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A SHIFTING BALANCE BETWEEN POLITICAL AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY: PARADIGMATIC CHANGE IN CHINA'S CIVIL SERVANT AND CADRES MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

This paper argues that the amended Civil Servants Law, which went into force in 2019, is part of a fundamental shift in the way Chinese civil servants are managed and incentivised. It finds that similar trends are also evident in the Communist Party of China's regulations for managing leading cadres. Changes, such as those to prioritize "political quality," will likely have important long-term implications for China's civil service, from the way its members are recruited to the way they implement policy, creating possible tensions between political and professional considerations in determining their behaviour. The implications of this shift do not stop here. Underlying this shift is a clear change in the relationship between the Party and the government, for example, with the former's Organization Department absorbing the State Bureau for Civil Servants and the Party playing a more direct role in managing the people who make up the government. In other words, the changes in the personnel system are suggestive of an approach to governing China that is different to that of any other time since the introduction of "Reform and Opening." The paper draws on documentary research, tracing changes in the personnel management systems over the last two decades. It examines formal and informal systems and institutions, covering Party organs and regulations as well as government organs and state law, and political discourse and drives to perceive systemic changes in the way Party and government workers are governed.

A Shifting Balance between Political and Professional Responsibility: Paradigmatic Change in China's Civil Servant and Cadres Management Systems^{1*}

By

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1. Introduction

In December 2018, the amended Civil Servants Law (CSL) institutionalized the use of a person's "political quality" (*zhengzhi suzhi* 政治素质) as one of the two basic measures of suitability for recruitment into the Chinese civil service. In the Regulations on Selecting and Appointing Leading Party and Government Cadres, similarly fundamental changes were made in 2014 and 2019 emphasizing such cadres' "politics" and "virtue." Civil servants and other types of cadres make decisions and implement policy for China's Communist Party (CPC) and government.² Adjustments to the systems for appointing, evaluating and managing these people are therefore an important form of political change. Examined over time, these systems can reveal much about the direction of political developments and flag up possible future implications for decision making and policy implementation. This paper argues that following the 18th National Party Congress in 2012, a reverse paradigm shift has been underway in the Chinese civil service and cadre management systems. Politicization is being institutionalized to such an extent as to fundamentally change the balance between political and professional values and to reconfigure the Party-government relationship. Similar changes are also observable in other elements of the CPC's personnel management system.

Much valuable research has been done on the cadre responsibility system (Edin 2003) the nomenklatura system (Burns 2006) and civil service reform (Jing & Zhu 2012; Burns & Wang 2010). This paper seeks to add to that work in three ways: First, by tracing shifts in recent years, it

^{1*} The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and incisive comments and suggestions, and colleagues at the School of Government, Peking University, for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

² Civil servants and cadres can be one and the same thing, but not all cadres are civil servants.

demonstrates how some of the findings of that research are no longer true. For example, as Burns and Wang (2010) point out, before reform in the early 1990s, ‘individual performance was formally assessed using politically oriented criteria, not work achievements’ but ‘reforms sought to refocus the evaluations on work performance’ (p. 72). Today, as this paper will show, this refocus is being reversed.

Second, instead of focusing on one system—the *state’s* system of legislation on civil servants or the *Party’s* regulations on personnel management—the paper attempts to cover a broader range of formal and informal systems and institutions: government organs and state law, Party organs and Party regulations, and political discourse and drives. In this way it seeks to perceive *systemic* changes in the way Party and government workers are governed.

Third, it is underpinned by a conceptualization of the regime as comprised of government and Party rather than collapsing the two under the concept of the “party-state” (Zheng 1997) and thereby highlights changes in the relationship between the two that are of deep importance to personnel management. It finds a growing trend for using and institutionalizing nebulous political indicators in such systems. It suggests this may risk creating a tension between, on the one hand, the need to develop a highly professional, able, and efficient body of civil servants and cadres, and, on the other, the invocation of “politics” and “virtue” to evaluate and manage these people.

The paper traces the changes in these systems over the last two decades. It begins, in the next section, by introducing the concept of “political responsibility” and proposing its potential tension with professional responsibility. In section three it examines changes in specific systems. It looks first at shifts in the Party and state organs as well as other arrangements for civil service management and then at the signs that foreshadowed these changes. The latter includes CPC drives and discourse used to galvanize and govern civil servants and cadres, and their percolation into government documents. Second, it examines the CSL, which first went into force in 2006 but was subject to major amendments in 2018. Third, it examines the Regulations on Selecting and Appointing Leading Party and Government Cadres, introduced in 1995, first amended in 2002, and amended twice under Xi Jinping 习近平 in 2014 and 2019. The paper concludes with a discussion of these findings and of the possible implications of the increasing reach of “politics” in governing the country’s governors.

2. Political Responsibility

In an online database of CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping's speeches, the term "political responsibility" (*zhengzhi zeren* 政治责任) appears over 180 times.³ As a simple frame of reference, in the entire works of Hu Jintao 胡锦涛, which cover his decade as General Secretary, the term appears only a handful of times. The same is true for Jiang Zemin 江泽民, whose three volumes contain only four uses of the term.

2.1. Who, for What, and to Whom?

Responsibility can only be understood when we know three things: who is responsible, for what, and to whom? The discussion here of "political responsibility", as it is used by Party leaders and in regulations, suggests the common difficulty of clearly establishing the latter two of these basic questions. This section proposes that two recent developments related to the term are notable. First, it is being used increasingly within the political system from the top down. Second, its meaning is relatively ambiguous, but is increasingly attached as a tag to specific "professional" (*yenwu* 业务) tasks, for example public service provision. This makes the changes to personnel management systems discussed below all the more likely to pose difficulties for civil servants and other cadres in balancing the need to demonstrate "political quality" with the need to fulfil specific professional tasks that are tagged with the "political responsibility" label.

Before the 18th National Party Congress in 2012 "political responsibility" was used mainly in reference to "a sense of political responsibility." For example, in 2004, Hu Jintao exhorted the delegates to the National People's Congress (NPC) to have a stronger 'sense of political responsibility in representing the people when exercising the power to manage the state' (Hu 2016). In the Party Charter, which was rewritten in 1982, a "sense of political responsibility" was institutionalized as a basic requirement of leading cadres. Such cadres must have:

‘a powerful dedication to the cause of revolution and sense of political responsibility, along with the organizational ability, level of education, and knowledge needed to competently perform leadership work.’ (Party Charter 1982).

³ This is based on a search in May 2019. See <http://jhsjk.people.cn>. Related terms are also used often, such as "political task" (*zhengzhi renwu* 政治任务), which in May 2019 got over 100 hits.

Aside from the important addition of “practical experience” to the list in 1992, these requirements have remained the same in each version. However, a *sense* of responsibility differs from an *actual* responsibility. Under past administrations, the term was occasionally used to refer to the actual, if vague, “responsibility” of Party members in relation to Party building.⁴ With very few exceptions, when used to refer to more than a sense of responsibility, it was reserved for use in such a context.⁵

In contrast, the notion of “political responsibility” as more than just a “sense of” has been proliferating rapidly since the 18th National Party Congress. Since then, not only has the term been used much more often, it has been used in respect to myriad issues. Below are three examples:

(1) In 2016, Xi Jinping (2016) stated that:

‘institutes of higher education are at the frontier of ideological work. The Party secretaries and administrators in charge of universities, and faculties (or departments) must *assume political responsibility* and leadership responsibility, and diligently implement the ideological work responsibility system.’

(2) In 2018, on environmental conservation, he exhorted:

‘all localities and departments must strengthen their Four Consciousnesses,⁶ resolutely protect the Party Central Committee’s authority and collective leadership, and resolutely *assume the political responsibility* of building an eco-civilization.’ (Xi 2018a).

(3) In a speech at the New Year Tea Party with the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Xi (2018b) told his audience that the CPPCC must:

‘*assume the political responsibility* of acting on the Central Committee’s demands regarding its work and of pooling the wisdom and energies of the sons and daughters of China, at home and overseas, for realizing the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.’

⁴ In the resolution issued at the 17th Central Committee’s fourth plenary session in 2009, Hu Jintao announced that “improving Party building under new circumstances is a major political responsibility (*zhongda zhengzhi zeren* 重大政治责任) of the whole Party.”

⁵ Jiang Zemin used the term to exhort Party committees and governments to attend to the ‘reemployment of laid-off workers’ referring to this as ‘a major political responsibility.’ However, it is used in this way only once in all three thick volumes of the *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*.

⁶ The Four Consciousnesses are discussed in greater detail in section three. They are often translated as ‘consciousness of the need to maintain political integrity, think in terms of the big picture, follow the leadership core, and keep in alignment with the central Party leadership.’

In each of these examples, “political responsibility” is something that can be “borne” or “assumed” (*danfu* 担负). It is not just a “sense.” In example (1) to what, exactly, “political” refers, is unclear. It suggests “responsibility for political matters,” and the target audience—those to assume responsibility—must infer the meaning of this from rules, conventions, or signs in the political system. In examples (2) and (3) it is simply added to a responsibility for doing something else. It is attached like an adjective, and “political” seems to essentially mean “important.”

In a political language system where policies and measures frequently come with extraneous modifiers like “great,” “important,” and “major,” “*political*” can communicate genuine importance. It also carries the implied meaning that – since the responsibility in question is regarded to be one of “*political*” significance, perceived failure in such a task might be regarded as a “*political*” failure and perhaps be punished differently to another kind of policy failure. Indeed, ambiguity over “to whom” a person (or organization) is responsible for a task can have the effect of heightening the sense that they are ultimately accountable to the CPC rather than, say, to their department or to local citizens. This is particularly important when it comes to the government-Party relationship. In addition, when measures of success or failure are, to a great extent, left to the discretion of some higher-up arbitrator—the relevant CPC committee, for example—the knowledge that a task is “political” potentially comes with trepidation about getting it “wrong.” This may result in a special, more palpable and intimidating sense of authority being wielded over the audience.

The concept “political suffusion” (*fan zhengzhi hua* 泛政治化) is useful to understanding the causes and effects of tasks and responsibilities being “suffused” with politics (Yang 2009). Political suffusion essentially refers to tasks being designated or described to lower levels of government as “political” by a higher level of government or by any level of the Party. Yang Xuedong (2009) argues that suffusion is generally intended to get certain tasks done and is facilitated by the concentration of the power to allocate resources in the hands of the higher authorities and the Party head of a government department. Yet its potential consequences include a reliance on top-down pressure to ensure policy implementation as well as cosmetic “political credit-seeking projects” (*zhengji gongcheng* 政绩工程) and a weakening of alternative types of incentive mechanisms and enforcement systems for ensuring the professionalism and efficacy of civil servants (or cadres’) work, such as law and ethical codes (Yang 2009). This would be of less consequence if “political responsibility” were only used in the speeches of leaders as an exhortation to action but, combined

with the institutional developments examined in section three, this expanding invocation of the “political” is accompanied by a more fundamental problem.

2.2. Political and Professional Responsibility—Hand in Hand or Antithetical?

Summarized by Jing and Zhu (2012) there has long been a debate on neutrality and the technical rationality of a civil service versus a politicized or value-laden approach. Yet, as section three will show, the changes instituted since the beginning of Xi Jinping’s first term as general secretary do not constitute a simple shift to requiring that civil servants hold certain political values and follow those values in their work. Instead, the system taking shape requires that they actively and clearly intimate, perform, or otherwise express those values in their everyday work. In other words, civil servants must not only be believers in socialism with Chinese characteristics and be loyal to the CPC but must also be *demonstrably*, even *measurably*, so.

At the same time, they must also fulfil specific tasks and responsibilities that carry a “political responsibility” tag. While civil services under all kinds of political system may involve a constant balancing act between the political and professional, the institutionalization of political indicators to govern the behaviour of civil servants may skew this balance to such an extent that it creates deep implications for the outcomes of their work.

This may particularly be the case in the Chinese context where sufficient rule of law is lacking and the “political” is frequently invoked through top-down drives. It may cripple policies or warp policy outcomes as civil servants and other cadres struggle to find a balance between demonstrating their loyal-to-the-Central-Committee-core “political quality” and using the necessary means to succeed in fulfilling a sector-specific, “professional” task tagged as a “political responsibility.”

3. Structural Change and Institutionalization

This section examines changes in the systems for managing civil servants and leading cadres. It explains how these systems are placing greater emphasis than at any time since the early 1990s on political and virtue-related indicators.

3.1. Structural Change, Drives, and Discourse

Two main trends are perceptible in the overall structures and systems that affect civil servant and cadre management. The first is a closer blending of Party and government; the second is a strong focus on reshaping people's behaviour and institutionalizing these changes.

In March 2018, the CPC Central Committee released a 'Plan on Deepening Party and State Institution Reform.' This plan broke with the custom of a long line of institutional reform plans introduced by the State Council solely for government organs. It announced that there would no longer be a stand-alone government body in charge of civil servants. The existing State Bureau of Civil Servants was to be swallowed up by the CPC's Central Organization Department, and the latter would 'take over all work related to the management of civil servants' (CPC Central Committee 2018). This move potentially unravels the reforms of the early 1990s which followed Zhao Ziyang's 赵紫阳 proposal, in his report to the 13th National Party Congress in 1987, of creating a clear distinction between political and career civil servants. Although that distinction was never technically made, research has shown that to a certain extent the thinking behind that proposal was put into practice (see Edin 2003; Jing & Zhu 2012). In his report Zhao spoke of "Party-government separation" (*Dangzheng fenkai* 党政分开). The changes taking place today are quite the opposite.

The Plan states that the aim of putting all civil servants under the control of the Organization Department by allowing the latter to devour the State Bureau of Civil Servants is:

'to better implement the principle that the Party manages cadres, strengthen the Party's concentrated, unified leadership of the ranks of civil servants, and better coordinate cadre management, to build and refine a unified, standardized and highly efficient civil servant management system' (CPC Central Committee 2018).

It adds that the Organization Department will retain the name of the State Bureau of Civil Servants in its relations with others.⁷

⁷ This is important to note if we are to understand the relationship between Party and government which in turn, I argue, is crucial to understanding Chinese political processes.

This plan tells us what the main responsibilities of the Central Organization Department are to be in its management of civil servants. They include ‘the unified management of civil servant recruitment and allocations, assessment and rewards and punishments, training, wages, and welfare, etc.’ (CPC Central Committee 2018). Particularly notable is the Plan’s clear statement that the Organization Department will be responsible for drafting civil servant management policies and laws and regulations, as well as organizing their implementation, and ‘guiding the development of the ranks of civil servants nationwide and their performance-based management’ (CPC Central Committee 2018). This effectively brings every aspect of the management of civil servants directly, openly, and in an institutionalized way under the control of the Party’s Organization Department. This is fundamental to understanding the changing professional-political balance as the Organization Department is first and foremost concerned with the latter.

These changes were foreshadowed by shifts apparent in other central-level official documents. Beginning in around 2016, in the Premier’s annual Government Work Report (GWR) and other documents issued at the “Two Sessions” there was a gradual increase in references to the Party’s political drives for managing cadres. Prior to this, such content had been relatively uncommon in government documents for decades. In the 2016 GWR, Li Keqiang stated that:

[the government] will practice the Three Stricts and Three Honests (*sanyan sanshi* 三严三实),⁸ strengthen its political consciousness, big picture consciousness, core consciousness, and keeping-in-line consciousness (*zhengzhi yishi, daju yishi, hexin yishi, kanqi yishi* 政治意识、大局意识、核心意识、看齐意识), and strengthen its conduct and capacity-building to create a high-calibre, professionalized civil service’ (State Council 2016).

Similar content also appeared in the NPC report and the CPPCC report. This was in the run-up to the 18th Central Committee’s sixth plenary session later in 2016, at which Xi Jinping’s position as “core” was formally affirmed (State Council 2017).

This trend toward greater inclusion of political content on such drives within the system of institutionalized government documents has continued to grow. The 2017 GWR, in its opening few paragraphs, affirms that all regions and all government departments had been steadily

⁸ This is commonly explained as the requirement that a person is ‘strict with themselves in practicing self-cultivation, using power, and exercising self-discipline; and honest in their thinking, work, and behaviour.’

strengthening the Four Consciousnesses (State Council 2017). Generally, the opening section of this carefully, consistently structured annual report gives a broad overview of the domestic and international context and of achievements and challenges.

The 2017 Report demonstrates a clear contrast with this conventional framework. By blending Party with government content, it suggests a greater intensity of such drives within the government system and, more importantly, blurs already unclear boundaries between Party and government with the former taking over authority formerly delegated to latter.⁹

Political drives have been gradually and systematically institutionalized over the two Xi administrations, first through the body of regulatory CPC documents and, more recently, through government regulatory documents and laws and regulations. The most important of these include the drive to strengthen the Four Consciousnesses; the drive to ensure observance of the Two Protects (*liang ge weihu* 两个维护)¹⁰; and the education campaign¹¹ entitled ‘Don’t Forget the Original Purpose, Keep in Mind the Mission.’ Such drives give a vague shape to guide understanding of what is meant by terms like “political quality” and “political dependability,” discussed in the following two sub-sections.

3.2. Civil Servants Law

The amended CSL (hereinafter “CSL” refers to the amended 2018 version) was promulgated in December 2018 and went into force in June 2019. At the time of its promulgation, while much commentary within China focused on its creation of more opportunities within the civil service for promotions, a few scholars turned their attention to another important matter: its ‘fundamental point’ is to ‘strengthen the Party’s leading position and role vis-à-vis civil servants and its ability to supervise them’ (School of Rule of Law and Government 2019).

The CSL makes important adjustments to the very definition of a civil servant and to the purpose of legislating on them. To the old definition it adds that they are ‘an important component of the ranks of cadres, the central force of the socialist cause, and public servants of the people.’ The

⁹ These trends are also evident in judicial system reports and are discussed in an insightful article by Susan Finder (2019).

¹⁰ This refers to the protection of the General Secretary’s core position, and the protection of the Central Committee’s authority and centralized, unified leadership.

¹¹ In Party parlance this is not referred to as a “campaign” or an “activity” (*buodong* 活动) but simply as “themed education” (*zhuti jiaoyu* 主题教育).

purpose of the Law, aside from managing, protecting, and overseeing, is no longer expressed as to build ‘high-calibre ranks of civil servants, foster diligence and integrity, and raise work efficiency’ but instead as being to: ‘promote civil servants’ correct and complete performance of duties, and build a body of civil servants who have firm conviction [in socialism with Chinese characteristics], serve the people, are diligent and practical, are willing to take things on, and are clean and honest, that is high-calibre and professionalized.’¹²

Three particularly important changes are notable here. First, ‘firm conviction [in socialism with Chinese characteristics]’ is institutionalized as a purpose of this basic law. Second, it introduces the notion of there being a ‘correct’ way for civil servants to fulfil their duties. Here, in Article 1, ‘correctly’ (*zhengque liuzhi* 正确履职) as opposed to some other adverb or, as in Article 2 ‘in accordance with law,’ is interesting. Third, it states the aim of building a professionalized civil service.

Article 7, which stresses a person’s “virtue,” can be interpreted as institutionalizing a fundamental change in determining who is chosen to become a civil servant and who thrives within the service. This new emphasis, according to the institutionalized definition of “virtue” reveals the introduction of a much stronger political character to the new rules.

The old version of the law reads ‘the appointment of civil servants shall follow the principle of merit and of both virtue and ability (*de cai jianbei* 德才兼备) and shall attach importance to concrete work achievements.’ This same article in the CSL now reads ‘the appointment of civil servants shall be based on virtue and ability, *treating virtue as first priority* (*de cai jianbei, yi de wei xian* 德才兼备、以德为先), on merit irrespective of origins, on dedication and righteousness, and shall *foreground political criteria* (*tuchu zhengzhi biaozhun* 突出政治标准), and attach importance to concrete work achievements.’ To recognize and understand the significance of these changes certain context is needed.

First, examining a cross-section of related rules and regulations highlights that the change is both new and repeated systematically across different formal documents. While the rules on appointment and management of cadres and civil servants have long required ‘both virtue and

¹² In translating quotes from the Civil Servants Law, I have prioritized consistency in wording and closeness to the original text, including in terms of order—which is often telling of importance—over the smoothness of the English.

ability,' the addition of 'treating virtue as first priority' is new. The Party Charter has, since it was rewritten in 1982, been amended seven times. It has always included the principle that the Party selects and promotes cadres based on their having 'both virtue and ability.'¹³ However, it was not until the 2012 amendments, made during the 18th National Party Congress that this emphasis on "virtue" was incorporated into the Party Charter by changing the principle to that of 'their having both virtue and ability, *treating virtue as first priority*.'¹⁴ The Party Charter is the CPC's most important institutional document, and as such this inclusion represents a kind of institutionalization of the principle. Its inclusion in the CSL demonstrates a major step to spread and deepen the practical implications of this institutionalization in the Party system to the civil service.

Second, we must understand *de* 德 or "virtue" in the context of the CPC-led political and ideological system. This is the first in a list of five qualities that are to be comprehensively assessed in appointing, promoting, influencing the pay, and other incentives of civil servants. The list has remained unchanged since the first Civil Servants Law was promulgated in 2005 and can also be found in other laws and regulations on Party and government personnel.

Before that first law was introduced, there were regulations on civil servant assessments. The 1994 version of those regulations—the Interim Regulations on State Civil Servant Assessments—stipulated that "virtue" (*de* 德) refers to displays of [a person's] *political, ideological (sixiang 思想), and moral character*.' The 1994 regulations were replaced in 2007 with the Provisional Regulations on Civil Service Assessments. The latter adjusted the definition to read, "virtue" refers to ideological and political quality as well as displays of personal integrity, professional ethics, and social virtue.'¹⁵

This principle of prioritizing "virtue" in the appointment of civil servants is reflected in the way they are to be assessed, which will not only influence who can become a civil servant in the first place, but will also affect the behaviour of civil servants nationwide in performing their duties and in making decisions on and implementing policies. The old Civil Servants Law stated that

¹³ The Party Charter, since it was essentially rewritten after the Reform and Opening began, has come to be amended at each National Party Congress. The seven times referred to here were in 1987, 1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2012, and 2017.

¹⁴ This idea seems to have first appeared in 2009 in the 17th Central Committee's fourth plenary session resolution on Party building, but the developments that followed under the 18th Central Committee cannot be assumed to follow in a linear progression.

¹⁵ *De shi zhi sixiang zhengzhi suzhi ji geren pinde, zhiye daode, shehui gongde deng fangmian de biao xian* 德, 是指思想政治素质及个人品德、职业道德、社会公德等方面的表现.

assessments should ‘comprehensively assess a civil servant’s virtue, ability, diligence, achievements, and honesty, *giving greatest weight to concrete work achievements.*’ Today, the latter clause of the CSL has been changed to read ‘giving greatest weight to *political quality* (*zhengzhi suzhi* 政治素质) and concrete work achievements.’

Political quality is not only to be emphasized in assessments but has also been added to the list of basic criteria that civil servants must fulfil. While the 2007 Civil Servants Law demanded ‘good character’ as a criterion, this was changed in 2018 to ‘good political quality and moral character.’ Further the list of obligations of civil servants adds ‘consciously accepting the leadership of the CPC,’ ‘taking the lead in practicing the Core Socialist Values,’ and being an exemplar of ‘familial virtue’ (*jiating daode* 家庭道德).

But what does “political quality” mean? As with “political responsibility,” I argue that part of this term’s importance comes from its vagueness: the term is at the same time both indeterminate and mutable—while it is undefined, the power of definition is concentrated at the current centre at any given time—and yet it must be somehow demonstrated or performed through the behaviour of individuals.

Perry Link’s (2013) work illustrates effectively how certain official formulations can be ‘abstract enough that they can accommodate different or even opposite interpretations’ (p. 246). Citing Liu Binyan, Link gives the example of ‘bringing large and medium-sized state enterprises to life’ being ‘a question of politics,’ and explains that this could be used by people with ‘fundamentally different assumptions’ to suit their own purposes. Lexically, “political quality” is similarly vague and therefore might technically be put to an equivalent use.

However, it is unthinkable that under the present administration the term would open to interpretation based on “fundamentally different assumptions.” The reason for this is the broader political context. While not explicitly defined, “political quality” must be directly assessed, and therefore those charged with implementation must overcome its indeterminacy and mutability. Assessors and assessees must understand what “political quality” means at any given moment, based on the political context, according to the political discourse and drives mentioned above. Arguably, the function of placing the onus on the assessor and assessee to infer what is being assessed in itself creates a test of “political correctness” on the assessor’s and assessee’s part and therefore creates an internalization of the search for “political quality” up and down the system.

3.3. Regulations on Selecting and Appointing Leading Party and Government Cadres

This sub-section examines changes in the way leading cadres are managed, particularly under the Xi administration as compared with previous administrations. It examines new changes instituted in 2014 and 2019 by comparing all four versions—1995, 2002, 2014, and 2019—of the Regulations on Selecting and Appointing Leading Party and Government Cadres. Ling Li (2019) has argued convincingly that there has been a ‘paradigm-change in the disciplinary regime of the Party’ including ‘the reversal of the depoliticization process of the Party’s disciplinary regime’ (p. 47). This section finds that a paradigm-change is also underway in the selection and appointment of cadres. It should be noted that this is important not only in terms of who is selected and appointed but also in terms of who is *not*, both in the Party and in government. It finds a new stress on “virtue,” “political criteria”, and “political dependability”; a shift in how potential candidates are observed that requires them to express “political dependability” in their everyday work; an imperative to study and demonstrate one’s having studied the “thought” of the current top leader; an emphasis on “faith”; and a reduction in the space for creative interpretation of central-level policy.

Changing the “Thought” and Principles

The opening line of the 2019 version is a new addition. It states, ‘these regulations are designed to uphold and strengthen the Party’s all-embracing leadership.’ It also adds the purpose of ‘implementing the Party’s new-era organizational line and cadre work principles (*fangzhen* 方针) and policies,’ suggesting a shift from those of the previous “era.”

On the principles that must be upheld in selecting and appointing leading cadres, in v.2014, Article 2.3 adds the requirement for ‘virtue and ability, treating virtue as first priority’ (*de cai jianbei, yi de wei xian* 德才兼备、以德为先). This followed the institutionalization of the same wording in the Party Charter and preceded its addition in the CSL. Following the pattern of the Charter and the CSL, the ‘virtue and ability’ part of this the principle was used in v.1995 and v.2002, but the ‘treating virtue as first priority’ part does not appear in either version. The trend that this demonstrates toward highlighting the “virtue” of leading cadres is strengthened further in v.2019, where it is moved up to Article 2.2.¹⁶

¹⁶ Order is often telling of priority in Chinese political documents and discourse.

Leading the Leaders

Two important changes are made in v.2019 regarding the nature of the leading bodies (*lingdao banzi* 领导班子) that the Regulations are to help form. In v.2014, Article 3 states, ‘the selection and placement of leading cadres must be suited to building leading bodies into leadership collectives that will uphold the Party’s basic theory, basic line, basic program (*jiben gangling* 基本纲领), basic experiences, and basic demands.’ First, a crucial line is added in v.2019 at the beginning of this statement to read, ‘the selection and placement of leading cadres must *put political standards first*’ (*ba zhengzhi biaozhun fang zai shouwei* 把政治标准放在首位). This is unprecedented, appearing in none of the previous versions. It also leaves “political standards” open to interpretation, although the people who must enforce these regulations are expected to, and likely do, understand what is intimated by this.

Second, on what leading bodies are to do, in v.1995 they are to ‘implement the Party’s basic line, wholeheartedly serve the people, and have the ability to lead modernization’; in v.2002 they are to ‘uphold the Party’s *basic theory*, basic line, and *basic program*, wholeheartedly serve the people, and have the ability to lead *socialist* modernization’; in v.2014, they are to ‘uphold the Party’s basic theory, basic line, basic program, *basic experience*, and *basic demands*’; and in v.2019 they are to ‘uphold the Party’s basic theory, basic line, and *basic policy* (*jiben fanglüe* 方略).’ The replacement of the “basic program” (*jiben gangling* 基本纲领) with the “basic policy” (*jiben fanglüe* 基本方略) as the aim of leadership by the leading bodies is of deep significance.

The “basic program” was added to v.2002 and continued to appear in v.2014. It refers to the “program” introduced in 1997 at the 15th National Party Congress by Jiang Zemin for constructing a Chinese socialist economy, Chinese socialist politics, and Chinese socialist culture. It was described in Jiang’s 1997 report as being ‘an important part of Deng Xiaoping Theory.’ In contrast, the Party’s “basic policy” refers to the fourteen points enumerated in 2017 in Xi Jinping’s political report at the 19th National Party Congress. The Chinese wording itself suggests an important difference, with “program” (*gangling* 纲领) suggesting an overarching set of principles or approach and “policy” (*fanglüe* 方略)¹⁷ connoting something more specific and detailed that has already been laid out for those who are to follow it.

¹⁷ In Chinese there are different ways of expressing “policy.” A common way of expressing this is “*zhengce*.” *Zhengce* tends to be narrower and more concrete, while *fanglüe* is broader and carries a stronger connotation of strategy.

On constructing Chinese socialist culture, the basic program expresses the need to develop a culture that ‘looks to modernization, to the world, and to the future,’ that necessitates ‘arming the Party and educating the people with Deng Xiaoping Theory,’ and that ‘continues the principle (*fangzhen* 方针) of letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought collide to serve the people and socialism, with the focus on building academia and the arts and making them thrive’ (Jiang 1997). The general “spirit” of this is one of exploration and possibility.

In contrast, the “basic policy” begins its list of 14 points with ‘Point One, Upholding Party Leadership Over All Work,’ which opens with the phrase ‘Party, government, military, people, education, and all points of the compass, the Party leads everything.’ The lines that follow add clarity: ‘The Four Consciousnesses must be strengthened and the Party Central Committee’s authority must be ‘consciously protected.’ The amorphous notion of Party leadership over everything is given a more definite shape by these two elements.

Each of the remaining 13 points also underline the Party’s leadership over everything, for example, under point six, ‘we must exercise Party leadership at every point in the process and over every dimension of law-based governance’ and ‘promote a combination of rule of law and rule of virtue (*dezhi* 德治).’ Essentially, we can understand that the current Central Committee—and particularly its “core”—has the last word on this “basic policy.” Combine this with the difference in the CPC lexicon between a “*gangling*” and “*fanglüe*” and we find that the emphasis on exploration based on the general concept of socialism with Chinese characteristics introduced under the influence of a top leader who is no longer in power has shifted to one of sticking to a pre-mapped-out framework in a way that strictly adheres to the thinking of the current Central Committee and its core.

This poses two significant challenges. First, with a relatively concrete framework that must be followed in line with the thinking of the Central Committee and its core, leadership bodies must determine what that thinking is. Essentially it is a constant work-in-progress, and because its creators are incumbent power-holders, the adjudicators of whether or not a leadership body’s decisions are in line wield a more direct and instant kind of power of adjudication.

Second, given the emphasis on “political standards” and strengthened demand for “Party leadership,” the leadership bodies of different kinds of units must be *seen* to be giving greater weight to these vague demands in their decision-making. Crucially, this is the case even if to do so conflicts with the professional demands of the specific functions of the organ they are leading.

Stressing the Political in Selection Criteria

In Chapter 2 of the Regulations v.2019 adds the statement that first and foremost Party and government leading cadres ‘must have firm faith.’ Easily overlooked, this is telling of a strengthened emphasis on the need to convey or project a belief in “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”—the defining feature of which, as Xi likes to stress, being CPC leadership. Also added to the CSL, this demand for ‘faith’ (*xinnian* 信念) can be better understood by referring to another key document.

The Code of Conduct for Intraparty Political Life Under New Circumstances was introduced in 2016 at the 18th Central Committee’s sixth plenary session. It states in no uncertain terms, ‘irresolution over ideals and faith is the most dangerous kind of irresolution; a slip in ideals and faith is the most dangerous way to fall.’ It then lays out its demands: ‘All Party members must view belief in Marxism and faith in socialism and communism as a lifelong pursuit.’ To strengthen this faith they must study: ‘Party organizations at every level shall...make such study an important criterion for evaluating the performance of leading bodies and cadres.’ What this creates is the need for leading and aspiring leading cadres to demonstrate their faith in a palpable or measurable way. Failure to do so may mean being passed over or even demoted. Again, it should be noted that there is no explicit statement of how this faith is to be assessed although it might be assumed that the Four Consciousnesses are a helpful guide and the and the Two Studies, One Do (*liangxue yizuo* 两学一做)¹⁸ form the basis of this study.

Changes to the selection criteria demonstrate a deeply significant shift in the role of ‘guiding thought.’ An amendment to the Regulations in 2019, at the beginning of Xi’s second term, incorporated ‘the conscious upholding’ of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era into the list of criteria for selecting all leading cadres.¹⁹ This is fundamental to understanding “political responsibility” because while in the past leading cadres have always been expected to adhere to the guidance of past top leaders, now they must adhere to that of the current leader.

¹⁸ To study the Party Charter, Party regulations, and the General Secretary’s policy addresses and to meet Party standards.

¹⁹ This change was also institutionalized as a basic criterion for Party leading cadres in the amended 2017 version of the Party Charter.

In the past there was a kind of temporal buffer creating the space for interpretation of the guiding thought. Under Jiang Zemin, in v.1995, no mention was made of Jiang's "thinking" and only indirect reference was made to that of Deng Xiaoping: cadres were expected to have sufficient grasp of 'Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, and *the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics*.' Only in v.2002, after Deng Xiaoping's passing and at the end of Jiang's second term as General Secretary, was a grasp of Deng Xiaoping Thought and Jiang's own Important Thought of Three Represents required of leading cadres. In early 2014, a little over a year after Xi Jinping succeeded Hu Jintao as General Secretary, adherence to Hu's Scientific Outlook on Development was required of leading cadres. Yet in 2019 the time buffer was removed and the space for interpretation was narrowed. Today, "political responsibility" must be understood according to the growing body of thought of the current "core." The same change is also incorporated into the new CSL in the form of the "guidance" to be followed in the civil service.

To illustrate this, we can compare v.1995's brief list of criteria and v.2002's list, which adds the requirement to 'stress study, politics, and righteousness,' with those of 2014 and 2019. V.2014 adds the demand that leading cadres 'maintain a high level of oneness with the Party Central Committee in thought, politics, and action.' V.2019 adds the Four Consciousness and the Two Protects.

Changes that reflect the discourse of the need for "rule of virtue" in addition to "rule of law" can be observed over time in the criteria on 'using correctly the power entrusted by the people.' While v.2002 adds 'doing things *according to law*,' in contrast, v.2014 makes two important additions on "virtue": '[leading cadres must] uphold principles and have the courage to grasp and to manage' (*gan zhua gan guan* 敢抓敢管); and must 'strengthen their moral cultivation; stress Party-ness (*Dangxing* 党性), attach importance to character, and be an exemplar; and lead others in practicing core socialist values.'

Finally, v.2014, as the first new version of the Regulations introduced under Xi, adds a large new section institutionalizing permission for the rules to be broken in certain circumstances. Most notable for the purpose of this paper is the fact that the first paragraph added begins with 'outstanding cadres to be promoted by rule-breaking (*po ge* 破格) should have exceptional quality (*suzhi* 素质) in terms of virtue and ability.' In v.2019, four characters are added before 'virtue and ability,' stating rule-breaking promotions can only be made for those who are 'politically dependable' (*zhengzhi guoying* 政治过硬).

Observing the Everyday, Changing the Selection Process

In v.1995, the selection process basically involved the Party committee (or leadership group) at the same level, or a higher organization department, presiding over a “democratic recommendation” process. When leading bodies were reaching the end of their terms, Party committees (or leadership groups) or organization (or personnel) departments were, ‘on the basis of democratic recommendation,’ to ‘collectively research and decide on persons for observation and assessment’ (*kaocha duixiang* 考察对象).

In 2014 a new Chapter 3, entitled “Motions” (*dongyi* 动议), was slotted in before the chapter on democratic recommendation, institutionalizing the addition of several steps before the latter stage is reached. This includes the requirement that organization (or personnel) departments analyse and judge (*fenxi yanpan* 分析研判) leading bodies based, in part, on ‘circumstances known about and understood from day-to-day [observation].’ Based on this, they are to make initial suggestions on the ‘positions, criteria, scope, methods, and procedures, etc.’ of promotions and appointments. These suggestions are reported to the main leading members of the Party committee (or leadership group) to be ‘mulled over’ (*yunniang* 酝酿).

This preliminary stage became more detailed in v.2019. First, added to the list of initial suggestions was ‘preferences on candidates’ (*renxuan yixiang* 人选意向). Second, was the striking paragraph: ‘Organization (personnel) departments should deepen their everyday understanding of cadres, using a knowledge of facts to understand people, putting the effort in regarding the everyday, to understand cadres in every regard, from different perspectives, and from close up.’ Then, ‘based on having an everyday understanding of things,’ they are to analyse and judge the leading bodies and leading cadres to provide ‘a basis and reference’ (*yiju cankao* 依据参考) for the Party committees (or leadership groups) as they are selecting and placing people.

This explicit requirement for cadres to be ‘understood’ on an everyday basis has at least two important effects. First, it creates the explicit requirement for cadres to *demonstrate* on a daily basis the abovementioned political dependability, “virtue,” readiness to protect the General Secretary’s core status, and so on. Second, it creates a layer between the original process of selection and appointment whereby if, for example, the organization department finds in the ‘everyday’ a reason to deem a potential candidate unsuitable it can reflect this in its ‘basis and reference’ to the Party committee and thereby preclude a person’s appointment. This effectively gives organization

departments more direct and institutionalized ways of influencing outcomes within Party organ or government agency.

Another element of this shift in the selection process is the complete deletion in 2019 of the requirement in Article 2.5 (v.2014) that the selection and appointment of leading cadres is to follow the principles of ‘democracy, transparency, competitiveness, and selection of the best’ (*minzhu, gongkai, jingzheng, zeyou* 民主、公开、竞争、择优).

In 2019, continuing a tug-of-war over the wording by which the practice is institutionalized, democratic recommendation again became only something that ‘should’ be done as opposed to something that ‘must’ be done (v.2014). The original regulations (v.1995) state ‘the selection and appointment of Party and government cadres *should*, through democratic recommendations, entail putting forward persons for assessment.’ In 2002 the ‘should’ was changed to ‘must,’ but this ‘must’ was again changed back to ‘should’ in 2019, undoing the previous change that had made democratic recommendations mandatory.

In addition, in v.2019 the emphasis shifted to a process of ‘talks’ (*tanhua* 谈话) and away from meetings. This happened in two steps, beginning in 2014. The statement in v.2002 that ‘democratic recommendations include recommendations made *through voting at meetings* and individual cases of recommendations made through talks,’ was changed in v.2014 to ‘democratic recommendations include recommendations made *through meetings* and individual cases of recommendations made through talks.’ Then in 2019 the order was changed to stress ‘talks and research,’ and ‘individual cases’ was deleted so that v.2019 read ‘democratic recommendations include *recommendations made through talks and research* and recommendations made through meetings.’

Underscoring the new emphasis on everyday observance and the weakening of democratic recommendation, a new paragraph was added in 2014 to the chapter on observation and assessment (*kaocha* 考察) stating that to ‘prevent votes of recommendation from being treated as equivalent to electoral votes’ in determining persons for observation and assessment ‘comprehensive consideration [shall be given] to democratic recommendations *and everyday evaluations, [and] annual evaluations....*’ In 2019, this new italicized content was changed to reflect the requirement discussed above for routinized efforts to ‘understand’ cadres such that democratic

recommendations are now to be considered alongside ‘everyday understanding, overall analysis and judgement, and suitability for the post etc. .?’

Consequently, this further enfeebles the role of democratic recommendation and to institutionalize the use of “virtue” and ‘everyday’ performance as potentially deciding factors. Ultimately, in combination with the insertion of the new Chapter 3 discussed above, this shifts power more decisively upwards and outside of the Party organ or government agency where the selections or appointments are taking place and strengthens the incentive or pressure for cadres to evince, intimate or otherwise perform their “virtuous” and political appropriateness in their everyday work.

4. Concluding Thoughts

The absorption in 2018 of the government’s State Bureau of Civil Servants by the Party’s Organization Department marked a fundamental structural shift both in the Party-government relationship and in the management of civil servants. This move, which gives one of the Party’s most powerful networks of organs direct control over the country’s civil servants, signals the all-embracing nature of the shift in thinking on governing and moulding the country’s body of governors and public servants.

Since the 18th National Party Congress, a “political” tag has increasingly been affixed to a broad sweep of tasks and responsibilities. At the same time, wide-reaching, systematic, and meticulous steps have been taken to institutionalize political indicators such as “political quality” and politicized “virtue” in the laws, rules and regulations that govern civil servants and cadres.

These developments indicate a clear shift away from the division of labour between government and Party in the management of such personnel. In the structure of management, the professional is blended with the political through the absorption of the government structures for managing civil servants. In the detailed institutions, the importance of the professional is weakened in relative terms to the political.

At least three factors can be observed that combine to make the meaning ascribed to political indicators liable to change: first, their inherent vagueness; second, the institutionalization of the incumbent General Secretary’s “Thought,” which means the temporal buffer that creates space for

interpretation by others is removed leaving them open to top-down change; and third, the use of political drives to give them a generally understood but still nebulous meaning.

Indeterminate and mutable as they are, these indicators and demands will nonetheless be used to appoint, observe, and assess such people. Indeed, their very nature as vague and open to change from above is part of what shapes their role. These qualities give them a nebulous, boundless air of authority that can never quite be pinned down to a clear definition. They are indefinable yet must be measurable.

Civil servants and cadres must be determined to have strong, passable, or poor “political quality,” to be “politically dependable” or not, or to be judged by the CPC as not only capable but, more importantly, sufficiently “virtuous.” Moreover, there is also a clear trend toward increasing institutionalized emphasis on the day-to-day in making such judgements. The outcomes will directly affect the appointment, promotion, pay, and rewards of civil servants and cadres, and as such they are likely to have a powerful influence on these people’s behaviour in their day-to-day work as they attempt to exhibit the strength of their “political quality.” This is certain to have an important influence on decision-making and policy implementation by civil servants and cadres nationwide. When implementing these newly amended institutions it may well emerge that, in attempting to strengthen professionalism at the same time as requiring demonstrations of political rectitude, something has to give.

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J C M

No 3

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