Management of Party Cadres in China

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For more than a decade, Western studies of Chinese politics have focussed more on centrifugal forces in Chinese society rather than on what holds it together. Thus there have been only a few works on the role of the party and its organisation in governing China. The field has focussed on the societal aspect of state-society relations, stimulating a plethora of studies on civil society and non-governmental developments.1 This focus on society and social phenomena has pushed research of the state and party out of the ruling paradigm.

Contrary to the ruling paradigm, this paper is informed by the belief that the party continues to play a dominant role in Chinese society and that it is too early to pronounce it obsolete, if not dead. In reality, in recent years the party has gradually strengthened its grip over Chinese society. In personnel management, the party has taken back some of the powers it handed over to the personnel departments of the government in the late 1980s and in the ideological sphere, the campaign of the “Three Representatives” clearly is about strengthening the role of the party. Other examples can be given. They all indicate a slow but growing reassertion of party control and that the party is rebuilding its machine for governing an increasingly complex Chinese society.

Party cadres constitute the core of the party’s organisational machine. Therefore an understanding of the composition and functioning of the cadre corps is important in trying to conceptualise how the Chinese political system works. However, only a few studies discuss in detail the number, composition and role of the cadre force.2 Those available are based on information gathered from a variety of scattered sources rather than a consistent set of data.

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2 The standard work on the Chinese cadre system in the era of Deng Xiaoping is Hong Yung Lee, From Revolutionary Cadres to Party Technocrats in Socialist China (Berkeley: University
This paper is also concerned with patterns of career mobility. It will be argued that political loyalty no longer is the most important credential for career mobility among Chinese cadres. In recent years, increasing emphasis has been put on educational qualifications and occupational competence. In fact, one could argue that China’s leadership has turned into a technocratic leadership and that China has developed into a technocratic state.

This argument is not new and has been developed by a number of scholars in relation to the top leadership organs in China such as the Politburo, the Politburo Standing Committee and the Central Committee. I substantiate and deepen the underpinnings of the “technocracy thesis” by redirecting attention to broader social and political categories, namely the 40.5 million party and state cadres in China. They form the recruitment basis for future leaders and therefore a detailed study of the cadre corps not only gives us important information on the current situation, but also allows for speculations as to the future of the Chinese Party-state.

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3 For a discussion of the role of political and educational credentials in career mobility, see Andrew G. Walder, “Career Mobility and the Communist Political Order,” American Sociological Review, Vol. 60, Number 3 (June 1995), pp. 309–328.