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Provinces in Command: Changes in Prefectural Appointments from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping (2003–2020)

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ABSTRACT

China's 'Xi-Li era' is said to be defined by both the concentration of power in the center and the strengthening of Party authority. In this paper, we ask whether these trends have been evident in local appointment practices since Xi Jinping took office in 2013. By comparing the career histories of 3,682 prefectural mayors and Party Secretaries under the Hu-Wen and Xi-Li administrations, we find that while appointment practices have shifted, the observed changes are not wholly consistent with the center-and Party-strengthening narratives. First, developments in the Xi-Li era suggest that while provincial authorities are increasingly using prefectural appointments for their own ends, the center remains high and far away in these decisions. Second, we do not find evidence that cadres with a strong Party background have a particular advantage in the Xi period. Instead, cadres with strong track records in key functional xitong, particularly those with an economic profile, are still the most likely to attain leadership positions. These findings contribute to the current debate on the nature of power reconfigurations unfolding in Xi's China.

KEYWORDS

authoritarian politics;
appointment politics;
central–local relation;
Chinese politics

Introduction

Since Xi Jinping took office in 2013, there have been sporadic signals that the center wishes to exert greater control over political appointments in the provinces' bailiwick. A series of cross-provincial appointments of leaders at the prefectural level suggests Beijing may be seeking to wrest control of these important posts away from the provinces. In 2016, for example, the Party Secretary (PS) of Changsha City (Hunan Province) was transferred to Shenyang (Liaoning Province), where he held the same position for less than a year before being promoted to Deputy PS of Jiangxi Province. Similarly, Hao Wang, the former PS of Xi'an City in Shaanxi Province, moved through three provinces within just two years before briefly settling back in Xi'an. These cross-provincial appointment cases have drawn attention because they are out of step with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 'one-level-down' appointment rule, which designates provincial authorities as responsible for making appointment decisions at the prefectural level. Since provinces have no authority to make appointments outside of their borders, cross-provincial appointments are quite rare and point to Beijing's involvement when they do occur.

These cases raise questions about whether political appointments at subnational levels have been influenced by the broader trends of power centralization and Party strengthening observed during

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Xi's tenure. Is Beijing stealthily overturning the one-level-down system and extending its direct control to more local levels? And does having a strong Party background improve one's chances for promotion in the new era? This article addresses these questions by comparing cadre appointments at the prefectural level between the Hu-Wen and Xi-Li administrations.

As Xi Jinping's two five-year terms have been completed and a third begun in 2022, analyses of his administration are solidifying. With many seemingly profound shifts happening across issue areas, including industrial policy and foreign affairs, recent research suggests the rise of a 'Xi era' characterized by strongman politics and the concentration of power.¹ However, others argue against drawing the simple conclusion that Xi represents a decisive break with the past. In some policy arenas, the current shifts have been described as a 'deepening' rather than a 'departure' from previous administrations, indicating that the change is far from radical despite Xi's more combative tone.²

Political appointments feature prominently in the current debate about the Xi era.³ Since his rise to power, scholars of Chinese elite politics have almost unanimously noted that Xi has been tightening his grip on personnel management. To establish and solidify his 'core leader' status, Xi has rewritten and promulgated more Party rules than any of his predecessors, including personnel regulations.⁴ A close reading of the updated appointment rules reveals there is now more scope for Party influence over promotion and appointment processes, signaling a gradual reversal of the meticulously crafted rules-based appointment and promotion processes that have developed in recent decades.⁵ The most notable departure from long-standing norms of power balancing in elite appointments at the highest levels of the state came at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, where Xi cemented his dominance of the Standing Committee of the Politburo.⁶

Our study contributes to the ongoing debate about the 'Xi-Li era' by exploring whether tightened control over cadre appointments at the central level has penetrated to the subnational level. To answer this question, we compare appointment practices at the prefectural level in the Hu (2003–2012) and Xi (2013–2020) periods.⁷ We study appointment patterns for the two top leadership positions at the prefectural level, the mayor and Party Secretary, and trace appointees' career through their vertical, horizontal, and regional mobility records prior to assuming their position. With a novel dataset tracking 1,988 prefectural mayors and 1,694 Party Secretaries' career histories, we show that prefectural appointments have a distinct logic in comparison with elite appointments at the central level. We do not find evidence that the center is usurping the provinces' authority over prefectural appointments. While new patterns are emerging in prefectural appointments, their common aim is to strengthen the provinces' ability to govern. In addition, contrary to claims that Party loyalty has become more important in appointment processes since 2013, our analysis finds

¹Jérôme Doyon, 'Clientelism by design: Personnel politics under Xi Jinping', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 3 (2018): 87–110; Jude Blanchette, 'From "China Inc." to "CCP Inc.": A new paradigm for Chinese state capitalism', *China Leadership Monitor* 66 (2020): 1–13; Kwan Nok Chan, Wai Fung Lam, and Shaowei Chen, 'Elite bargains and policy priorities in authoritarian regimes: Agenda setting in China under Xi Jinping and Hu Jintao', *Governance* 34, no. 3 (2021): 837–54.

²Kyle Jaros and Jennifer Pan, 'China's newsmakers: Official media coverage and political shifts in the Xi Jinping era', *China Quarterly* 233, no. December 2017 (2018): 111–36; Wendy Leutert and Sarah Eaton, 'Deepening not departure: Xi Jinping's governance of China's state-owned economy', *China Quarterly*, no. August 2020 (2021): 1–22; Minxin Pei, 'Policy continuity with rhetorical escalation: Parsing Xi Jinping's political report to the 20th Party Congress', *China Leadership Monitor*, 74 (2022): 1–12.

³Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard and Nis Høyrup Christensen, 'The 19th Party Congress: Personnel changes and policy guidelines', *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2017): 79–97; Xuezhong Guo, *The politics of the core leader in China: Institution, legitimacy, and power* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 80–117; Joseph Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 86–108; David J. Bulman and Kyle A. Jaros, 'Loyalists, localists, and legibility: The calibrated control of provincial leadership teams in China', *Politics and Society* 48, no. 2 (2020): 199–234.

⁴Minxin Pei, 'Rewriting the rules of the Chinese party-state: Xi's Progress in reinvigorating the CCP', *China Leadership Monitor*, 60 (2019): 1–9.

⁵Joseph Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 86–108; Chien-Wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, 'Dual elite recruitment logic and political manipulation under Xi Jinping', *Issues & Studies* 57, no. 04 (December 2021): 2150015.

⁶Eun Kyong Choi, John Wagner Givens, and Andrew MacDonald, 'From power balance to dominant faction in Xi Jinping's China', *China Quarterly* 248, no. 1 (2021): 935–56; Zeren Li and Melanie Manion, 'The decline of factions: The impact of a broad purge on political decision making in China', *British Journal of Political Science*, (2022): 1–20. doi:10.1017/S000712342200062x.

⁷Although Xi is still in his position, our dataset includes only cadres appointed before 2021.

a robust Party profile is not a predictor of success in securing top positions at the prefectural level. In fact, candidates with a strong track record in key government posts remain the strongest contenders, as they were during the Hu-Wen era.

This article makes both empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, it offers new evidence relevant to the scholarly debate on Xi's power consolidation over cadre management. While previous studies have analyzed how Xi has upended established conventions at the highest levels of political power,⁸ the question of whether the trend of concentrating power down to sub-provincial levels remains understudied. Theoretically, the article engages with the broader literature on leadership transition and Chinese politics. It expands the scope of research on the politics of appointment during a leadership transition, which has primarily focused on democracies because there are not many authoritarian regimes that successfully navigate peaceful transitions from one ruler to the next.⁹ It also contributes to the literature on political selection in Chinese politics. The CCP's performance-based promotion system has received considerable attention in recent years for its crucial role in China's economic miracle.¹⁰ However, with most research focused on officials' promotion across administrative ranks, previous literature has not thoroughly analyzed cadres' horizontal and regional mobility.¹¹ The Party itself values horizontal and cross-regional appointments and incentivizes local officials to acquire varied work experience through various means. This article contributes knowledge about these understudied dimensions of appointment and their changes in the past two decades.

Politics of Cadre Appointment in Local China

Personnel politics under Xi have undergone major changes in terms of both policies and actual practice, resulting in the central government and the Party having more control over personnel arrangements at all levels.¹² In the following sections, we elaborate on hypotheses derived from both scholarly debate and actual shifts in policy. We then use these hypotheses to evaluate whether appointed cadres' tenure length and mobility experience is consistent with the trend of power consolidation observed at higher levels of the political hierarchy.

Cadres' Tenure Length

Regulation on cadres' tenure length was first discussed in Deng's personnel reforms in the 1980s and codified later in the early 2000s. As part of Deng's efforts to terminate lifetime tenure and thereby

⁸Ruixue Jia and Yiqing Xu, 'Rotating to the top: How career tracks matter in the Chinese Communist Party', *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2020); Eun Kyong Choi, John Wagner Givens, and Andrew MacDonald, 'From power balance to dominant faction in Xi Jinping's China', *China Quarterly* 248, no. 1 (2021): 935–56, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000473>. David J. Bulman and Kyle A. Jaros, 'Localism in retreat? Central-provincial relations in the Xi Jinping era', *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 131- (2021): 697–716.

⁹Christopher A. Cooper, Patrik Marier, and Ali Halawi, 'The politics of senior bureaucratic turnover in the Westminster tradition: Trust and the choice between internal and external appointments', *Public Policy and Administration*, 2020, 095207672092973; John D. Huber and Cecilia Martinez-Gallardo, 'Replacing cabinet ministers: Patterns of ministerial stability in parliamentary democracies', *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 2 (2008): 169–80; Anne Meng, *Constraining dictatorship: From personalized rule to institutionalized regimes* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Qingjie Zeng, 'Leadership succession and the resilience of electoral authoritarian regimes', *Political Studies* 68, no. 3 (2020): 768–96.

¹⁰Hongbin Li and Li-An Zhou, 'Political turnover and economic performance: The incentive role of personnel control in China', *Journal of Public Economics* 89, no.9–10 (2005): 1743–62; Victor Shih, Christopher Adolph, Mingxing Liu, 'Getting ahead in the communist party: Explaining the advancement of central committee members in China', *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (2012): 166–187.

¹¹Stan Hok-Wui Wong and Yu Zeng, 'Getting ahead by getting on the right track: Horizontal mobility in China's political selection process', *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 109 (2018): 61–84; Xueguang Zhou and others, 'Stratified mobility in Chinese bureaucracy: A model and empirical evidence', *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 3 (2018): 1–45; Ling Zhu, 'Spatial mobility as a governance tool: Mechanisms, patterns, and applications in the Chinese bureaucracy' (Annual Meeting of American Political Science Association, Washington DC, September 2019).

¹²Chien-Wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, 'Dual elite recruitment logic and political manipulation under Xi Jinping', *Issues & Studies* 57, no. 04 (December 2021): 2150015.

rejuvenate the Party, the central government began to experiment with limited tenures from the late 1980s to early 1990s in several pilot provinces. Tenure limits were first codified in the 2000 document 'Outline for Deepening Cadre Management Reform' (*shenhua ganbu renshi zhidu gaige gangyao*), which covered tenure and term limits for all government and Party leadership posts. However, it was not until 2006, with the 'Interim Provisions for Party and Government Leading Cadre Tenure' (*dangzheng lingdao ganbu zhiwu renqi zanxing guiding*), that the CCP clarified the specifics of cadres' tenure limits: according to Articles 3 and 4 of the document, cadres should serve a five-year term in each position.

However, failing to meet the five-year tenures is a well-established norm in the Party. Other authoritative documents in the cadre management system seem to contradict the 'Interim Provisions' by allowing and, in fact, encouraging cadres to cut tenures short in order to be fast-tracked for promotion, or to serve short-term posting as means of gaining experience (*guazhi*).¹³ Analysis of 1142 mayors from 2002 to 2012 suggests only 17% of them served out their five-year terms, with most in position between two and three years.¹⁴

Under the Xi-Li administration, the average length of tenures is expected to increase due to shifts in personnel policy and actual appointment practices. As Doyon points out,¹⁵ the CCP has revised its personnel rules in recent years to limit fast-tracked and exceptional promotions. In the 2014 and 2019 revisions to the *Regulations on the Selection and Appointment of Leading Cadres of the Party and Government* (*dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong gongzuo tiaoli*), fast-tracked promotions were 'strictly controlled' (*yange kongzhi*), and promotions were forbidden in cases where officials had spent less than one year in their previous post. If cadres now have to adhere more strictly to the step-by-step promotion process, the result should be longer average tenures. Additionally, the state's new focus on charting a path of inclusive and sustainable growth would also recommend longer tenures since the newly prioritized policy areas are complex and positive outcomes cannot be generated in the short-term. In the case of poverty alleviation, for example, local officials in regions under the poverty line were ordered not to leave their postings until they won the 'war against poverty'—these officials came to be called 'frozen cadres' (*ganbu dongjie*).¹⁶ Based on both policy imperatives, we propose that:

H1: Cadres have longer tenures in the Xi-Li administration than during the Hu-Wen era.

Cadres' Mobility

The appointment of leading cadres at the prefectural level is embedded in the CCP's overall cadre management system which is hierarchical and jurisdictionally-bounded. The Chinese state is structured by five hierarchical administrative levels: township, county, prefectural, provincial, and central. In line with the 1982 Constitution, which granted administrative entities at or above the county level downward authority, leading officials (mayor/governor and Party Secretary) of each level are appointed from the top-down by the government one level up. This means that provincial-level governors are managed by the central government, and prefecture-level mayors by the provincial-

¹³Sarah Eaton and Genia Kostka, 'Authoritarian environmentalism undermined? local leaders' time horizons and environmental policy implementation in China', *China Quarterly* 218, no. 1 (2014): 359–380.

¹⁴Jinghui Cao, Juan Liu, and Lingli Hu, '地方官员任期制的执行困境及其治理路径' ['The implementation dilemma and governance of the tenure system of local officials'], *华南理工大学学报 (社会科学版)* [*Journal of South China University of Technology (Social Science Edition)*] 20, no. 3 (2018): 92–99.

¹⁵Jérôme Doyon, 'Clientelism by design: Personnel politics under Xi Jinping', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 3 (2018): 100.

¹⁶Sanguai Wang and Yu Zhong, '贫困县何以摘帽: 脱贫攻坚中的央地关系与干部激励' ['How impoverished counties removed from the poverty list: The central-local relations and promotion incentives in poverty alleviation'], *贵州财经大学学报* [*Journal of Guizhou University of Finance and Economics*] 2021, no. 5 (2021): 1–7.

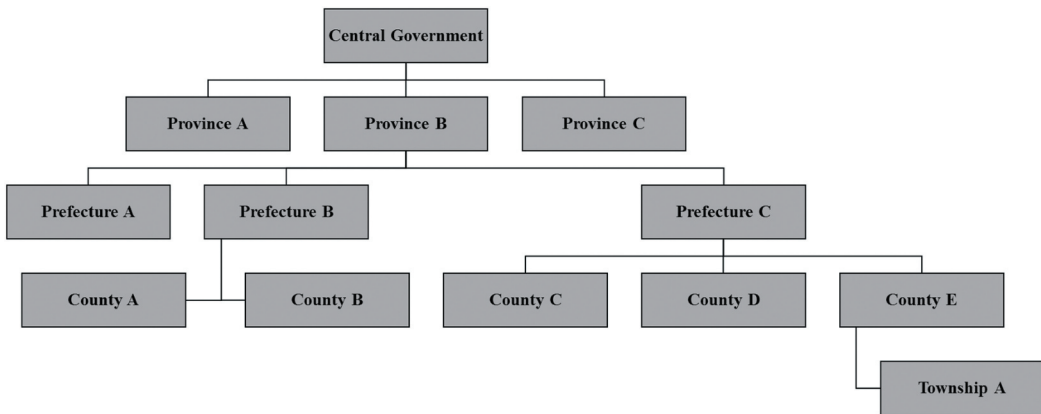


Figure 1. Administrative structure of China.

level government (see Figure 1). The one-level-down appointment rule also implies that appointment decisions are jurisdictionally-bounded, since the upper-level government has sole authority for promotions only within its jurisdiction. Figure 1 shows how Prefecture B can appoint cadres from counties within Prefecture B (i.e. Counties A and B). However, it has no authority to move cadres from County C, which is subject to the management of Prefecture C.

Within this hierarchically top-down and jurisdictionally-bounded appointment system, cadres build their career and climb the political ranks through three distinct forms of mobility: vertical, horizontal, and regional. Vertical mobility refers to the fact that promotion-seeking officials need to compete with peer officials on a wide array of indicators for a spot at the next administrative level.¹⁷ Horizontal mobility is connected to the CCP's efforts to train cadres with well-rounded work experience in multiple sectors. As such, appointees often need to rotate across multiple functional departments in order to be in the running for an appointment to mayor or Party Secretary of a locality.¹⁸ Regionally, while rank-and-file cadres mostly stay within the jurisdiction presided over by the authorities one level up,¹⁹ leading officials such as the mayor are routinely rotated from place to place as part of the CCP's long-standing fight against localism.²⁰

Vertical Mobility

Vertical mobility refers to moves across administrative levels, both upward and downward. Situated in the middle of China's administrative hierarchy, the prefecture-level government sits between the county and provincial levels. Upward mobility from the county refers to county officials' promotion to lead the prefectural government. This possibility of upward movement is the institutional basis of the famous political tournament game among local officials: to be promoted to the upper-level government, cadres need to compete with cohorts from the same jurisdiction by proving their competence on a variety of indicators or building networks with major

¹⁷Hongbin Li and Li-An Zhou, 'Political turnover and economic performance: The incentive role of personnel control in China', *Journal of Public Economics* 89, no. 9–10 (2005): 1743–62; Pierre F. Landry, Xiaobo Lü, and Haiyan Duan, 'Does performance matter? Evaluating political selection along the Chinese administrative ladder', *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no.8 (2018): 1074–1105.

¹⁸Xueguang Zhou and others, 'Stratified mobility in Chinese bureaucracy: A model and empirical evidence', *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 3 (2018): 1–45; Ruixue Jia R and Yiqing Xu, 'Rotating to the top: How career tracks matter in the Chinese Communist Party', *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2020).

¹⁹Xueguang Zhou and others, 'Stratified mobility in Chinese bureaucracy: A model and empirical evidence', *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 3 (2018): 1–45.

²⁰David J. Bulman and Kyle A. Jaros, 'Localism in retreat? Central-provincial relations in the Xi Jinping era', *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 131 (2021): 697–716.

decision-makers.²¹ However, the tournament theory often ignores the downward move. Since prefecture-level appointments are controlled by the provincial government, it is equally likely for the provincial government to ‘parachute’ in someone from a provincial bureau that has stronger ties to the provincial authorities.²² In fact, from 1990 to 2011, only 5% of prefectural Party Secretaries developed their careers from the county level.²³

Based on the trend of overall recentralization in grassroots governance since 2013, we expect an increase in parachute appointments from the provincial government and a decrease in vertical mobility from the counties during Xi’s first two terms. One reason for this hypothesis is Xi’s view of county governance. On the one hand, he has often stressed the importance of counties and the need for quality leadership at this level, emphasizing that ‘cadres . . . should first hone their governing skills through working as county party secretaries’.²⁴ However, instead of promoting county officials for their hard work, he prefers for them to stay in their counties to anchor the CCP’s grassroots governance.²⁵ Under his leadership, the Organization Department has initiated ‘county party secretary workshops’ (*xianwei shuji yanxiu ban*) and revived national awards for outstanding county PSs in 2015 and 2021, with Xi personally awarding about 100 county PSs each time. However, despite this new degree of recognition from Beijing, these positions are not springboards for promotion. Instead, as Kou and Tsai note,²⁶ most of the award-winning county officials’ careers have subsequently slowed down or even stagnated, consistent with Xi’s statement that local officials should ‘focus on (their) contribution to the people instead of pursuing high-ranking posts’.²⁷

County officials’ upward mobility is further threatened by the increasingly vague criteria used in cadre evaluation processes. Doyon’s review of key personnel documents²⁸ under Xi shows criteria such as ‘political standard’ (*zhengzhi biao zhun*) and cadres’ contribution to ‘cultural construction’ (*wenhua jianshe*) and ‘Party construction’ (*dang de jianshe*) have been added to the newest *Regulation*.²⁹ With the erosion of promotion standards that heavily weight quantifiable measures like GDP growth, county-level cadres now face a more amorphous set of promotion rules that may make it harder for them to advance. Indeed, the new rules might give advantage to provincial-level cadres parachuting downward to the prefectures, since they are, presumably, much closer to the decision-makers in charge of appointments. As such, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2: Compared with the Hu-Wen era, in the Xi-Li period there are currently fewer prefectural Party Secretaries and mayors whose careers extend from the county level.

²¹Hongbin Li and Li-An Zhou, ‘Political turnover and economic performance: The incentive role of personnel control in China’, *Journal of Public Economics* 89, no. 9–10(2005): 1743–62; Victor Shih, Christopher Adolph, Mingxing Liu, ‘Getting ahead in the communist party: Explaining the advancement of central committee members in China’, *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (2012): 166–187; Jérôme Doyon and Franziska Barbara Keller, ‘Knowing the wrong cadre? Networks and promotions in the Chinese Party-State’, *Political Studies* 68, no. 4 (2020): 1036–1053.

²²Xiang Gao, ‘Promotion prospects and career paths of local party-government leaders in China’, *Journal of Chinese Governance* 2, no. 2 (2017): 223–234.

²³Genia Kostka and Xiaofan Yu, ‘Career backgrounds of municipal Party Secretaries in China: Why do so few municipal Party Secretaries rise from the county level?’ *Modern China* 41, no. 5 (2015): 467–505.

²⁴Chien-Wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, ‘Dual elite recruitment logic and political manipulation under Xi Jinping’, *Issues & Studies* 57, no. 04 (December 2021): 2150015–12.

²⁵Chien-Wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, ‘Dual elite recruitment logic and political manipulation under Xi Jinping’, *Issues & Studies* 57, no. 04 (December 2021): 2150015–12.

²⁶Chien-Wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, ‘Dual elite recruitment logic and political manipulation under Xi Jinping’, *Issues & Studies* 57, no. 04 (December 2021): 2150015.

²⁷Jinping Xi, “不求‘官’有多大, 但求无愧于民” [Focus on your contribution to the people instead of pursuing high-ranking posts]. 15 July, 2013, accessed 27 December 2022, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0705/c40531-22087040.html>.

²⁸The documents include the *Plan to Deepen Reform of Party and State Institutions* and the *Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres*.

²⁹Jérôme Doyon, ‘Clientelism by design: Personnel politics under Xi Jinping’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 3 (2018): 87–110.

Cadres' Horizontal Mobility

Horizontal mobility captures moves across bureaus and departments. There is a twofold logic behind horizontal rotation. First, the CCP has a long history of moving cadres across sectors before assigning them important roles in order to hone their governing skills by working in a variety of different sectors.³⁰ Second, horizontal rotation is also in tune with the purpose of centralization since it helps curb factionalism and corruption and conveys information to the principal.³¹

Judging from recent policy reforms, it is likely that cadres' horizontal mobility has been increased in the Xi-Li era. In the revised *Regulation*, the Central Organizational Department decided to 'enhance the exchange of cadres across localities, functional departments, and across state-owned enterprises and government'. This new policy is intended to strengthen the Party's control over cadres and curb factionalism from bureaucratic departments and state-owned enterprises, which have been known as incubators for powerful political factions (among others, the 'petroleum clique' (*shiyou bang*), headed by Yongkang Zhou, and the Youth League faction).³² As explicitly stated in Sichuan Province's implementation of this new policy, '(we) need to broaden the horizon of cadres ... and break cadres' ties with one single work unit, department, and sector' (*danwei suoyou, bumen suoyou, hangye suoyou*).³³ Additionally, more horizontal rotation aligns well with China's shift from the growth-at-all-costs to a more sustainable development model. In recent years, the CCP has adjusted officials' assessment metrics and added more non-economic responsibilities to performance evaluation criteria. For instance, the weight of economic indicators in Anhui Province's cadre evaluation list has dropped from 48% to 29% between 2011 and 2019.³⁴ This suggests that appointment decisions will be even more likely to favor those who have experience working in a variety of governance areas and not just on economic topics. As such, we propose that:

H3a: Prefectural Party Secretaries and mayors in the Xi-Li era will be rotated across more departments than under Hu-Wen.

Another notable change in appointment rules is the centralization of personnel management in the hands of the Party. Challenging the widely accepted 'separation of the Party and the State' (*dangzheng fenkai*) principle underlying the CCP's personnel management, the CCP under Xi has effectively extended its control over non-leading CCP cadres and even non-CCP cadres by bringing several government agencies with cadre management and disciplinary function portfolios under the Party's control.³⁵ For instance, the National Civil Service Administration, which is in charge of non-leading cadres, officially had its authority transferred from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security to the CCP's Central Organization Department in 2018. Given the Party's greater role in cadre management, we propose that:

³⁰Stan Hok-Wui Wong and Yu Zeng, 'Getting ahead by getting on the right track: Horizontal mobility in China's political selection process', *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 109 (2018): 61–84; Xueguang Zhou and others, 'Stratified mobility in Chinese bureaucracy: A model and empirical evidence', *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 3 (2018): 1–45.

³¹Yasheng Huang, 'Managing Chinese bureaucrats: An institutional economics perspective', *Political Studies* 50, no. 1 (2002): 50–61.

³²Wenyan Tu and Xiajuan Guo, 'Gendered clientelism and corruption: Are women less corrupt than men in China?', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1936117>.

³³Wuhou Organization Department, '持续开展科级干部跨部门交流' [Continue the exchange of section ranked cadres across work department]. 13 October, 2016, accessed 27 December 2022, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1013/c406416-28775202.html>.

³⁴Evaluation Targets and Weight Towards Prefectures within Anhui Province 2011–2019 (Anhui sheng ge shizhengfu mubiao guanli jixiao kaohe zhibao ji quanzhong), calculated by authors.

³⁵Jérôme Doyon, 'Clientelism by design: Personnel politics under Xi Jinping', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 3 (2018): 87–110.

H3b: Prefectural Party Secretary and mayor appointments in the Xi-Li era will be more likely to be awarded to cadres with Party work experience.

Cadres' Regional Mobility

Regional mobility refers to moves across jurisdictions. The possibility and range of regional mobility depends on the level of a cadre's political rank. While the CCP has been diligently applying the Rule of Avoidance (*hui bi zhidu*) to combat nepotism and localism by appointing leading cadres away from their birthplace,³⁶ not all cadres move within the same jurisdictional range. While the Rule requires cadres to be appointed away from their hometown,³⁷ hometown is a relative concept: Prefecture-level cadres may be able to avoid their birth *prefecture* but not their birth *province*, since their appointment is subject to the provincial government which is only able to move prefectural cadres within the province. As a result, cross-provincial mobility for prefectural leaders is very low, and on average, most of them have lived, studied, or worked only in two provinces.³⁸ The jurisdiction-based mobility limitation is more obvious at the county level. As county cadres are managed by the prefectural government, they could not even avoid their birth *prefecture*. Gao found that 82% of county leaders in Zhejiang Province have worked their whole life in the same prefecture.³⁹

We expect that both the cross-prefectural and cross-provincial mobility for prefectural leaders have increased since 2013 and that more outsiders have been appointed as prefecture PSs or mayors during the Xi-Li era. To substantiate this expectation, we provide two reasons. First, despite the limited cross-provincial mobility due to the one-level-down appointment method,⁴⁰ new clauses in the *Regulation* to enhance exchange of cadres are likely to challenge the *status quo*. These clauses not only give prefectural leaders more opportunities to be rotated across prefectures but also grant the central government permission to bypass the provincial-level government and appoint prefectural cadres directly. As a sign of the new role the center could now take on in prefectural appointments, a total of 18 prefectural cadres were transferred across provincial borders in a space of just four days in 2019.⁴¹

Second, cadre rotation has long been used as a tool to combat corruption in China.⁴² Against the background of the ongoing anti-corruption campaign initiated by Xi, cadres' regional mobility is likely intensifying. Corruption is network-based,⁴³ and appointing outsiders and rotating cadres across localities more often helps the central government deter cadres from being co-opted by local corruption networks and ensure their loyalty to the central government during anti-corruption initiatives. The anti-corruption campaign launched in 2012 under Xi is the longest and most intense such campaign in the CCP's history.⁴⁴ It has taken down cadres at all levels, including both 'tigers'

³⁶Qingjie Zeng, 'Cadre rotation and campaign mobilization in China's anticorruption enforcement', *Journal of East Asian Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017): 167–90.

³⁷Sarah Eaton and Genia Kostka, "Authoritarian environmentalism undermined? local leaders' time horizons and environmental policy implementation in China". *China Quarterly* 218, no. 1 (2014): 359–380.

³⁸Genia Kostka and Xiaofan Yu, 'Career backgrounds of municipal Party Secretaries in China: Why do so few municipal Party Secretaries rise from the county level?' *Modern China* 41, no. 5 (2015): 467–505.

³⁹Xiang Gao, 'Promotion prospects and career paths of local party-government leaders in China', *Journal of Chinese Governance* 2, no. 2 (2017): 223–234.

⁴⁰The application of the one-level-down policy at the county level has eroded over time. From 2016 to 2021, a total of 14 provinces took over the appointment authority of county officials from prefectural government to provincial government. For details, see Lu and Tsai (2021).

⁴¹Ziwen Jiang, '多名厅级干部跨省区市交流任职, 已涉19省份' [More than 19 provinces already: Prefectural cadres exchange across provincial and prefectural borders]. December 2019, accessed September 20, 2021, <http://news.cctv.com/2019/12/25/ARTIrN5lzw20rzOsq0p8k9z8191225.shtml>.

⁴²Yasheng Huang, 'Managing Chinese bureaucrats: An institutional economics perspective', *Political Studies* 50, no. 1 (2002): 61–79; Qingjie Zeng, 'Cadre rotation and campaign mobilization in China's anticorruption enforcement', *Journal of East Asian Studies* 17, no. 2 (2017): 167–90.

⁴³Ting Gong, 'Dangerous collusion: corruption as a collective venture in contemporary China'. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 35, no. 1 (2002): 85–103.

⁴⁴Melanie Manion, 'Taking China's anticorruption campaign seriously', *Economic and Political Studies* 4, no. 1 (2016): 3–18.

from top levels and ‘flies’ at lower levels. The campaign has also targeted places with entrenched clientelist networks to combat localism and re-establish control from the top.⁴⁵

Personnel reshuffling is in line with the anti-corruption drive and also supports overall centralization. For example, personnel shifts at the provincial level have significantly accelerated since 2013, leading to a major increase in the number of outsiders on the Standing Committee of Provincial Party Congresses.⁴⁶ We would, therefore, expect the same for prefectural leaders, who are more likely to be outsiders from other provinces due to the Xi’s anti-corruption campaign. In particular, the erosion of the one-level-down rule makes intervention from the central government in prefectural appointment more feasible. Based on the insights above, we propose that:

H4a: Under Xi-Li, prefectural Party Secretaries and mayors are more likely to gain cross-provincial and cross-prefectural work experiences than previously.

H4b: Under Xi-Li, prefectural Party Secretaries and mayors are more likely than before to be appointed from outside the province.

Data and Method

Data

Our analysis is based on a recently compiled dataset including all prefectural mayors and Party Secretaries (PSs) who served between 2003 and 2020. They hail from 412 prefectures across 31 provincial units. In total, we sampled the biographies of 1,988 mayors and 1,694 PSs. For officials who served between 2003 and 2015, we adopted and updated the data from Jiang’s Chinese Political Elite Database.⁴⁷ We took two steps to record the resumés of officials who served from 2015 until 31 December 2020. First, we referred to the prefectural yearbooks and Google search results for lists of mayors and PSs. We were able to access the incumbents’ resumés from the Local Officials’ Dataset on *Renminwang*. For the most part, we were able to collect any missing resumés through *Baidu Baike*. The finalized dataset includes the cadres’ biographic information and every reported study, training, work, and exchange experience from their resumés. Biographical information covers gender, ethnicity, date of birth, place of birth, highest level of education, Party membership, and the date they joined the CCP. For each experience, we documented the length of time, location, work unit, job title, and administrative rank of the job (e.g. *fuchu*, *zhengchu*).

Several coding issues emerged in the process of building the dataset. First, for 51 mayors and 98 PSs, it was not straightforward to categorize them into the Hu-Wen and Xi-Li eras as they were appointed multiple times across both periods. We addressed this issue by making the distinction based on the starting date of each *appointment* and allowing double counting, as we are interested in the appointment decision rather than the person. For example, if a mayor was appointed three times (i.e. in 2008, 2011, and 2014), the person would be included in both the Hu-Wen and Xi-Li groups. Thus, we treated each appointment, rather than the person, as an observation. Another coding difficulty comes from cross-appointments. There are two scenarios for cross-appointments: when cadres are posted in multiple positions simultaneously, and, more seldom, when officials assume a temporary transferred post while retaining their main position. For example, a prefectural

⁴⁵Peter Lorentzen and Xi Lu, ‘Personal ties, meritocracy, and China’s anti-corruption campaign’, (November 21, 2018). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2835841>.

⁴⁶David J. Bulman and Kyle A. Jaros, ‘Loyalists, localists, and legibility: The calibrated control of provincial leadership teams in China’, *Politics and Society* 48, no. 2 (2020): 199–234.

⁴⁷Junyan Jiang, ‘Making bureaucracy work: Patronage networks, performance incentives, and economic development in China’, *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 4 (2018): 982–999.

deputy mayor might also be appointed as director of a major development zone. The prefectural deputy Party Secretary is also likely to assume the position of head of the Organization Department. To include them all might lead to inflation when calculating the seniority and mobility range. Therefore, we manually went through each of their past placements and kept only the highest-ranked and most demanding position in the situation of cross-appointments.

Last, the calculation of cadres' tenure could potentially introduce bias due to the artificial truncation of tenure length: Many cadres appointed in the Xi-Li era are still in office in 2020 and have not completed their term. To ensure the comparability of the two groups of data, we truncated the data from the Hu-Wen era, only looked at cadres from 2003 to 2010, and excluded those who were still in office in 2010 when calculating average tenure length.

Method

The analysis first adopted Kostka and Yu's method by calculating the vertical, horizontal, and regional mobility scores of the officials when they are appointed as mayors or PSs (see Table 1).⁴⁸ These scores provide a general impression of how mobile Chinese mayors/PSs have been in the past two decades and whether the pattern has changed since Xi's inauguration. The *vertical* score ranges from 1 to 5, with one unit representing the official's work experience at one level of administration. For example, a mayor who has worked at the provincial, prefectural, and county levels would get a score of 3. The *horizontal* score is calculated by assigning 1 point to each department or work unit where the person has worked. A score of 2 points applies if the official moves from the county Organization Department to the prefectural Government General Office. Lastly, the paper calculates two versions of the *regional* mobility score to unravel how mobile mayors/PSs are at different administrative levels: The first score measures cross-provincial moves, and the second score the cross-prefectural moves. The regional mobility score captures the cadres' mobility from the province/

Table 1. Variable summary

Variable	Description	Measurement
Vertical score	Overall vertical mobility across the five different administrative levels (national, provincial, prefecture, county, township)	Each level counts 1 point, and the score ranges from 1 to 5
Horizontal score	Overall horizontal mobility across different work unit	Each work unit counts 1 point
Regional score (Cross-province)	Overall cross-provincial mobility	Each province counts 1 point
Regional score (Cross-prefecture)	Overall cross-prefectural mobility	Each prefecture counts 1 point
Vertical predominance	Where cadres have worked the longest vertically	N/A
County experience	Percentage of cadres who have worked in counties	N/A
<i>Xitong</i> predominance	Where cadres have worked the longest across different <i>xitong</i>	N/A
Work unit predominance	Where cadres have worked the longest across different departments/ work units	N/A
Provincial outsider	Percentage of outsiders from a different province	N/A
Prefectural outsider	Percentage of outsiders from a different prefecture	N/A

⁴⁸Genia Kostka and Xiaofan Yu, 'Career backgrounds of municipal Party Secretaries in China: Why do so few municipal Party Secretaries rise from the county level?' *Modern China* 41, no. 5 (2015): 467–505.

prefecture of birth, education, and each post before their appointments as mayor or PS. Each move is worth 1 point.

In addition to general mobility scores, the analysis also provides details about the cadre's past experiences on every dimension. Vertically, to analyze trends in county officials' likelihood of serving in leading prefectural positions, we calculate the proportion of cadres who have spent the majority of their career working in counties. To this end, we first summarize the length of time an official worked at each administration level. We then categorize the cadres based on the level where they worked the longest. For example, if a mayor worked in the provincial department for 12 years, county government for five years, and prefectural government for seven years, the mayor would be labeled a provincial type of cadre. Second, we track whether a cadre has any county experience.

For horizontal mobility, we also categorize the type of cadres based on the system or sector (*xitong*) and specific work unit in which they worked the longest. The coding of the system follows Jiang's codebook and includes, among others, the Communist Party, the government, the Youth League, state-owned enterprises, the People's Liberation Army, etc.⁴⁹ Each *xitong* includes multiple departments.⁵⁰ For instance, the *xitong* of the Communist Party includes departments such as the Propaganda Department and the Organization Department. In addition to classifying *xitong*, we have also conducted an analysis of cadres' work experience in each work unit to find out which unit is predominant in producing mayors and PSs.⁵¹ This categorization indicates the official's specific capacity and which system and work unit's interests they might serve. Lastly, for regional mobility, the analysis calculates the percentage of 'outsiders' at both the provincial and prefectural level, defined as those who worked in a province/prefecture other than their birth province/prefecture.

Findings on Demographic Information

In terms of leading cadres' overall characteristics, prefectural appointment decisions since 2013 have not become more inclusive, but more cadres with higher educational qualifications are being selected. For both mayors and PSs, women's representation remains stagnant, whereas the proportion of ethnic minorities has slightly decreased (see Table 2). Regarding age, it takes over two years longer for cadres in the Xi-Li era to make their way to the mayor/PS position than before, and the difference is significant with T test. With higher preference given to senior cadres with more experience in the new administration, the average starting age of mayors increased from 47.6 to 50 years; and the age of those in the PS group increased from 49.8 to 52. In terms of education, both mayors and PSs have higher degrees than their counterparts in the 2000s: more cadres have master's and doctoral degrees and the percentage of cadres whose highest degree was from a college (*zhuanke*) or high school dropped to nearly zero in both groups.

Across both the Hu-Wen and Xi-Li eras, there are interesting differences between mayors and PSs. In comparison to mayors, PSs are far less diverse, slightly less educated, and much older. Ethnic minorities have 6% fewer PS positions compared with their share among the mayors. While the gap of women's representation in the two groups of leaders is not as wide as the ethnicity gap, women have less chance to serve as PSs than as mayors. Compared with PSs, mayors are more highly educated in both the Hu-Wen and Xi-Li eras, with 4% more leaders in the mayor group holding a postgraduate degree. In addition, PSs are two years older than mayors on average.

⁴⁹Junyan Jiang, 'Making bureaucracy work: Patronage networks, performance incentives, and economic development in China'. *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 4 (2018): 982–999.

⁵⁰Our analysis includes eight *xitongs*: The Party, government, Youth League, representative bodies, People's Liberation Army, state-owned enterprises, grassroots organizations, and school.

⁵¹There are almost 7,000 work units in our dataset, and it is impractical to calculate the predominance of work units based on all of them. Instead, we ranked the work units based on frequency and selected the top six work units when calculating the predominance.

Table 2. Demography of prefectural cadres, 2003–2020

	Mayor		P-value	Party Secretary		P-value
	2003–2012	2013–2020		2003–2012	2013–2020	
Female (%)	6.4	7.0	-	4.3	5.7	-
Ethnic Minority (%)	14.2	12.4	-	8.1	7.2	-
Starting Age (years)	47.6	49.9	0	49.8	52.3	0
Finishing Age (years)	51.0	52.4	0	53.6	54.2	0
Highest Degree (%)			-			-
Ph.D.	18.9	23.8		16.0	24.0	
Master's	57.5	62.2		58.3	58.2	
Bachelor's	18.0	12.9		20.3	16.2	
College	3.3	0.3		0.1	0.6	
High School and Below	0.2	0.0		3.11	0.0	
N/A	2.1	0.8		2.5	1.1	
Tenure (years)	2.7	2.4	0	2.9	2.4	0
Total Number	1,116	923		933	859	

When calculating the length of tenure under Hu, we only included cadres who had served between 2003 and 2010 to make the two groups of data comparable.

Table 3. Mobility scores and outsider proportion of mayors/PSs

	Mayor			Party Secretary		
	2003–2012	2013–2020	P-value	2003–2012	2013–2020	P-value
Vertical score	2.47	2.43	0.2	2.65	2.5	0
Horizontal score	6.24	6.77	0	6.78	7.22	0
Regional (cross-province)	1.92	1.96	0.33	2.04	2	0.5
Regional (cross-prefecture)	3.18	3.34	0.002	3.6	3.75	0.006
Provincial outsider (%)	33.88	38.56	-	39.80	43.72	-
Prefectural outsider (%)	91.92	95.57	-	95.82	97.45	-

The vertical score is based on the sum of administrative levels at which a cadre has worked; the horizontal score is based on the sum of work units in which a cadre has worked; and the regional score is based on the sum of provinces or prefectures where a cadre has worked.

Mobility Scores: Vertical, Horizontal, and Regional

The findings on cadres' mobility scores reveal that the index has stayed mostly stable on vertical and cross-provincial mobility (see Table 3), with the exception of the PS group's vertical score. The index table further shows that both mayors and PS's horizontal mobility scores and prefectural level regional mobility scores are higher, confirming our hypotheses on the administration's resolve to enhance cadres' exchanges across departments and localities and to curb potential factionalism and localism.

Cadres' horizontal score is significantly higher in the Xi-Li period. For mayors, the number of departments they have worked in increased from about six to almost seven, and for the PS group from seven to eight. However, when controlling for the career length of appointees, we find that cadres under Xi are not necessarily more horizontally mobile than their counterparts under Hu: While the average score for cadres after 2012 is still higher, the difference is no longer statistically significant. This means that while the Xi administration pushes cadres to work for more departments, the rising score of horizontal mobility is mostly driven by the extra years they have worked before the appointment, as preference is now given to more senior and experienced cadres. However, more rotation across departments still helps achieve the goal of curbing factionalism, since cadres do not spend the extra years in one department but are rotated away.

The regional mobility analysis includes the mobility score at both the provincial and the prefectural levels. The provincial regional mobility score is surprisingly stable over time for both the mayor and PS groups. The mayors have lived, studied, and worked in fewer than two provinces, and this number does not change much for the new generation. The same holds for the PS group.

However, the situation is different at the prefectural level. For mayor groups, the number of prefectures they have lived, studied, and worked in increased from 3.18 to 3.34, and the score for PSs improved from 3.6 to 3.75. In other words, the exchange of cadres is conducted mostly within the same province, and the often eye-catching cross-provincial appointments are still not the norm, despite the push from the central government.

The regional mobility analysis also calculates the proportion of outsiders in the system, defined as those whose current appointed position is located in a province/prefecture that differs from their birth province/prefecture. The results show that outsiders make up an increasing proportion of both mayors and PSs at both levels. At the end of 2012, 34% of all mayors and 39% of PSs were outsiders from a different province. In the Xi-Li era, outsiders make up 39% of the seats of mayors and 44% of PS spots. At the prefectural level, the number rises from 92% to 96% for mayors and from 96% to 98% for PSs, meaning that nearly all prefectural leaders in the Xi-Li era are working in a locality that is not their hometown. However, the modest 5% increase in provincial outsiders in the Xi-Li era is surprising. In light of Xi's anti-corruption campaign, one might have expected the Xi administration to have substantially increased cross-provincial appointments. This result corroborates the previous finding that cross-provincial appointment is not the norm, despite the policy shifts. In practice, it is still difficult for the central government to extend its control to the prefectures.

Past Work Experience

Desirable Cadre Type Based on Vertical Experience

This section categorizes the types of cadres according to the level of government where they serve the longest and, therefore, know the best. For administrative levels, the analysis divided the cadres into seven types based on their administrative work experience: central, provincial, prefectural, county, township, enterprise, and education type.⁵² The results reveal that the composition of cadres based on their administrative type significantly shifted after 2013 for mayor group, $\chi^2(6) = 17.99, p = 0$, but not for the PS group, $\chi^2(6) = 5.69, p = 0.46$ (see Figure 2). The change in the mayor group is brought about by the increase of appointees who build their careers from the prefectural level. Among PSs, the proportion of each type stay mostly stable. A comparison between the mayor and the PS groups shows that while provincial and prefectural type cadres take most positions, the mayor group has a larger proportion of county-type cadre, and the gap remains in the Xi-Li era.

To further explore the cadres' vertical backgrounds, we also analyze their work experience at each administrative level (see Figure 3). The calculation shows that during the Xi-Li era, the proportions of mayors with county and provincial work experience have remained stable. The proportion of mayors with prefectural work experience increased from 81% to 88%, making it the only significant change during this leadership transition, $\chi^2(1) = 12.91, p = 0$. There has also been no structural change in the PS group, though with a slight decrease of leaders with county experience and increase of those with provincial experience. However, the change is not significant.

Taken together, the analysis of previous work experiences along the vertical dimension contradicts our hypothesis that there will be fewer cadres with county work experience under Xi-Li, as the share of county background cadres remains stable. Instead, we found that prefectural work experience has become more prized for mayor appointments. Not only are mayors more likely to be selected from among those who are deeply rooted in prefectural governance, but it becomes almost a precondition for mayors to gain some prefectural work experience before they are appointed. We also found that the rising share of mayors with prefectural experience is driven by several factors. Mayor candidates in the Xi-Li era are needed to work longer at the prefectural level, although this result is not statistically significant (9.8 to 10.3 years, $p = 0.12$). They also need to work across more

⁵²The analysis differentiates between enterprise cadres and education cadres, defined as those who build their career from working in (either state-owned or private) enterprises and schools (e.g. universities and high schools). While these placements are set up at a certain administration level, the job description of these posts varies largely from the ones in government.

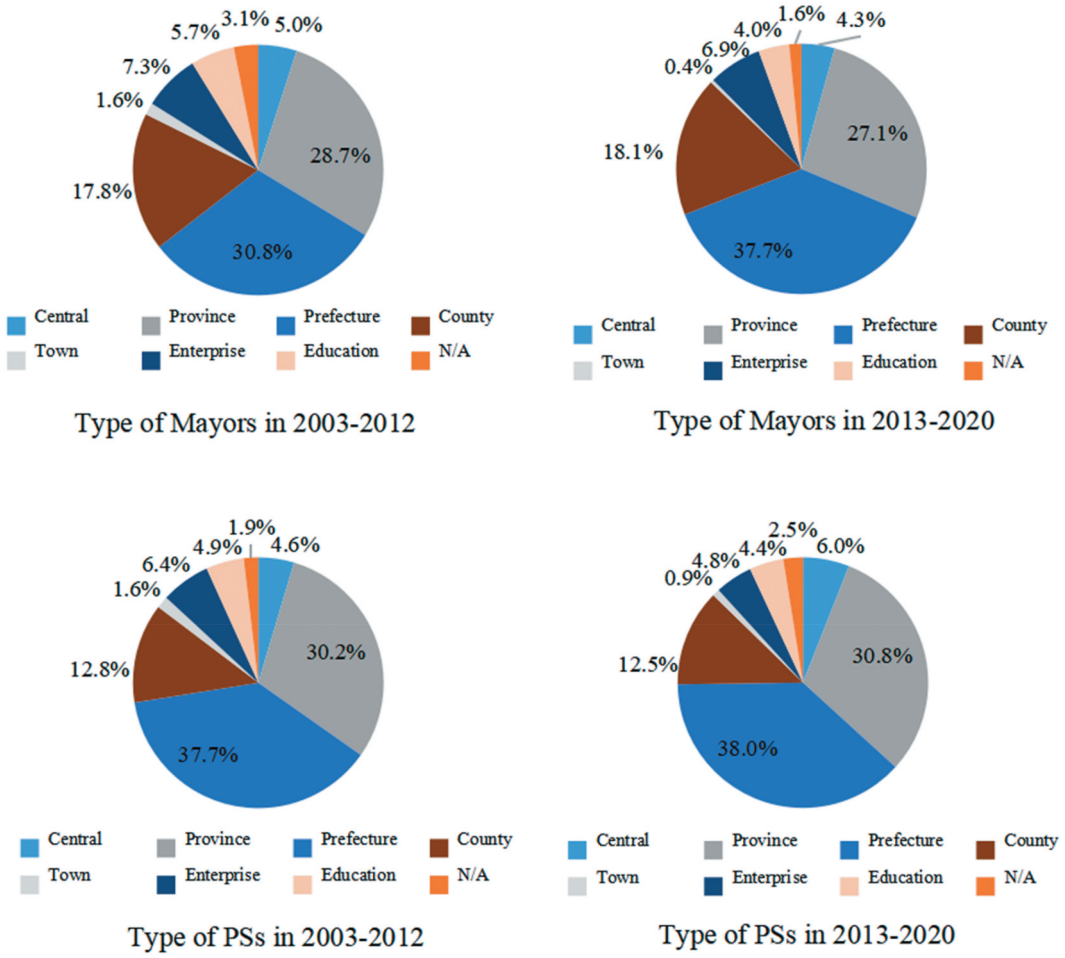


Figure 2. Previous Work Experience Based on Administrative Level.

prefectures (from 3.18 to 3.34, $p < 0.01$) than their counterparts from the Hu era (see Table 3). Notably, the rising share of cadres with prefectural experience is not from within the prefecture but usually rotated in from other prefectures. This structural shift is accompanied by an increase in the share of outsiders from other prefectures from 92% to 96% ($p < 0.01$).

Cadre Type Based on Horizontal Sector/Work Unit Work Experience

To determine which sector/work unit produces most of the prefectural leaders, we calculated the proportion of cadre types based on their work experience in each *xitong* and specific work unit (see Figure 4). The comparison illustrates the difference in composition of both mayors and PSs since 2013, and the change is significant for both groups: for mayors, $\chi^2(8) = 21.0, p = 0$; and for PSs, $\chi^2(8) = 23.4, p = 0$. Challenging our expectation that more cadres with strong Party affiliations would be appointed in the Xi-Li era, Xi’s rise to power brought with it more mayors and PSs who had primarily worked in government/functional departments. This group’s proportion grew from 46% to 52% in the mayor group, and from 46% to 54% in the PS group. Within the PS group, it seems the pressure on PSs to have actual governing experience has also increased, as the percentage of the party type of PS cadres dropped from 30% to 26%, and was accompanied by an increase of government-type PSs who built their career through years of

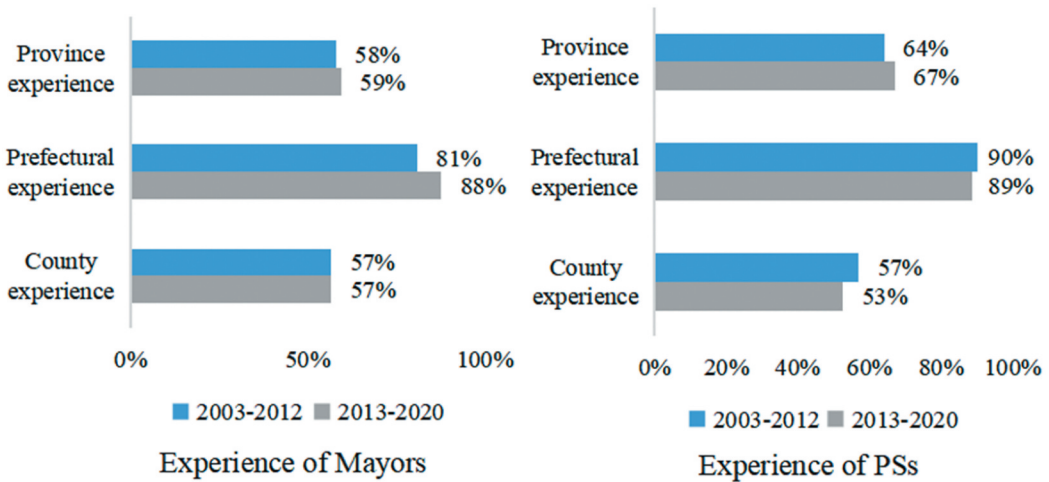


Figure 3. Proportion of Cadres with Experience at Different Administrative Levels.

working in functional departments. Interestingly, the increase in the number of government-type PSs corresponds to the narrowing promotion path for cadres from Party type cadres, that is, those who have worked their way up through Party agencies such as the Organization Department.

To identify the specific work units linked to promotions, we examined cadres' experience by using the same method. We found that for mayors, the General Office of the Government (*bangongshi* or *bangongting*) and the Development and Reform Commission are the two units behind the rising share of mayors with a government background (see Figure 5). However, the increasing importance of the two units can be seen as a continuation rather than a departure from the appointment patterns under Hu, as they were also the most-represented work units at the time. This suggests relative stability over time in the preference for leading cadres with general governing experience and expertise on the economy. For the PS group, the decrease in Party-type cadres is attributable to a decline in the number of cadres with a background in the Organization Department, the General Office for CCP Committees, or the Propaganda Department.

Our findings on past experience challenge both hypotheses: one suggesting a gloomier political future for county-type cadres and the other positing a preference for government-type over Party-type cadres. Instead, they reveal appointment patterns and nuances that have previously been overlooked in research on power consolidation in personnel. Like the previous administration, the Xi-Li era has kept most county cadres in the counties. However, prefectural-level experience has become increasingly important for mayors: A rising share of mayors have prefectural work experience, and they must rotate through more prefectures and work longer in prefectures to be appointed. Regarding horizontal work experience, our findings challenge the consensus that the Party has tightened its grip on personnel and show that an increasing share of mayors and PSs have a government background, especially from the Government General Office and the Development and Reform Commission. Indeed, these findings suggest that the government (as opposed to the Party) has a tighter grip on personnel appointments in prefectures.

Tenure Length in the Xi-Li Era

Contrary to the CCP's recent personnel regulations that suggest reigning in fast-tracked promotions and making cadres stay longer in their posts, the average tenure of cadres has significantly decreased in the Xi-Li administration: Mayors' tenure decreased by 0.3 years and PSs' tenure 0.5 years (see Table 3). Compared with the Hu-Wen era, mayors' tenure was shortened from 2.69 years to 2.42 years and PSs'

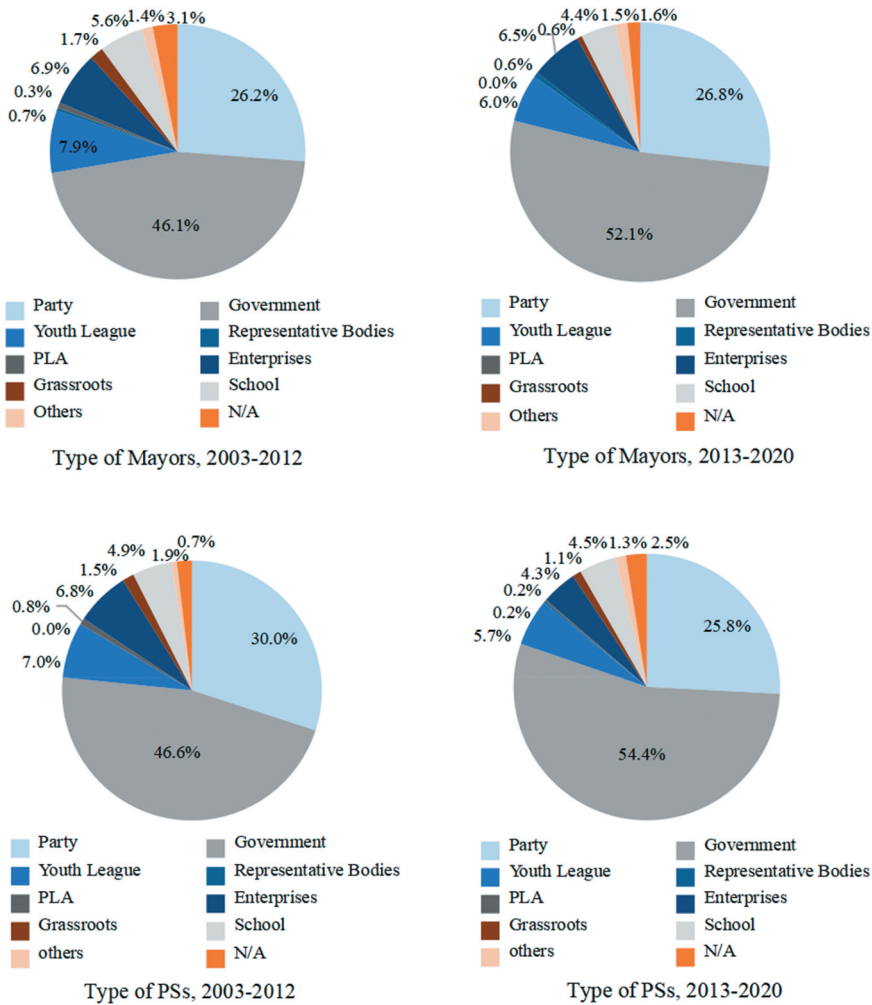


Figure 4. Work Experience in Different Systems/Xitong.

tenure from 2.91 to 2.36 years. The distribution of cadres among different tenure groups suggests that the drop was driven by the decrease in the number of long-term mayors and the doubling of short-stayers (i.e. those who serve less than one year as PSs) (see Figure 6). Some 72% of mayors in the Xi-Li era work less than three years in their position, and the proportion of those working for a longer time (more than three years) drops by almost 6% compared with the Hu era. The shortened tenures are especially striking for PSs, as this position used to be considered more stable than that of mayors. However, since 2013, 13% of PS appointments have lasted less than one year, while such short-staying PSs had accounted for only 6.7% before 2013. The proportion of long-staying PSs who worked in one position for more than three years also dropped sharply, from 45% to 28%.

What's Behind the Short-Stayer Trend?

The increase in the number of short-stayers under Xi is the result of both the anti-corruption campaign and the greater control exercised by the provincial-level government. By manually going through the short-stay cases, we show that 15% of the PS group were either appointed to

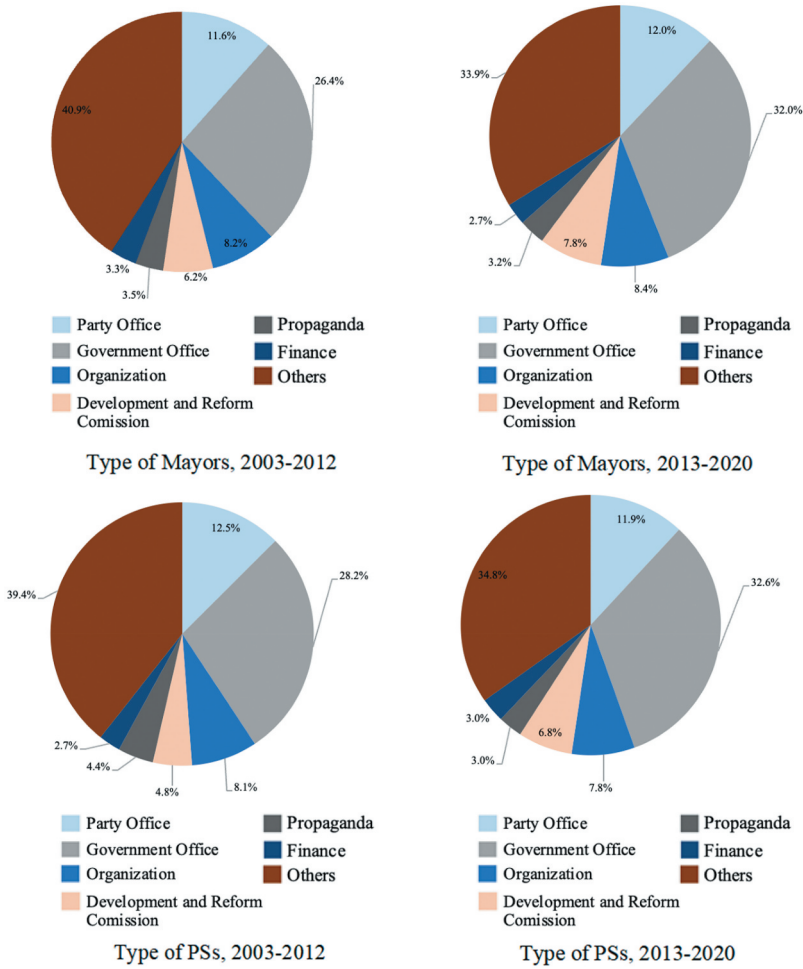


Figure 5. Work Experience In Different Work Units.

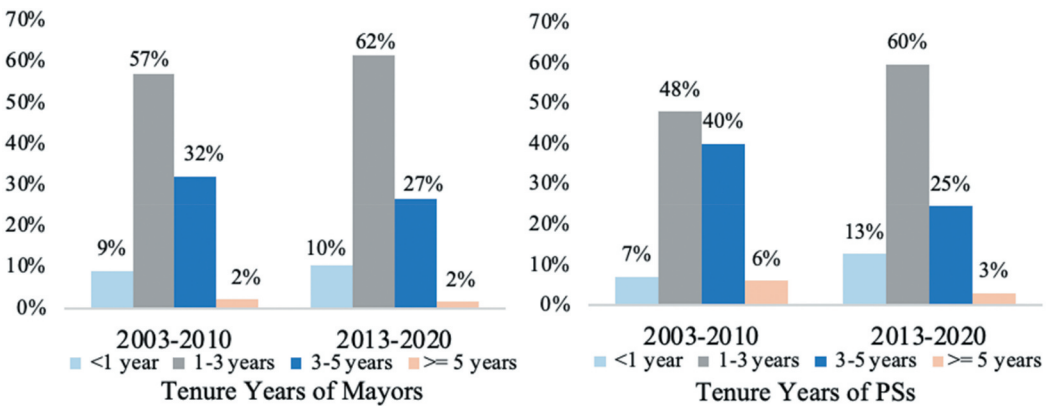


Figure 6. Distribution of Mayors/PSs' Tenure.

temporarily fill a vacancy caused by the removal of corrupted cadres or themselves removed due to corruption. In the Hu era, only 9% of short-stay appointments were attributable to corruption. For example, in 2016, Zhiqiang Duan was promoted from mayor to the PS position in Bayannur after his predecessor, Yonglin He, had been charged for corruption. Duan held the position for only seven months while waiting for the provincial-level government to find a suitable long-term PS to fill the position. A similar situation happened with Lihua Ai, also in 2016, when a former colleague, Shuju Tao, was removed from the PS position in Ulanqab due to corruption. As with Duan, Ai held the position for only seven months. In the mayor group, while the proportion of corruption-induced cadre rotation cases is also high in the Xi-Li era (i.e. 15%), it remains stable compared with the number under Hu-Wen, which was also 15%.

The second reason for the increase in the number of short-stayers is the provincial government's increasing use of prefectural appointments to train their own cadres working as 'paratroopers' at the prefectural level. The analysis started by reviewing cadres' placements before and after the appointment and observed four distinct rationales for short-term positions: (1) as a *transitional* post before their promotion to the provincial government or a longer-term and higher-ranked position (type 1); (2) as a *training* post before cadres assume a position as long-term mayor or PS (type 2); (3) as a *paratrooper* position for provincial cadres to gain some local experience before they continue their career in the provincial government (type 3); and (4) as an *ending* position for those who are soon to retire, those who died, or went to jail.

Transitional posts are provided for cadres with prior mayor/PS experience who are qualified to be promoted to the next level. In such cases, the short-staying post is usually at the same rank as their previous position. Transitional short-stayers are likely to be cadres who have spent most of their time in sub-provincial-level government. Some of them might have worked in provincial government but only for a brief period. Therefore, these short-term posts are best characterized as a waiting room for their next promotion—either to the provincial-level government or, for the mayors, to a PS post. For example, before Yuzhou Yao was appointed as head of Political and Legal Affairs Commission of Anhui Province, the former PS of Xuancheng Prefecture stayed in Chuzhou Prefecture for two months as PS, from August to October 2016.

Training posts are for newcomers who need a 'training session'. Unlike *transitional* posts, training posts are typically higher ranked than cadres' previous post and equally ranked with the long-term position that comes after the training post. The final position could be a long-term mayor or PS post or, in rare cases, head of provincial bureau or even deputy provincial governor. For example, before assuming the PS position of Shanluo Prefecture, Runze Hu—previously the mayor of Hanzhong prefecture—worked as the PS of Hanzhong Prefecture for four months between July and December 2013 to familiarize himself with the PS's responsibilities.

Paratrooper positions can be also characterized as training positions but are purely for provincial cadres to gain local experience, as they are soon brought back to the provincial government, usually with a promotion. The deputy provincial head of Hubei Province between 2018 and 2019, Anli Chen, followed this path as she had been assigned to Suizhou Prefecture for eight months before being promoted to deputy provincial head. Previously, she had worked as the deputy head of the Organization Department of Hubei Province.

The summary of different types of 'short-stayers' shows that the current administration's rationale of short-stayer appointment has changed (see Figure 7). There was a major increase in the paratrooper type of short-term stayers—trainees for the provincial cadre pool—from 15% to 41% in the mayor group and from 19% to 30% in the PS group. By analyzing these paratrooper cases, we found that while many of them have also worked in prefectural or county-level government, the decisive factor for them to be categorized as paratroopers is typically holding a high-ranked position in provincial-level government before the appointment. This signals the cadre's need to gain some governing experience in a local leadership position—a traditional practice of the CCP for training its cadres. For instance, Shuguang Xiang was already the deputy secretary of the general office of Hunan provincial government before being rotated to Yongzhou as mayor. After less than one year

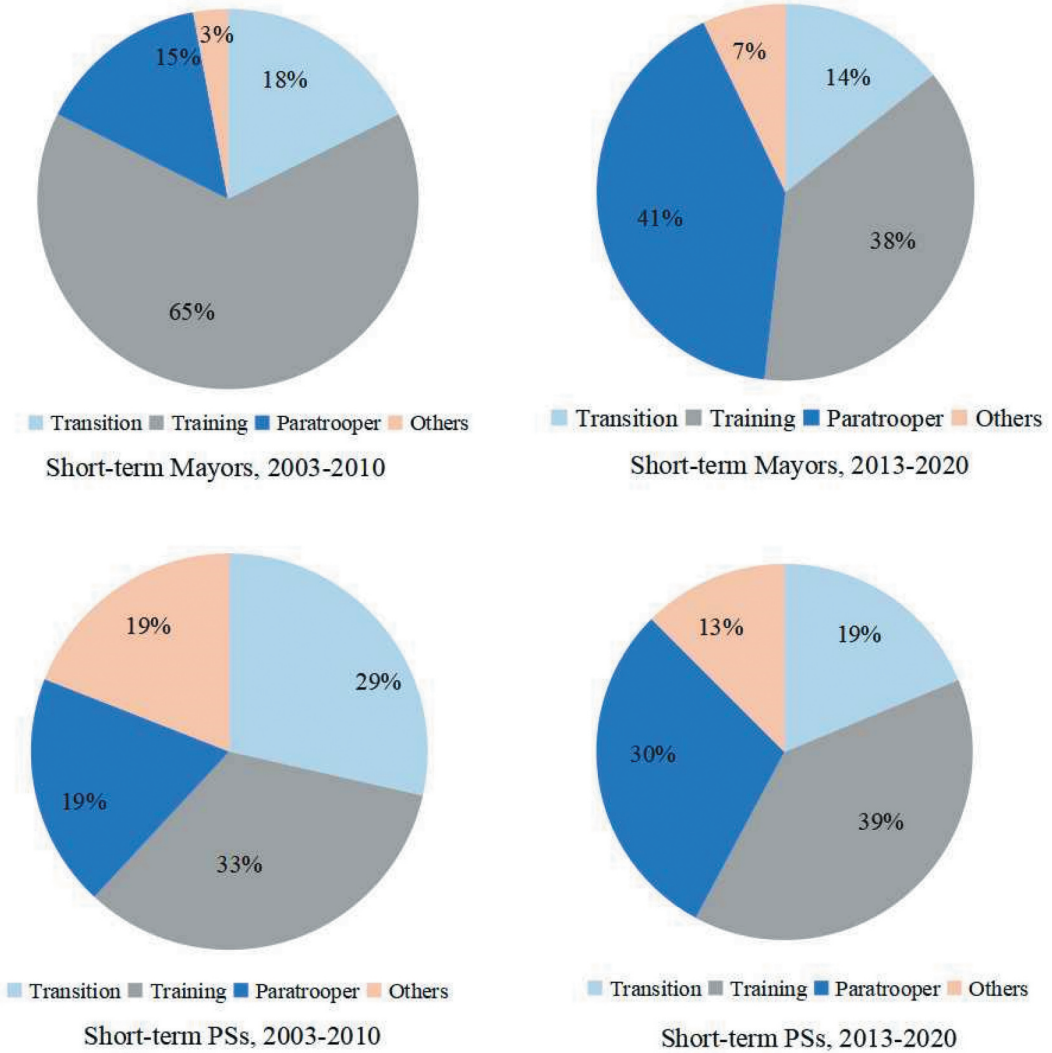


Figure 7. Short-stay Cadres' Career Paths.

in Yongzhou, he was called back to the provincial government, this time as the deputy secretary of the provincial government.

The increase in the numbers of paratroopers under Xi sends two messages: 1) Local experience now plays a bigger role in provincial-level promotion decisions, and 2) there is an acceleration in the provincial-level personnel reshuffling that brings more cadres to the prefectures. Either way, this trend shows that prefectural short-term leaders sent from above are somewhat like agents 'dispatched' by the provincial government, and for them the position serves as a steppingstone to advance their careers.⁵³ Using prefectural appointments for this purpose has the potential to seriously compromise the prefectural government's governing capacity while strengthening the provincial-level government's control over the prefectures.

⁵³Notably, these agents are not here to fill the spots left by corrupted official as only two paratrooper cases related to corruption.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we examined whether and how the trend of power consolidation in personnel politics under Xi's rule manifests at the prefectural level. Our findings both support and challenge previous findings on the centralization and Party-strengthening trends. On the one hand, we found that an increase in rotations for mayors and PSs across prefectures and functional departments is consistent with the notion that central authorities seek to curb localism and rein in corruption at the local levels. At the same time, a rise in 'paratroopers' sent to prefectures to effectively serve as the eyes and ears of the provincial government indicates higher-level authorities are shoring up their authority and power over subordinate levels. On the other hand, our analysis of where exactly power is pooling contradicts the conventional belief that it is Beijing's influence that is increasing. Contrary to suggestions from the updated *CCP Regulations on the Selection and Appointment of Leading Cadres of the Party and Government*, which gives the central government more leeway to move prefectural level cadres directly across provinces, we have found that appointment authority is still firmly in the hands of provincial authorities as prefectural cadres rarely move across provincial borders. Similarly, despite the CCP's expanding jurisdiction in personnel management, both mayors and PSs are more likely to come from government agencies than Party departments. Overall, our findings show a bureaucratic landscape where cadres are much less attached to the prefecture they lead and much more controlled by the province in which they govern.

Our findings reveal the unintended consequences of the CCP's personnel reforms during the Xi-Li era and how power is redistributed along the five levels of the party-state, despite efforts by the central government and the Party to tighten control. As Doyon notes in a thorough examination of the transformation of personnel policies under Xi,⁵⁴ our findings confirm that the trend of power concentration does not necessarily lead to an increase in power for the central government. Instead, as our research confirm, prefectural appointment power has been consolidated but only within the provincial bureaucracies, resulting in a loss of power for other levels of the state.

We also confirm that the seemingly radical shifts brought about by the Xi-Li rule in China are, in fact, more subtle than previously suggested. For example, Minxin Pei describes these changes in Xi's political report to the 20th Party Congress as 'continuities with rhetorical escalation'.⁵⁵ The same can be said of prefectural appointment: Notwithstanding the rhetorical escalation pushing for change, there are many continuities with the Hu-Wen administration. In terms of vertical mobility, the county cadres' upward mobility remains surprisingly stable, despite Xi's call for county PSs to stay where they are. This suggests that county-level politics might simply be too far removed from the central government for Beijing to impose its preferences. Similarly, the attention-grabbing cross-provincial appointments of prefectural cadres under Xi turn out to be exceptions rather than a sign that Beijing is usurping the provinces' appointment powers.

The changing bureaucratic landscape we have observed in this article has far-reaching consequences for Chinese politics, which are worth pursuing in the future. Among them, the significantly shortened tenures of prefectural leaders resonate with the increasing concern over the disincentives of local officials to deliver and innovate.⁵⁶ Owing to the increasingly repressive political climate and fears raised by the anti-corruption campaign, local officials in the Xi-Li administration have learned to play it safe.⁵⁷ However, the risk averse tendency also creates disincentives for local officials to improve productivity and to innovate as they are afraid of making mistakes. For instance, policy innovation projects dropped from 100 in 2008 to below 10 only several years into the Xi-Li

⁵⁴Jérôme Doyon, 'Clientelism by Design: Personnel Politics under Xi Jinping', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 3 (2018): 87–110.

⁵⁵Minxin Pei, 'Policy Continuity with Rhetorical Escalation: Parsing Xi Jinping's Political Report to the 20th Party Congress', *China Leadership Monitor*, 74 (2022): 1–12.

⁵⁶Jessica C. Teets and Reza Hasmath, 'The evolution of policy experimentation in China', *Journal of Asian Public Policy* 13, no. 1 (2020): 49–59.

⁵⁷Zeren Li and Melanie Manion, 'The decline of factions: The impact of a broad purge on political decision making in China', *British Journal of Political Science*, (2022): 1–20. doi:10.1017/S000712342200062x.

administration.⁵⁸ By adding another mechanism, this article contributes to the existing research on the topic of disincentives for local officials to deliver and innovate. Fast turnover, as previous literature suggests,⁵⁹ may encourage predatory behavior cadres with no interest in long-term benefits. These roving rulers are also likely to reluctantly respond to Beijing's call for sustainable and inclusive development for this reason. Combined with the repressive environment and ongoing anti-corruption campaign, shortened tenure in Xi-Li administration might lead cadres to a path full of short-termism and risk averse practices, a reality that does not bode well for local governance and development in China.

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⁵⁸Xuelian Chen and Christian Göbel, 'Regulations against revolution: Mapping policy innovations in China', *Journal of Chinese Governance* 1, no. 1 (2016): 78–98.

⁵⁹Olson, Mancur. 'Dictatorship, democracy, and development'. *American political science review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 567–576; Alexander Libman, Vladimir Kozlov, and André Schultz, 'Roving bandits in action: Outside option and governmental predation in autocracies', *Kyklos* 65, no. 4 (2012): 526–562; Sarah Eaton and Genia Kostka, "Authoritarian environmentalism undermined? local leaders' time horizons and environmental policy implementation in China", *China Quarterly* 218, no. 1 2014: 359–380.