

Pierre F. Landry

Decentralized Authoritarianism in China



The Communist Party's
Control of Local Elites
in the Post-Mao Era

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China, like many authoritarian regimes, struggles with the tension between the need to foster economic development by empowering local officials and the regime's imperative to control them politically. Pierre F. Landry explores how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) manages local officials in order to meet these goals and perpetuate an unusually decentralized authoritarian regime.

Using unique data collected at the municipal, county, and village levels, Landry examines in detail how the promotion mechanisms for local cadres have allowed the CCP to reward officials for the development of their localities without weakening political control. His research shows that the CCP's personnel management system is a key factor in explaining China's enduring authoritarianism and proves convincingly that decentralization and authoritarianism can work hand in hand.

Pierre F. Landry is Associate Professor of Political Science at Yale University and a Research Fellow with the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University. He is an alumnus of the Hopkins-Nanjing program and taught in the Yale-Peking University joint undergraduate program in 2007. His research interests focus on Chinese politics, comparative local government, and quantitative comparative political analysis. His recent articles have appeared in *Political Analysis* and *The China Quarterly*.

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*The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites
in the Post-Mao Era*

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York
www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521882354

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First published in print format 2008

ISBN-13 978-0-511-42315-4 eBook (EBL)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-88235-4 hardback

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Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xvii
1 Authoritarianism and Decentralization	1
<i>Appendix 1A.1: The Political Origins of Decentralization</i>	28
<i>Appendix 1A.2: The Relationship between Decentralization and Political Regimes</i>	33
2 Organizing Decentralization	37
3 Promoting High-Level Generalists: The Management of Mayors	80
4 Organizational Power: The View from Within	116
<i>Appendix 4A: Designing the Jiangsu Elite Study</i>	152
5 Explaining Cadre Rank	162
<i>Appendix 5A: The Cadre Promotion Model</i>	206
6 The Impact of Village Elections on the Appointment of Party Branch Secretaries	221
7 Conclusion	257
<i>References</i>	269
<i>Index</i>	291

Tables

1.1	Fiscal Decentralization and Political Regimes (1972–2000)	<i>page 6</i>
1.2	Share of Subnational Expenditures among Heavily Decentralized Autocracies	7
1A.1.1	Observability of Decentralization Indicators, by Regime (1972–2002)	30
1A.1.2	Political and Economic Origins of Decentralization	32
1A.2.1	Two-Way Impact of Decentralization on Political Regimes (1972–2002)	35
2.1	The Appointment System under the “Two Levels Down” Policy (1980–1984)	44
2.2	Number of Cadres under Central Management (Selected Years)	45
2.3	Replacement of People’s Communes by Townships (1979–1985)	46
2.4	The Appointment System under the “One Level Down” Policy (since 1984)	50
2.5	Principals and Agents under the “One Level Down” System of Cadre Management	52
2.6	Distribution of Public Employees and Government Officials, by Province (2002)	64
2.7	Special Cities at and above the Prefecture Level	67
2.8	Examples of Deputy Prefecture–Level Cities	69

2.9	Evolution of Urban Governments, by Category (1978–2003)	70
2.10	Gaoyou: Key Indicators Related to the Establishment of the CLC	72
2.11	MCA 1999 Standards for Establishing County-Level Cities	74
2.12	Relationship between Investment in Fixed Assets and Bureaucratic Status of County-Level Units in Jiangsu (1998)	77
3.1	Municipal Performance Indicators of 104 Cities (2000)	83
3.2	Test of Colinearity between Key Components of the CUDC Municipal Performance Index	85
3.3	Level of Education among Mayors (1990–2001), Percentage by Gender Group	88
3.4	Gender Distribution and Ethnic Minority Status of Mayors (1990–2001)	88
3.5	Age Distribution among Mayors (1990–2001)	89
3.6	Recent Cases of Mayors or Former Mayors Dismissed for Corruption	94
3.7	Multinomial Logit Estimates of Mayor Promotion	97
3.8	Top Fifteen Cities Based on Economic Progress since the Mayor's Appointment as of 2000	104
3.9	Fitted Odds of the Impact of Educational Attainment on Promotion Outcomes	107
3.10	Female Mayors, 1990–2003	109
4.1	Respondents' Membership in Political Parties	123
4.2	The Organization System, by Question Item	129
4.3	Subjective Importance of Institutions for the Promotion of Cadres at Their Own Level	130
4.4	Rank Ordering of the Importance of the Party Secretary vs. the County Head	133
4.5	Importance of the Local People's Congress	135
4.6	Ranking of County and Municipal Party Committees among County Appointees	137
4.7	Ranking of Local Organization Departments among Cadres under County Management	139

4.8	Rank Ordering of the Importance of Local Organization Departments among Core Leaders	141
4.9	Probit Estimates of Subjective Ratings of the Importance of Institutions Related to Cadre Appointment	144
4.10	Predicted Probability of the Importance for Cadre Promotion, by Institutions	145
4.11	Perceived Benefits of Prefectural Reform	148
4A.1	Economic Standing of JES Counties Relative to National, Provincial, and Municipal Values	155
4A.2	Rankings of JES Counties Relative to Key Provincial Indicators (1997)	155
4A.3	List of Institutions Selected in the JES Sample	160
5.1	Relationship between Cadre Education and Cadre Rank and Comparison with Shen's 1994 Study	174
5.2	Relationship between Formal and Remedial Education	176
5.3	Geographical Origin of JES Respondents with Military Experience Compared with Officials with Civilian Background Only	184
5.4	Proportion of JES Respondents with Military Experience, by Rank	185
5.5	Linear Effects and Joint-Significance Tests of Cadre Assignments in CCP Institutions	195
5.6	Linear Effects and Significance Tests of Cadre Education, by Period	197
5A.1	Ordered Probit Model of Cadre Rank	204
5A.2	Alternative Estimates of the Retrospective Probability of Selection into the Sample	211
5A.3	Two Models of Cadre Promotion Compared: Selectivity vs. Ordinary Probit Specification	214
5A.4	Comparison of Models Estimated over Distinct Intervals	218
6.1	Key Indicators of Gaoyou (2004)	242
6.2	Frequency of VCC Promotions to the Post of Village CCP Secretary, Gaoyou	247
6.3	Multivariate Probit Estimates of VCC Promotion to the Post of Village Party Branch Secretary	251

Figures

1.1	Current Levels of Fiscal Decentralization (Expenditure Method)	<i>page 4</i>
1.2	Fiscal Decentralization: Subnational Expenditures as Percentage of Total Government Expenditures (1952–2002)	5
1.3	Likelihood of Authoritarianism: China vs. India	11
2.1	Replacement of Prefectures by Municipalities (1977–2003)	59
2.2	Formation of Municipalities (1990–2003)	61
2.3	Employment in Government, Party, and Mass Organizations (1978–2001), in Millions	62
3.1	Average Tenure among Mayors (1990–2001)	91
3.2	Political Fate of Mayors (1990–2001)	96
3.3	Fitted Impact of Economic Performance on the Probability of Promotion of Mayors	103
3.4	Fitted Odds of Promotion, by Municipality	113
4.1	Age Distribution of the Respondents of the Jiangsu Elite Survey	121
4.2	Level of Education among JES Respondents	122
4.3	Distribution of CCP Membership among JES Respondents, by Period of Entry	123
4.4	Expected Rank Orderings in Case of Effective Decentralization	132

4.5	Stated Importance of Departments of Organization for Cadre Appointments at the Respondent's Rank, by Level of Local Government	138
4.6	Fitted Impact of the Bureau's Influence in Economic Decision Making on the Perceived Importance of the County Party Secretary for Cadre Appointments	146
4.7	Relationship between Respondents' Assessment of Prefectural Reform and the Predicted Probability of Rating the County Secretary as "Important" or "Very Important" to the Promotion Process	147
4A.1	Jiangsu's Economic Disparities: Regional Shares of Key Provincial Indicators (1997)	153
4A.2	Regional Disparities in Jiangsu (Standard Deviation from Provincial Mean of County/City GDP per Capita in 1998)	154
4A.3	Evolution of the GDP per Capita among JES Counties (1985-1998)	156
4A.4	Relationship between CCP Employees and Provincial GDP	158
4A.5	Number of Employees in Party Agencies Relative to All Government Employees, by Province (1995)	159
5.1	Evolution of Respondents' Rank (1954-1996)	170
5.2	Age Distribution of JES Respondents, by Rank	171
5.3	Rates of Promotions among JES Respondents	190
5.4	(a) Predicted Rank for Mr. Li, Assuming Secondary Education; (b) Predicted Rank for Mr. Li, Assuming Tertiary Education	192
5.5	Combined Linear Effects of All Coefficients Related to Experience in CCP Institutions and Seniority as a Communist Party Member (1983-1988 vs. 1993-1995)	194
5.6	Impact of an Appointment in a Mass Organization, by Education Level	196
5.7	Effect of Enterprise Experience, Combined with Educational and Political Factors	199
5A.1	Relationship between Threshold Parameters and Predicted Rank	205
5A.2	First Year of Observation among Respondents Entering the Data Set after 1980	208

5A.3	Comparison between Selection Models	212
6.1	Simplified Power Structure of Village Committees and Party Branch Committees	226
6.2	Share of CCP Members Elected to Village Committees (2003)	237
6.3	Relationship between Rural Income in 2002 and the Proportion of CCP Members on Village Committees in 2003, by Province	239
6.4	Mean Probability of VCC Promotion to Party Branch Secretary, by Tenure Length	244
6.5	Average VCC Observed Tenure (1994–2004)	245
6.6	Village vs. Neighborhood Committee: Impact on the Promotion to PBS	252
6.7	Impact of Township Economic Development on VCC Promotion to PBS	254
7.1	Share of Party and Government Employees in the Labor Force (1989–2002)	264

Acknowledgments

Though I did not know it at the time, this book really began in Michel Oksenberg's office after one of his famous trips to Shandong, on the day he introduced a small group of graduate students to the recently published gazetteer of Zouping County. I was impressed by Mike's enthusiasm, but it was not until Professor Liu Linyuan of the Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and American Studies agreed to advise me in an independent study that I realized how right Mike really was. Liu *laoshi* walked me to the Provincial Gazetteer's Office and convinced me that the systematic study of Chinese local government was possible.

I am most thankful to my dissertation committee for their support in the early stages of this project. Pradeep Chhibber cheerfully challenged my arguments and always kept me thinking about broad comparative questions. Kenneth Lieberthal's immense experience and knowledge of Chinese bureaucratic politics helped me navigate many empirical minefields. Christopher Achen dispensed first-rate methodological and professional advice, and Albert Park offered most helpful comments on the econometric work. I thank them all for their encouragement and constructive criticism.

I am deeply indebted to the Research Center for the Study of Contemporary China at Peking University, and above all Professors Shen Mingming, Yang Ming, and Yan Jie for their mentoring and astute advice at key junctures of my research. In Hong Kong, Dr. Hsin Chi

Kuan and Jean Hung of the Universities Service Centre for China Studies at the Chinese University turned me into a lifelong USC enthusiast. Much of this book is owed to the generosity of the Centre's most capable staff and to USC's phenomenal collection of gazetteers and yearbooks that made the development of the data set on mayors possible.

The respondents to the Jiangsu Elite Survey must obviously remain anonymous, even though it is their willingness to participate in the first place that made this project possible. All have my sincere appreciation.

At Yale, the intellectual stimulation of my colleagues and graduate students in the Department of Political Science, the Council on East Asian Studies, and the MacMillan Center helped me write a better book. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Deborah Davis for her mentoring and support during the ups and downs of the review process, as well as to José A. Cheibub (who kindly shared his data on political regimes), Susan Rose-Ackerman, Frances Rosenbluth, Mary Cooper, and Jonathan Spence, who each read various parts of the manuscript. Julia Jin Zeng, Shiru Wang, Yumin Sheng, and Mei Guan provided excellent research assistance. I also thank my friends and *tongxue* who patiently read and critiqued my ideas at various stages of the research: Alice Cooper, Bruce Dickson, Helen Haley, Betsy Henderson, Ellen Lust-Okar, Melanie Manion, Andrew Mertha, Holly Reynolds, Jeremy Schiffman, Kaja Shert, and Robert Kissel, who put up with my bad computer habits and saved me from multiple disasters. I also want to recognize my editor, Lewis Bateman, as well as Emily Spangler, Shelby Peak, Janis Bolster, and Phyllis Berk at Cambridge University Press for their outstanding professionalism, support, and patience throughout the publication process, as well as the anonymous reviewers of the original manuscript whose detailed comments greatly helped improve the book. To all, I am immensely grateful, though none are in any way responsible for the remaining errors. I am.

The research and writing were made possible by the financial support of the ACLS–Chiang Ching-kuo dissertation fellowship and the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan, the Croft Institute for International Studies at the University of Mississippi, and the MacMillan Center and the Council

on East Asian Studies at Yale University. Their support is gratefully acknowledged.

Finally, I thank my parents, Christian and Marie-Claude Landry, for their unending moral, financial, and intellectual support and their willingness to put up with my incessant travels two oceans away. This book is dedicated to them.

Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CLC	county-level city
COD	Central Organization Department
CYL	Communist Youth League
DIC	Discipline Inspection Commission
JES	Jiangsu Elite Study
LPC	local people's congress
MCA	Ministry of Civil Affairs
MO	mass organization
NPC	National People's Congress
OD	Organization Department
PBS	(Communist) Party branch secretary
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PPC	provincial people's congress
PPPCC	provincial people's political consultative conference
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMB	Renminbi
SEZ	special economic zone
<i>Subei</i>	Chinese abbreviation for Northern Jiangsu
<i>Sunan</i>	Chinese abbreviation for Southern Jiangsu
TPC	township people's congress
TVE	township and village enterprise
VC	village committee
VCC	village committee chairman

Decentralized Authoritarianism in China

Authoritarianism and Decentralization

In November 2002, Hu Jintao became the fourth general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of the “reform era,” which began in earnest in December 1978. The carefully orchestrated leadership transition was widely regarded as the most predictable and peaceful transfer of power in the history of the People’s Republic. The contrast with the events of the late 1980s that rocked the communist world could not have been greater. When communism ended, first in Eastern Europe, then in the Soviet Union itself, the future of the Chinese regime seemed very much in doubt. The series of demonstrations during the spring of 1989 proved that the CCP was not immune to the kind of political instability that led to the destruction of communism elsewhere. Although by the summer of 1989 the Chinese leadership seemed to have “won,” scholars outside China ascribed the use of force against demonstrators to the desperation of a Party weakened by ten years of reforms; Deng’s pyrrhic victory signified a “transition postponed,” but certainly not a precluded one (Shue, 1992; Pei, 1994).

Fifteen years later, the transition has still not taken place. Instead, the post-Tiananmen leadership surprised the world by embracing a breathtaking series of politically difficult reforms: deeper integration with the world economy, culminating with World Trade Organization membership in 2001; the restructuring of the state sector, including massive layoffs; the privatization of much of the housing sector in urban areas; and the generalization of partially competitive elections

at the village level. Robust economic growth continued, despite the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Far from collapsing in the 1990s, the Chinese regime thrived.

The durability of China's political system is not unique among authoritarian regimes. Among China's communist neighbors, the Soviet Union lasted seventy-four years (1917–1991) and the People's Republic of Mongolia sixty-six (1924–1990), while the North Korean and Vietnamese parties have remained in power from the 1940s to this day. Beyond the socialist world, other authoritarian regimes have also proved highly durable, such as Franco's Spain (1936–1975), Suharto's Indonesia (1965–1998), or the Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) until the political liberalization of the 1990s. What makes the Chinese case especially intriguing is not the duration of the CCP's rule per se, but the manner in which political authority is exercised: China is an authoritarian regime, but it is also decentralized, and these two characteristics do not go hand in hand intuitively or empirically (Burki, Dillinger, and Perry 1999; Dethier, 2000; Gibson, 2004).

Most economists recognize that economic decentralization contributed to China's impressive performance, but political scientists have been far more divided about the political significance of these reforms for the long run. If we turn to the major cross-national compilations of regime types produced by comparativists in recent years, it appears that very little structural political change has occurred since the height of Maoism.¹ Yet even though the PRC has not undergone a transition to "democracy," the current regime is qualitatively different from the system that the reformers inherited from Mao in the late 1970s. These regimes differ from one another not only because the economic resources available to the leadership are larger than at any time in China's economic history, but more importantly because the mechanisms of accumulating and redistributing *political* resources, the manner in which conflicts within the Party are handled, and more generally the "rules of the game" – have changed profoundly.

In this book, I seek to explain how the CCP has devised and implemented a political strategy that preserves the core elements of the authoritarian system while pursuing economic and administrative

¹ Przeworski et al. (2000) code China as an authoritarian bureaucracy since 1954, while Freedom House ratings relentlessly find that Chinese citizens are "not free."

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