed to provide cadres with a genuine opportunity to gain administrative experience, so most often these cadres are assigned to “meaningful” duty. This type of temporary transfer is also known as a “cultivating transfer” (*peiyang gua* 培养挂). Upwards and horizontal transfer are slightly more complex. In many cases, the transferred cadres become “agents” for their dispatching unit, and are encouraged to fight for the unit’s interests. For example, when lower governmental levels dispatch cadres to higher-level units (upwards transfer), the cadres’ most likely main responsibility is to strive for greater capital investment opportunities and preferential policies towards the dispatching unit. In the case of horizontal transfer, governmental level dispatch cadres may be sent to enterprises of equal rank in order to attract greater business investment from the external unit in their dispatching unit.

32. Di Nianxiang and Jiang Ting, “Woguo ganbu guazhi duanlian wenti ji qi duizheng yanjiu” (Research into the Issues and Related Policies of Cadres’ Temporary Transferred Duty), *Qishi* (Seeking Truth), No. 2 (2011), pp. 20–23.

33. See Article 66, State Civil Servant Law, “Guojia gongwuyuan fa” (State Civil Servant Law), 27 April 2005, *people.net*, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/3354668.html>, accessed 22 June 2012.

34. The concept of “transferred duty” in the original Chinese has the notable connotation of being temporary.

35. Xue Wanbo and Li Xiaoping, “Guazhi duanlian qidai zhidu chuangxin” (Temporary Transferred Duty Awaits Institutional Innovations), *Dang de shenghuo* (Party Life), No. 5 (2012), p. 16.

36. Yin Donghua, “Guazhi xianxiang diaocha” (Investigation into the Phenomenon of Temporary Transfer), *Juece* (Decision-Making), No. 8 (2008), pp. 30–31.

Thus, upwards and horizontally transferred cadres often take on “empty” positions, in order to focus more on these underlying responsibilities.

Within the CCP, temporary transferred duty is considered by many to be “gold-plated” (*dujin* 镀金), as cadres are able to gain great value with relatively little input. The majority of temporary transfer assignments are limited to one year,³⁷ and Organization Departments at all levels often take completion of transferred duty as a standard parameter when assessing cadres’ qualification for promotion.³⁸ As a result, many CCP cadres are more than willing to take on this duty: after return to the dispatching unit, the majority earn swift promotion, thus breaking through the restrictions of regulated tenure.³⁹

Though the duty is “gold-plated”, promotion is not guaranteed, as dispatching units do not completely overlook cadres’ performance of their duties at the external receiving unit when making the decision over promotion. However, substantive regulations for assessing the work performance of externally transferred cadres are still lacking. It is thus often the case that, after the period of duty draws to a close, the external receiving unit simply submits an appraisal (*jianding* 鉴定) to the dispatching unit. If cadre performance is judged “excellent” or “particularly outstanding”, it is highly likely that the cadre will be promoted upon return to the original post. However, this manner of evaluation is hardly rigorous and clearly falls short of the more refined procedural approach employed in contemporary cadre assessment, which includes such methods as democratic evaluation and public opinion surveys. Instead, the power of assessment is entirely in the hands of the leader of the external receiving unit. Consequently, cadres participating in temporary transferred duty often place scant emphasis on work performance and instead focus their energies on establishing a close and cordial relationship with the unit’s leader.

Due to the rapidity and ease of promotion through the mechanism of temporary transferred duty, many cadres enthusiastically apply for external transfer, in particular when certain localities publish lists of vacancies for transferred duty in cases of urgency. For example, following the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, the affected localities released a list of vacancies, seeking more external cadres to support rescue and reconstruction work. A huge number of cadres leaped at the chance of earning rapid promotion through temporary transfer to the disaster area. In September 2008, the Sichuan Provincial Organization Department

37. Wang Mian, “Guazhi ganbu difang guancha” (Local Observation of Cadres on Temporary Transferred Duty), *Liaowang xinwen zhoukan* (Outlook Weekly), No. 45 (November 2008), p. 23.

38. Li Song, “Guazhi ganbu difang guancha” (Standardizing the Cadre Temporary Transfer Route), *Liaowang xinwen zhoukan*, No. 45 (November 2008), p. 25.

39. For example, in 2012 three of the cadres born in the 1960s and currently at Ministerial rank who had experienced temporary transferred duty were Zhou Qiang, Lu Hao and Nur Bekri. Zhou and Lu were promoted immediately on return from their transferred duty, while Nur Bekri earned promotion four months after his return.

was forced to issue a document urging affected areas to rectify the problems of bloated numbers of transferred cadres and to ensure that only those whose areas of expertise were in greatest demand be accepted for transfer.⁴⁰

An official from Longyan City in Fujian Province explained that the Longyan municipal government office employs 13 Deputy General Secretaries, and of these positions, six were established to provide for cadres on transferred duty.⁴¹ This mechanism of cadre training can threaten the aim of personnel streamlining recently called for by the CCP.⁴²

NON-REGULATION PROMOTION THROUGH OPEN SELECTION

The third means by which cadres attempt to sidestep the age dilemma is “non-regulation promotion”. Following the introduction of Opening Up and Reform policies, encouragement for the promotion of talented officials became a crucial cornerstone in the modernization and development of the PRC. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping announced that the CCP must “improve identification, promotion and even bold non-regulation promotion of the most outstanding young cadres”.⁴³ “Non-regulation” here refers to promotion of cadres outside pre-defined regulatory criteria, such as those on age, ethnicity, educational experience, gender and so on. This includes promotion breaking the regulations on length of tenure, which stipulate that cadres must spend five years at each official rank; advancement before the completion of this fixed period is therefore known as “non-regulation promotion” (*poge tiba* 破格提拔). A related, although far less common, practice is that known as “leap-frog promotion” (*yueji tiba* 越级提拔), which consists of cadres directly skipping an entire rank.⁴⁴ As this is a particularly unusual occurrence, we focus on non-regulation promotion.

40. “Sheng zhi bumen bude zixing xuanpai ganbu guazhi zaihai” (Provincial Affiliated Departments Not Allowed Unilaterally to Select Cadres for Temporary Transfer to Disaster Areas), *Chengdu wanbao* (Chengdu Evening News) (6 September 2008), p. 2. For more on excessive numbers of deputy positions, see Graeme Smith, “Political Machinations in a Rural County”, *The China Journal*, No. 62 (July 2009), pp. 39–42; Ben Hillman, “Factions and Spoils: Examining Political Behavior within the Local State in China”, *The China Journal*, No. 64 (July 2010), pp. 11–14.

41. Xue Wanbo, “Guazhi duanlian weihe bushi zaoyu gan’ga?” (Why Is Temporary Transferred Duty Often an Awkward Affair?), *Dang de shenghuo*, No. 5 (2012), pp. 20–21.

42. Dali L. Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan: Market Transition and the Politics of Governance in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 144–48.

43. Deng Xiaoping, “Dang he guojia lingdao zhidu de gaige” (Party and National Leadership System Reform), *people.net*, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/69112/69113/69684/69695/4949714.html> (18 August 1980), accessed 28 June 2012.

44. To make it possible to reach Division Head before 45 years of age, the Central Organization Department allows cadres at the rank of Section Head demonstrating outstanding performance to “leap-frog” to Division Head. “Xian dangzheng zhengzhi zhuti 45 sui zuoyou” (Principal Party and Government County Leaders Average Around 45 Years Old), *Jiangnan dushi bao* (Jiangnan Metropolis Daily), 28 January 2006, A10.

Of the current officials of Ministerial rank, almost all those born in the 1960s (known as the “post-60s” [60 hou 60 后]), have received non-regulation promotion. In fact, without promotion outside tenure regulations, they would not have been able to reach their current posts. On average, these cadres leaped from Deputy Section Head to Section Head in just 2.4 years, then from Section Head to Deputy Division Head in 3.4, to Division Head in 2.7, and to Deputy Bureau Director in 3.2 years. These averages are all clearly far below the five-year proviso.⁴⁵ As cadres attempt to sprint forward with small steps, non-regulation promotion is the most common method of getting ahead. Within non-regulation mechanisms, the most notable method is promotion through open selection (*gongkai xuanba* 公开选拔).⁴⁶

“Open selection” refers to promotion earned through success in examinations or interviews where the field is thrown open for application by any eligible cadre. In general, the highest rank where open selection is permitted is Bureau Director. The CCP also limits the range of eligibility for open selection by both age and professional experience. For example, those participating in open selection tests for Division Head rank must have spent at least one year in a Deputy Division Head position, a condition laid down to prevent the occurrence of leap-frog promotion. The process of open selection testing largely involves both a written exam and an interview. The written exams include compulsory general topics and specific specialist questions. The general topics relate to a number of official political disciplines, including Marxism-Leninism and CCP history; specialist questions touch on job-related areas of expertise.⁴⁷

Interview topics generally cover current political issues. In addition to evaluating the interviewees’ ability to express themselves, the interview panel also tallies up marks on the score report for evidence of candidates’ understanding of “the big picture” in politics. For example, one interview question discussed a well-received speech from the 2010 Two Meetings (*Lianghui* 两会: The National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference), which debated the merits of delegates avoiding vague and oblique “bureaucratese” in favor of straight talking. Aside from stating that the Two Meetings’ delegates should indeed have the courage always to speak the truth, interviewees would accrue marks on their score report for emphasizing that the speech was “indicative of the increased democratic and harmonious nature of that year’s successful Two

45. Yin Anxue, “Neidi ‘60 hou’ sheng bu guanyuan duo huo poge tiba” (Most “Post-60s” Provincial and Ministerial-Rank Officials Earn Non-Regulation Promotion), *Juece tansuo* (Exploring Decision-Making), No. 5 (2011), pp. 31–32.

46. For a further discussion of open selection, see Stig Thøgersen, “Frontline Soldiers of the CCP: The Selection of China’s Township Leaders”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 194 (June 2008), pp. 414–23.

47. “Dangzheng lingdao ganbu gongkai xuanba he jingzheng shanggang kaoshi dawang” (Party and Government Leading Cadre Open Selection and Competitive Appointment Examination Syllabus), Xinhua net, http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2004-04/30/content_1448228.htm, accessed 24 June 2012.

Meetings.”⁴⁸ Thus, interviewees can easily secure high scores by both discussing the particularities of the issue at hand and demonstrating broad understanding of overall political conditions, as well as laying great emphasis in their answers on the importance of key issues such as political stability and harmony.

Sometimes during the interview process candidates are called upon to take part in a “leaderless small group discussion” (*wu lingdao xiao zu taolun* 无领导小组讨论). This assessment hopes to identify whether cadres possess leadership qualities such as organizational, negotiation and communication skills. Each small group consists of roughly 6–12 members, and there is no group leader. The groups are presented with a simple task such as ranking in order of importance the qualities needed to perform well as a leading cadre.⁴⁹ Once the discussion is finished, each group must select one member to present their conclusions. During this assessment, the examiners are evaluating whether cadres can take responsibility and communicate effectively, as these will be vital concerns if they are later promoted to high positions.⁵⁰

Although the scoring for the written test is fairly objective, the interview section is far more subjective, perhaps leading to unfair results. Ai Lisheng (艾理生), a cadre on the interview board of the Hunan Provincial Organization Department’s Test Evaluation Centre, observed that there was invariably dissatisfaction and suspicion amongst interviewees following the results of the interview segment in the open selection test. Candidates often conjecture that interviewers and interviewees “have associations”. In other words, informal political factors are considered likely to affect the final interview scores.⁵¹ Furthermore, there is no doubt that some officials bribe Organization Department staff to secure promotion.⁵² To resolve this problem, authorities in some areas have begun to initiate “externalized” interviews,⁵³ with panels that consist of cadres from other localities.

Open selection presents cadres with the opportunity to earn non-regulation promotion and to sidestep the ever-looming age dilemma by advancing more quickly through the ranks. However, non-regulation promotion also attracts criticism due to the subjective nature of selection, which may allow cadres to

48. Luo Yuliang, “Lingdao ganbu gongxuan mianshi moni shiti jiexi: jiu” (Analysis of Leading Cadre Open Selection Mock Interview Questions [9]), *Lingdao kexue* (Science of Leadership), No. 21 (July 2010), p. 35.

49. Gu Ming, “Gongxuan zhi lu” (The Path of Open Selection), *Juece*, No. 5 (2010), p. 89.

50. Sun Hang, “Gongxuan kaosheng ruge zai wu lingdao xiao zu taolun zhong tuoying er chu” (How Open Selection Examinees Stand Out in Leaderless Small Group Discussions), *Lingdao kexue*, No. 24 (August 2010), p. 46.

51. For a more in-depth discussion of informal politics, see Lowell Dittmer, “Chinese Informal Politics”, *The China Journal*, No. 34 (July 1995), p. 197.

52. For a related case, see Wang Yu, “Boqu hongpao xian yao shen” (Removing the Cloak to Reveal the Monster), *Dangshi zongheng* (Horizons of Party History), No. 11 (2005), pp. 43–44.

53. “Ganbu gongxuan 18 nian zhi bian” (Changes in Cadre Open Selection Over the Last 18 Years), *Xiaoxiang chenbao* (Xiaoxiang Morning Paper), 19 June 2012, A6.

advance to high positions at too young an age. Rejuvenation is a necessary principle for the CCP, but overly enthusiastic non-regulation promotion may instead lead to deterioration in cadre quality due to inexperience. The career path of Zhang Hui (张辉) provides an interesting case in point. Graduating from university at 22, Zhang was selected for non-regulation promotion to Section Head rank at the age of just 24. Following a later period of temporary transferred duty, and a stint in the CYL, by 28 Zhang was the PRC's youngest-ever Deputy Bureau Director.⁵⁴ Though his is a remarkable case, whether such a rapid rise as Zhang's is actually beneficial to the cultivation of political ability is a question well worth consideration.

There are many other instances of cadres employing a range of different methods to sprint with small steps. This raises the question of whether some of the leading stars of the CCP's sixth generation also followed similar routes to achieve their current high positions. Can the model of the "sprint with small steps" further supplement academic understanding of the CCP's system of cadre management?

RESOLVING THE AGE DILEMMA: CADRES' SPRINT WITH SMALL STEPS

Some scholars argue that increasing numbers of cadres are receiving promotion due to improved political performance.⁵⁵ Others claim that factional relations represent the biggest contributing factor to cadre promotion: cadres who can boast clientelist ties to the upper echelons of the CCP leadership are able to secure promotion more easily.⁵⁶ Without rejecting these arguments, we argue that resolving the age dilemma also has a role.

How have successful cadres employed the three mechanisms to gain the necessary age advantages before Ministerial rank? Within current political circles in the CCP, a few "post-60s" cadres of Ministerial rank or above are already being identified as the potential successors of the Party's sixth generation of leaders, as a result of the noteworthy professional experience that they have gained despite their youth. In 2012, these included Hunan Provincial Party Secretary Zhou

54. "Shandong '80 hou' tingguan zai huo zhongyong" (Shandong "Post-80s" Bureau Rank Official Assigned Another Important Position), *Nanfang dushibao* (Southern Metropolis Daily), 3 December 2011, A10.

55. Maria Heimer, "The Cadre Responsibility System and the Changing Needs of the Party", *The Chinese Communist Party in Reform*, pp. 124–26; Maria Edin, "State Capacity and Local Agent Control in China: CCP Cadre Management from a Township Perspective", *The China Quarterly*, No. 173 (March 2003), pp. 35–52.

56. Andrew J. Nathan, "A Factionalism Model for CCP Politics", *The China Quarterly*, No. 53 (January–March 1973), p. 37; Victor Shih, Wei Shan and Mingxing Liu, "Gauging the Elite Political Equilibrium in the CCP: A Quantitative Approach Using Biographical Data", *The China Quarterly*, No. 201 (March 2010), pp. 83–89.

Qiang (周强), Jilin Provincial Party Secretary Sun Zhengcai (孙政才), Fujian Provincial Party Secretary Su Shulin (苏树林), Hebei Provincial Governor Zhang Qingwei (张庆伟), CYL First Secretary Lu Hao (陆昊), Party Secretary of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Hu Chunhua (胡春华) and Chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Nur Bekri (努尔·白克力).⁵⁷ Of these, the cases of Zhou Qiang and Lu Hao are most illustrative of the operation of the mechanisms outlined in this article, as both have employed all three methods along the path to their current positions at Ministerial rank. The career paths of both cadres are shown in Table 3.

Zhou Qiang earned one leap-frog promotion, four non-regulation promotions, one period of temporary transferred duty and two terms in the CYL to reach the Ministerial-rank post of Governor of Hunan Province, before being transferred to his current position as Hunan Provincial Party Secretary. When, at 38 years of age, he first attained the rank of Minister, he had accumulated a massive 25-year age advantage. As for Lu Hao, after one leap-frog promotion, three non-regulation promotions and one period of temporary downwards transfer, he stepped onto the CYL route, currently working as the League’s First Secretary. Lu Hao was 41 when he reached Ministerial rank, blessed with a 22-year age advantage. These two “post-60s” rising political stars thus used a variety of methods in their personal sprints with small steps, ultimately reaching Ministerial rank at around 40 years of age and securing the safety net of a considerable age advantage.

In addition to sidestepping the initial age dilemma, CCP cadres who sprint with small steps can spend a great deal of time at the Ministerial level acquiring the further experience necessary to prepare them for State Leadership positions. Although Zhou Qiang took up his initial Ministerial position as First Secretary of the CYL at just 38 years of age, he has gone on to undertake two further terms at this rank (Governor of Hunan Province, and Hunan Provincial Party Secretary). In 2012, aged 52, Zhou has already spent 14 years at Ministerial rank. When Lu Hao completes his own period of tenure as First Secretary of the CYL, it is reasonable to expect that he will be required to spend at least one more term at Ministerial rank before he is considered eligible for promotion. Both Zhou and Lu will thus experience a long period of time at the Ministerial level, but their original huge age advantages ensure that both still have a fighting chance of attaining State Leadership rank before they reach the maximum age for promotion.

57. In March 2013, there were three “post-60s” Ministerial-rank cadres newly appointed: Qinghai Provincial Deputy Party Secretary Hao Peng, Guizhou Provincial Governor Chen Min'er and CYL First Secretary Qin Yizhi.

Table 3. Comparison of the careers of Zhou Qiang and Lu Hao

Leadership rank	Clerk	Deputy Section	Section	Deputy Division	Division	Deputy Bureau	Bureau	Deputy Ministry	Ministry	State	
Age (a)	40	40	40	45	50	52	55	58	63	67	
ZHOU QIANG											
Position	Clerk		Principal Staff Member	Dep. Division Head	Division Head (c)	General Office Dep. Director	Legislative Dept Secretary	CYL Executive Secretary	CYL First Secretary	Provincial Governor	Provincial Party Secretary
Age (b)	25		27	29	31	33	35	35	38	46	50
Promotion mechanism		Leap-Frog	Non-Reg.	Non-Reg.	Temp. Duty	Trans.	Non-Reg.	Non-Reg.	CYL Route		
Advantage			13	16	19	19	20	23	25	17	13
LU HAO											
Position	Factory Cadre	Factory Dep. Director	Factory Director's Assistant	Enterprise Dep. Gen. Manager	Zhongguancun Dep. Director	Executive Dep. Director (d)	Vice Mayor of Beijing	CYL First Secretary			
Age (b)	22	23	23	31	32	34	36	41			
Promotion mechanism	Non-Reg.	Non-Reg.	Non-Reg.	Leap-Frog	Non-Reg.	Temp. Trans. Duty		CYL Route			
Advantage		17	17	14	20	21	22	22			

Note:

- a) In the row titled Age (a), numbers represent the age of ineligibility for promotion to the next rank;
 - b) In the rows titled Age (b), numbers represent the age at which the cadre first took on the position;
 - c) When he was Director of the Regulation Division, Zhou took transferred duty as Assistant to the Director of the Shenzhen Municipal Bureau of Justice from March to September 1993;
 - d) When he was Deputy Executive Director of the Zhongguancun Central Management Committee, Lu took transferred duty as Assistant to the General Manager of the Yangtze River Three Gorges Dam Corporation from March 2002 to February 2003;
 - e) In March 2013, Zhou was appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme People's Court (Deputy State level), and Lu became Heilongjiang Provincial Governor.
- Source: Arranged by authors according to *Zhou Qiang tongzhi jianli* (Resumé of Comrade Zhou Qiang), *people.net*, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/9667/9684/6569581.html>, accessed 15 June 2012; and *Lu Hao tongzhi jianli* (Resumé of Comrade Lu Hao), *people.net*, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/9667/9684/6569692.html>, accessed 15 June 2012.

CONCLUSION: SPRINTING IN THE FAST LANE FOR PROMOTION

This article discusses a crucial underlying problem of the CCP cadre appointment system: the age dilemma. Although this flaw in the system has thus far been neglected in the academic literature, it in fact constitutes one of the most significant threats to the smooth functioning of the CCP’s system of cadre management. Cadres make use of the CYL route, temporary transferred duty and non-regulation promotion to sprint with small steps to early promotion, thus avoiding the trap of the age dilemma. Two of these methods have their roots in the Mao era, while the third came about during the post-Mao reform period. All three contribute in part to the loosening of the strict institutional limitations indicative of the Leninist practices still at the heart of the cadre management system. In modern-day China, with its current emphasis on constructing a conventional flow of cadre advancement and retirement (*neng shang neng xia* 能上能下), these three methods represent institutional innovations well suited to meeting the requirements for promotion.

From this perspective, it is comprehensible that some cadres can be singled out as rising stars as a result of the advantages of an accumulation of extensive professional experience at a young age. In addition to the much-identified factors of political performance and behind-the-scenes factional power games, another crucial factor for such cadres is their use of different methods to sprint with small steps and shake off the shackles of the prolonged, gradual career progression entailed in the principle of regulated tenure. Before reaching Ministerial rank, cadres must ensure that they accumulate a sizeable age advantage; those who are successful come to the notice of the higher leadership, who may then make extensive efforts to cultivate them further, vastly increasing their prospects of ultimate promotion to State Leadership ranks.

There are some negative effects of cadres’ sprinting with small steps. The advantages of reassignment through the CYL route may encourage a cynically opportunistic mindset in cadres; in turn, the requirements of temporary transferred duty often lead to bloated numbers of deputy positions, in direct conflict with the CCP’s current principle of organizational streamlining. As for non-regulation promotion, over-enthusiastic bending of regulations may cause disorder in the cadre appointment system.

For those hoping to become rising stars in the CCP, there is thus more to the game than political performance and factional support; in addition, one must steer into the fast lane and prepare to sprint with small steps through the combined use of these three key mechanisms. To avoid getting permanently stuck as a “ceilinged cadre”, officials need to exhaust every option at their disposal to scale the ladder as quickly as possible and secure a crucial age advantage.