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# Selection of China's Top Leadership Cadre: The Roles of Supreme Leaders, Factional Networks, and Candidate Attributes

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## Abstract

This article provides empirical evidence to show how the general secretaries of the Chinese Communist Party dominated provincial personnel through their factional ties. Based on panel data from 1993 to 2017, this study finds that the provincial leaders' personal connections with the incumbent party head significantly increased their promotion chances. The positive effect of the incumbent party heads on promotion did not depend on provincial leaders' economic performance and seniority. This study further uncovers that working experiences in the prefectural leading positions strongly increased the likelihood of promotion. However, connections with other important top leaders did not have similar effects. These findings challenge the traditional wisdom on the collective leadership and indicate the dominance of the Chinese Communist Party's heads for provincial personnel arrangements.

## Keywords

Factionalism, political performance, seniority, leadership selection

## Introduction

Recently, a growing body of literature examines authoritarianism using institutional perspectives (Boix and Svobik, 2013; Geddes, 1999; Magaloni, 2008; Reuter and Robertson, 2015). Formal political institutions help mitigate many of the worst features of

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authoritarianism. Perhaps most importantly, they enable regular interaction between dictators and their allies, thereby facilitating power-sharing. In this way, institutions prevent conflicts among ruling coalitions from escalating into ruinous confrontations, thus enhancing authoritarian stability (Svolik, 2012). In China, however, this mechanism may not function effectively. The absolute power concentration at the top, and the absence of overt ideological differentiation, might preempt or mitigate serious political conflicts at the centre. Under these conditions, institutions may be no more than a tool of the top leadership to regulate lower levels of government and induce them to follow the centre.

What are the roles of the supreme leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in these established institutions? Do the CCP's formal or informal institutions have a significant independent influence on the behaviour of these supreme leaders? Or do these institutions become the dependent tool of each new supreme leader? China's governmental structure is mainly based on geographical principles. This self-contained structure allows provincial leaders to impose substantive direction regarding regional economic policies (Qian and Xu, 1993; Qian et al., 2006, 2007). The CCP's provincial personnel management power provides more political resources to determine policy orientation than does central personnel power. Therefore, the CCP's provincial-level personnel management is an excellent dependent variable with which to evaluate these broader questions.

Scholars who study the determinants of the CCP's personnel management disagree about the importance of meritocracy and clientelism. Pro-meritocracy scholars believe that the CCP selects its cadres based on their performance (Bell, 2016; Zhou, 2008). Institutionalisation of this meritocracy occurs via a promotion tournament that encourages local bureaucracies to align with the top (Miller, 2008; Nathan, 2003). However, pro-clientelism scholars depict China's bureaucracy as being a web of political networks (Keller, 2016). They see the CCP's collective leadership as the basis of underlying informal patron–client networks that sustain the factional balance of power at the centre (Shih et al., 2010). Under these conditions, the CCP's leaders strive to appoint their trusted followers to important positions.

These studies enlarge our knowledge of the CCP's personnel management. However, the influence of the CCP's incumbent supreme leaders on high officials' career promotions seems to have been underestimated. Therefore, this article discusses the power of the CCP's supreme leaders in selecting the CCP's top leadership cadre. I argue that the CCP's personnel management institutions may be a tool of the CCP's supreme leaders to extend their factional power. Although institutions seem to constrain the career mobility of province-level leading cadres, the party heads in power might be able to overcome these constraints and appoint sycophants and loyalists from their own factions. To test these arguments, this study draws on a set of panel data to test the effects of performance-based and seniority-based institutional constraints on provincial leaders' career mobility from 1993 to 2017. Apart from the greater availability of data sources, I focus on this historical period mainly because it incorporated the major institutionalisation of China's personnel management, which has arguably generated both political stability and economic prosperity. Thus, focusing on this period enlarges our understanding of China's bureaucratic politics. Through quantitative analyses of career

mobility, I find that personal connections between the CCP's supreme leaders and the provincial party secretaries and governors significantly increase the probability of provincial leaders' promotion. However, connection with other incumbent top leaders imposes opposite effects. It may largely dim their political prospect.

This study advances the existing literature on China's leadership promotion methods and outcomes in the following ways. First, I summarise multiple quantifiable factors related to career mobility and compare their different effects in a provincial-level panel. I also discuss the interactions among them. Second, I distinguish the influence of the CCP's supreme leaders from that of other top leaders, which helps to distinguish the uniquely important role of party heads in China's political system. Based on this, the current study attempts to answer the broader question concerning the extent to which the CCP's supreme leaders are able to impose discretionary control over the whole political system. The Leninist party cultivates its leaders and shapes their political behaviour in political practice. The party's supreme leaders, in turn, enjoy a unique position in this system, which empowers them to change the status quo of the party's institutions (McAdams, 2017). Therefore, it appears that the party's heads are by far the most powerful actors in Chinese politics.

The roadmap of this article is as follows. In the next two sections, I briefly review the prior literature on the determinants of career promotion at the higher levels of the CCP party-state and develop my own theories. The fourth section discusses the data and methods. The fifth section presents baseline results and robustness checks. Moreover, I further test the effects of the personal connection with other Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) members affect career promotion. The sixth section discusses how my results relate to prior findings. The conclusions are presented in the final section.

## **Institutionalisation of Authoritarianism and Meritocratic Bureaucracy**

Since the 1990s, the CCP's ruling elites have gradually come to a consensus over sustaining long-term prosperity as a strategy to preserve the leadership of the CCP (Cai and Treisman, 2006). For this purpose, the party centre tried to institutionalise personnel management, decentralise power and transfer economic profits to generate reform incentives (Solinger, 1987; Tsou, 1984; Wong, 1987). Contrary to what many expected, the ensuing expansion of local autonomy, conflicts of interest, and corruption among cadres has not undermined reform performance as in other transition economies (Bo, 2004; Burns, 1989; Frye and Shleifer, 1997; Huang, 1996; Landry, 2008). Most scholars attribute this to the CCP's formal meritocratic institutions (Bell, 2016; Huang, 2008).

First, meritocracy provides a solution to the inconsistency of policy preferences among levels of government. The CCP stands at the pinnacle of central autocracy to master the organisational resources (Burns, 1994; Huang, 1996; Yan, 1995). Economic reform has not substantially attenuated party control over the bureaucratic system. Instead, the party has built a performance-based elite promotion system (Naughton, 1995; Xu, 2011). It can reward those officials achieving better economic

performance by appointing them to important posts, which increases bureaucratic competition among different regions to increase economic growth (Chen et al., 2005; Li and Zhou, 2005). Under these conditions, bureaucracies often stay in line with the party's overall economic purposes. Therefore, this "veritable bureaucratic revolution" (Li, 1998: 395) induces local bureaucrats to be devoted to growth (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988).

Second, this meritocratic bureaucracy places importance on professional qualifications to select officials with the potential to advance growth. A nominee should show his or her future performance capabilities to most of the top leaders (Xu, 2011). In this case, quantitative evidence revealed that the candidates' past political experiences matter (Du et al., 2012; Zhang, 2010). This is mainly because these job records convincingly show the candidates' political training in policy-making, regional development, social control, crisis management, and other important policy areas. In addition, a wider variety of career experiences may reduce the likelihood of collusion with particular regions and increase political loyalty to the party centre (Xiang, 2019; Zhou, 2016; Zhou et al., 2018).

Age is another crucial factor in examining the qualifications of provincial leaders. To allow younger but more qualified technical officials to replace older revolutionaries, the *de facto* lifetime tenure of leading cadres has been abolished since the early 1980s (Li, 2004). Before the strict retirement age arrives (usually sixty-five years old for provincial-level leaders), younger officials have more time to accumulate the leadership experiences required; they also have more time to secure higher positions. In contrast, provincial officials are less likely to be promoted to a higher position when approaching retirement age. Because of this, holding provincial positions at relatively young ages has gradually become a political advantage for future leaders.

Meritocratic scholars believe that the CCP cultivated a pro-market bureaucracy through established institutions. However, Tao et al. (2010) were sceptical of this viewpoint, claiming that any unambiguous formal institutional configuration would constrain the behaviour of authoritarian rulers, which runs counter to their discretion and interests. For autocratic rulers, supervising the subordinates' political behaviour to ensure loyalty is actually more important than improving performance (Landry et al., 2018). Thus, China's dictators may place a higher priority on maintaining short-term power by buying the support of winning coalitions than on improving economic performance (Jiang, 2018; Shih et al., 2012). Therefore, opinions that performance concerns have trumped factions in determining the career promotion of China's provincial leaders may be misunderstandings. Along these lines, more recent studies have stressed the role of personal favouritism or clientelism in the CCP's personnel management (Jia et al., 2015; Opper et al., 2015). The presence of collective leadership has been widely accepted by some Chinese politics observers (Hu, 2013; Li, 2016; Nathan, 2003). This collective leadership system empowers the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau of the CCP, usually known as the PSC, to make the final decisions on provincial leaders' career mobility (Zhang, 2009). Thus, a close relationship with incumbent PSC members is expected to be a crucial factor in such mobility.

## Institutional Constraints on the CCP's Supreme Leaders

Previous researchers have revealed multiple criteria of political selection, proving that both performance and factionalism are relevant for elite mobility (Choi, 2012; Jia et al., 2015; Walder, 1995; Zhang, 2009). However, they might underestimate the capacities of the CCP's heads to change the status quo of the bureaucracy via factional ties. Goldstein (1991) argued that, in the CCP's established hierarchy, a commitment to the unified image and organisational vitality of the Leninist vanguard party sustains a well-functioning political system, which endows the CCP's supreme leaders with ultimate authority. Tsou (1995) claimed that the political struggle of the CCP is basically "a game to win all." He thus stood in sharp contrast with Nathan's (1973) popular view that balance-of-power politics can be sustained on a regular basis within the party centre. As the individuals who hold the real power of the CCP, the personal authority of the supreme leaders is at the apex of the party-state's political order. Successive supreme leaders endeavour to concentrate power tightly in their hands, which may even affect the collective leadership of the PSC. In this view, the role of formal institutions in constraining the CCP's top leaders should not be exaggerated. Neither the formal institutions of the personnel evaluation system nor the so-called collective leadership at the apex can effectively constrain the political behaviour of the CCP's supreme leaders. The party heads, at both central and local levels, are able to develop their own factions to change China's bureaucracy (Li, 2012; Doyon and Keller, 2020; Keller, 2016; Meyer et al., 2016).

Therefore, from my perspective, the CCP's incumbent supreme leaders seem to be able to bend the rules of meritocracy. In addition, they may have a strong desire to do so. First, the supreme leaders are most anxious about the political loyalty of their subordinates. Under the CCP's pyramid hierarchy, the party's supreme leaders stand at the peak of the political pecking order (Yan, 1995). Any political threats to their power are most likely to come from below. The expansion of autonomy and the centrifugal tendency of local governments may pose substantial threats to the power of the centre and may trigger a sense of insecurity in the party's supreme leaders. Therefore, they tend to adjust personnel selection rules to fulfil their demands for personal loyalty. Second, the party's supreme leaders do not rely completely on economic performance to consolidate power. Although prosperity legitimises the CCP's authoritarian regime, it does not necessarily strengthen the power of the supreme leaders. Instead, different factions within the party may challenge their authority by building the prestige of their circles through regional economic achievements (Cai and Treisman, 2006). If the performance-based personnel selection rules were strictly followed, hostile factions would have expanded their strength through excellent performance and would thus be able to challenge the power of the CCP's supreme leaders. From this understanding of personnel management in China, I derived the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Factional connections with the CCP's incumbent supreme leader make provincial leaders more likely to be promoted.

Under the CCP's institutionalised personnel management rules, economic performance, past working experiences, and age should be the crucial factors affecting provincial

leaders' career promotions. However, any established rules in the party seem to run counter to the dictators' ambition of pursuing power, because they may impose a constraint on the political behaviour of the dictators. Strong leaders should be able to break constraining rules when they have a personal political interest in doing so. Thus, the interactive hypotheses specify:

**H2:** The effect of factional connections on career promotion does not depend on the economic performance of provincial leaders.

**H3:** The effect of factional connections on career promotion does not depend on the past working experiences of provincial leaders.

**H4:** The effect of factional connections on career promotion does not depend on the age of provincial leaders.

## Data and Methods

### Panel Data

To test the theories and hypotheses above, panel data on provincial leadership was gathered. It takes the province-year as the unit of analysis, incorporating almost all of the provincial party secretaries and governors from 1993 to 2017. Since 1997, Chongqing has been upgraded to a municipality directly under the central government and has become an independent provincial administrative unit. Thus, the provincial leadership data for Chongqing begins in 1997. I replaced leaders whose tenure was less than half a year with their successors because their short tenure was unlikely to generate any meaningful policy influences. I excluded leaders who died during their tenure. I also excluded those transferred to the People's Congress or to the Consultative Conference after the age of 63, because their exit from power circles seemed to be due to age rather than performance or any other political concerns.

Biographical information was mainly from Jiang's (2018) *Chinese Political Elite Database*. I double-checked the data by using other independent data sources from the websites *China Vitae*, *Wikipedia*, and *Baidu Baike*. Data on provincial economies were obtained from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS) website and the annually published China Statistical Yearbooks.

### Baseline Model

This study incorporates a binary variable accounting for promotion or non-promotion as its dependent variable. In this case, a logit model is valid for estimating the effects of factionalism on provincial leaders' career mobility. The probability of promotion is given by

$$\begin{aligned} Promotion_{p,t+1} = & \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Personal\ Connection_{p,t} + \alpha_2 X_{p,t} \\ & + \alpha_3 Personal\ Connection_{p,t} X_{p,t} + \alpha_4 Z_{p,t} + \gamma_{p,t} + \eta_p + \varepsilon_{p,t} \end{aligned}$$

**Table I.** Descriptive Statistics.

	(1) All Leaders (last tenure year)	(2) Party Secretary (last tenure year)	(3) Governor (last tenure year)	(4) All samples
Promotion	42%	22%	61%	12%
Personal connection	10%	8%	12%	10%
Economic performance	111.10 (2.33)	111.12 (2.29)	111.08 (2.36)	111.13 (2.68)
SOE	30%	28%	31%	29%
INTERPRO	40%	39%	41%	37%
REMOTE	9%	10%	8%	9%
CENT	34%	37%	32%	34%
CITY	66%	70%	63%	65%
CYL	21%	21%	22%	22%
Experiences	2.00 (1.07)	2.04 (1.13)	1.96 (1.00)	1.96 (1.04)
Age	60.04 (4.19)	61.20 (4.16)	59.02 (3.95)	58.72 (4.08)
Tenure	4.37 (2.29)	4.60 (2.38)	4.17 (2.20)	3.19 (2.15)
Graduate	43%	40%	46%	46%
GDP (in trillion RMB)	1.02 (1.30)	1.00 (1.20)	1.03 (1.39)	1.01 (1.32)
Sample size	358	168	190	1,526

Note. Reported in each cell are the sample means for continuous variables and the percentage for dummy variables. Reported in parentheses is the standard deviation for continuous variables. SOE = experiences at state-owned enterprise; INTERPRO = work experiences in other provinces; REMOTE = work experiences in Xinjiang and/or Tibet; CENT = past experiences of working in the central government; CITY = past experiences of assuming prefectural-level party secretary and/or city mayor posts; CYL = past experiences of working in the Communist Youth League.

where  $p$  denotes the province and  $t$  indicates the year.  $Promotion_{p,t+1}$  is the career mobility status of one provincial leader.  $Personal\ Connection_{p,t}$  is the main independent variable indicating the personal connection of the provincial leaders to the incumbent party head.  $X_{p,t}$  is a vector of the performance, experience, and age characteristics of provincial leaders. I incorporated  $X_{p,t}$  and its interaction with  $Personal\ Connection_{p,t}$  to test whether there is any differentiation of the effects of these promotion determinants between connected and non-connected leaders. For technical reasons, the continuous variables in  $X_{p,t}$  are centred to avoid collinearity caused by interaction terms.  $Z_{p,t}$  is a vector of control variables. The year dummies  $\gamma_{p,t}$  and the province dummies  $\eta_p$  capture common shocks and time-invariant heterogeneity among different observations. Both of them are allowed to differ between party secretaries and governors. The standard errors are clustered



at the province level to avoid serial correlation. For convenience of explanation, I will report the odds ratio of coefficients in the final models.

### *Dependent Variables*

As the main dependent variable of this study, *Promotion* indicates whether a party secretary or governor of province  $p$  in year  $t$  was appointed to a higher position during the period between July of year  $t$  and June of year  $t + 1$ , which was to be matched with their economic performance in year  $t$ . Given the ambiguous rules of the CCP's bureaucratic hierarchy, scholars have held varying opinions on criteria for judging provincial officials' upward mobility (Geng et al., 2014; Zhong et al., 2016). I regard a provincial leader as being promoted if he or she assumed a national-level office, including becoming a member of the Politburo, a vice president of the People's Republic of China, a vice-premier, or a state councillor in the central government. Provincial governors becoming provincial party secretaries or heads of a central party department or a ministry could also be seen as promotions. For comparability to some previous studies (Jia et al., 2015), I also regard occupying the secretary of the Secretariat of the CCP's Central Committee, the vice chairmanship of the National People's Congress or the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and the head of the Supreme People's Court as a promotion. In robustness check, exclusion of these factors generates very similar results.

### *Independent Variables*

In this study, the most important independent variable shows the factional connections of provincial party secretaries and governors. I designated the variable *Personal Connection* as the measure of the relationship between provincial leaders and the CCP's incumbent heads (general secretary of the Central Committee). In this regard, past researchers often regarded shared working experiences as evidence of interpersonal ties (Keller, 2016). Working in the same place during the same period increases the probability of knowing each other and establishing mutual trust. However, intimate factional ties are also built on hierarchical relationships within a regional or departmental bureaucracy. In particular, incumbent supreme leaders might be expected to promote their past subordinates. Therefore, I coded the variable *Personal Connection* as 1 if a provincial party secretary or governor used to work with one of the subsequent supreme leaders as a subordinate within a regional or departmental bureaucracy at the same time; otherwise, it was coded as 0. Specifically, China's bureaucracies are organized mainly along territorial lines (Qian et al., 2006). Regional governments are responsible for supervising bureaucratic functioning throughout their regions. Therefore, regional party-government leaders can easily establish relationships among superiors and subordinates within regional bureaucracies, which give them opportunities to foster cronyism. By contrast, the leading figures of a central or local department can only establish personal connections with the officials in these

systems. Based on this principle, I defined all the officials in a given region as one party leader's cronies if this leader was the head of the party or government in that region; however, I defined the officials of a central ministry or local department in a given region as the cronies of other officials in that department. This patronage connection is only coded as existing when the supreme leader is in office, and not before or after he is in office.

To encourage local bureaucrats to follow the party centre, the CCP's top leaders may evaluate the performance of their inferiors via important economic indicators (Zhang, 2009). Accordingly, I measured a provincial leader's *Economic Performance* using the average provincial GDP growth rate. It was measured by the mean value of the provincial GDP growth rate during one leader's tenure. The average provincial GDP growth rate reflects the provincial leaders' contributions to regional prosperity, which would be expected to be a criterion for calculating the performance of provincial cadres.

To capture seniority, I constructed several dummy variables, including *SOE*, *INTERPRO*, *REMOTE*, *CENT*, *CITY*, and *CYL*. *SOE* measures work experiences at state-owned enterprises. *INTERPRO* measures work experiences in other provinces. To ensure the significance of these political experiences, all these positions need to be at or above the departmental level. *REMOTE* measures work experiences in the local government of Xinjiang and/or Tibet. *CENT* measures past experiences of working in branches of the central government. *CITY* measures past experiences of assuming prefectural-level party secretary and/or city mayor posts. *CYL* measures whether the officials used to work at or above a departmental level branch of the Communist Youth League (Wu, 2006). I simplified my model by creating a count variable *Experiences*, which ranges from 0 to 6. It measured the number of these different work experiences that provincial leaders have. In addition, I included the age of the provincial leaders as an independent variable (*Age*). All of these variables show the seniority of provincial leaders within the party.

### Control Variables

Career promotion may be influenced by other confounding factors. In the baseline models, several control variables were introduced to isolate such potential effects. First, I followed previous studies by including provincial *GDP* to control for provincial welfare effects (Li and Zhou, 2005; Opper et al., 2015), which allows for the possibility that taking charge of economically developed regions may provide crucial professional experiences for promotion. Second, I included a dummy variable, *Graduate*, to show when officials have a graduate degree or above. Finally, I incorporated a continuous variable, *Tenure*, to show the number of years a provincial leader has already served in the current post. I assume that longer office terms reduce the promotion chances of a provincial leader, because it tends to strengthen officials' local favouritism and decrease their linkage with the centre. Moreover, longer tenures might imply poor performance in current positions.

The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. It shows that about 42 per cent of provincial leaders are promoted at the end of their tenure in office. But governors have much more chances than party secretaries in career promotion, 61 and 22 per cent, respectively. About 10 per cent of observations have a personal connection with the CCP's incumbent top leader. And over 60 per cent of them used to work at the prefectural leading positions. On average, each observation has at least two working experience items.

## Empirical Results

### Baseline Models

The baseline results are presented in Table 2. A personal connection with the incumbent supreme leader has significantly positive effects on promotion in several separate models,

**Table 2.** Baseline Regression Results for Career Promotion.

	(1) Promotion	(2) Promotion	(3) Promotion	(4) Promotion	(5) Promotion	Odds ratio
Personal connection	0.879** (0.313)	0.886** (0.337)	0.666* (0.276)	0.629 <sup>+</sup> (0.326)	0.721* (0.365)	2.057*
Economic performance		0.034 (0.049)			0.064 (0.064)	1.066
Personal connection*		0.127 (0.089)			0.042 (0.094)	1.043
Economic performance						
Experiences			0.360** (0.120)		0.474** (0.165)	1.606**
Personal connection*			0.575* (0.265)		0.359 (0.291)	1.432
Experiences						
Age				0.029 (0.022)	-0.004 (0.030)	0.996
Personal connection*				-0.261*** (0.072)	-0.246** (0.092)	0.782**
Age						
Tenure					0.336*** (0.072)	1.399***
Graduate					0.223 (0.259)	1.250
GDP					-0.184 (0.176)	0.832
Fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
N of provinces	31	31	31	31	31	
pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	0.406	0.408	0.422	0.413	0.459	
Log likelihood	-324.10	-322.84	-315.38	-320.33	-295.36	
Obs.	1,526	1,526	1,526	1,526	1,526	

Note. Independent variables are lagged one year. Robust standard errors clustered at the province level are reported in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

including isolated regression (Model 1), regression with separate interaction terms of economic performance (Model 2), experiences (Model 3), and age (Model 4). Even with the inclusion of the complete set of variables and fixed effects, the effects of the personal connection variable are significant at the five per cent level (Model 5). The odds ratio suggests that all else being equal, the likelihood of provincial leaders' career promotion is increased by approximately 105.7 per cent when there is a personal connection with the incumbent supreme leader.

In addition to factionalism, past working experiences and age also had significant positive effects on provincial leaders' career promotion. Models 3 and 5 jointly show that richer work experiences increase the probability of career promotion, and the results are still significant at the ten per cent level, even when all of the control variables are included. Specifically, the odds ratio shows that the likelihood of career promotion is increased by 60.6 per cent for each additional item of past working experience. The effects of interaction between personal connections and past working experiences are not significant once I incorporated control variables in Model 5, which suggests that the decision of the supreme leaders to promote provincial officials may not depend on their seniority. However, the effects of age on promotion are more complicated. Models 4 and 5 demonstrate that the likelihood of career promotion does not increase with age. Nevertheless, models 4 and 5 show that the coefficient on the interaction term of personal connection and age is negative and statistically significant at the one per cent level, implying that increased age might decrease the likelihood of the career promotion of the connected officials.

In sum, first, both personal connection and seniority impose significantly positive effects on career promotion. Second, neither performance-based nor seniority-based criteria effectively influence the decision-making of the CCP's supreme leaders on bureaucracy mobility. Third, only personnel management rules about age limits constrain the CCP's supreme leaders' efforts to promote their cronies into higher positions. Therefore, these stepwise logit regressions strongly support hypothesis H1 of a positive association between factionalism and career promotion chances. H3 is weakly accepted. H4 is strongly rejected. In contrast, the evidence does not support the traditional wisdom on meritocracy. Neither economic performance nor the interaction terms between personal connection and economic performance significantly increase the chances of promotion. Therefore, H2 is strongly accepted.

### **Robustness Checks**

For robustness checks, I conducted a series of modifications to the baseline models. First, I modified the coding strategies of *Promotion*, as mentioned before. Second, I changed the coding strategies for *Personal Connection*. I followed some new literature (Keller, 2016; Meyer et al., 2016) to take overlapping time and rotation of provincial unit into consideration. In this case, a leader's personal connection was coded as 1 if he or she used to be a provincial subordinate of the subsequent supreme leader for at least one year, and while working together, he or she was transferred into or out of their patron's work unit. Here

**Table 3.** Robustness Checks for Career Promotion.

	(1) Modification of promotion	(2) Modification of personal connection	(3) Modification of economic performance
Personal connection	0.650 <sup>+</sup> (0.360)	0.655** (0.330)	0.977* (0.453)
Economic performance	0.071 (0.066)	0.086 (0.064)	0.057 (0.059)
Experiences	0.480** (0.164)	0.512*** (0.155)	0.477** (0.165)
Age	-0.009 (0.035)	-0.019 (0.029)	-0.002 (0.030)
Personal connection*	0.027 (0.094)	-0.107 (0.153)	-0.149 (0.095)
Economic performance	0.260 (0.270)	-0.024 (0.203)	0.358 (0.288)
Personal connection*	-0.298* (0.116)	-0.190* (0.101)	-0.198+ (0.103)
Age	0.310*** (0.069)	0.343*** (0.074)	0.340*** (0.074)
Tenure	0.430 (0.268)	0.240 (0.241)	0.232 (0.258)
Graduate	-0.162 (0.175)	-0.204 (0.175)	-0.208 (0.176)
GDP	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fixed effects	31	31	31
N of provinces	0.459	0.451	0.460
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	-278.12	-299.65	-294.84
Log likelihood	1,526	1,526	1,526
Obs.			

Note. Independent variables are lagged one year. Robust standard errors clustered at the province level are reported in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

I am interested in the rotation of these politicians because a workplace change under the watch of their patrons might signal a very strong factional coalition. A newly appointed senior official in a provincial unit would have an incentive to bring close allies to the new posting and then send them on to other units to extend their factional influences. Conversely, a party leader has no incentive to appoint and transfer untrustworthy subordinates in the localities under his purview. Third, I took the difference in average GDP growth rate relative to adjoining provinces to measure provincial leaders' performance. This reflects the superiority of a given provincial leader in regional economic competition. This variable was calculated by subtracting the mean value of economic performance of the adjoining provinces from the economic performance of the provincial leader's province.

Table 3 shows that they yield similar results to the baseline models. In addition, I regressed the five indicators of past working experiences separately. Table 4 shows that working as a party secretary and/or mayor of a prefecture-level city increased the likelihood of promotion by 174.2 per cent when all the variables are included. Past working experiences in state-owned enterprises, central government and Communist Youth League also impose some positive effects on their likelihood of promotion.

### *Patronage Ties with PSC Members*

Some quantitative studies have indicated significantly positive effects of personal ties with the incumbent PSC members on provincial leaders' career promotion (Jia et al., 2015; Oppen et al., 2015). However, I posited that this was caused by incidental correlation, because the party's supreme leaders were among the PSC members. One way to separate the confounding effects of the supreme leaders from other PSC members is to regress on the personal connection with them. I coded one provincial leader as having *Personal Connection with other PSC* if he or she used to work with at least one incumbent PSC member, except for the CCP's supreme leader. For comparison, I also measured the provincial officials' *Personal Connection with all PSC*.

I regressed these variables separately using logit regression models and incorporated the interaction term of *Personal Connection* and *Personal Connection with other PSC* to test their complementary effects. I also included the control variables from the periodicity regressions. Table 5 displays the results. Model 1 suggests that personal ties with any one PSC member increase the likelihood of promotion, but the result is not significant. Model 2 generates similar results to my baseline models. Model 3 shows that personal ties with any other PSC members do not significantly improve the promotion chances of provincial leaders. More interestingly, models 4 and 5 suggest that the probability of promotion becomes much higher after including the connection with the top, the connection with other PSC leaders, and their interaction term. Model 5 shows that the promotion chance of those provincial leaders exclusively connected with the incumbent general secretary is over eight times larger than others. However, their promotion chances declined dramatically if they also have personal connection with other PSC leaders. Additionally, I provide more robustness checks and details on the effects of personal connections with the CCP's general secretary and other PSC members in the online supplemental material. These tests provide additional evidence for the theories of the CCP's elite struggles in Doyon and Keller (2020). They believe that the effects of personal ties depend on who one is connected to in the CCP's local elite struggles. My tests suggest that their theories may also be supported at the national level.

## **Discussion**

This article, in general, shows the importance of patronage networks in affecting elite selection of the CCP at the provincial level. However, there is little evidence to support

Table 4. Working Experiences and Career Promotion.

	(1) Promotion	(2) Promotion	(3) Promotion	(4) Promotion	(5) Promotion	Odds ratio
SOE	0.561 <sup>+</sup> (0.290)	0.618* (0.296)	0.638* (0.303)	0.611 <sup>+</sup> (0.327)	0.603 <sup>+</sup> (0.333)	1.827 <sup>+</sup>
INTERPRO	0.085 (0.255)	0.020 (0.263)	0.023 (0.266)	0.199 (0.340)	0.158 (0.353)	1.171
REMOTE	0.687 (0.465)	0.780 (0.479)	0.743 (0.509)	0.594 (0.590)	0.692 (0.590)	1.998
CENT	0.307 (0.263)	0.360 (0.263)	0.394 (0.273)	0.553 <sup>+</sup> (0.319)	0.570 <sup>+</sup> (0.319)	1.769 <sup>+</sup>
CITY	0.740** (0.231)	0.822** (0.254)	0.835** (0.260)	0.989*** (0.281)	1.009*** (0.290)	2.742***
CYL	0.689** (0.265)	0.634* (0.271)	0.685* (0.297)	0.574 <sup>+</sup> (0.348)	0.508 (0.370)	1.662
Personal connection	0.894** (0.312)	0.849** (0.308)	0.844** (0.316)	1.087** (0.338)	1.095** (0.344)	2.988**
Economic performance		0.088 (0.054)	0.091 <sup>+</sup> (0.054)	0.101 (0.070)	0.083 (0.069)	1.086
Age			0.025 (0.026)	-0.032 (0.029)	-0.031 (0.029)	0.969
Tenure				0.350*** (0.075)	0.353*** (0.075)	1.423***
Graduate					0.178 (0.304)	1.195
GDP					-0.219 (0.167)	0.803
Fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	

(Continued)

Table 4. (continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Promotion	Promotion	Promotion	Promotion	Promotion
N of provinces	31	31	31	31	31
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	0.423	0.425	0.426	0.455	0.456
Log likelihood	-314.55	-313.46	-313.11	-297.55	-296.58
Obs.	1,526	1,526	1,526	1,526	1,526

Note. Independent variables are one year lagged. Robust standard errors clustered at the province level are reported in parentheses. SOE = work experiences at state-owned enterprise; INTERPRO = work experiences in other provinces; REMOTE = work experiences in Xinjiang and/or Tibet; CENT = past experiences of working in the central government; CITY = past experiences of assuming prefectural-level party secretary and/or city mayor posts; CYL = past experiences of working in the Communist Youth League.

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**Table 5.** Personal Connection with PSC Members and Career Promotion.

	(1) Promotion	(2) Promotion	(3) Promotion	(4) Promotion	(5) Promotion	Odds ratio
Personal connection with all PSC	0.398 (0.275)					
Personal connection		0.879** (0.313)		2.303* (0.965)	2.236** (0.841)	9.352**
Personal connection with other PSC			0.100 (0.282)	0.151 (0.309)	0.096 (0.349)	1.100
Personal connection*				-2.001 <sup>+</sup> (1.059)	-1.965* (0.999)	0.140*
Personal connection with other PSC						
Controls	No	No	No	No	Yes	
Fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
N of provinces	31	31	31	31	31	
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	0.403	0.406	0.401	0.411	0.426	
Log likelihood	-325.57	-324.10	-326.64	-321.26	-313.19	
Obs.	1,526	1,526	1,526	1,526	1,526	

Note. Independent variables are one year lagged. Robust standard errors clustered at the province level are reported in parentheses. PSC = Politburo Standing Committee.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

either the effects of economic performance alone or the complementarity of economic performance and political connection. Given the widely accepted notion that merit-based recruitment has played a crucial role in China's economic and political reform after the Mao era (Chen et al., 2005; Choi, 2012; Li and Zhou, 2005; Zhang, 2009), these results may seem to run counter to common sense. Nevertheless, not all the studies on the cadres assigned to provincial leading posts strongly support the performance hypotheses (Oppen et al., 2015). One plausible explanation for this distinction is that the CCP employs a multilevel appointment strategy in which sub-provincial level officials are promoted according to their performance (Guo, 2007; Landry, 2008; Yao and Zhang, 2015), while political conformity may become more important for provincial-level leaders (Li, 2014). This is because lower-level officials are essential to regional economic development, but have no substantial influence at the centre of power. Promoting competent officials is crucial to regional growth, while the political consequences of promoting potentially disloyal officials are acceptable. Conversely, higher-level cadres directly influence the selection of central leaders. A national official with a high degree of competence and a low degree of loyalty may increase political risks for supreme leaders. Thus, performance-based recruitment at higher levels is replaced by political concerns (Landry et al., 2018).

More importantly, unlike some previous works (Jia et al., 2015; Opper et al., 2015), this study accentuates the significance of personal ties with the CCP's supreme leaders in career promotion of China's provincial elites. This article shows that, first, the exclusive patronage ties with incumbent general secretary of the CCP, to the largest extent, increases the probability of the provincial leaders' career promotion; second, the personal ties with any other PSC members alone cannot help them to be promoted; and third, personal connection with both incumbent general secretary and any other PSC member only slightly increases the likelihood of promotion. In other words, the empirical evidence does not support the complementarity between connection with supreme leaders and connection with other top leaders. The effects of the two are offsetting. This is probably because connection with other PSC members undermined the perceived loyalty of the provincial officials to the incumbent supreme leaders. This finding is very important. It further reveals not only concerns of the CCP's top leaders on personal loyalty but also the weaknesses of the collective leadership rules at the top.

## Conclusion

Based on panel data from 1993 to 2017, this study proves that personal connections with the CCP's incumbent supreme leaders significantly increased the promotion chances of provincial leaders. These positive effects did not depend on economic performance or past work experience. Age limits and retirement rules still mattered for provincial leaders' career promotion. Past working experiences of being a prefectural party secretary and/or city mayor also increased provincial leaders' promotion chances. In addition, this study does not support the argument that economic performance is an important determinant of the provincial leaders' political future. The study also challenges our understanding of the CCP's collective leadership. The effects of factional ties with other incumbent PSC members on career promotion were weak. Therefore, this study strongly supports the existence of the power of the incumbent supreme leader in selecting the CCP's high-level leadership. The CCP's established institutions seem to be a dependent tool for each new supreme leader.

Given the crucial role of provincial leaders in implementing central policies, controlling the provincial personnel is pivotal to advancing the policy agenda. The party's supreme leaders are able to use career incentives to induce their factional coalitions to follow their policy preferences. In this way, they consolidate their personal control over the party as a whole, which in turn allows them to change the status quo policies of the party-state. For instance, Jiang's dominance was reflected in his efforts to allow capitalists to join the party. In this way, he transformed the class base of the CCP (Gore, 2015). Another example is Xi Jinping's power of control. Although Xi's seniority as a national leader was that of a lightweight, he successfully purged the opposing factions and assigned his cronies to important posts to control the CCP's bureaucracy before the 19th Party Congress (Li, 2016). This was the political outcome of the anti-corruption movement. Based on this makeover, he could move on to abolish the institutionalised tenure restriction of the national leader by amending the constitution. In 2020, the appointment of his retired cronies to crucial departments supervising Hong Kong seemingly signals a break in

enforcing age limit rules for assigning higher officials. Xi Jinping assigned Xia Baolong (68 years old) and Luo Huining (66 years old) to the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office and the Hong Kong-based Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong SAR, respectively. Both senior officials are clearly above the sixty-five-year-old retirement threshold (Lam, 2020). In this case, Xi Jinping's decisive determination and power once again demonstrate the unchallenged authority available to the CCP's supreme leaders.

Some may be interested in the rise and fall of Hu Jintao's power as well as in his association with the Communist Youth League (CYL). It is unclear whether the CYL is Hu Jintao's personal faction. Past observers often regarded the CYL as Hu's power base (Wu, 2006). Nevertheless, the evidence showing Hu Jintao's efforts to affect the CCP's provincial personnel through this faction is very weak. The effects of past experiences of working in the CYL on provincial leaders' career promotion disappear after including some control variables. From this standpoint, it seems that the CYL is not an effective faction in the CCP's bureaucracy. From another perspective, however, Xi Jinping's antipathy towards and vigilance against the CYL suggests that the CYL used to be an independent faction influencing Chinese politics and possibly even challenging the power of the supreme leaders (Lim and Blanchard, 2016). Was the CYL a subordinate faction under Hu Jintao's personal control or an independent elite group? Or should we regard it as only a valuable type of work experience in the CCP's bureaucracy? So far, these questions remain unresolved and require further study.

Furthermore, this study does not tell us whether the past and incoming supreme leaders did not have significant effects on the promotion of connected provincial leaders. But some previous studies have shown the impacts of already designated and retired general secretaries of the party on the composition of the party centre. For instance, Meyer et al. (2016) suggested that Jiang Zemin helped his factions come into the 16th Central Committee, and Xi Jinping exerted a strong influence on the composition of the 18th Central Committee. However, my study was able to find no strong evidence of Jiang Zemin's or Hu Jintao's impact on provincial leaders' promotion when they were not in power. It seems, rather, that the Party Congress is a crucial component of a political mechanism in generating the next selectorate, within which two successive generations of party leaders and their factional coalitions compete with each other directly. The Party Congress meeting finally confirms the legitimacy of these political outcomes (Wu, 2015). After that, the newly selected supreme leaders are able to exclude other leaders from intervening in the selection of officials to more important provincial leading posts. Therefore, I supposed that the previous and future leaders might influence choices of new supreme leaders, but not subsequent choices of provincial leaders. Further studies should be done to testify such theories and assumptions.

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## Supplemental material

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