

Drawing an Age Line: Rejuvenation or Exclusion

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Abstract

It is widely recognized that the political system in the PRC is more institutionalized and predictable than in the past, and that its regular rejuvenation is a source of strength. While not denying the virtues of the age-based system, this paper argues that there are limits on the forced rejuvenation scheme. It looks at how cadres in the CCP's Central Committee are excluded from competing for the top leadership positions because of their age. Four groups of elite are identified, T2 (*zongshuji*, *zongli*), SCP-TS (*changwei*), PB-SCP (*juwei*), and CC-PB (*zhongwei*), and their frustration over exclusion from competing for the T2 positions in the next major leadership turnover (next even-numbered Party Congress) measured (Exclusion and Frustration Rate, EFR). An overall score is also calculated to measure the total frustration with the system (Total Exclusion and Frustration, TEF). It is shown that the EFR and TEF are extremely high, and tension is bound to accumulate in the system. Finally, the Bo Xilai case is explored to demonstrate how aspirant cadres may be discriminated against by the system and thus inclined to rebel against it. It is advised that instead of simply accepting the system as it stands and calculating how personnel decisions will be churned out, more attention should be given to its limits and sustainability in the long term.

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Drawing an Age Line: Rejuvenation or Exclusion

There is a consensus among scholars in the study of Chinese elite politics that the system demonstrates increasing institutionalization (e.g. Bo, 2005; Kou, 2013). In the post-Mao and particularly post-Deng era, informal power gave way to institutional authority, political successions followed clear-cut rules, and generational replacement became an established pattern. The Chinese political system evolved from ideological utopianism to rational meritocracy, from utter unpredictability to high routinization. The most important feature of the new system is forced rejuvenation, a mechanism with which the elite purges itself of the gerontocrats. By doing so, the regime set itself apart from the Soviet and East European party-states whose ossified systems undermined the Communist rule (Kou, 2006).

Rejuvenation is important in sustaining any organization. Communist party-states are no exception in this regard. Organizational rejuvenation rests on retiring old leaders. However, those leaders tend to be in the top echelons of the organization, hence the dilemma: self-interest of the most powerful officials prevents their retirement, undermining the organization's ability to meet the challenges from the environment. In order for rejuvenation to take place, an authority higher than the top leaders has to will it. In a competitive political system, the higher authority can be found in the constitution or in the will of the people. However, in an authoritarian system where the ruling political elite wields ultimate power, the task of retiring the top leaders becomes next to impossible. That is why autocratic rulers, in ancient and modern times as well, tend to hang on to power until their death, or their overthrow.

This is the *dilemma of authoritarian reform*: the only people who can make the reform cannot make it without hurting their own interests, hence no reform.

When forced rejuvenation does exist, two mechanisms are most widely used: term limits and age limits. In a democracy, top officials are typically elected, and often they are subject to term limits. At the same time there are age limits for government officials and military officers. Some top officials may be subject to neither, such as the Justices on the U.S. Supreme Court.¹ In the case of historical communist party-states, there was neither age limits nor term limits for top leaders, hence gerontocracy in the Soviet Union and East European communist regimes in the 1980s, which directly led to the revolutions at the end of the decade. It appears that the absolute power wielded by communist leaders foretells the absence of any mechanisms of forced rejuvenation, thus adhering to the established pattern for all authoritarian regimes. The dilemma of authoritarian reform is confirmed.

The same problem appeared in China as the octogenarians, who were rehabilitated en masse by Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) and Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) in the end of the 1970's and early 1980's, kept paramount power and held the front-line leaders answerable to them (Wu, 2004). However, Deng the top "Immortal" introduced sweeping personnel reform that radically changed the situation. From the 1990's on, even the top leaders were subject to both age limits and term limits (retirement line, *lixixian*).² Forced rejuvenation became a prominent feature of the

¹ Chien-wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai (2014: 154) compare the Western democratic bureaucracy and the CCP cadre appointment system, and find the major difference between the two in the separation of political appointees and civil servants in the West, and the absence of such separation in China.

² For a discussion of the development of the system, see Ding (2012).

Chinese communist party-state.³ Only Vietnam developed a similar system. It is not a coincidence that China and Vietnam not only survived the meltdown of global communism at the end of the 20th century, but have thrived and prospered as reforming socialist systems in the 21st century, compared much more favorably with Cuba and North Korea that are still stuck in dynastic successions.

The fact that the top leaders in China accept forced retirement when they hold ultimate power raises an interesting question. Why would they damage their own interest? After all, there is no external challenge to their rule, and they wield ultimate authority in the regime. Theoretically they can formulate the rules to better suit their interest. The introduction of the new system of forced rejuvenation is the result of a unique situation: a paramount leader who is not subject to the new rules arranged for the rest of the party. The crux of the matter is informal power: the paramount leader is able to wield great authority behind the scenes even after his official retirement. The introduction of forced rejuvenation did not damage his personal interest. As he is the paramount leader, he can make the party accept the new rules. When he is gone the system has been put in place and become self-sustainable: the young generations would push for the retirement of their superiors, as they themselves are pushed by even younger cadres below them in due time.⁴ With the passing away of the revolutionary generation and the rise of the technocrats, no new leader can reach paramount status and change the rules. The system is then institutionalized. Deng was the path-breaking paramount leader. He was the higher authority that stood above the party-state, and thus was in a position to impose the new system of forced

³ For Deng's role in reforming the succession process, see Lee (2000).

⁴ For a theoretical explanation of the process through which China introduced the new system, see Kou (2013: ch.3).

rejuvenation for everyone except himself to follow.

However, one has to be aware of the arbitrariness and limits of the system, for it damages not only the self-interest of the top leaders, but also precludes the chances of becoming top leaders of a very large age-cohort. Age limits cum term limits creates a web that stifles the political aspiration of the most able and ambitious elites. The Bo Xilai (薄熙來) challenge is a clear indication of the tension in the system. In the following discussion, we will delve into the features of China's forced rejuvenation, their impact on the politically ambitious, and the reaction from the aspiring elite. We will argue that Deng's solution to China's dilemma of political succession is not a perfect one, and that cracks have appeared that may undermine the system in the not very long future.

The System

There are various criteria for the appointment and promotion of cadres in the CCP. Experience, education and performance are arguably the most important ones.⁵ Factional politics also plays a critical role, particularly when it comes to top level personnel arrangements.⁶ These are positive criteria. Age in a system of forced rejuvenation is a negative criterion. The way it operates is to exclude from

⁵ For an exploration into the importance of leadership experience (ministerial, provincial, central committee), see Bo (2014). For a study of the importance of party position experience and political credentials, see Huang (2010; 2011).

⁶ For an empirical investigation into the relation between factional ties with top leaders and elite promotion decisions, see Shih, Adolph and Liu (2012).

consideration of appointment and promotion those cadres whose age surpasses the maximum for the job concerned. Positive criteria are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for appointment and promotion. Negative conditions, however, can determine who cannot get appointment and promotion in a categorical way. Arguably the negative conditions, with age the most prominent one among them, wield greater influence on personnel decisions than positive factors. Its impact is more predictable than all the other factors. The justification for strictly adhering to the age rule is the country needs young and energetic leadership for its rapid modernization, and that age is a neutral criterion that is acceptable to all concerned (Bo, 2014: 65).

Table 1 Maximum Age for Promotion

Rank	Position	Age of Ineligibility for Promotion
<i>Zheng guo ji</i>	State Leader	67
<i>Fu guo ji</i>	Deputy State Leader	67
<i>zheng bu ji</i>	Minister	63
<i>fu bu ji</i>	Deputy Minister	58
<i>zheng ting ji</i>	Bureau Director	55
<i>fu ting ji</i>	Deputy Bureau Director	52
<i>Zheng chu ji</i>	Division Head	50
<i>Fu chu ji</i>	Deputy Division Head	45
<i>Zheng ke ji</i>	Section Head	40
<i>Fu ke ji</i>	Deputy Section Head	40

Source: Kou and Tsai (2014: 157).

As shown in table 1, there are specific age limits for the promotion to different levels of positions in the party-state. Once a cadre goes beyond the age limit without being promoted, he would lose any opportunity for moving upward in the hierarchy.

This is forced rejuvenation *par excellence*. It guarantees that high officials are reasonably young and energetic. Combined with term limits, cadres would be forced to retire before hanging on too long in the same post. This arrangement is diametrically opposite to the ossified gerontocracy of the historical Soviet and East European communist regimes, and is an effective cure to China's "Immortal" politics of the 1980's.⁷

The system took shape from bottom up, with the highest echelon cadres becoming subject to age limits later than those in the middle and lower ranks. The cardinal principle of "drawing a line at 70" (*qishi huaxian*, 七十劃線) was first applied to politburo standing committee members at the 15th Party Congress (1997) to rid Qiao Shi (喬石), the main political rival of the then General Secretary Jiang Zemin (江澤民). That rule, however, did not apply to Jiang himself who exceeded the age limit too when the line was drawn for Qiao. Jiang even hung on with chairmanship of the Central Military Commission until 2004, when he was 78. However, he was the last exception.

At the 16th (2002) and 17th (2007) Party Congress, those aged beyond 67 were forced to retire from the Politburo, giving credence to the new line now drawn at 67 (seven up, eight down; *qi shang ba xia*, 七上八下).⁸ This pattern was followed at the

⁷ It can be argued that such scheme rejuvenates the state administrative system more effectively than in a democracy where age merely functions to invoke retirement. For example, aging of the civil servants poses a problem in Taiwan. See Shih (2009).

⁸ It is widely believed that the age line was redrawn at 67 because Zeng Qinghong, Jiang's chief lieutenant who joined the Standing Committee of the Politburo to monitor Hu Jintao, willed it to rid Li Ruihuan, a liberal that Jiang loathed at the 16th Party Congress. The same age guillotine fell on Zeng five years later.

18th Congress (2012) which witnessed the retirement of all the high cadres aged beyond the magical number of 67. It is clear that the system originally for the administrative hierarchy of the party-state gradually engulfed the political leadership because of elite competition. With the top echelon also brought into the scheme of forced rejuvenation, one witnesses the birth of an organizational anomaly. From top to bottom the age guillotine rules supreme.

Table 2 shows the age of all the members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo (SCP) from the 16th through the 18th Party Congress. It can be clearly seen that the 67-Line was strictly adhered to. None got into the SCP beyond 67, and all who reached that age line retired at the end of their current terms, making 72 the highest retiring age for PSC members (Jia Qinglin (賈慶林) at the 18th Party Congress, and Yu Zhengsheng (俞正聲) expectedly at the 19th Congress). Although the age limit permits PSC members to serve until 72, the top two leaders (general secretary and premier) would retire no later than when they are 70. Thus both Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) and Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) assumed the top positions at 60, and retired at 70. Xi Jinping (習近平) succeeded Hu at 59, and Li took premiership at 57. It has become customary that the general secretary and the premier would be in their sixties when serving the party-state, and that their tenure is ten years, or two terms, the maximum permitted by law.

Table 2 Standing Committee of the Politburo

	16 th Politburo (2002-2007)	17 th Politburo (2007-2012)	18 th Politburo (2012-)
General Secretary cum State Chairman	Hu Jintao: 60-65	Hu Jintao: 65-70	Xi Jinping: 59-64
Prime Minister	Wen Jiabao: 60-65	Wen Jiabao: 65-70	Li Keqiang: 57-62
Chairman of People's Congress	Wu Bangguo: 61-66	Wu Bangguo: 66-71	Zhang Dejiang: 66-71
Chairman of People's Consultative Conference	Jia Qinglin: 62-67	Jia Qinglin: 67-72	Yu Zhengsheng: 67-72
First Secretary in Central Party Secretariat	Zeng Qinghong: 63-68	Xi Jinping: 54-59	Liu Yunshan: 65-70
First Vice-Premier	Huang Ju: 64-69	Li Keqiang: 52-57	Zhang Gaoli: 66-71
Secretary of Central Discipline Inspection Commission	Wu Guanzheng: 64-69	He Guoqiang: 64-69	Wang Qishan: 64-69
Head of Central Propaganda and Thought Work Leadership Group	Li Changchun: 58-63	Li Changchun: 63-68	
Central Politics and Law Commission	Luo Gan: 67-72	Zhou Yongkang: 65-70	

Source: Author's calculation.

We can trace the political careers of the top leaders and make some extrapolations. The top two leaders typically serve on the SCP for one or two terms before they assumed real power. Thus Hu served ten years on the SCP before he succeeded Jiang (though not completely), while Xi and Li received five years' of job

training on the ruling body. Wen was an exception as he was a Politburo member prior to his appointment as premier, namely he hadn't had any previous experience as a SCP member when he took the number two position. As Hu's ten-year apprenticeship is obviously too long, and may well be a sign of Deng's determination to arrange for a future political succession when he still could, it is reasonable to expect that future leaders will receive a one-term (five-year) job training on the SCP à la Xi and Li.⁹ If we take a look at the current (18th Party Congress) composition of the ruling SCP, we find all but Xi and Li have to bow out at the 19th Party Congress to be held in 2017, for by then Yu Zhengsheng would be 72, Zhang Dejiang (張德江) and Zhang Gaoli (張高麗) 71, Liu Yunshan (劉雲山) 70, and Wang Qishan 69 (王岐山), all surpassing the 67 mark. The new "crown princes" (i.e., future general secretary and premier) would then need to be promoted to the SCP, either from the ranks of the Politburo, or "helicoptered" from the Central Committee, to be groomed by Xi, Li, and other newly appointed SCP members who presumably would be the crown princes' seniors. In this way, the sixth-generation successors would closely follow their predecessors in establishing themselves as China's leaders for 2022-2032.

To become China's next generation rulers, one needs to be younger than 60 in 2022 (or born after 1962), and promoted to the SCP in 2017. Entering the SCP (*ru chang*, 入常) requires a status of either being a member of the Central Committee (Hu in 1992, Xi and Li in 2007), or being a Politburo member (Wen in 2002) from the last Party Congress. The combination of these two conditions narrows our focus to a small group of mid-aged leaders. If we concentrate on the Politburo members with the right age condition, only two persons stand out, namely Hu Chunhua (胡春華) and

⁹ For the top leaders' apprenticeship, and a comparison between Hu and Xi, see Miller (2009).

Sun Zhengcai (孫政才) (both born 1963 and aged 49 in 2012). All the other Politburo members, including all members of its Standing Committee, fail to meet the age requirement. If all Central Committee members are included, then we find a larger reservoir of potential candidates. However, as the average age of the 18th Central Committee was 56.1 in 2012, quite a large portion of this reservoir is excluded from the top jobs at the next leadership turnover in 2022. In short, the age and status conditions combine to focus our attention to those Central Committee members aged less than 50 at the last Party Congress where major leadership turnover occurred as the reservoir for the next leadership turnover.

In sum, the Chinese system of forced rejuvenation took shape gradually under specific historical conditions. The rehabilitation of old cadres and the politics of immortals in the late 1970's and early 1980's prompted a reform to rejuvenate the cadre corps. The existence of a paramount leader, i.e. Deng, made this reform possible. Deng was powerful enough to impose the system of forced rejuvenation without damaging his own interests: he could and did pull the threads behind the scene after official retirement. The dilemma of authoritarian reform is solved. After the passing away of the revolutionary generation, no political leader was in a position to undo what Deng did. Furthermore, the system was adjusted in the direction of expanding its scope to cover the top echelon and adding to its stringency, all in the name of further energizing the cadre corps but actually used as a strategy in intra-elite competition. There was a ratchet-cum-boomerang effect as stringent rules can only be adjusted by more stringency, and the leader who strikes down his political rivals with an age rule will be hit by the same rule at a later time. Once put in place, the system is self-sustained, as each echelon of cadres is pushing for advancement by replacing their superiors who have hit their age limit before they themselves are pushed aside by

the echelon beneath them. In this sense, the top leaders are pushed by the whole cadre corps to retire. The system thus guarantees periodical replacement and rejuvenation of the officials. However, its stringencies and arbitrariness also have their side effect as the age guillotine rules supreme.

The Exclusion and Frustration

The system of forced rejuvenation excludes and frustrates cadres who fail to meet the age requirement. Although the phenomenon is omnipresent in the whole party-state hierarchy, it is the potential tension at the top that matters most. There would be serious ramifications if elite are alienated by their exclusion from the top positions and inclined to challenge the fundamental rules of political succession. But where would the frustration come from?

Assuming the CCP maintains its monopoly of political power in China, and the party keeps its pyramidal structure, we can concentrate on the Central Committee, presumably the source of legitimacy for all the central party organs, that is composed of more than 200 provincial-ministerial level high officials who wield greatest power in the system. Any political challenge to the leadership and the rules of political succession would have to come from the ranks of the Central Committee. The Central Committee can be divided into four groups of leaders: the top two (general secretary cum state chairman and premier, or T2), the Standing Committee members of the Politburo other than the T2 (SCP-T2, i.e. SCP *minus* T2, or *changwei*, 常委) the Politburo members outside the Standing Committee (PB-SCP, i.e. PB *minus* SCP, or

juwei, 局委), and the Central Committee outside the Politburo (CC-PB, i.e. CC *minus* PB, or *zhongwei*, 中委). Those four groups are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive in China's high power structure. In each one of them, there is structural reason to be frustrated by the age-based system of forced rejuvenation.

Take the top two leaders (T2) for example. Presumably they are at the very top of the hierarchy, and enjoy the greatest power and prestige, so there seems to be no reason for discontent. However, no politicians are willing to hand over power unless forced to. As mentioned earlier, neither democracies nor authoritarian regimes force their leaders to retire simply for old age. The PRC's political system is the most discriminative against the aged leaders. The T2 have both the incentive and potential power to thwart the age-based scheme of forced rejuvenation that would compel them to retire at the end of their terms. Their acceptance of the system can only be understood as an act of resignation under pressure stronger than their will and power, but that equilibrium may not hold when the constraints on the T2 lessen.

Historically, the incumbent and succeeding T2s were not always on good terms. The conflict of interests between the succeeded and the successors was an important factor, but the cross-generational designation of successors also played a key role. It is well known that Hu was designated as successor to Jiang by Deng, hence the early promotion of Hu to the SCP in 1992, when he was only 50, compared with his colleagues aged 66 in average. Jiang was still in the process of being installed as the core of the third generation leadership, when his own successor had been designated and landed to the power center, under the auspices of the paramount leader. The "co-habitation" of Jiang and Hu could not be a pleasant experience for either of the two. When it came to Hu's successor, the general secretary did not have any greater

power than his predecessor. Xi's designation at the 17th Party Congress was obviously not the result of intraparty consultation and democratic selection. Factional politics played a key role, and Hu's plan to put the "Leaguers" (*tuanpai*, 團派) in leadership positions was oftentimes thwarted.¹⁰ The same may happen to Xi. The inability to designate one's own successor, the forced co-habitation with an imposed heir apparent, the inevitable lame duck effect, and the obligation to groom and empower the succeeding leadership all act against the self-interest of the retiring core, and provide the incentive for the core to challenge the age-based rejuvenation system. Both Deng and Jiang managed to extend their authorities beyond official tenure, testifying to the natural desire by the old guards to hang on to power.¹¹

The SCP members other than T2 (SCP-T2, *changwei*) are in no better position when faced with the tyranny of the age guillotine. Their role is very much like the royal councilors for heirs apparent (*guming dachen*, 顧命大臣). Because of their age, they are destined to retire when the new core is formally enthroned. A look at the age distribution of the SCP-T2 at the 16th through the 18th Party Congress clearly shows it (table 1). The enthronement of the new core thus means the end of their own political careers. As they are more senior, the SCP-T2 group may well be the superiors of the core when the latter advanced up the hierarchical order. They groom the T2 "juniors"

¹⁰ The *tuanpai*, or the Leaguers, are those cadres who are closely associated with the Chinese Communist Youth League in their political careers. For a discussion of the competition between the Leaguers and the princelings, or the populists and the elitists, see Li (2009a; 2009b; 2012a; 2013a; 2013b). The competition between the two camps harks back to the conflict between the Leaguers (*tuanpai*, 團派) and the "Shanghai Gang" as represented by Hu Jintao and Zeng Qinghong at the 16th SCP. See Li and White (2003).

¹¹ The role of the retiring T2 is like Chinese emperors forced to step down by their princes. Animosity is expected.

while knowing their own age would inactivate them very soon. The discrepancy between seniority/power and career expectancy for the senior SCP members and the “crown princes” creates tension. In a political culture that respects seniority, such inverse relation makes both the senior SCP members and the political heirs apparent uncomfortable, for there are two conflicting sets of norms governing their relationship. Just like there were numerous cases in Chinese history when the young emperor clashed with his royal councilors for power, so can one find similar conflict between the core designated and the ordinary SCP members, such as revealed by the Zhou Yongkang (周永康) case.

The non-SCP Politburo members (PB-SCP, *juwei*) are a larger set of elite who stand for promotion into the SCP of the next Party Congress. Since 1982 when the 12th Party Congress was held, almost all the elected SCP members were either already in that body of the previous congress, or promoted from the previous Politburo. The rule is the new SCP would carry over all the previous SCP members, unless they are over age limit or implicated in some political or legal cases. Once that is done, and there are still vacancies in the SCP, then new members will be selected from the previous Politburo (PB-SCP). Amazingly there are only six exceptions to this rule among the 53 selections across the seven Party Congresses from 1982.¹² Among the rest 46 cases, 23 involve reappointing previous SCP members, and 23 are promotions of previous PB members. Although the PB-SCP members have a good chance of being selected into the SCP of the next congress, especially when there is a major turnover (i.e., even-numbered congresses), the absolute majority of them are excluded from the next T2 core because of age. Take for example the 18th Politburo, among its

¹² They are Zhu Rongji, Liu Huaqing and Hu Jintao at the 12th Congress, Zeng Qinghong at the 16th Congress, and Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang at the 17th Congress.

18 non-SCP members, only Hu Chunhua and Sun Zhengcai are suitable for selection into the sixth leadership core. The bulk of this group, just like the SCP, is excluded from top power by virtue of their birth year.

The CC-PB (*zhongwei*) is a much larger set of leadership reservoir, with a lower average age than the PB-SCP. In that pool the officials' chances of joining the top leadership are scant, given their large number, although not impossible. Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基), Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang (李克強) were "helicoptered" from CC-PB to SCP, skipping the intermediate layer of Politburo.¹³ As the CC includes all the important provincial and ministerial officials, most of its members are at least in their late 50's when they join the group. This means when the leadership turnover comes, they would be in their 60's, thus disqualified for the T2 top jobs. What this means is if an aspirant party official wants to reach the top echelon, he needs to be selected into the CC in his late 40's, and promoted to the SCP in the early 50's. This is obviously extremely rare. Among the 180 CC-PB members elected at the 18th Congress, only three, Su Shulin (蘇樹林), Zhang Guoqing (張國清) and Lu Hao (陸昊), were at 50 or in their late 40's in 2012. All the rest of the CC-PB group were in their 50's and beyond. This means the absolute majority in the CC-PB group would not be able to compete for the T2 top position in 2022.

¹³ Zhu Rongji was an alternate member of the 13th CC. His elevation was unprecedented.

Calculating Exclusion and Frustration

It is obviously difficult to calculate individual frustration. However, if we assume that high party cadres would be frustrated if they are excluded from competing for the top positions (T2) because of their age, or because a new T2 team has been chosen for better fitting the age profile, then we can calculate the percentage of cadres on each level of the hierarchy who are excluded and thus frustrated. We call that the “EF Rate” (EFR). A cadre is frustrated when he is excluded from competing at the next major power turnover, typically an even-numbered Party Congress. Table 3 shows the EFR on the T2, SCP-T2, PB-SCP, and CC-PB levels for the 16th through the 19th Congress period (the numbers for the 19th Congress are obviously estimates).

Table 3 EF Rate (Model 1)

	16 th Congress 2002-2007	17 th Congress 2007-2012	18 th Congress 2012-2017	19 th Congress 2017-2022 (est.)
T2	1 (2/2)	1 (2/2)	1 (2/2)	1 (2/2)
SCP-T2	1 (7/7)	0.71 (5/7)	1 (5/5)	0.6 (3/5)
PB-SCP	1 (16/16)	1 (16/16)	0.89 (16/18)	1
CC-PB	0.95 (165/174)	1 (179/179)	0.98 (177/180)	1
TF	0.995	0.913	0.976	0.88

Source: Author’s calculation.

Let’s begin with the 16th Congress that covers the period of 2002-2007. On the T2 level, the top leaders (Hu and Wen) knew they would not be able to compete in the next power turnover (2012), hence they were both excluded and frustrated (2 of 2),

and the EFR is 1. On the SCP-T2 level, all the seven Standing Committee members knew their age would force them out of power by 2012, thus they were excluded and frustrated (7 of 7), and the EFR is also 1.¹⁴ On the PB-SCP level, the EFR is also one, as all the 16 non-SCP Politburo members were in their late 50's and up, hence barred from the 2012 competition.¹⁵

On the CC-PB level, we are looking into the age distribution of 174 CC members who were not in the Politburo. Among the 174 cadres, only 9 were younger than 50 in 2002 and thus were kept in the game for the 2012 power competition. All the rest (165) would be older than 60 by 2012, hence barred from competing for T2 at that time. The 9 CC members with age advantage were Zhang Qingwei (張慶偉) (41), Zhao Leji (趙樂際) (45), Wang Huning (王滬寧) (47), Li Keqiang (47), Han Zheng (韓正) (48), Xi Jinping (49), Liu Zhijun (劉志軍) (49), Zhang Chunxian (張春賢) (49), and Lu Zhangong (盧展工) (50). Not surprisingly, Xi and Li were among them. As all but 9 were barred from competing in 2012, the EFR here is 0.95 (165/174). It is interesting to note that Bo Xilai (53) was not among the 9 and was excluded and frustrated.

For the column of the 17th Congress, the situation is a bit different. As Xi and Li had been designated as general secretary and premier to succeed Hu and Wen in five years' time, the EFR on various levels shows some changes. On the T2 level the FR remains 1 (2 of 2), but on the SCP-T2 level the presence of Xi and Li there reduces its EFR to 0.71, as two of the seven non-T2 Standing Committee members are satisfied. The EFR on the PB-SCP level remains 1 (16/16), and Bo Xilai was one of the 16

¹⁴ Here we are talking about Wu Bangguo (61), Jia Qinglin (62), Zeng Qinghong (63), Huang Ju (64), Wu Guanzheng (64), Li Changchun (58), and Luo Gan (67).

¹⁵ Here we have an alternate Politburo member Wang Gang (60) included.

frustrated non-SCP members. On the CC-PB level, the EFR rises to 1, as none of the 179 members could compete against Xi and Li in 2012.

We can now shift to the 18th Congress. Standing at 2012, the next major leadership turnover would be 2022, at the 20th Congress, hence candidates for the T2 positions have to be younger than 50 in 2012, and 60 in 2022. On the T2 level, as both Xi and Li knew that they would not be able to compete in 2022, they were excluded and frustrated, rendering a EFR of 1 (2 of 2). As for the SCP-T2 group, all 5 were senior leaders, and could not compete in 2022, hence a EFR of 1 (5 of 5).¹⁶ On the PB-SCP level, among the 18 Politburo members, 16 were over 50 in 2012, thus excluded and frustrated. Only Hu Chunhua (49) and Sun Zhengcai (49) remained in the game. Hence the EFR on this level is 0.89 (16 of 18).¹⁷ Finally, when we take a look at the age distribution on the CC-PB level, we find among the 180 non-PB members, only 3 passes the age test, namely under 50 in 2012, and under 60 in 2022. The three are Lu Hao (45), Zhang Guoqing (48), and Su Shulin (50). Hence on the CC-PB level the EFR is 0.98 (177 of 180).

We can now extrapolate from the previous pattern to the 19th Congress that is going to be held in 2017. The EFR on the T2 level will remain 1 (2 of 2), for Xi and Li remains unable to compete in 2022. On the SCP-T2 level, since the top two leaders for 2022 will be designated at the 19th Congress, and presumably promoted to the SCP,

¹⁶ The five are Zhang Dejiang (66), Yu Zhengsheng (67), Liu Yunshan (65), Wang Qishan (64), and Zhang Gaoli (66).

¹⁷ The 18 Politburo members are Ma Kai (66), Wang Huning (57), Liu Yandong (67), Liu Qibao (59), Xu Qiliang (62), Sun Chunlan (62), Sun Zhengcai (49), Li Jianguo (66), Li Yuanchao (62), Wang Yang (57), Zhang Chunxian (59), Fan Changlong (65), Meng Jianzhu (65), Zhao Leji (55), Hu Chunhua (49), Li Zhanshu (62), Guo Jinlong (65), and Han Zheng (58).

the EFR will dive to 0.6, with three SCP members excluded and frustrated, two satisfied.¹⁸ Finally, following the pattern of the 17th Congress, the PB-SCP and CC-PB groups will find no member satisfied, for the future T2 has been designated. The EFR for both categories is 1, whatever their size.¹⁹

Finally, we can give weights to the various levels of the party hierarchy, and gauge the total frustration with the system. As China has a typical Leninist party state, with a top-down power structure, we shall give 0.4, 0.3, 0.2, and 0.1 to the T2, SCP-T2, PB-SCP, and CC-PB levels, and calculate the value of total exclusion and frustration (TEF).²⁰

$$\text{TEF} = 0.4\text{EFR}_{\text{T2}} + 0.3\text{EFR}_{\text{SCP-T2}} + 0.2\text{EFR}_{\text{PB-SCP}} + 0.1\text{EFR}_{\text{CC-PB}}$$

We find TEF during the 16th Congress period is 0.995. It dropped to 0.913 during the 17th Congress, and surged to 0.976 in 2012. The 2007 dip is caused by a more satisfied SCP-T2, reflecting the presence of Xi and Li in that body. We also estimate

¹⁸ The assumption here is the size of the SCP will remain the same at 7. If the SCP expands to 9 members, then the EFR will rise to 0.71, as in 2007. Concerning the change of the SCP's size at the 16th Party Congress from seven to nine, see Wang (2005).

¹⁹ The absolute majority of the members in the PB-SCP and CC-PB groups will be older than 55, a fact disqualifying them to compete at the 20th Congress. Furthermore, the designation of the T2 at the 19th Congress also locked them out of the core of power. For members on the CC-PB level, their chances of being "helicoptered" directly into T2 position are practically nil. In all, the EFR for the two groups during the 19th Congress period will be 1.

²⁰ The assumption here is the higher one's position is in the hierarchy, the greater frustration he will feel from not being able to compete for the top job. Also, in terms of the impact on the system, the frustration of T2 and SCP members obviously carry more weight than the disgruntlement of ordinary CC members.

that TEF for the 19th Congress will be 0.88.²¹ Those figures clearly indicate the overwhelming exclusion and frustration with the system. This is the basis for challenge.

Up to this point, we have assumed that T2 shall not exceed 60 in age when taking office, and thus will not break the 70-line when retiring. This is the pattern of the 4th and 5th generation of leadership (Hu, 60-70; Wen, 60-70; Xi, 59-69; Li, 57-67). We shall call this Model 1. However, we can loosen our assumption a bit. Assuming we take the “seven up and eight down” criterion or the 67-line for excluding the SCP competitors, knowing that T2 would also have to come from the SCP, and insist that T2 should serve two terms (ten years), then any SCP member who enters the body under 62 will be able to take the T2 position for he will be able to serve two SCP terms. If that is the case, then the cutoff age would be 62, not 60. Using this new criterion, we recalculate the EFR at different levels, and come up with a slightly different TEF for each Congress period, as shown in table 4. We shall call this Model 2.

²¹ This is because we assume the SCP will remain the same size, i.e. five members for SCP-T2, and among the five, two will be the designated T2 for 2022, hence the EFR on this level (EFR_{SCP-T2}) will be 0.6, and the TEF for the 19th Congress 0.88.

Table 4 EF Rate (Model 2)

	16 th Congress 2002-2007	17 th Congress 2007-2012	18 th Congress 2012-2017	19 th Congress 2017-2022 (est.)
T2	1 (2/2)	1 (2/2)	1 (2/2)	1 (2/2)
SCP-T2	1 (7/7)	0.71 (5/7)	1 (5/5)	0.6 (3/5)
PB-SCP	1 (16/16)	1 (16/16)	0.89 (16/18)	1
CC-PB	0.93 (161/174)	1 (179/179)	0.96 (173/180)	1
TF	0.993	0.913	0.974	0.88

Source: Author's calculation.

The difference between Model 1 and Model 2 leads us to the CC-PB level (bold in Table 4). For the 16th CC-PB, four more members would gain the ticket for 2012 competition (Yang Yuanyuan (楊元元), Zhang Qingli (張慶黎), Wang Chen (王晨), Xu Qiliang (許其亮)). The addition of these four persons to the “satisfied” list would lower the EFR on this level to 0.93 (compared with 0.95 if they are excluded), rendering a slightly lower TEF score (0.993 compared with 0.995). By the same token, the new cutoff age would allow in four more members from the 18th CC-PB for the 2022 competition. The lucky ones are Zhang Qingwei (張慶偉) (61 in 2022), Nuer Baikeli (努爾·白克力) (61 in 2022), Zhou Qiang (周強) (62 in 2022), and Chen Miner (陳敏爾) (62 in 2022). Their addition lower the EFR of the 18th CC-PB to 0.96 (compared with 0.98 prior to addition), and the overall TEF to 0.974 (from 0.976). As can be clearly seen, the loosening of our assumptions does not change the overall picture, for there remains overwhelming frustration with the system throughout the hierarchical levels from CC up. The exclusion and frustration rate ranges between 0.6 and 1 on a 0-1 scale, and the overall exclusion and frustration ranges from 0.88 to 0.993 on a 0-1

scale from the 16th through the 19th Congress period. It can be seen that only those with age advantage or the few T2 designates are satisfied with the system.

Bo Xilai: an individual or a phenomenon

The case of Bo Xilai clearly shows the tension that can grow under the system of forced rejuvenation. Bo had long been recognized as an ambitious provincial leader. His flirtation with the New Left gave him the reputation as the loudest voice for that social and intellectual movement in the establishment. He appealed to the lower strata of the population who gained relatively little under market reform. Bo was a leader with genuine social base. As such, he had the potential to challenge the rules of political succession in the CCP. Before the 18th Party Congress was held, whether Bo would join the SCP, or even promoted to a T2 position was a widely discussed issue (Wishik, 2012). He had already sat on the 17th Politburo since 2007, and was the powerful party secretary of Chongqing, one of China's four province-level municipalities.

The mysterious case involving embezzlement, bribe-taking, murder, and betrayal that brought Bo down was merely a small part of the shockwave that this aspirant cadre sent to the system. Bo was a victim of the age-based system in the PRC. He was born in 1949, thus aged 63 in 2012. If we use the strict rule, i.e. 60 as the cutoff point (Model 1), then he is automatically disqualified from the 2012 competition. If we lessen the restriction and use 62 as the cutoff point (Model 2), then Bo was still

unfortunately born too early by a mere one year.²² Had he been born one year later, he would have aged 62 in 2012. That means he would have a pretty good chance of serving two terms in the Standing Committee of the Politburo, hence qualifying him as a candidate for T2 at the 18th Party Congress. It really doesn't matter whether his experience, performance, factional connections, etc. would actually land him in that position if his age is right. The fact that he was disqualified simply because of his age (by a mere one year) before any of his qualifications can be considered is enough for him to challenge the system.

Bo must have known his situation under the system well before 2012. The age rule acted against him in competition for the top position. The best he could expect was to serve one term in the SCP.²³ If he missed the 18th Congress, he would be too old (again by one year) for inclusion in the 19th SCP. Actually he didn't have a chance at the 18th Congress at all. Looking at the composition of the 18th SCP, it is clear that all the 17th Politburo members under the age of 67 in 2012 were given priority consideration. The older they were, the more priority they received. A line was cut at 59, so that all but one (Liu Yandong, 劉延東, 67) above that age were included into the 18th SCP.²⁴ None of the younger cohort in the 17th Politburo (Bo, 63; Li Yuanchao, 李源潮, 62; Wang Yang, 汪洋, 57) was promoted to the Standing Committee. Bo didn't have a chance at the 18th Congress, and his age prevented him for competing at the 19th.²⁵ The maximum he could achieve was a Politburo member.

²² Or half year, since he was born on July 3.

²³ For a discussion of Bo's chances of getting into the 18th SCP, see Kou (2012).

²⁴ Liu appears to have been the victim of her gender, just like Wu Yi before her.

²⁵ Of course had the size of 18th SCP been kept at nine members, as at the 16th and 17th Party Congress, the chances of the three younger Politburo members to be included into the SCP would have been much greater. However, the reduction of the size of the SCP seems to be a deliberate act on Jiang

For some this is a career high mark, worthy of celebration. For Bo, this is definitely not enough.²⁶ Given normal distribution of aspirations and talents, it can be expected that there is a whole stratum of Bo Xilai's chafing under the system that discriminates against them for being born in the wrong years, despite their aspirations and talents. Bo Xilai's challenge to the system, be it the populist campaign to appeal to the public and seek a seat on the 18th SCP or the widely circulated plan to ally with security czar Zhou Yongkang for a forceful entry into China's power core, definitely is not an unique act, but a phenomenon that is likely to reappear in the future.²⁷

Conclusion

In this paper we explore into the system of forced rejuvenation in the PRC. Age limit is pointed out as the single most important criterion in personnel decisions. That gives much greater predictability to the system than in the past. However, in contrast to the mainstream opinion in the literature that there has been more institutionalization and thus stability in the system, this paper argues that the inclusion of top political posts into the age-based scheme widely excludes and frustrates cadres. In a democracy rejuvenation of the top echelon is achieved through holding regular elections, not stifling political aspirations of the aged politicians. In the PRC, once the

Zemin's part to prevent more Leaguers (Li Yuanchao and Wang Yang) from getting into the power center. See Fewsmith (2013).

²⁶ For the way Bo aggressively pursued a seat on the SCP and how his ambition was stifled, see Li (2012b).

²⁷ For the Bo case and its implications, see Zheng (2013).

system was put in place, top elite found themselves subject to the age guillotine. Are they resigned?

We are interested in knowing whether cadres are likely to be frustrated under the scheme of forced rejuvenation for their exclusion by age. We concentrate on the Central Committee and up for this is where national politics takes place. The main concern is whether high cadres will be frustrated by exclusion from competing for the top two positions in the system: the general secretary of the CCP cum the state chairman of the PRC, and the prime minister, for age reasons. For this reason we divide the Central Committee into four groups of leaders: the top two (general secretary cum state chairman, and premier, or T2), the Standing Committee members of the Politburo other than the T2 (SCP-T2), the Politburo members outside the Standing Committee (PB-SCP), and the Central Committee outside the Politburo (CC-PB). The points of tension in the system are identified by looking into the four groups respectively.

An index was designed to measure cadre exclusion and frustration, the Exclusion and Frustration Rate or EFR, which is the percentage of cadres in a group who are excluded to compete for the T2 positions at the next major leadership turnover (typically an even-numbered Party Congress) for age reason. We do this for the periods from the 16th to the 19th Congress (from 2002 to 2022). We also calculate an overall exclusion and frustration score with the system (Total Exclusion and Frustration, TEF) by giving different weights to the four EFRs and add them up. We find overwhelming frustration across tiers and across Congress periods. This is the case whether we use Model 1 (60 as the cutoff age), or Model 2 (62 as the cutoff age). The fact is clear: the overwhelming majority of the Chinese elite are discriminated by

their own age for competing for the top jobs in the hierarchy. Only those very few with age advantage are not excluded and thus satisfied with the system.

We then look into the case of Bo Xilai, an aspirant politician with strong social appeal. He is a victim of the age-based system. Despite his great aspirations, he cannot be considered a candidate for the T2 positions because he was born in the wrong year. The maximum he could expect is a one-term service in the Politburo. Bo Xilai's challenge to the system is definitely a phenomenon that is bound to reappear in the future, and not a one-time act of defiance by an aspirant party leader.

The institutionalization and stability of the political system in the PRC may be exaggerated. Age limit was originally used to rejuvenate an ossified, authoritarian political system. It was imposed by a paramount leader. As China bade farewell to its revolutionary veterans, the system became entrenched and developed its own logic. Age was enshrined as an objective, neutral criterion for solving personnel conflicts. It set the framework of appointment and retirement for even the most powerful leaders. It provides an overwhelming incentive for cadres to advance their career quickly, for otherwise they would be excluded from consideration of promotion. Age advantage trumps any other considerations when it comes to career advancement. This tyranny of age excludes and frustrates cadres on a massive scale. They would be denied chance of promotion for no other reason than a wrong birth year. When a system has an exclusion and frustration rate of over 0.9, namely more than 90 percent of all the high cadres are excluded from competing for the top positions in the hierarchy, there is something wrong and tension is bound to accumulate.

Political succession in the PRC had always been turbulent until the 1990's. Jiang

Zemin was a compromise figure installed after the turmoil of the Tiananmen Incident. His succession by Hu Jintao may thus be considered as the first orderly succession.²⁸ However, Hu was handpicked by Deng Xiaoping ten years prior to the power transfer, hence the succession of 2002 hinged partly on the lasting influence of Deng, and not on the institution per se. Xi's succession to Hu in 2012 thus became a real test. In that regard, the Bo Xilai case and the lingering saga of Zhou Yongkang, and their collaboration that might have shaken the system had there not been the exposure of the criminal activities by Bo's wife, speak volumes about the vulnerabilities of the system.

If patterns developed in the past are honored, all the SCP members except Xi and Li will be retired at the 19th Party Congress to be held in 2017. Five new members will be recruited into the group, with two of them, because of their young age, designated as the "crown princes." Xi, Li, and the three other more senior SCP members would groom the future T2. The T2 will be selected from a very short list: Sun Zhengcai, Hu Chunhua, Su Shulin, Zhang Guoqing, and Lu Hao (Zhang Qingwei, Chen Miner, Nuer Baikeli, and Zhou Qiang will be added if we use Model 2). All this is dictated by age, namely the exclusion of all the other potential competitors for their failure to meet the age standards in picking the top leaders. Before education, experience, performance, or even factional connections can have any impact, age in itself has narrowed the selection pool to mere five cadres.²⁹ Where on earth can we

²⁸ For a discussion of the significance of the 16th Party Congress in institutionalizing political succession in the PRC, see Zheng and Lye (2003) and Dittmer (2003).

²⁹ If we give priority to Politburo members vis-à-vis Central Committee members, then Hu Chunhua and Sun Zhengcai will be designated as the future T2 at the 19th Party Congress. Their selection is guaranteed by their age advantage among the 18th Politburo members. This will be a political succession arranged ten years before it takes place, unprecedented in the CCP's history.

find top political leaders picked in this way? The system obviously favors those cadres who took “fast tracks” to advance their careers. No wonder among the five primary candidates, two (Hu Chunhua and Lu Hao) served as First Secretary of the Communist Youth League. Zhou Qiang and Nuer Baikeli are also prominent Leaguers (Lam, 2012). The League’s advantage is gained by manipulating the rules of age. It has a different system of maximum age for promotion to specific levels of positions and can fast track the advancement of its cadres, so that when the Leaguers are back in the mainstream, they hold age advantage. Fast tracking through particular organizational channels may be a convenient way for individual career advancement, but it makes little sense for the party to recruit the best talent into the top echelon. The practice is nurtured under forced rejuvenation, a short cut that the system encourages competing blocs of power to develop.

At this point, we can find that the system may even be too stringent to its apparent beneficiaries. The incumbent T2 are barred from competing in the next grand power turnover (next even-numbered party congress), hence they are unable to extend their political life beyond that future point, despite the fact that they are the most powerful figures in the system. This makes T2 potential candidates for undermining the rules of succession. Furthermore, the way political succession is prearranged by the old guards before they leave the scene (as Hu was anointed), or behind the scene (as Xi was chosen), and the long co-habitation period (five to ten years) between the current and future T2s makes the system quite unbearable for the top leaders. Given Xi’s assertiveness after he assumed power, would there be an orderly succession

Although Hu Jintao was also anointed ten years before his actual succession to Jiang Zemin, the choice of Wen Jiabao to be the premier was not made until the end of Zhu Rongji’s term. Hu and Sun may become the first T2 designated a decade before the succession, by the sheer weight of their age.

arrangement at the 19th Party Congress that would see the promotion of a group of Leaguers led by Hu Chunhua is dubious. Here one may even find a clue of the unprecedented assertiveness of Xi: this is his way of building up authority to combat the looming succession arranged by Hu Jintao for the Leaguers to succeed him.

This paper looks at age discrimination related to the competition for the top jobs as the source of cadre exclusion and possible frustration. The system of forced rejuvenation obviously redresses many of the shortcomings of the old regime that features blatant factional struggle, disregard of rules and regulations, lack of objective criteria for promotion and retirement, octogenarian politics and immobilism. However, the age-based system has gone too far in regulating the cadre corps. Besides exclusion and frustration that accompany the denial of access to competition at the top echelon, there are many other aspects of the system that need to be explored for its implications.³⁰ Instead of simply accepting the system as it stands and calculating how personnel decisions will be churned out under it, more attention should be given to its impact, limits and sustainability in the long term.

³⁰ Such as the large number of critical retired cadres who are forced to step down and resentful of age discrimination. See Li (2012b: 603).

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