

The Impending Rise of the “Tsinghua Clique”: Cultivation, Transfer, and Relationships in Chinese Elite Politics

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Abstract

The Tsinghua clique is highly influential in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) politics. But in the past, alumni from other elite universities, such as Peking University and Renmin University of China, also occupied positions as senior cadres, so Tsinghua did not have any more influence than they did. However, since 2002, Tsinghua University has developed a “cultivation/transfer” system whereby the school, in a purposeful, calculating, and organized manner, selects and trains talented students and then places them in political posts after graduation. After these students enter officialdom, they strengthen their ties with other alumni through their connections with the Tsinghua authorities and the Tsinghua Alumni Association. With this system in place, Tsinghua alumni account for the majority of “post-1980 generation” county-level leading cadres. We therefore predict that the “Tsinghua clique” will gain even stronger political influence, and Tsinghua University will likely become the most significant university for cultivating senior cadres.

Key Words: Cultivation/transfer system, institutional explanation, Tsinghua clique, Tsinghua University Alumni Association, technocracy

Introduction

For a long time, the Tsinghua clique (清华帮 *Tsinghua bang*, or the Tsinghua University clique) has been a powerful influence in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In this paper, the term “Tsinghua clique” refers to individuals who have formal degrees from Tsinghua University in Beijing¹ and now serve as cadres in the Chinese political system. Many observers have reported on the Tsinghua clique’s influence in CCP political governance.² Academics have also pointed out that the

¹ This includes holders of bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees, but excludes those who have undertaken other shorter courses of study.

² Lingui Xu, “Jiuwei Zhonggong zhongyang zhengzhiju changwei cong Qinghua xiaoyuan zouchu” [Nine Members of the CCP’s Standing Committee Came from Tsinghua University], *Zhongguo xinwen wang* [China News Network], accessed: September 26, 2017. <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/04-21/2989057.shtml>; Ding Wang, “Qinghua daxue xiaoyou,

number of Tsinghua University graduates has increased in leadership posts at all levels.³ Yet graduates of other elite institutions, such as Peking University or Renmin University of China, hold a similar proportion of senior cadre positions, so the fact that Tsinghua graduates have joined their ranks is hardly surprising.⁴ However, there may be more significant changes in the future.

We have discovered that since 2012, Tsinghua graduates have occupied the largest proportion of the “post-1980 generation” (80后 *balinghou*, born after 1980) county-level (县级 *xian ji*) leading cadre positions (county party committee secretaries and county mayors). We term this the “post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique phenomenon.” Post-1980 generation county-level leading cadres share certain characteristics: they are in their thirties and they hold local leadership roles governing hundreds of thousands of people. They are the “preferred cadres” (重点干部 *zhongdian ganbu*) that the CCP is focused on nurturing. If Tsinghua graduates outnumber graduates from other universities in the post-1980 generation county-level leadership now, Tsinghua graduates will also come to dominate the leadership at division (处级 *chu ji*) and township-section (乡科级 *xiangke ji*) levels. In other words, if the post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique phenomenon is proven to be true, in about 20 years from now, the Tsinghua clique will occupy an overwhelming proportion of the leadership posts at ministry and national levels. They will surpass graduates of other schools by a large margin. This prediction is reflected in the title of this article: the impending rise of the Tsinghua clique.

This paper proposes an institutional explanation for the post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique phenomenon. Since 2002, Tsinghua University has put in place a system that targets talented students, training them and eventually transferring them into official posts. Tsinghua University has also used its alumni association to maintain and strengthen relationships between its students and graduates of the university already occupying official posts. The system has yielded positive results since 2011. Many post-1980 generation Tsinghua graduates have already risen to leadership positions at county level.

Unfortunately, only a small number of insiders truly understand these systems; they are impenetrable to the outside world, including academics. During the period January 2015-October 2017, we conducted multiple interviews with Tsinghua

jueqi beijing zhengtian” [Tsinghua University Alumni Rise among Chinese Officialdom], *Xinbao caijing xinwen* [Hong Kong Economic Journal]. December 21, 2005, p. 9.

³ Zhiyue Bo, “The 16th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Formal Institutions and Factional Groups” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 13, no. 39 (May 2004), pp. 245-247.

⁴ Qian Wang, “Zhengzhi wutai shang de Beida biyesheng” [The Beijing University graduate on the political stage], *Nanfang zhoumo* [Southern Weekly], accessed: June 12, 2018, <http://www.infzm.com/content/trs/raw/20142>.

undergraduates and alumni, including 16 officials. These interviews gave us an insight into how these important and mysterious systems operate. Although the rise of the Tsinghua clique has been evident since the Mao era, we do not attempt to go back that far in history here. Our analysis focuses on understanding the rise and continued success of the Tsinghua clique in recent times from an institutional point of view. We also speculate on how the cultivation/transfer system and the liaison mechanism between the Tsinghua University authorities and the school's alumni will enable the Tsinghua clique to maintain its strong influence over Chinese politics in the future.

This article is structured as follows. In section II, we will discuss the two main explanations proposed by scholars for the rise of the Tsinghua clique and point out their shortcomings. In section III, we will explain the post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique phenomenon and Tsinghua's talent cultivation policy. In section IV, we will outline the "cultivation/transfer" system. In sections V and VI, we will discuss the two mechanisms involved in "cultivation" and "transfer." In section VII we discuss how the Tsinghua authorities and the university's alumni association maintain relationships with alumni, encouraging illustrious Tsinghua alumni to support each other in their official careers and to form a cohesive community. In section VIII, we will explain the defining characteristics of the Tsinghua University system and why it is difficult for other universities to replicate it in its entirety. In section IX, we will offer our conclusions.

The Existing Literature on the Tsinghua Clique: Historical Culture and Technocratic Explanations

The Tsinghua clique's influence on Chinese politics dates back to the Mao era and continues to this day. To date, the most systematic academic research that has been conducted on this topic may well be Joel Andreas' book, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class*. The book tries to explain why Tsinghua alumni have been so active in Chinese politics during both the Mao and post-reform eras.⁵

Andreas believes that during the Mao era, Tsinghua University, under the direction of its president, Jiang Nanxiang 蒋南翔, resolutely obeyed the party leadership's injunction to train a "red and expert" (又红又专 *youhong youzhuang*) class of technocrats who would build a vibrant, thriving China. Under Jiang's leadership, Tsinghua students supported the rule of the Communist Party and were

⁵ Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Another work on the history of the Tsinghua clique is Cheng Li, "University Networks and the Rise of Qinghua Graduates in China's Leadership" *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 32 (Jul., 1994), pp. 1-30.

willing to answer the call to serve the party. This formed the ideological and cultural foundation for all Tsinghua alumni who entered politics. In the post-reform era, as China's economy continued its rapid development, the technocrat concept further solidified the Tsinghua clique's status in politics. Andreas proposes the historical/cultural explanation for Tsinghua's ascendancy during the Mao era, and the technocratic explanation for the school's continued prominence after the beginning of the reforms. Below, we organize the literature on this topic according to these two explanations.

The historical and cultural approach emphasizes how Tsinghua's history influences its alumni's participation in politics. In this, the role played by its president, Jiang Nanxiang, is crucial. Jiang aspired to make Tsinghua a training ground for "red engineers,"⁶ declaring that Tsinghua graduates "shall labor to keep fit and work for our nation for at least 50 years."⁷ As a result of this kind of encouragement, Tsinghua students had a generally favorable view of the CCP's leadership. In addition to Jiang Nanxiang's personal influence, another two historical factors are worthy of attention. First, Tsinghua University was one of the important bases for the student movement developed by the CCP before it came to power. When China was under Kuomintang rule, leading members of the CCP, including Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 and Peng Zhen 彭真, were actively involved in the Tsinghua student movement. This cemented the close relationship between Tsinghua and the party. Second, in the early 1980s, when the CCP was actively promoting a youth movement among its cadres, Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦, head of the CCP's Central Organization Department, recruited a number of assistants to help him select cadres, including Hu Qili 胡启立 and Liu Bing 刘冰, both of whom had been deputy secretaries of the Tsinghua's Party Committee. Their keen understanding of Tsinghua affairs led them to recommend more fellow alumni to Hu Yaobang.⁸ At these periods in CCP history, the above historical contexts played an important role in introducing large numbers of Tsinghua graduates into the political arena.

The technocratic approach, in contrast, emphasizes the way in which the CCP's economic development strategy enhanced the importance of technical experts, enticing them to enter politics. Compared with the revolutionary cadres of the early years of the CCP, this new generation of officials had all received a high-quality technical education. They were knowledgeable about modern practices and valued

⁶ Fan Ge, "'Hongse gongchengshi men' de 1958" ["Red Engineers" in 1958] *Kan lishi* [Look at History], vol. 4 (2011), p. 73.

⁷ Huijian Fang, ed., *Jiang Nanxiang chuan* [Biography of Jiang Nanxiang] (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2005), p. 214.

⁸ Shunli Kang and Jinghua Liu, *Beijing zhengtian Qinghua mingren* [Tsinghua Celebrities in Beijing Officialdom] (Hong Kong: Modern Celebrity Press, 2005), pp. 80-83.

practical skills over ideology. These characteristics proved helpful in promoting China's economic and industrial development.⁹ Zhiyue Bo believes that "technocrats are in command" in contemporary China,¹⁰ and the Tsinghua clique is an important source of technocrats. Technocrats tend to work in functional government departments. They, along with party-style cadres (who mainly originate from the humanities), are the two main groups of cadres in the CCP.¹¹ Cheng Li also believes that the need for technically qualified professionals, as well as mutual support and networking among Tsinghua alumni, is the reason for the rise of the Tsinghua clique from 1980 to the present day.¹²

These two studies allow us to understand the reasons for the rise of the Tsinghua clique from different perspectives. China's historical culture and the need for modernization have allowed this established science and technology university to provide the CCP with a large number of cadres. However, these two strands in the literature still do not account for all the relevant factors. The historical/cultural approach describes the origins of the relationship between the CCP and Tsinghua University, but it does not fully explain the rise and continued prominence of the Tsinghua clique. The technocratic approach points to the need for technical professionals in modern China's pursuit of development, but it does not explain why Tsinghua graduates stand out in Chinese politics. How are Tsinghua graduates able to perform so well in their political careers?¹³

We do not intend to negate the importance of these two factors with respect to the rise of the Tsinghua clique in the past. They provide a clear backstory to the placing of a large number of Tsinghua graduates in important positions. However, we believe that the rise of the post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique since 2011, when Tsinghua graduates account for the vast majority of post-1980 county-level leading cadres, is an unprecedented phenomenon. Naturally, this leads us to ask whether there are any other factors that can more directly explain the post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique phenomenon. We will seek to answer this question by looking at institutional systems.

⁹ Li Cheng and Lynn White, "The Thirteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: From Mobilizers to Managers" *Asian Survey*, vol. 28, no. 4 (April 1988), pp. 371-399.

¹⁰ Zhiyue Bo, *China's Elite Politics: Political Transition and Power Balancing* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2007), pp. 98-106.

¹¹ Xiaowei Zang, *Elite Dualism and Leadership Selection in China* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

¹² Cheng Li, *China's Leaders: The New Generation* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), pp. 87-126.

¹³ One possible explanation is that Tsinghua University, as the leading science/engineering university in China, produces the best students, who are therefore better candidates for promotion. We do not object to this point of view, but we hope to suggest some other institutional factors that may be playing a part.

The Post-1980 Generation Tsinghua Clique Phenomenon and Tsinghua's Talent Cultivation Policy

Information obtained from public media shows that members of the post-1980 generation have been occupying county-level leading cadre posts since 2011, and the proportion of these cadres who are Tsinghua graduates seems to be particularly large. One article noted that according to 2016 annual statistics, in Fujian Province alone there were as many as three post-1980 county-level leading cadres who were Tsinghua graduates.¹⁴ This seems to indicate the existence of a post-1980 Tsinghua clique phenomenon.

Unfortunately, no public information is available concerning all post-1980 generation county-level leading cadres nationwide. Although the database of local government leaders on people.com.cn, the most credible source of information, provides personal details of each county-level leader, the education section states only the level of education achieved without specifying the university from which the official graduated.¹⁵ This makes it impossible to find out who is a Tsinghua graduate. In order to solve this problem and seek support for our argument in favor of the existence of a post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique phenomenon, we gathered information from two different sources. Our first source of information is interviews with cadres working in local organizations in Fujian Province and the Guangxi Autonomous Region, two locations where we have contacts. The resulting information on post-1980 county-level leading cadres in these two provinces is displayed in tables 1 and 2.

¹⁴ *Sanwei "bashi hou" Qinghua boshi de shitu qidian* [The Starting Point of the Careers of Three "Post-1980 Generation" Tsinghua University Ph.D.s] *Xinjing baowang* [The Beijing News], accessed: June 7, 2018 <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/news/2016/10/13/419697.html>. The information gathered by the authors indicates that there were five post-1980 generation Tsinghua graduates occupying county-level leading cadre positions in Fujian Province in May 2018.

¹⁵ *Difang lingdao ziliaoku* [Database of local government leaders] *Renming wang* [People's Daily Online], accessed: June 3, 2018 <http://ldzl.people.com.cn/dfzlk/front/personProvince1.htm>.

Table 1. Post-1980 Generation Cadres Occupying County-level Leading Posts in Fujian, 2018

Name	Level of education and alma mater	Date working started	Year of birth	Current position
Wang Bo	Ph.D. Tsinghua University	2012	1987	Mayor of Shanghang County, Longyan City
Dang Shuai	Ph.D. in Automobile Engineering Tsinghua University	2013	1987	Mayor of Gutian County
Shen Xiaowen	Ph.D. in Biology Tsinghua University	2012	1983	Mayor of Pucheng County
Li Teng	Ph.D. in Engineering Tsinghua University	2012	1984	Party committee secretary, Mingxi County, Sanming City
Lei Lianming	Ph.D. in Sociology Tsinghua University	2009	1983	Mayor of Yongtai County, Fuzhou City

Source: Interviews with cadres of local organizations in Fujian Province, June 5, 2018.

Table 2. Post-1980 Generation Cadres Occupying County-level Leading Posts in Guangxi, 2018

Name	Level of education and Alma Mater	Year career started	Year of birth	Current position
Liu Qi	Ph.D. in Economics and Management Tsinghua University	2009	1982	Mayor of Luchuan County, Yulin City
Sun Ruijun	Ph.D. in Economics and Management Tsinghua University	2010	1983	Party committee secretary, Tanlong District, Guigang City
Hao Yusong	Ph.D. in Physics Tsinghua University	2007	1981	Mayor of Jingxi City (county-level city)
Yu Fujian	Ph.D. in Law Tsinghua University	2011	1981	Mayor of Bama County, Hechi City
Wu Xiaohui	Ph.D. Nanjing University of Science and Technology	2007	1980	Mayor of Pingxiang City (county-level city)
Lu Lanbi	Guangxi University for Nationalities	1998	1980	Mayor of Debao County, Baise City, Guangxi

Source: Interviews with cadres of local organizations in Guangxi Autonomous Region, June 7, 2018.

The information in the two tables certainly provides evidence of the existence of a post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique phenomenon. From Table 1, we can see that all five of the post-1980 generation county-level leaders in Fujian were graduates of Tsinghua University, while from Table 2, we can see that four of the six post-1980 cadres in Guangxi were likewise Tsinghua alumni. Nonetheless, we admit that the samples we obtained from the two provinces might involve selection bias, so they should not serve as standalone evidence of a post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique

phenomenon. It is necessary for us to obtain nationwide data to justify our argument. We did find an online source that listed a total of 38 post-1980 generation county-level leading cadres in 2016.¹⁶ Since the list does not include information about the cadres' alma maters, we attempted to search for this information in other online sources. We were able to find out the alma maters of all but seven of these cadres. The data is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Post-1980 Generation County-level Leading Cadres, 2016

Name	Alma mater	Name	Alma mater	Name	Alma mater
Zhang Hui	Shandong University of Finance and Economics	Dong Yuyi	Tsinghua University (Master's)	Zhou Mi	China University of Technology
Liu Kai	Beijing University	Jin Li	Tsinghua University (Ph.D.)	Li Teng	Tsinghua University (Ph.D.)
Zhou Senfeng	Tsinghua University (Master's)	Zhang Jian	Party School of Sichuan Province	Hu Juan	Renmin University of China
Hao Yusong	Tsinghua University (Ph.D.)	Wan Lingling	Hubei University	Chen Weiming	Meizhou Agriculture School
Yang Pengpeng	Party School of Yunnan Province	Wang Bo	Tsinghua University (Ph.D.)	Lei Lianming	Tsinghua University (Ph.D.)
Shen Xiaowen	Tsinghua University (Ph.D.)	Dang Shuai	Tsinghua University (Ph.D.)	Chen Liyu	Master's degree (school unknown)
Wang Shiwei	Chengdu Sport University	Li Jianjun	Sichuan Normal University	Guo Yunxiao	Tsinghua University (Ph.D.)
Duan Hongli	Party School of Yunnan Province	Wang Xiwei	Fudan University	Yan Ning	Bachelor's degree (school unknown)
Zheng Shengjing	Tsinghua University (Master's)	Lu Lanbi	Guangxi University for Nationalities	Qiu Ling	Master's degree (school unknown)
Zhang Yan	Bachelor's degree (school unknown)	Ma Ju	Chongqing University	Wang Wei	Party School of Guangdong Province
Su Haitao	Wuhan University	Qin Bo	Unknown	Hu Xintian	Bachelor's degree (school unknown)
Zheng Junping	Renmin University of China	Zheng Shao	Party School of Jiangxi Province	Hu Haiyang	Jiangxi Normal University
Su Jianjun	Nanjing Forestry University	Teng Shuangxing	Master's degree (school unknown)	Number of Tsinghua graduates: 11	

Source: Information gathered by the author from relevant websites

From Table 3, we can see that 11 of the 38 post-1980 generation county-level leading cadres in 2016 were graduates of Tsinghua University; the university with the next highest number is Renmin University of China with just two graduates. Peking University—a school with an equally high reputation as Tsinghua—has only one graduate on the list. This data again testifies to the existence of a post-1980 generation

¹⁶ “‘Bashihou’ xianweishuji xianzhangquanlu” [The Complete Record of "Post-1980 generation" County Committee Secretaries and County Mayors] *Gerentushuguan* [Personal Library], accessed: June 7, 2018, http://www.360doc.com/content/17/0510/09/8527076_652620698.shtml.

Tsinghua clique phenomenon. But how can this phenomenon be explained? We believe that it is related to a system that Tsinghua University put in place in 2002.

It was only in 2002 that Tsinghua University established a system for cultivating future government officials. Prior to this, graduates of Tsinghua University, along with other top-notch universities like Peking University and Renmin University of China, were all achieving great things in various areas, including politics, and many of them hold senior positions in the government. The proportion of Tsinghua alumni who were officials was nothing extraordinary. However, the incumbent head of the CCP Organization Department, Chen Xi 陈希, a Tsinghua graduate who served as secretary of the Tsinghua University Party Committee between 2002 and 2008, put a heavy focus on cultivating Tsinghua students to work for the government. It was Chen who set up the cultivation/transfer system, which was largely completed during his tenure as party secretary.¹⁷

From our interviews, we also learned that in 2003, a Tsinghua University professor, Hu Angang 胡鞍钢, submitted a confidential report to the university's party committee in which he noted that there were fewer Tsinghua alumni at or above vice-ministerial level (副部级 *fubu ji*) in the government than there were alumni of Peking University or Renmin University of China. Hu urged the university to make a concerted effort to train and encourage Tsinghua graduates to join the government. Chen Xi agreed with Hu, and the party committee began laying plans to put the suggestion into practice.

Another piece of insider information comes from an internal speech given by the deputy secretary of the Tsinghua University Party Committee, Shi Zongkai 史宗凯 (responsible for advising students on career options) in November 2013. Shi commented that the efforts made to cultivate students of the 1960s' and 1970s' generations and encourage them to join the government had been inadequate. Therefore, it was important to double down on efforts to cultivate the post-1980 generation so that outstanding students would be able to take up positions that would increase the influence of Tsinghua alumni in the government.¹⁸ Starting from 2002, many of the post-1980 generation of Tsinghua students have been trained and transferred into official posts. Through years of practice and effort, a certain number of them have already risen to county-level leading cadre positions. In the following section, we will discuss the cultivation/transfer system that has been gradually developed by Tsinghua University since 2002.

¹⁷ Interview conducted with Professor Z at Tsinghua University, June 8, 2018.

¹⁸ "Shi Zongkai de jianghua" [Shi Zongkai's speech], Student Development Committee for Public Departments at Tsinghua University, internal information, January 2014.

Framework of the “Cultivation/Transfer” System

Through our interviews, we know that Tsinghua University has a system for cultivating talented students and directing them into Chinese politics.¹⁹ This cultivation/transfer system came into full operation no later than 2010.

The system is depicted in Fig. 1. It is divided into two parts: cultivation and transfer. The cultivation of Tsinghua University students is led by the school’s deputy party secretary, with the Party Committee Postgraduate Work Department (党委研究生工作部 *dangwei yanjiusheng gongzuobu*) carrying out the day-to-day work.²⁰ From the day they enter the university, talented students are selected and cultivated by the school to strengthen their relevant abilities.

Once the students graduate, the school has two very effective conduits through which they are placed in government positions. First, the students are placed in a “temporary attachment class” (挂职班 *guazhiban*) to connect the students with available positions in relevant units. Then, by signing contracts with the university, government organizations are enticed to give priority to Tsinghua graduates when selecting candidates for available positions and the students are ensured continued promotion up the ranks. This is known as the “agreement on the transfer of selected students” (定向选调协定 *dingxiang xuandiao xieding*). Finally, the university encourages the students to fill hardship posts in remote areas by, for example, offering them an additional stipend to supplement their pay. In the following two sections, we will discuss the structure depicted in Figure 1.

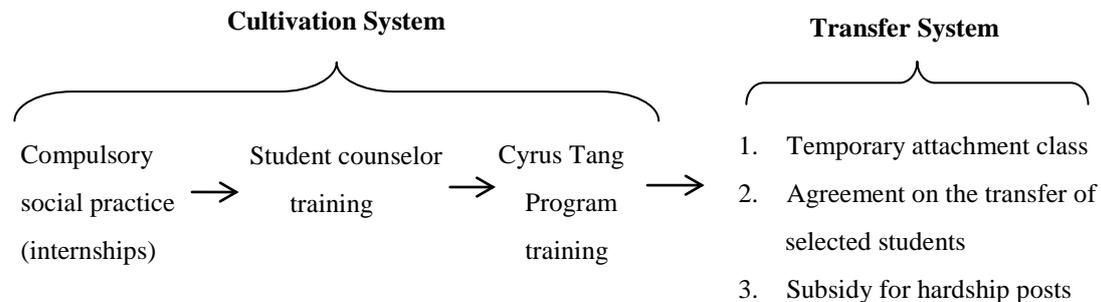


Figure 1 Tsinghua University’s Cultivation/Transfer System

¹⁹ Interview with Professor J of Tsinghua University, October 13, 2017.

²⁰ Interview with a member of staff of the Tsinghua Party Committee Postgraduate Work Department, September 27, 2017.

Nurturing Outstanding Students: Talent-spotting and Training

As shown in Fig. 1, Tsinghua University's cultivation system consists of three stages: "compulsory social practice" (社会实践必修课 *shehui shijian bixiuke*) or internship, student counselor (学生辅导员 *xuesheng fudao yuan*) training, and the Cyrus Tang Program (唐仲英计划 *Tang Zhongying jihua*) training. The number of students is reduced in each stage. The internship stage has the largest number of students and serves as a way for the university to observe the students. Only the most outstanding, politically ambitious students are admitted to the Cyrus Tang Program.

During their internships, the students fill administrative support positions in government departments and private enterprises. The school signs contracts with provincial, city, and county governments as well as many large corporations, allowing students to receive valuable on-the-job training in these organizations, which are known as "bases for social practice" (社会实践基地 *shehui shijian jidi*). This is a two-credit, on-campus social practice course that is compulsory for both undergraduates and postgraduate students who transfer from other universities.

The internships that the social practice students undertake in a "social practice base" may last anywhere from a month and a half to a year depending on the student's preference. There are two specific types of internships. The first type involves Tsinghua University students serving in administrative support positions in local government departments in order to develop their administrative skills. They may act as assistants to the county magistrate or the director general. The second type of internship is as an assistant to the general manager of a large state-owned enterprise. Politically ambitious students tend to choose longer internships in government departments. During their internships, these students must complete all the tasks assigned to them by their superiors and fill out work reports, and their performance is evaluated by the unit where they are working according to a points system. Students' grades for this course serve as an important basis for the university to determine whether they will continue training for a career in politics.

We will take T City as an example. This city signed a contract with Tsinghua University and became a social practice base for its students in 2006. As per the agreement, Tsinghua selects 10 students every June for internships in T City. In 2013, 6 of the 10 students worked in government positions, acting, for example, as assistants to the director of the Municipal United Front Department, the director general of the Science and Technology Bureau, and the president of the T City Municipal Committee Party School. The other four students were placed in state-owned enterprises in the city.²¹ There are two reasons why local governments are keen to

²¹ Interview with Intern L, September 1, 2017.

sign contracts with Tsinghua University. First, by becoming one of Tsinghua's social practice bases, they can obtain support for personnel training and R&D in their industrial parks as well as help in applying for national projects. In addition, it makes them more attractive to Tsinghua graduates as employers. In fact, the number of Tsinghua graduates that a municipal government department can attract every year has become an indicator of the administrative achievement of any local organization department's human resources work.²²

The second stage consists of the selection and training of student counselors. Most major Chinese universities have university employees serving as student counselors. However, most of the student counselors at Tsinghua are senior students. This allows them to obtain valuable administrative training. The Party Committee Postgraduate Work Department is responsible for the selection of student counselors, who must be CCP members and must have excellent grades. Their grades for the social practice class are particularly important.

Each student counselor is responsible for one class of students. Not only do they have to understand the overall situation of all the students in their class, they are also responsible for students' applications for scholarships, party membership, and special project funds.²³ Becoming a student counselor is a special honor. Not only do counselors receive a monthly stipend,²⁴ they also get preferential treatment when it comes to participating in relevant university training programs. For politically ambitious students, one of the most important training programs is the Cyrus Tang Program.

The final stage is individualized professional training for the aspiring cadres provided by the university. In 2011, Tsinghua University established the Cyrus Tang Program, co-founded by Tsinghua University and the Cyrus Tang Foundation.²⁵ Through this program, Tsinghua selects 80 outstanding students each year and sends them for 2–6 years of systematic training in government departments to strengthen their leadership skills.²⁶ In addition to cultivating the students' professional administrative abilities, the program also has a mentoring system. It gives the

²² Interview with Cadre I of the Sichuan Organization Department, October 22, 2017.

²³ Interview with Student Counselor L, October 2, 2017.

²⁴ In 2017, Tsinghua University student counselors received a monthly stipend of 2400 RMB. Interview with Student Counselor L, October 2, 2017.

²⁵ Cyrus Tang was a Chinese-American entrepreneur who established the foundation in 1998 to assist China with cultural and educational undertakings.

²⁶ Tsinghua University also has other similar training programs for students wishing to work in government, including the Student Career Development Program. Unfortunately, we cannot discuss them here due to limited space.

students the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in government administration.²⁷

Most of the program's mentors are Tsinghua alumni who are working in government. For example, 16 of the 18 mentors of the sixth Cyrus Tang Program were Tsinghua alumni, the highest ranking of whom had a bureau-level (正厅级 *zhengting ji*) post, while the lowest ranking was at deputy division level (副处级 *fuchu ji*). They included a deputy secretary-general of a provincial party committee, a vice mayor, the director general of a municipal industry and information technology bureau, a county party secretary, and the director of a county organization department. Each mentor takes on approximately five students, sharing their experiences so that their mentees will be better able to serve the public in the future.²⁸

Let us take Student M in the third Cyrus Tang Program as an example. He was selected for the program during his third year of study at Tsinghua. M's mentor was W, the head of a municipal organization department. M and W were thus able to form a close student-mentor relationship. Every semester, M and four other students went to W's city to conduct research, during which W guided them. In July 2017, when M graduated with his master's degree, he took W's advice to enter politics and went to Xi'an to work in a community affairs office.²⁹

Main Conduit and Supporting Measures for Transfer to Official Posts

After training, the most talented and aspirational Tsinghua graduates are selected for work in government departments after graduation. As this paper will show, the two crucial conduits are the temporary attachment class and agreements on the transfer of selected students. In addition, the university grants subsidies to graduates in hardship posts.

Every year, 20 Tsinghua students who are about to graduate are selected for the temporary attachment class. These students have already determined that they wish to work in public service. After graduation, they will initially stay in school working as leaders of its subsidiary departments. For example, they might serve as deputy secretary of the campus committee of the Communist Youth League or as deputy director of the school's employment guidance center. In addition to the basic criteria such as party membership, having a good behavior record, excellent academic performance, and experience of serving in leadership positions in the student community during their course of study, students selected for the temporary

²⁷ *Tsinghua University Student Leadership Handbook – Third Cyrus Tang Program*. This handbook was provided by Student M, on the third program, June 20, 2017.

²⁸ Interview with Student N of the sixth Cyrus Tang Program, October 7, 2017.

²⁹ Interview with Student M of the third Cyrus Tang Program, June 20, 2017.

attachment class must also be recommended by the party committee secretary and the dean of their college as well as passing an interview with the deputy secretary of the school's party committee. Of course, if a student has already passed the above three training stages with flying colors, he/she will have a pretty good chance of being selected for the temporary attachment class.

For example, in the year that Student L was selected for the temporary attachment class, the class consisted of 18 doctoral graduates and two master's graduates.³⁰ Members of the class stayed at the school to work for about a year, after which the school recommended them to local governments with which it had signed agreements.³¹ G, a member of the temporary attachment class, obtained his Ph.D. in 2006 and then worked in the school's student career guidance center. In July 2007, the school sent him to B City to work as a deputy secretary-general. By 2017, he had already been promoted to party secretary of B City.³² Members of the temporary attachment class are usually promoted very quickly because they have already served in deputy division director-level posts while they were still at school. When they are attached to local government offices, they all start at deputy division level at the very least, with some even serving as division-level leaders from the start.³³

Next, there is the agreement on the transfer of selected students which allows aspirational graduates of Tsinghua University to obtain government positions through special channels arranged by the school, often bypassing the highly competitive civil service exams. For example, certain central government ministries or local governments conduct "targeted recruitment" (定向招聘 *dingxiang zhaopin*) of Tsinghua graduates each year. That is to say, there are certain positions for which only Tsinghua graduates can apply. Government departments do this because Tsinghua is one of China's most prestigious universities. Some organizations even use the number of Tsinghua graduates working in a unit a key performance indicator.

Take local governments for example. In 2009, Tsinghua University started signing agreements on the transfer of selected students with provincial governments.³⁴ By late 2015, 22 provinces (including autonomous regions and municipalities) had

³⁰ Interview with L, a member of the temporary attachment class, July 11, 2016.

³¹ For specific examples of strategic cooperation, please see "Qinghua daxue yu Shanghaishi qianshu zhanlue hezuo xieding shenhua xiaoshi hezuo" [Tsinghua University and Shanghai sign a Strategic Agreement to Deepen their Cooperation], *Qinghua daxue wang* [Tsinghua University Network], accessed: October 22, 2017. <<http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/news/4205/2015/20150919203643196734667/20150919203643196734667.html>>

³² Interview with G, a member of the temporary attachment class, August 14, 2017.

³³ Interview with L, a member of the temporary attachment class, July 11, 2016.

³⁴ These agreements are mainly aimed at individuals who will be working in certain special public service areas, such as the deputy mayor of a poor area. These cadres are promoted much faster than normal cadres.

signed such targeted recruitment agreements with Tsinghua.³⁵ Students who are recruited in this way are known as “selected students” (选调生 *xuandiao sheng*). These recruitment agreements have greatly increased the chances of Tsinghua graduates being hired by government departments.

The government units that have signed agreements with Tsinghua University send personnel to Tsinghua each year on the eve of graduation to tout their advantages to the students. They then hold a written test and an oral test for applicants on campus. Although the questions in the written test cover similar subject matter to those of the competitive national civil service exams, they are much, much easier. In the oral exam, the selected students are only asked about their motives for applying and their future plans. One interviewee told us, “The exams are just formalities. If you are a Tsinghua graduate who is well-behaved, politically qualified, and healthy, you will be admitted to work in a local government. Plus, the more students they admit, the better it is [for them].”³⁶ Therefore, Tsinghua students are extremely keen to participate in this process. With the exception of a few provinces, the admission rate is nearly 100%.

Because the vast majority of Tsinghua students study engineering, they tend to prefer to find work in state-owned enterprises, private enterprises, foreign enterprises, or research institutions. The salaries they will receive in those posts far exceed what can be earned in local government positions. Therefore, not many students choose to participate in the selection process for government jobs. This has led government departments to compete for graduates, offering various enticements, including guaranteed promotion and material incentives. For example, the Hebei Provincial Organization Department stipulates that any Tsinghua University graduate who agrees to work in Hebei will receive anywhere between 50,000 and 300,000 RMB to cover relocation costs. In addition, students with masters’ degrees from Tsinghua will be promoted to section-level (正科级 *zhengke ji*) leadership positions within four years. Those with a doctoral degree will be promoted to deputy division-level leadership positions within the same period. In other words, Tsinghua University’s selected students are fast-tracked both during the hiring process and in terms of future promotion. They are promoted at a much faster rate than the average civil servants.

Finally, in an effort to encourage Tsinghua graduates to work in hardship locations and/or posts, the university offers a package of supplementary rewards. In 2004, Tsinghua established the Volunteer Service in the West Award (志愿服务西部奖 *zhiyuan fuwu xibu jiang*), which was expanded into the High-Fliers Award (启航奖 *qihang jiang*) in 2008. These awards are offered to new graduates who

³⁵ Statistics provided by the Tsinghua University Party Committee Postgraduate Work Department, July 1, 2016.

³⁶ Interview with a member of staff of the Guangxi Party Organization Department, October 12, 2017.

take up government posts in the 12 provinces/municipalities in the west of China and in the three northeastern provinces, as well as those involved in agriculture, forestry, water conservation, geology, mining, oil fields, the military industry, and the production and construction corps, etc. The award is a one-off subsidy ranging from 3,000 to 8,000 RMB.³⁷

The Tsinghua Alumni Association also has special funds available to subsidize graduates in hardship posts. After obtaining his master's degree in July 2008, Wei Huawei 魏华伟 went to the infamous AIDS village, Wenlou Village 文楼村, in Zhumadian City 驻马店市, Henan Province, to serve as a village official. His monthly salary was only 1,200 RMB per month, but Tsinghua gave him a monthly special subsidy of 2,000 RMB to cover his living expenses. Wei continued to receive the subsidy throughout the three years he worked in the village. The night before he was to leave his post to become the head of a county, the party secretary of Tsinghua University, Chen Xu 陈旭, visited Wenlou Village with her team to offer her praise and encouragement.³⁸

When Tsinghua University leaders visit alumni working in grassroots positions, not only do they express their concern for them, they also help them develop their careers. The secretary of the Tsinghua University Party Committee usually serves as an alternate member of the CCP Central Committee, so when he/she goes on inspection tours of the provinces, he/she must be received by the provincial secretaries and the head of the provincial organization department.³⁹ This gives grassroots cadres who are Tsinghua alumni an opportunity to meet provincial leaders. They can ask the leaders about work-related problems and get valuable commitments from them in person; for example, the provision of targeted subsidies.

In addition, to encourage graduates who may be concerned about their futures to work in hardship posts, Tsinghua University plans exit strategies for them. Some students who go to these areas discover that they simply cannot adapt to their new environment. In these circumstances, the school will find them new work opportunities in other places. For example, after H graduated with a master's degree

³⁷ “Qinghua daxue ‘qi hang jiang’ pingxuan tongzhi” [Announcement about a Recipient of Tsinghua University’s “High Flyer Award”] *Qinghua daxue faxueyuan wang* [Tsinghua University Law School Network], accessed: September 28, 2017 <http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/law/3568/2016/20160523100302633506951/20160523100302633506951.html>.

³⁸ “Qinghua daxue dangwei shuji Chen Xu shenru Wenlou cun kanwang Wei Huawei” [Tsinghua University Party Committee Secretary Chen Xu Ventures into Wenlou Village to Visit Wei Huawei] *Henan sheng zhengfu renmin wang* [Henan People’s Network], accessed: October 2, 2017.

³⁹ “Chen Xu fu Guangxi kanwang xuandiao sheng wei wen xiaoyou” [Chen Xu Goes to Guangxi to Visit Selected Student and Alumni], *Qinghua daxue wang* [Tsinghua University Network], accessed: October 14, 2017.

in July 2012, she went to work for the Tibetan government. However, she had trouble adapting to life in the mountains, so in June 2014, Tsinghua found her an administrative position at the university itself.⁴⁰

Tsinghua goes above and beyond what most universities are willing to do in terms of taking responsibility for its graduates. With support from the school, Tsinghua graduates are more willing to work in hardship posts than are graduates of other universities. From Figure 2, we can see that many Tsinghua graduates have chosen to work in relatively poor areas in western or central China. In recent years, the CCP has stressed the need to improve the administrative abilities of government officials. Therefore, cadres with who have performed well in remote hardship posts are likely to have more opportunities for promotion.⁴¹ Tsinghua’s policies ensure that the Tsinghua clique will continue to be a force in Chinese politics.



Data Source: Statistics provided by Director S of Tsinghua University Student Grassroots Public Sector Development Research Association, September 9, 2017.

Figure 2 Number of Tsinghua University Graduates Working in Provincial Party Committees and Government Departments (2005–2015).

⁴⁰ Interview with H, a Tsinghua alumnus, June 21, 2015.

⁴¹ Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Chien-wen Kou, “The Party’s Disciples: CCP Reserve Cadres and the Perpetuation of a Resilient Authoritarian Regime” *The China Quarterly*, no. 221 (March 2015), pp 12-14.

Establishing and Strengthening Alumni Relationships

After graduation, relations between Tsinghua alumni and the Tsinghua authorities as well as among the alumni themselves are much closer than they are at other universities. This is due to the active role that the Tsinghua authorities and the Tsinghua Alumni Association play in maintaining relationships with alumni. Because of this, officials who graduated from Tsinghua University have a strong sense of being “Tsinghua people” (清华人 *qinghua ren*) and are more willing to support one another.

1. Maintenance of Relations with Alumni by the School Authorities

The Tsinghua authorities have always actively engaged in maintaining relationships with their alumni. The Tsinghua University Student Grassroots Public Sector Development Research Association (清华大学学生基层公共部门发展研究会 *Tsinghua daxue xuesheng jiceng gonggong bumen fazhan yanjiuhui*), a body under the Tsinghua University Professional Guidance Center, helps collect and collate data on Tsinghua alumni working in politics as well as helping to contact and serve them.⁴² Tsinghua invites alumni working at deputy division level or above to participate in the Cyrus Tang Program and act as off-campus mentors, guiding junior alumni and establishing teacher–student relationships. Those alumni who have not reached the deputy division level are regularly invited back to the school to participate in salon-type discussions.

When these alumni return to the school to participate in salons, they usually speak about their experiences working at the grassroots level. For example, for the Guangxi Alumni Face-to-face Salon (广西校友面对面 *guangxi xiaoyou mianduimian*), held at Tsinghua on October 11, 2017, the school invited eight alumni working in grassroots positions in Guangxi to give a talk. Participants in the discussion included the deputy director of the Tsinghua University Professional Guidance Center (就业指导中心 *jiuye zhidao zhongxin*) and 31 undergraduate students.⁴³ All of the eight alumni were working in hardship posts in Guangxi’s poorest counties. They still have great affection for Tsinghua University because of the way that the school has kept in contact with them since graduation. One of the alumni commented, “We work at the grassroots levels of the government. We do not necessarily need Tsinghua to give us any kind of substantive support. As long as the

⁴² Interview with Director S of the Tsinghua University Student Grassroots Public Sector Development Research Association, September 27, 2017.

⁴³ Interview with Student L, who attended this salon, October 11, 2017.

school still cares about us, we are more than satisfied.”⁴⁴ From this example, we can see how much Tsinghua cares about all of its alumni working in government posts.

Tsinghua also invites its best alumni to come back to the school and obtain higher degrees, which is another way of continuing the relationship. For example, in 2011, 22-year-old Jiao Sanniu 焦三牛, who was serving as a deputy division-level cadre, returned to Tsinghua for an in-service master’s degree in public management in July 2014. Xiong Yizhi 熊义志, the director of the professional guidance center, explained as follows,

*Tsinghua University has a tradition of helping its alumni who actively go to work in remote grassroots positions. Not only does this support include continued contact during their professional careers but it also includes providing them with preferential opportunities to earn advanced degrees after they have been working for more than three years ... Jiao Sanniu is not the first alumnus to benefit from this policy.*⁴⁵

As a result of the school authorities’ efforts to maintain relationships with its alumni, officials who graduated from Tsinghua University have a greater sense of attachment to their alma mater. By participating in activities organized by the university, the officials also get to know one another and simultaneously establish relationships with those aspiring to pursue a career in government. In other words, the Tsinghua authorities serve as an important platform for alumni to connect with each other.

2. The Alumni Association’s Maintenance of Relations with Alumni

The second important platform is the Tsinghua Alumni Association, which is an extremely well-organized body. The president of the association is the incumbent president of Tsinghua University, which explains its appeal. There are 196 individual alumni organizations in China and overseas, and over 80% of alumni stay in touch with the association. The Alumni Association provides free email accounts for alumni and issues alumni credit cards to its members. The association’s finances are sound: between 2006 and 2014, it received alumni donations amounting to 114 million

⁴⁴ Interview with Official E, who attended this salon, October 11, 2017.

⁴⁵ “Ceng bei chengwei ‘huojian tiba ganbu’ Jiao Sanniu jinnian qiutian jiang hui Qinghua du yan” [Jiao Sanniu, Who Was once Called the “Cadre Promoted Like a Rocket,” Will Return to Tsinghua this Fall to Pursue His Graduate Studies] *Zhongguo gongchan dang xinwen wang* [Chinese Communist Party News Network], accessed: October 20, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0320/c64387-24693423.html>.

RMB.⁴⁶ Indeed, the Tsinghua Alumni Association receives more in donations from its members than any other alumni association in China.⁴⁷

Tsinghua's Alumni Association is larger and more structured than those of most other universities. For example, Beijing University's alumni association is a loosely organized and scattered group, which leads to a situation where "no one thinks any other alumnus is better than him/her. Plus, they love to discuss controversial topics. It is very hard for them to get together and accomplish anything."⁴⁸ Furthermore, in many places, for instance Guangxi, only the Tsinghua Alumni Association is registered with the Provincial Civil Affairs Bureau and has an official venue for events. Other alumni associations are loosely organized and not officially registered.⁴⁹ One of our interviewees also told us that discussions in Tsinghua Alumni Association meetings are very disciplined. After a decision is made, it is respected by the dissenting alumni.⁵⁰ From the institutional operations and strict discipline of the Tsinghua Alumni Association, we can see why it is a more tight-knit group than the associations of any other colleges and universities.

Regional alumni associations often invite local alumni to socialize with one another. What distinguishes Tsinghua's regional alumni associations from those of other schools is that they have highly stratified organizations that aim to reinforce the hierarchy among senior and junior alumni. Alumni who arrive to work in a particular area in the same year will form a sub-group within the association. For instance, eight alumni serving in the government in Guangxi established a group called the Guangxi Recruits of the Class of 2017 (2017 级广西选调班 2017 ji guangxi xuandiao ban). Within this group, there are a party branch secretary and a class monitor who act as administrators. During the annual meeting of the alumni association, the class monitors of each class of recruits report on their work situations and the difficulties they have encountered that year, with senior alumni reporting first. Senior alumni will help junior alumni in an effort to win their respect.⁵¹

Thus, the Tsinghua Alumni Association has become a liaison platform providing assistance for officials who are graduates of Tsinghua University.

⁴⁶ "Qinghua daxue xiaoyouhui jieshao" [Introduction to the Tsinghua University Alumni Association], *Qinghua daxue wang* [Tsinghua University Network], accessed: October 30, 2017, <http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/xyh/5619/index.html>.

⁴⁷ "Gaoxiao xiaoyou juankuan paixing: Qinghua 25 yi jushou" [Ranking of University Alumni Donations: Tsinghua with 2.5 Billion Comes out on Top] *Fenghuang wang* [Phoenix Net], accessed: October 30, 2017, http://news.ifeng.com/a/20170608/51213225_0.shtml.

⁴⁸ Interview with Z, a Beijing University alumnus and a township party secretary in Guangxi, July 5, 2017.

⁴⁹ Interview with X, secretary of the Tsinghua University Guangxi Alumni Association, September 1, 2016.

⁵⁰ Interview with a member of staff of the Guanxi Organization Department, October 1, 2017.

⁵¹ Interview with a member of the Tsinghua Guangxi Recruits of the Class of 2017, October 25, 2017.

Sometimes the assistance provided is more technical. P is another Tsinghua alumnus who works in a poor village in Guizhou. He wanted to develop e-commerce in the village, but he did not know where to start. Through the Alumni Association, he learned about O, another alumnus working in Hangzhou's Tonglu County 桐庐县. This particular county is known as China's home of e-commerce, as e-commerce is more highly developed there than elsewhere. P contacted O and explained the situation in the village where he worked. He expressed his desire to visit Tonglu County to learn more about its e-commerce. O immediately agreed and secured a sizable grant to support him. P's success in developing e-commerce eventually led to his promotion to director of the county's Big Data Development Bureau in July 2016.⁵²

In addition, the Tsinghua Alumni Association also provides financial assistance. While serving as the chief of Henan's Wenlou Village (China's AIDS village), Wei Huawei, one of the alumni discussed above, received a lot of support from the Tsinghua Henan Alumni Association. It invested over 2 million RMB to build mushroom production plants, and provided over 800,000 RMB to build village roads, basketball courts for elementary schools, and a fitness center for the villagers. This gave what was a pretty run-down village a much-needed facelift.⁵³ Wei Huawei was widely heralded for his achievements and in January 2016, he was promoted to county chief.

Local alumni associations often invite the university authorities to hold seminars for alumni in their localities to strengthen the bond between the school and local alumni. The secretary and deputy secretary of the school's party committee often participate in these events and join in informal discussions with the alumni. On August 27, 2016, for example, Tsinghua held a Guangxi Alumni Forum in Nanning, which was attended by both the secretary and deputy secretary of the Tsinghua University Party Committee. During the forum, these officials commended the university's outstanding alumni working in the Guangxi government. The head of the Tsinghua Guangxi Alumni Association remarked, "Tsinghua's solicitude for its alumni never dies regardless of where they may work."⁵⁴ These are all examples of the ways in which relations between alumni are strengthened.

The Results of the Tsinghua System

⁵² Interview with P, a Tsinghua alumnus, October 5, 2017.

⁵³ Interview with Wei Huawei, January 1, 2015.

⁵⁴ Interview with Secretary X of the Tsinghua University Guangxi Alumni Association, September 1, 2016.

The cultivation/transfer system put in place by Tsinghua University in 2002 has since 2011 given rise to the post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique phenomenon. More recently, this kind of system has been adopted by other top-notch universities in China. This is evidence of institutional diffusion.⁵⁵ In this article, we take agreements on the transfer of selected students as an example. By signing agreements with local governments and transferring selected students to their areas to serve as officials, Tsinghua has increased the chances of its graduates entering officialdom. This system has since been replicated in many other universities. For instance, Peking University introduced such agreements in 2011 and Renmin University of China followed suit in 2014.⁵⁶

However, as of now, Tsinghua University's system has yielded better results than those of other universities. There are two explanations for this. First, Tsinghua was the first university to put such a system in place. Hence, its results are already apparent, whereas those of the other universities remain at the pilot stage. Second, both the incumbent general secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping 习近平, and the head of the Organization Department of the CCP, Chen Xi, are Tsinghua graduates and therefore support the effort to get their fellow alumni into government posts. In an internal speech delivered at Tsinghua University, Xi Jinping suggested that all Chinese universities be modeled on Tsinghua so as to cultivate a pool of talent that is both "red and expert."⁵⁷ On top of that, Chen Xi is the very person who initiated the cultivation/transfer system at Tsinghua University, so his support is a given. For example, Chen took advantage of his position as head of the CCP's Organization Department to request that local governments raise their quotas of Tsinghua "selected students."⁵⁸

We can see from the above that Tsinghua University and the CCP have become inseparable in recent years. In western countries, certain elite universities have a tradition of supplying more senior government officials than other schools, two examples being the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom and Tokyo University in Japan. Yet Tsinghua is different in the sense that it has put in place a unique system that directs graduates toward officialdom. Also, the school relies on its Alumni Association to maintain its relationship with alumni who already hold official posts. These alumni reinforce each other's influence in political circles. Finally,

⁵⁵ To learn more about the concept of "institutional diffusion," please see Yanlong Zhang, "Institutional Sources of Reform: The Diffusion of Land Banking Systems in China" *Management and Organization Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (November 2012), pp. 507–533.

⁵⁶ Interview with a member of staff of the Guangxi Organization Department, October 1, 2017.

⁵⁷ Draft of an internal speech given to the Tsinghua University Party Committee, April 27, 2017.

⁵⁸ Interview with Professor Z at Tsinghua University, June 8, 2018.

Tsinghua graduates have been highly appreciated by senior CCP officials. This is all evidence of the unique position of Tsinghua graduates in Chinese officialdom.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the institutional mechanisms which allow the Tsinghua clique to thrive. Two main approaches dominate discussion of this topic in the current literature: history/culture and technocracy. This paper argues that the former approach helps us to understand why many Tsinghua graduates seek to become public officials, while the latter explains why a continuous supply of graduates from universities of science and engineering is important for the continued development of the CCP regime. We believe that these two approaches show us why the Tsinghua clique is such a major influence in Chinese politics. However, it is important to provide a more direct institutional explanation of the post-1980 generation Tsinghua clique phenomenon that has come into being since 2011.

We can explain this phenomenon by examining the system that Tsinghua has put in place for training its students for official careers and arranging for their direct transfer into official posts, as well as their continued connection with the school after graduation. First, through the “cultivation/transfer” system, Tsinghua University begins observing students’ ability to serve as officials when they are at school. The school then cultivates the relevant skills and abilities and puts selected students on the fast track to promotion after graduation, allowing them to obtain government positions with ease and quickly rise through the ranks. Finally, the Tsinghua authorities and the Tsinghua Alumni Association play an important role in maintaining relationships with Tsinghua graduates in official posts, cementing bonds between the alumni and their alma mater as well as among the alumni themselves.

The case study in this paper offers an institutional explanation for the impending rise and continued success of the Tsinghua clique in politics. Today, members of this clique already occupy the vast majority of county-level leading cadre positions held by the post-1980 generation, far exceeding the number of graduates of other universities. In other words, the Tsinghua clique is extremely influential among local cadres. This may lead to Tsinghua graduates holding a higher proportion of senior leadership posts than graduates of other universities in about 20 years time. Finally, the top leadership of the CCP, including Xi Jinping and Chen Xi, regard the recruitment of large numbers of “red and expert”⁵⁹ Tsinghua graduates as a way of

⁵⁹ Although there is mention of this characteristic of Tsinghua graduates in the literature, we have not conducted the relevant empirical analysis of contemporary graduates, so we cannot judge whether this assumption is correct. We only mention it as part of a normative discussion of the opinion of the top leadership. Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers*, p. 253.

reinforcing the ideological conformity and governance ability of the ruling class, thus maintaining the CCP's dictatorship and making its regime even more resilient.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Andrew Nathan "Authoritarian Resilience" *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 14, no. 1 (January 2003), pp. 6-17.