

Do All Roads Lead to Rome? A Review of the Literature on Succession Politics in China

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Political elites have a tremendous influence on past, present and future socioeconomic and political developments in both western and non-western countries. Unsurprisingly, the analysis of China's elites has been crucial in the study of politics there. A large body of literature has examined the members of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, a stronghold of the nation's political elites. Given the growing interest and research on elite politics in the PRC in recent years, this paper reviews studies of the pathways to political power and the personal qualifications of the members of the Central Committee that are central to studies of elite Chinese politics. This review paper is organized both chronologically and thematically. It shows a shift away from the study of demographics of Central Committee members toward theorizing of how recruitment into the Central Committee works. Some scholars have theorized succession politics in China as the rise of technocracy, while others have used institutionalization and factional politics to explain how China's leaders are selected. This paper summarizes and identifies several theoretical and methodological issues in existing studies as an effort to advance research on succession politics and political evolution in China.

KEYWORDS: elites; political power; leadership selection; elite recruitment; China.

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The rapidly growing studies of political elites have been a major development in political science in recent years (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2021; Kertzer & Renshon, 2022; Korsnes et al., 2017). Scholars have recognized that elites have a tremendous influence on the past, present, and future trajectories of both western and non-western countries (Amsden et al., 2014; Kertzer & Renshon, 2022;

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Olson, 2016; Putnam, 1977). China's political leaders are a similarly privileged group that controls major material, symbolic and political resources in the People's Republic of China (PRC). They wield disproportionate power to shape the path of reform and change and guide the ongoing development and future evolution in China (Bekkevold & Ross, 2016; Bo, 2010; Chao, 1959; Houn, 1957; Kou & Zang, 2014; Scalapino, 1972a). Thus, Bullard (1979) claimed that "one of the most illuminating approaches to the study of politics in China has been elite analysis."

The main stronghold for China's political elites is the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Each CCP National Congress elects a Central Committee (Bo, 2010; Chao, 1959; Kou & Zang, 2014; Miller, 2016). Scholars have reached "a surprising level of consensus" that the composition of the Central Committee is crucial in determining China's political development (Li, 2007). They have regarded the election of a Central Committee by a National Congress as the outcome of succession politics (Chou, 1974; Fewsmith, 2003; Zheng, 2005) and developed a rich body of literature on the Central Committees and the National Congresses of the CCP. Teiwes (1974) and others (Bullard, 1979; Wilhelm, 1980) were likely the first to review this literature. Few if any have done so since Goldstein (1994). This paper aims to narrow this knowledge gap in China studies. While it does not guarantee coverage of all published works in this field, the following discussion is the result of extensive efforts to include as many important publications as possible. Elite politics, succession politics and leadership selection are used interchangeably throughout this paper, so are the terms factionalism, factional politics, cliques and clique politics.

Leadership Stability and Changes from the 8th CC to the 11th CC

The CCP was established in 1921 and held its first seven National Congresses before 1949 (Klein & Hager, 1971). North (1951, 1952) offered an influential study of the key players in pre-1949 Central Committees, finding that these CCP leaders were young men whose level of education isolated them from the main currents of Chinese society. They were full-time professional politicians specializing in warfare or party organization and had been appointed to their positions through their achievements rather than by accident of birth (Bennett, 1978; Kampen, 2000; Klein, 1962; Klein & Clark, 1971; Scalapino, 1972b; Waller, 1971, 1972a, 1972b). Described as the first generation of CCP leadership, these leaders dominated the seven National Congresses held before 1949 and during the 8th Central Committee until the eve of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 (Kampen, 2000; Klein & Clark, 1971; Klein & Hager, 1971; Oksenberg, 1987).

Leadership Stability in the 8th Central Committee (1956–1969)

The 8th Central Committee was elected during the CCP National Congress held in 1956. Waller (1972a) found that the full members of the 8th Central Committee had made it to the center of power through their work in the CCP, government, or army before and after 1949. Elite turnover rates were small, and there were limited efforts to increase the representation of women, ethnic minorities, the young and the better-educated. Klein and Hager (1971) similarly observed continuity and stability in the 8th Central Committee's composition.

Houn (1957) noticed that the 8th Central Committee was more than twice the size of the 7th: "This big increase in the committee's membership was apparently made for the purpose of giving recognition to some of those who had accumulated greater party seniority and had rendered more meritorious services to the party from 1945 on. The wholesale retention of the full members of the Seventh Central Committee may be regarded, in the first place, as a display of party harmony." The average age in the 8th Central Committee was 53. For comparison, the average age of the 7th Central Committee in 1945 was 46.8 (North, 1952, p. 52). The members of the 8th Central Committee were drawn heavily from the upper-middle and middle strata of Chinese society. Many were well educated, and nearly half had studied overseas (Bennett, 1978; Chao, 1959; Li & White, 1998; Oksenberg, 1987; Scalapino, 1972b).

A Leadership Reshuffling in the 9th Central Committee (1969–1973)

Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966 to settle scores with political rivals like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping who had gathered a large number of followers in the CCP and the government. Mao successfully purged Liu, Deng and their followers from political office, resulting in a large turnover rate (81 percent) in the 9th National Congress (Li, 2016, pp. 80–81). Radicals of the Cultural Revolution that consisted primarily of workers, peasants and younger military officers replaced the CCP veterans who had sided with Liu and Deng.

Klein and Hager (1971) claimed that 72 percent of the 170 full members of the 9th Central Committee were newcomers. By comparison, the 8th Central Committee had only 33 (34 percent). Only five of the 109 alternates of the 9th Central Committee had previously held full or alternate membership (Tien, 1984). Far fewer members of the 9th Central Committee were educated abroad than their predecessors in the 8th Central Committee. Two-thirds of the members of the 8th Central Committee had traveled abroad, whereas this was true of only a quarter of the 9th Central Committee. No less than one-quarter of the members of the 8th Central Committee were drawn

from ministers and vice-ministers, and this figure was reduced to 10 percent in the 9th Central Committee. Other major changes included the increased role of workers, peasants and the military establishment.

Based on the available data, Scalapino (1972b) analyzed the compositions of the Politburo and its Standing Committee during the 9th Central Committee, showing that the average age on the Standing Committee of the 8th Central Committee was 58.66, compared to 67.8 during the 9th. Many of these were either cadres in the party's administration or military officers. The average age on the 8th Central Committee was 53.4 years, 61.1 years on the 9th Central Committee. The gender ratio changed slightly, with 70 males and 4 females in the 8th Central Committee and 134 males and 11 females in the 9th Central Committee. The members of the 9th Central Committee were less educated than those of the 8th. At least 30 of the 74 members of the 8th Central Committee had studied abroad. By comparison, only 18–20 of the 145 members of the 9th Central Committee had received some foreign training. The members of the 8th Central Committee were also more senior in their CCP membership than those of the 9th Central Committee. Finally, there was a rise in military officers and a decline of petty intellectuals in the composition of the 9th Central Committee (see also Bennett, 1978; Deshingkar, 1969; Li & White, 1998; Oksenberg, 1987; Wich, 1974).

Coalition Politics in the 10th Central Committee (1973–1977)

Fang (1974) asserted that the 9th Central Committee had military leaders as its backbone as a reward from Mao in exchange for the support of Lin Biao during the Cultural Revolution, supplemented by veteran and “Cultural Revolution” cadres. The 10th Central Committee, on the other hand, had Cultural Revolution cadres as its core, supplemented by military leaders and veteran cadres. 75 percent of the members of the 9th Central Committee retained their positions. Of the 195 full members of the 10th Central Committee, 32.3 percent were military cadres, 36.4 percent were veteran cadres and 29.7 percent were Cultural Revolution cadres. 42 female members accounted for 12.8 percent of the 10th Central Committee's members, signifying a net increase of 4.6 percent from the 9th's 8.2 percent (Bennett, 1978; Chou, 1974; Li & White, 1998; Oksenberg, 1987).

Wich (1974) observed that the 10th National Congress confirmed the validity of the “political and organizational lines” ratified in the 9th Central Committee. Some veteran cadres who had been purged before 1971 were rehabilitated and joined the 10th Central Committee. The composition of the 10th Central Committee signified a reversal of the distinctive aspects of the 9th Central Committee. This was a substantial

erosion of strong military representation, an outcome of Lin Biao's downfall in 1971. The composition of the 10th Central Committee "seems to reflect the style of coalition politics."

A Prelude to Changes in Leadership Selection: The 11th Central Committee (1977–1982)

Mao passed away in September 1976. Hua Guofeng and his allies purged the Gang of Four (四人幫, *si ren bang*) from the CCP leadership in October 1976 and expelled their affiliated members from the 11th National Congress (Dittmer, 1983; Li, 2016; Mirsky, 1982). Tien (1984, p. 21) observed a low survival rate (39 percent) among the members of the 10th Central Committee. Scalapino (1977) claimed that veterans of the Long March began to return to China's center of political power after the 11th National Congress. Knowledge of 11th Central Committee's composition is limited overall, as it is one of the least studied. This is surprising since it was quite important for the rejuvenation of the CCP's leadership in the 1980s, as noted below. In fact, Chung (1977) observed that the 11th National Congress would go down in history as a major turning point because "it ended an era of destabilization and revolutionary tension, and would usher in a new era of normalization, stabilization, productivity, and modernization" (see also Oksenberg, 1987).

More importantly, Deng Xiaoping and other top leaders proposed to shift the CCP's focus from revolution to economic development during the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee held in 1978 (Dittmer, 1983; Lee, 1983, 1991; Szczudlik, 2017; Tien, 1984). Elite recruitment from 1949 to 1978 was

... based on (1) seniority in joining the party and the revolution, such as taking part in the "Long March" and the "Anti-Japanese War"; (2) ideological sophistication in Marxism; (3) political loyalty and "activism in class struggle"; and (4) "class" background from a "proletarian family." None of these policies changed significantly until the early 1980s, and the elite they generated can be seen in the pre-1987 central committees. (Li & White, 1988, p. 374; see also Lee, 1991; Li & White, 1998)

These cadres were poorly educated and were too old or too incompetent to meet the challenges of this shift. Deng and his allies were compelled to replace the old cadres with young, educated and competent leaders (Lee, 1983; Li, 2008; T. Wang, 1985). The CCP held the Sixth Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee in 1981 (Dittmer, 1983; Tien, 1984; S. Wang, 1982) to prepare for a large-scale leadership reshuffling in the 12th National Congress held in 1982 (Bo, 2016; Lee, 1983, 1991; Oksenberg, 1987; Xu, 2020).

The Emergence of Technocracy in China? The 12th Central Committee (1982–1987)

Lee (1983) observed that in the 12th National Congress, Deng and his allies did away with mass representatives, substantially cut the share of the military and removed CCP cadres that were affiliated with the Gang of the Four in the pre-1977 era. According to Tien (1984), only 33 percent of the members of the 11th Central Committee continued to serve on the 12th Central Committee. Oksenberg (1987, p. 4) remarked that the 12th National Congress “confirmed many Yan’an-era leaders to the Politburo and Central Committee while also electing many younger officials to the Central Committee.” Lee (1983) agreed that almost half of the members of the 12th Central Committee were old veteran cadres. Lee (1983) also claimed that the composition of the 12th was less politically and ideologically diverse than that of the 9th, 10th and 11th Central Committees.

Dittmer (1983) discussed three major issues pertaining to the 12th National Congress. First, the CCP eliminated the post of Chairman and designated the General Secretary as the *de facto* leader of the CCP. The General Secretary had formerly chaired only the Secretariat and had only the power to “convene” meetings of the CCP Political Bureau and its Standing Committee. This move reduced his relative power and the concomitant possibility of a renaissance of the “cult of personality.” The new arrangement was intended to facilitate a more clearer functional division between the CCP and state leadership (Oksenberg, 1987; Tien, 1984).

Second, Dittmer (1983) observed the important nomination process that preceded the elections of Central Committee members, i.e., a list of candidates for the formal election was either decided by “preliminary election” or drawn up directly, in which case the number of candidates on the list was to be greater than the number to be elected.

Next, Dittmer (1983) observed that about 60 percent of the 348 members and alternate members were elected for the first time. Of these members, more than 66 percent were less than 60 years of age. The average age of the alternates was 66, that of the Politburo members was 72.4 and that of the Politburo Standing Committee members was 75. Military representation was reduced to about 20 percent, while the number of “specialized personnel” increased from 2.7 percent in the 11th Central Committee to 17 percent in the 12th Central Committee. Women represented 6.9 percent of the 12th Central Committee and ethnic minorities 8.9 percent. Finally, a high proportion of the members of the 12th Central Committee were concurrent government officials from the ministries and commissions of the State Council (Bartke & Schier, 1985; Li & White, 1998; Mirsky, 1982; Tien, 1984).

Finally, Lee (1983) observed that the 12th National Congress signified an end to China's revolutionary era, and some members were career bureaucrats with formal education and working experience in functionally specialized ministries. These people could be considered as technocrats, and it would be only a matter of time before China would have a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime led by technocrats possessing a managerial perspective and a pragmatic economic orientation. Mills (1983) similarly argued that Deng and his associates began to replace the generation of the revolutionary elite with a technocratic elite in the 12th National Congress. Later, Li and White (1998, p. 232) agreed that the 12th National Congress could be seen as a watershed for CCP leadership. Few top posts were filled by technocrats before 1982, whereas post-1982, Central Committees and Politburos were predominantly technocratic. It is not an overstatement to say that Lee (1983) and Mills (1983) represent a milestone in research on Chinese succession politics, as they inspired China scholars to describe and offer theories on succession politics in China.

The Technocracy Thesis: The 13th Central Committee (1987–1992)

Oksenberg (1987) found a generational succession due to the declining influence of the Cultural Revolution and the retiring of old guards, promotion of young cadres and establishment of outlines for an orderly succession in the 13th National Congress. The “Yenan generation lost its dominance at the apex,” and 42 percent of the 348 full and alternate members on the 12th Central Committee did not make it to the 13th Central Committee. Some new Central Committee members were technocrats, while others joined because of their family backgrounds and personal connections. Weil (1988) also drew attention to the new generation of engineers and apparatchiks in the 13th Central Committee.

Li and White (1998) offered an influential study of the 13th Central Committee. They (1988, p. 373) lamented that research “in the China field lacks enough new theoretical approaches to understand China's recent political changes.” Li and White used technocracy theory from the West to guide their analysis “because it can link newly perceived functional needs in society to changing values among party leaders” in China. They analyzed the bibliographic data on the members of the 13th Central Committee and Politburo including (1) biographical data on representation by age, sex, geographical location and ethnicity; (2) educational background by level, foreign training and specialty; (3) career pattern by the date of joining the party and the Central Committee in addition to past administrative, party, or military work; and (4) current occupational position in the government, party organization, or military.

Li and White (1988) observed a low percentage of specialists in the Central Committees before 1982 (1.7 percent in the 9th Central Committee and 2.7 percent in the 11th Central Committee). “Comparing the Thirteenth CC with the Eleventh, the percentage of specialists has increased almost ten times.” Many members of the 13th Central Committee were engineers who had graduated from leading universities in China, and many had also studied in the Soviet Union. Compared with the educational background, political experience and career patterns of members of previous Central Committees, the 13th was one of unprecedented managerial-technocratic leadership for the CCP. Li and White (1990, 1991) reiterated these arguments.

An Alliance between Career Bureaucrats and Technocrats: The 14th Central Committee (1992–1997)

Deng Xiaoping and the other old guards of the revolution are seen as the second generation of Chinese leadership (1978–1989). They gradually left the center of power after the 13th National Congress. The third generation of Chinese leadership (1989–2002) came to the fore after Jiang Zemin consolidated his power in the 14th National Congress held in 1992. While some western observers anticipated the promotion of a number of “princelings” (the children of senior cadres), this did not happen with the 14th Central Committee (Bachman, 1992; Baum, 1998; Christiansen, 1993; Li & White, 1998). Although the party was calling for the promotion of younger cadres, the average age of the 14th Central Committee (56.3) was higher than that of the 13th Central Committee (55.2). The percentage of minority members on the 14th Central Committee was lower than on the 13th (Zang, 1993; see also Saich, 1992).

Li and White (2003, p. 559) observed that a “technocratic turnover” occurred during the 14th National Congress as technocrats (engineers or natural scientists who became politicians) increased from 2 percent in 1982 to 26 percent in 1987 and 52 percent in 1997. However, Zang (1993) found that only 29.1 percent of the college-educated members of the 14th Central Committee had training in engineering, management, or finance. Zang (1993) also found that only 62 members could qualify as technocrats because they (1) were trained in finance, engineering, or other applied natural sciences or (2) had working experience in industry, finance and economic planning. If military technocrats are added to the category, only a total of 79 “real” technocrats could be said to be on the 14th Central Committee. This means that 41.8 percent could be viewed as technocrats in the strict sense, though the actual number could be slightly higher because the career patterns of 3.7 percent are unknown. Finally, 40.74 percent of the 14th Central Committee had worked in the government or the

party hierarchy or were PLA political commissars with no formal education in finance, engineering, or military science. It is difficult to label the 14th Central Committee as one of technocratic leadership based on the above findings. Rather, it could best be characterized as an alliance between career bureaucrats and technocrats.

In his review of the literature on Chinese elite politics, Goldstein (1994, p. 717) stressed the importance of the debate on the technocracy thesis:

Those emphasizing the technocratic character of China's new elite paint a picture of a regime more likely to apply scientific criteria to the analysis of policy problems, supplanting the more ideological stance of the old revolutionary mobilizers. Though certainly not equivalent to democratization, such a change suggests the emergence of "experts" as a countervailing power to the establishment "reds." If instead the technocratic elements in the elite remain dependent on career bureaucrats, then the analysis of policy problems will be colored by the latter's central concern with maintaining power and privilege. Where career bureaucrats hold the dominant position, only those experts who share their interest in assuring the party-state's political monopoly are likely to be recruited for leading positions.

Full-Fledged Technocratic Leadership? The 15th Central Committee (1997–2002)

The 15th National Congress was an important one for Jiang Zemin, as he was recognized as the core of the CCP's third generation of leadership (Baum, 1998). Baum (1998) found that the 14th and 15th Central Committees had similar average ages (56.3 vs. 55.9), and the youngest full member was 43 and the oldest 76. Only 4.1 percent of the 15th Central Committee were women, down from the 5.3 percent of the 14th Central Committee. The 15th Central Committee was larger than the 14th. It was also better educated (72 percent vs. 61 percent were college-trained), and more technocratic (56 percent vs. 40 percent had educational or professional backgrounds in science, engineering, management, or finance). There was an increase in the presence of state councilors and ministers, from 18 percent of the 14th Central Committee to 26 percent of the 15th. Provincial representation also increased from 26 percent to 32 percent. Military representation remained roughly constant (East Asian Institute, 1997; Shambaugh, 1998).

Li and White (1998) similarly saw no major change in terms of military representation between the 14th and 15th Central Committees. They noted that many members of the 15th Central Committee were politically inconspicuous before 1982. The portion who joined the CCP after 1960 increased from 18 percent in the 14th Central Committee to 48 percent in the 15th. Eleven (46 percent) of the members of the 15th Politburo were not CCP members before 1957. Others were princelings from the privileged ruling class and were well educated.

Li and White (1998) also noted that a high percentage (92.4 percent) of the 15th Central Committee were college educated. The proportion of full Central Committee members who majored in Engineering and other scientific fields rose by nearly 15 percent from 40.5 percent of the 14th Central Committee. Li and White identified 98 (55.4 percent) full Central Committee members as technocrats. Eighteen of the 24 Politburo members and all seven members of the Standing Committee were technocrats as well. Technocrats accounted for just 2 percent of the 12th Central Committee of 1982 but an entire quarter by 1987 and over half by 1997. No technocrat served as a provincial secretary or governor in 1982, and just one minister was a minister. Technocrats accounted for more than 70 percent of each of these three top administrative categories by 1997.

Thus, Li and White (1998) wanted to bring closure to the debate on the technocracy thesis by arguing that China was now being run by engineers-turned-politicians. The ascent of technocrats to dominance in the leadership was now clearer than ever in the composition of the 15th Central Committee. At the same time, Li and White (1998) offered a revised technocracy thesis proposing that China's technocrats rose to power only partly because of their educational and professional qualifications and that many were also protégés of veteran patrons. Family backgrounds, school ties and work as the personal secretaries of senior leaders were three major informal channels for the career advancement of technocrats in post-Deng China. This revised account is a more accurate observation of elite mobility than the original technocracy thesis.

New Directions in Studies of the 16th and 17th Central Committees

China scholars have paid close attention to the demographical attributes of Central Committee members in their studies of the 16th and 17th National Congresses. They have also raised questions for the technocracy thesis and introduced new concepts such as institutionalization and factional politics.

The 16th Central Committee (2002–2007)

Fewsmith (2003, p. 7) found that, of the 198 full members of the 16th CC, “112 were new, a turnover rate of 56 percent — compared with 57 percent last time. Similarly, the average age of the new Central Committee (55.13) was almost identical to the last one (55.9). The number of provincial representatives (65) was similar to the previous Central Committee (61), and the number of State Council seats was up somewhat (60 compared to 51). The number of women, never very well represented

on the Central Committee, fell from 7 to 5 (2.5 percent). Fifteen members were members of national minorities, about the same as last time (14). The military appears to have maintained its status quo” (see also Bo, 2010; W. Chen, 2003; Zheng, 2005). Li and White (2003) similarly examined the 16th CC members with regard to their demographics such as age and gender and diverse career patterns. T.-Y. Wang (2003) found that China’s fourth-generation leaders were the most well-educated group since the founding of the PRC in 1949 (see also Zheng, 2005).

The 17th Central Committee (2007–2012)

Li (2009, pp. 16–17) proposes that the fifth generation of China’s leaders started to accede to national leadership in the 17th National Congress. These leaders came from different class backgrounds and divergent career paths: “They lacked the strong political bonds and solidarity experienced by previous generations of leaders. It should be noted that a great number of those fifth-generation leaders seated on the Seventeenth Central Committee who were born in the early 1960s have business backgrounds as CEOs of China’s flagship enterprises.” Bo (2010) reports that the 17th Central Committee included more people with overseas education than the 16th.

Challenges to the Technocracy Thesis

Li (2008) reiterated that post-Mao China had been governed by three generations of technocratic leadership since the early 1980s. At the same time, Li and White (2003) report that the proportion of technocrats dropped to 46 percent in the 16th Central Committee and that CCP leaders who were trained in law and the social sciences increased in number (see also Li, 2022b). Li (2007) observes that the educational backgrounds of top leaders from the fifth generation were much more diverse than those of the third and fourth generations who were predominantly technocrats. Li (2009) notes the rapid decline of the dominance of technocrats within the Chinese leadership and the increasing prominence of CCP leaders trained in economics, law, and the social sciences in the 17th Central Committee. Li (2022b) agrees that the sudden entry of economists into the core leadership presented a challenge to China’s technocracy.

The Institutionalization of Succession Politics after the 16th Central Committee?

China scholars have used other concepts to understand the leadership selection in China. For example, Zang (2004, 2005) considered the role of different institutional

tasks among the government and CCP hierarchy with regard to elite recruitment and mobility in the Chinese political hierarchy. Other scholars have used the term institutionalization to label the outcomes of succession politics in studies of the 16th and 17th National Congresses. For example, Zheng (2005) argues that succession politics was greatly institutionalized under China's third generation of leadership. One indicator was an orderly succession in the 16th National Congress in 2002, which marked the formal transition of political power from the third to the fourth generation of Chinese leadership (Li & White, 2003; T.-Y. Wang, 2003). Another indicator of institutionalization in elite politics was the introduction of competitive elections in the selection of Central Committee members in the 16th National Congress, as this eliminated 5.1 percent of the candidates for full members and 5.7 percent for alternate members (Li, 2016, p. 92).

The above insights have not been accompanied by solid theoretical elaboration or rigorous empirical analysis, however. Fewsmith (2003) questions whether the "fourth generation" was ready to take over and whether the institutionalization of succession was complete. He claimed that Hu Jintao's role was uncertain, as "Jiang packed the Politburo and its Standing Committee with his allies and retained his position as head of the Party's Central Military Commission (CMC)," thereby "opening up questions about the degree to which political governance, particularly at the top of the system, was institutionalized."

Clique Politics in Succession Politics

Attention to the role of factional politics in the selection of Central Committee members has been another major development in the study of leadership succession in China. J. Huang (2000) proposes that factionalism has always been rampant in CCP politics and serves to protect against damaging criticism or purges and mobilize support for upward mobility. The faction may provide a microcosmic unit beyond the family for social identity and solidarity. One may form a faction with trusted colleagues and subordinates in their current work unit or with ties made during their previous socialization. The affiliations of a political actor may change over time depending on the issue at stake and other circumstances. A strong factional network can be useful and even indispensable for the actor's survival and the pursuit of future political ambitions.

However, factionalism was barely included in the study of Chinese politics before 1966 (J. Huang, 2000). There have been attempts since the 1990s to understand elite politics from the perspective of factional politics in the PRC (Dittmer, 2003;

Dittmer & Wu, 1995; Goodman, 1984; Kou & Zang, 2014). In particular, Bo (2004) made four observations in his study of the 16th National Congress: (1) Provincial units emerged as the most powerful institution in the 16th Central Committee (see also Fewsmith, 2003; Li & White, 2003; Zheng, 2005); (2) in terms of informal factional groups in the 16th Central Committee, the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) Group was the most powerful by a large margin, the Qinghua Clique ranked second, and the Shanghai Gang third; (3) although 15 children of former high-ranking officials served on the 16th Central Committee, they hardly formed a coherent faction; and (4) the military was better represented in the 16th Central Committee than key central government institutions (29 ministries and commissions) (see also Li & White, 2003; Zheng, 2005). Li (2007) similarly argues that many rising stars of the fifth generation differed “significantly with respect to socio-political backgrounds and career paths.”

Bo (2008) points out the 17th National Congress showed a substantial decline of the Shanghai Gang, a factional group affiliated with Jiang Zemin. Also in decline were graduates of Qinghua University, known as the Qinghua Clique. There was a substantial expansion of princelings and the Chinese Communist Youth League Group, a factional group closely associated with Hu Jintao (Kou, 2014; Kou & Tsai, 2014). Both the Shanghai Gang and Qinghua Clique shrank significantly according to their group cohesion indexes while the princelings increased somewhat and the Chinese Communist Youth League Group expanded substantially (Breslin, 2008; Kou et al., 2006).

The Fifth Generation of Leadership Comes to the Fore: The 18th Central Committee (2012–2017)

Several scholars have identified the 18th National Congress as the beginning of the fifth generation of Chinese leadership (Brødsgaard & Grünberg, 2014; Finkelstein & Kivlehan, 2015; Sharp, 2013). This was the Congress in which Xi Jinping became the CCP General Secretary. Bo (2016) points out that six of the members of the 18th Politburo were princelings, five by birth and one by marriage. A college degree was a must for membership in the 18th Central Committee. Some ambitious politicians went further to obtain a master’s degree or even a doctorate. Li (2016) discusses five primary and non-mutually exclusive channels through which CCP officials obtained Central Committee membership in the 18th National Congress: The central party apparatus, ministerial leadership, military, flagship state-owned enterprises and provincial administrations.

Further Evidence against the Technocracy Thesis

Li (2016) noted that only one member of the 18th Politburo Standing Committee had studied engineering and worked as an engineer in his early years, and only two members of the 18th Politburo (8 percent) could be considered technocrats. Bo (2016) found that the percentage of members with no full-time college education was the highest since 1992. Moreover, less than 41.2 percent of the Politburo's members had majored in Sciences and Engineering, while more than 59.8 percent had studied the Humanities and Social Sciences. Bo (2016) concluded that the 18th Politburo can hardly be seen as “technocratic” because only slightly more than one-third possessed either engineering or academic backgrounds and only one member could be considered a technocrat.

R. Huang and Henderson (2022) similarly found that contrary to the technocratic label slapped on the Hu administration (2002–2012), many provincial leaders in Hu's era had come of age during the Cultural Revolution and had no college education, let alone proper STEM training. These officials were less educated than their predecessors and offered a small pool of talent for leadership selection in China.

Further Evidence for Increasing Institutionalization in Succession Politics

First, Li (2016) regarded turnover rates in the 18th National Congress as an outcome of institutionalization in the extant rules and norms regarding age limits. Second, Li (2016) saw elite circulation in the CCP leadership as the norm rather than the exception in the post-1978 era, attributing this to the effective implementation of institutional norms and regulations. Third, the congressional delegates chose 205 full members from 224 candidates on the ballot (9.3 percent were eliminated) and 171 alternate members from a candidate pool of 190 (11.1 percent were eliminated) due to competitive elections in the 18th National Congress.

Xi Jinping in Command: The 19th Central Committee (2017–2022)

Fewsmith (2018) observed that the 19th National Congress brought about more extensive changes than any other National Congresses after 1978. For example, never in the reform era had there been such a purging of the Central Committee as in the 19th National Congress, even following Tiananmen: Of the 205 full members, only 78 retained seats (38 percent). Only 32 CCP leaders were promoted from the list of alternate members of the 19th Central Committee (20 percent). Fewsmith (2018) also

observed four main routes of upward mobility in the CCP: Serving in the central party apparatus, the State Council (the government side of the party-state system), the provincial party and state leadership, or the military. This observation offers limited support for the technocracy thesis.

Further Evidence for Factional Politics in Leadership Succession

Fewsmith (2018) saw the 19th Politburo Standing Committee as a body that drew from political networks like the Communist Youth League Group and the Shanghai clique. Szczudlik (2017) identified three main factions in the Central Committee, though the boundaries between them were blurred. These were the conservative and elitist faction of the princelings, the Shanghai group, and the populist egalitarian group associated with the Communist Youth League clique headed by former CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao. Bommakanti (2018) asserted that if Xi were to ignore age and term restrictions, albeit unwritten ones, he would risk antagonizing other factions within the CCP.

Questions on Increasing Institutionalization in Leadership Succession

Miller (2016) and Tanner (2017) discussed possible institutional and personnel changes in the 19th National Congress. Bommakanti (2018) observed that the CCP in the 19th National Congress made use of meritocracy over favoritism in the election of the party leadership. He further indicated a growing “differentiation and functional specialization of institutions within the regime” and the firm establishment of strong institutions to safeguard the norms of succession politics and secure the legitimacy of the CPC.

However, Fewsmith (2018; see also Zhou, 2020) argued that Xi Jinping in the 19th National Congress reshaped both the personnel of the CCP leadership and the norms by which it operated. Xi had extraordinary latitude in reshaping the 19th Central Committee and did not follow the practice of age norms when forming the 19th Politburo. In other words, Xi came to dominate Chinese politics in a way that no other leader (with the possible exception of Deng Xiaoping) was able to do after 1978. This argument challenges claims of the institutionalization of China’s leadership succession.

A New Era for Elite Politics in the PRC? The 20th Central Committee (2022–2027)

Based on the research of the CCP leadership since the 1980s, scholars and media commentators confidently predicted lists of new leaders before the 20th National

Congress held in October 2022 (Li, 2022a, 2022c; Yilin, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d; Yueshan, 2022). R. Huang and Henderson (2022) expected the return of technocrats to the top leadership, for example. Their expectations were partly based on the fact that under Xi, the portion of industry technocrats in provincial leadership positions shot up from less than 20 percent before the 18th Central Committee to nearly 45 percent and 62 percent in the 19th. Clay (2022) similarly discussed the rise of technocracy (especially the aerospace clique) in Chinese politics under Xi and expected the upcoming 20th National Congress to serve as the ultimate test of the prowess of the nascent “aerospace clique” in CCP politics. Yet, few if any of the above predictions came true in the 20th National Congress, and few if any of the above scholars and commentators were able to anticipate the unexpected outcomes in the selection of the new CCP leadership (Li, 2022d; see also Chu et al., 2022; Hu, 2022; Wu, 2022; Yilin, 2022h, 2022i). The initial shock regarding the 20th National Congress was followed by different interpretations concerning the selection of leadership in China. Interestingly and unsurprisingly, institutionalization has not been one of them.

Challenges to the Technocracy Thesis

Some scholars and commentators have claimed that technocrats returned to the inner circle of power in the 20th National Congress (Chu et al., 2022; Li, 2022b; Yilin, 2022e, 2022f). Others however have claimed that technocracy in the CCP leadership has declined in the 20th National Congress (Yilin, 2022j). Hao (2022) asserted that only one member of the 20th Politburo Standing Committee could be seen as a technocrat. Furthermore, the technocracy thesis is based on a claim that technocracy is a chosen model of government for development in post-1978 China, and it is feasible because of the expansion of higher education and official recognition that science and technology are vital to economic development in China (Li & White, 1990, 1991). Thus, the advocates of the technocracy thesis bear a burden to explain why there were the rise, decline and return of technocracy between the 13th Central Committee and the 20th Central Committee, when the assumed reason has in fact become stronger since the 13th Central Committee.

Different Views on Factional Politics

Some scholars have stressed the absolute domination of Xi’s New Zhijiang Army (之江新軍, *Zhijiang Xinjun*) clique and the total demise of the Communist Youth League group, the princelings, and the Jiang Zemin/Shanghai faction in the 20th National Congress (P. Chen, 2022; Cheng, 2022; He, 2022; Hu, 2022; Wu, 2022;

Yilin, 2022e). However, Hao (2022) asserts that only two members of the 20th Politburo can be seen as Xi's trusted followers. More importantly, it is necessary to clarify whether the New Zhijiang Army or Xi himself has been the dominant force in the CCP after the 20th National Congress. According to Fewsmith (2018), the answer is clearly the latter. Hence, it is a challenge to exploit factionalism as a relevant concept for the study of elite politics in and after the 20th National Congress.

Summary and Discussion

This paper reviews the literature on succession politics and provides an in-depth discussion of research on the post-1982 transformation of China's leadership. Scholars have moved from a focus on the demographics of each Central Committee to an attempt to develop theories of leadership succession in China. Their first major attempt is the technocracy thesis to understand the leadership transformation in China. They have then identified different routes for upward mobility and drawn attention to the role of institutionalism and factional politics in leadership selection in the CCP. While the literature has so far been largely descriptive in nature, it has laid a solid foundation for future research, and the field is likely to become strong theoretically and methodologically as new generations of scholars come to the fore.

This paper also shows that political changes in recent years have defied explanations and predictions concerning leadership succession by students of Chinese politics. The surprise and different interpretations the 20th National Congress noted above will likely encourage China scholars to critically evaluate existing concepts, methods, findings and conclusions concerning succession politics in China. While a major overhaul of the literature is impossible within the scope of this paper, it is helpful to discuss a few theoretical and methodological issues in the literature before concluding this review. The discussion below focuses on the technocracy thesis given significant empirical and theoretical inputs from Li, White, and many other Chinese scholars. The technocracy thesis merits discussion also because of its lasting influence on the literature (Lin, 2020; Liu, 2016; Xu, 2020). Readers interested in institutionalism or factional politics in China can refer to Kou and Zang (2014).

The discussion below raises three issues concerning the future influence and credibility of the technocracy thesis in China studies. First, is it appropriate to characterize the Chinese leadership as technocracy? As noted, Lee (1983) and Mills (1983) are among the first to characterize China's top leaders as technocrats, with Oksenberg (1987) following suit. Other China scholars and media commentators have since described CCP leaders as technocratic officials or simply technocrats (Andreas, 2009;

Chu et al., 2022; R. Huang & Henderson, 2022; Li, 2022b; Liu, 2016; Yilin, 2022e, 2022f, 2022g) following Li and White (1988, 1990, 1998). Nevertheless, the above discussion of the 20th Central Committee makes technocracy a problematic label for current political elites in China.

Furthermore, who are technocrats? Li and White (1998, p. 231) first defined technocrats “as people who have three traits: technical education, professional experience, and high posts. They vie for power on all available grounds but cohere as a political elite partly because of their notion that technical professionalism confers some right to rule.” Later, Li and White (1998, p. 236) added that the technical elites came to power because of their technical credentials and political or family connections. Most recently, Li (2022b) has reiterated that a technocrat is a person who concurrently holds specialized training in engineering or natural science, a professional occupation (engineering, for example), and a leadership position in China.

These definitions may differ from the common understandings of technocracy outside China. The term originates from research in the West where technocrats are defined as persons who exercise power by their technical knowledge (Akin, 1977; Bell, 1973; Putnam, 1977). Li and White (1990, p. 22) note that scholars in the West see a technocrat as one “who shares an ideology of modernization, an aversion to politics, a belief in the free enterprise system and yet a need for government planning, an elitist view of society, and a commitment to development.” In China studies, Lee (1991, p. 407) portrayed “technocrats” as those whose influence was based entirely on technical expertise and had non-bureaucratic careers, were non-political or non-ideological, and were relatively lacking in personal ties (see also R. Huang & Henderson, 2022). Technocrats such as these cannot enter China’s top leadership.

It seems that China pundits define “technocrats” in the Chinese leadership differently. While they can choose to use the term *technocracy* to label the Chinese leadership, they must also explain why this Western concept is an appropriate and useful label in the Chinese context. Otherwise, readers may see the Chinese leadership according to their understanding of technocracy in the West and may miss the fine differences between Western technocracy theory and the technocracy thesis of China. Also, while many top Soviet leaders were engineers (Jinzhong, 2022), they are seldom labeled as technocrats by Kremlinologists. Why could Chinese political leaders with technical education and professional experience be seen as technocrats? Finally, some Chinese experts have claimed that the rise of technocracy has been driven by factors such as the profound social transition (such as improved education) and the CCP’s determination to modernize the Chinese economy since 1978. These factors have become stronger today than in the 1980s when the technocracy thesis was first raised. Thus, the advocates of the technocracy thesis must explain why there has been

the ascent of technocrats to dominance in the CCP leadership in the 15th Central Committee, a sudden decline afterward, and a debatable resurgence of technocratic leadership in the 20th Central Committee.

Second, even if Chinese scholars contend that technocracy is an appropriate and useful concept for the study of elite politics in China, they must answer the question of “so what?” They must explain, why and how the technocracy thesis can help readers understand and foresee elite politics and political developments in China, and how technocrats differ from other CCP leaders in government. Proponents of the technocracy thesis claim that because technocrats have trained and worked in technocratic fields, they tend to be more apolitical, focus on problem solving, and believe in scientific progress to move society forward (R. Huang & Henderson, 2022; Li, 2022b; Li & White, 1990, 1991). This claim has remained a hypothesis rather than a verified statement, however. One way for Chinese experts to address the “so what” question may be to compare the governing behavior of technocrats with those of other types of political leaders, but a focus on the Central Committee or Politburo members cannot do the job. Scholars can instead compare patterns and outcomes of government in regions governed by technocrats and those by others. Scholars can develop other innovative methods to address this “so what” question to advance research on succession politics in China.

Third, Chinese scholars must devote more attention to different types of data and methods to address the question. A large part of the literature on succession politics in China is based on bivariate analyses of small samples (e.g., the Politburo Standing Committees). While this approach has merits and deserves attention, it is one of the traditional sinology and differs from mainstream social science research that is relying increasingly on sophisticated statistical tools, large samples and even big data. Chinese experts must learn from these empirical methods in order to arrive at more accurate estimates and predictions about succession politics in the PRC. One exciting development in the field of elite politics in China is the growing number of studies that are based on sound methodologies, theoretical elaborations, or both (e.g., Fisman et al., 2020; Keller, 2016; Shih et al., 2012; Shih et al., 2010; Tokarev et al., 2021). It is expected that this development will eventually dominate elite politics in China, thereby integrating the field into the mainstream social sciences in the upcoming years.

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