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**Bureaucratic Behavior: Resilience and Accountability**  
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In this memo I address research on bureaucratic behavior in China. When we open the black box of China's cadre administration, what do we find drives bureaucrats? To whom, or what rules/norms, are they accountable? How might they contribute to the "resilience" and adaptive nature of the regime (or be a drag on it)? Much research past and present addresses this question, and I review some of it below. I offer the view that much of the current research has become overly-focused by research agendas that may appear broadly explanatory of either China or authoritarian regimes generally but, while offering many insights, leave other important features of China's bureaucracy unexplored.

In discussing "bureaucratic behavior," I am not mainly considering "elite politics," i.e., the "roving bandits" who work at the very apex of the Chinese party-state. My sense is that in the most elite realm behavior is driven by unique rules (see, e.g., Shih et al 2012, Fewsmith 2002)<sup>1</sup>. I also am not focused on research designed in the first place to explain varying policy outputs (Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Harding 1984; Mertha 2009; L. Tsai 2007), though ultimately policy outputs must be linked to research on bureaucracy. A prime focus eventually should be the 99% of bureaucrats outside the promotion system (e.g., "street level bureaucracy" [Lipsky 1980]; Zang 2017), though my own work (with Ciqi Mei) has not gone to that area yet. My focus is largely on cadres (e.g., the vice-*chu* level) who are part of the party *nomenklatura* system, though I am interested in exploring ways in which these cadres' behavior is *not* directly and solely driven by the formal promotion rules of that *nomenklatura*/promotion system. What are the other less explored patterns and rules that govern their behavior? (I admit that my comments do not always hew to this scope, as I try to draw links to other areas of our research.)

**1. In what areas has knowledge accumulated over decades and resulted in coherent theoretical frameworks?**

We have accumulated knowledge about China's bureaucratic behavior over three (roughly defined) generations. A first generation of scholarship, reflecting to some degree what we might call "totalitarianism studies," described China's Leninist organizational structure, and helped to explain how ideology informed bureaucratic behavior (Schurmann 1968). Harding (1981) sought to identify patterns and cycles in how the party sought to control bureaucrats. These remain foundational works. A second generation, reflecting the obvious weaknesses of totalitarianism revealed by the Cultural Revolution, sought to compare PRC bureaucratic behavior according to dominant models in political science (Harding, 1984). This took the field toward an emphasis on informal (factional) politics in explain intra-bureaucratic behavior

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<sup>1</sup> In this memo I cite a few touchstone works to signal the research vein to which I refer; many other works obviously could be cited.

(Teiwes 1993; Nathan 1973; Tsou 1996), but that inquiry hit something of a dead end – at least in part, in my view, due to the lack of non-rumor based data. A alternative literature on “fragmented authoritarianism” that echoed classic “where you sit determines where you stand” bureaucratic analysis became hegemonic, reflecting the relative openness of bureaucratic organizations to researchers (Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Mertha 2008). While bureaucratic competition remains salient, though, such a focus – and explanation of policy outputs – is no longer contributing to new knowledge. A significant gap in understanding about the internal dynamics of the bureaucracy was filled by increasingly detailed descriptions of the cadre promotion system (Manion 1985, Burns 1994; Chan 2004, Whiting 2004).

The third (and currently dominant) generation of work related to bureaucratic behavior has been influenced strongly by rationalist paradigms in political science. These have extended the study of the cadre promotion system from a principal-agent framework, (Li and Zhou 2005; Landry 2008), with the promotion system serving primarily as an independent or intervening variable. (This focus also has been at the heart of many studies of central-local relations and policy implementation, e.g., O’Brien and Li 1999.) In addition, there has been a conscious effort to link study of “the Chinese state” to the theory-of-everything comparative authoritarianism literature, especially theories positing the centrality of the dictator’s bargain with potential competitors to the throne (Buena de Mesquita et al /LPS 2003; Svobik 2012). By my observation, such linkages have come to be *de rigueur* for framing our publications.

## **2 What knowledge exists (in old and new studies) but lacks connection and is ripe for knowledge accumulation?**

Despite much value in past generations and the prospect offered by new theories, we seem to have become stuck, without much new to say about bureaucratic politics. Principal-agent theory offers an important framework, but serves mainly as a trellis. Studies of the cadre promotion system have provided some sturdy vines, yet seem (to me) to have become an invasive weed, not necessarily due to the authors’ intentions but to our attraction to them. Focus on cadre promotion threatens to crowd out other interesting questions: Do cadres in the *nomenklatura* system respond only to the Organization Department incentives? Do cadres respond merely to the idea that they can rise up the promotion ladder, or are they also responding via other senses of obligation? Recently, some interesting ideas have been floated. How might cadres do an end-run around that system, or ignore it (without actually requiring us to consider them corrupt)? Are the incentives widely ignored, and if so under what conditions? What dilemmas does a system of “managing for results” create?

In a similar vein, the rush to apply the LPS frame to Chinese elite politics has often occurred without consideration of basic questions of applicability, such as how meaningfully to define the selectorate and winning coalition. (See the excellent critique of LPS as a “blunt instrument” by Gallagher & Hanson, *ARPS* 2015, and recall earlier careful selectorate work of Shirk 1993.)

So, in my view the ready default to cadre promotion, as well as the broader comparative LPS frame, could use some balancing. While the cadre promotion incentives are undoubtedly important to cadres, and the idea of an autocratic bargain is in some senses compelling, they now serve too much as a shorthand for behavior that is taken for granted. Other frames can help flesh out the gaps. For example, in the vein of principal-agent theory, some emphasize the role of information: how do bureaucratic actors seek and use information from lower institutions (e.g., Lorentzen 2014). Others have pointed to continued use of cadre mobilization tactics in the party's toolkit (Perry & Heilmann 2011; Mertha 2017). At times, coercive mobilization by the state can explain bureaucratic behavior better than promotion incentives. For example, cadres' need to demonstrate fealty to Xi's anti-corruption campaign likely helps explain why that campaign has been associated with the slow-down of the very economic activity cadres normally pursue in a promotion bid. Given the need to preserve some space for the role of rhetoric and ideology, moreover, studies of signaling that focus not on public or cadre opinion but on less coherent "messaging" may be helpful (e.g., Huang 2013; Lorentzen 2013; Zhi and Pearson 2017). Ang (2017) urges us to exanube adaptive behavior incentivized by the center but adapted by local officials. Finally, recently Ciqi Mei and I have tried to explore a more purely bureaucratic logic emphasizing norms of elite cohesion to explain why punishment of officials is actually extraordinarily lenient, and harms accountability. This behavior is not coherently explained by a LPS framework. (Mei and Pearson 2017; see also Wang Y. 2014, Zang 2017 and Brodsgaard 2002.)

### 3. A path forward

My thoughts about a way forward applies to studies of the Chinese state across a multitude of institutions, not just bureaucratic behavior, though they are highly relevant to the latter. As noted above, there has been a tendency recently to bring broad theories of authoritarian regimes to explain Chinese politics. This is not a bad thing, and has led us to useful explanations of some aspects of quasi-democratic state institutions in particular (e.g. Truex, 2016). At the same time, important works demonstrate the limits of these broader comparative theories (e.g., Manion, 2015; Dickson 2016). Without returning to a day of *sui generis* analysis of Chinese politics, we also should not be trapped by the one-size-fits-all theories that (at their worst) severely distort the mechanisms of the state, even if they make our field more legible to other comparativists. Indeed, in my view we remain at a foundational stage for studies of many topics, particularly those inside the black box of the state.

I would urge, then, a broadening once again to frameworks and approaches. Some of those may take us back "inside" the study of Chinese politics. Perhaps different parts of the state operate according to different logics. In terms of bureaucratic behavior, for example, perhaps promotion paradigms explain a lot for some levels of the bureaucracy (the top 4%, according to Ang 2017), and on some issues (the drive for growth, public goods provision, or broader results-based measurement parameters). But for the other 96% (or disaggregated further by level) or for certain types of issues, such as those subject to mobilization such as anti-corruption or punishment, other frames may have more explanatory power. What might historical accounts of

imperial bureaucracy suggest (e.g., Huang 1982; Kuhn 2009), and/or further archival work from the post-1949 period? Are participant-observer studies (by PRC-based scholars) possible? The logic and mechanisms of the authoritarian survival literature are simply too narrow. Perhaps China is just another one-party authoritarian regime. But we don't yet know that for sure.

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