SOCIAL STABILITY AND PROMOTION IN THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA

by

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ABSTRACT

Social Stability and Promotion in the Communist Party of China

by

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China does not have elections, thus promotion within the Communist Party of China (CCP) is the only way to reach high positions in state bureaucracy. Extant scholarship has uncovered many determinants of promotions in China, such as personal connections and merit of provincial party leaders. However, social stability has been overlooked by scholars as one of the key criteria of promotion to higher levels of the CCP. Like every authoritarian regime, the CCP faces threats from the masses over which the elites rule. Reducing social mobilization is a key component of the CCP’s rule. In order to minimize collective activities of Chinese citizens, provincial officials use censorship of the media, including posts on the social media websites, threats of job termination, as well as threats of deportation from urban areas. I argue that those provincial officials who minimize the number of protests (measured as labor protests in this thesis) increase their chance of promotion. The data on promotions to the Politburo are consistent with this argument.

(43 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Social Stability and Promotion in the Communist Party of China

Siniša Mirić

The Communist Party of China (CCP) controls all political, economic, and military issues in China. In the absence of elections, the only route of recruitment at higher levels of the political hierarchy in the Party is an official promotion. The scholarship on promotions offers two main explanations for advancement inside the Communist Party of China: (i) informal connections between high officials and candidates, and (ii) merit of candidates. This scholarship disregards, however, the importance of achievement of political targets by the candidates, specifically, their ability to deliver social stability.

Like every authoritarian regime, the CCP faces threats from the masses over which the elites rule. Reducing social mobilization is a key component of the CCP’s rule. In the past decade, labor strikes have become offensive in nature with workers demanding better conditions and espousing democratic values, thus challenging the Party’s dominant position in Chinese society. In order to minimize collective activities of Chinese citizens, provincial officials use censorship of the media, including posts on the social media websites, threats of job termination, as well as threats of deportation from urban areas. For that reason, those provincial officials who minimize the number of labor protests increase their chance of promotion to the Politburo. Furthermore, avoiding unrest should matter more for the promotion of party secretaries than governors, whose domain is economic growth.

To evaluate my argument, I analyze promotions of provincial leaders to the Politburo in 2003-2017. The data yield that—consistent with my argument—provincial leaders’ ability to minimize labor strikes increases their chances of promotion. In addition, positive economic performance matters more for the promotion of governors than of party secretaries.
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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE HIERARCHY OF THE PARTY</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DETERMINANTS OF PROMOTION IN THE CCP</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL STABILITY AND PROMOTION</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATA AND METHOD</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Variable</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanatory Variable</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Variables</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESULTS</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISCUSSION</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cox event history analysis for the career path of Chinese provincial party leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cox event history analysis of economic performance (governors vs. party secretaries)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Correlation between strikes per capita and economic characteristics of Chinese provinces</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Promotion of province leaders to the Politburo.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A distribution of strikes (per million capita)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cumulative hazard of promotion to the Politburo.</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The Communist Party of China (CCP, Party) controls all political, economic, and military issues in China. Since the CCP is highly centralized (Joseph, 2009; Lim & Chen, 2016), party leadership has a deciding role in directing the country’s future. In the absence of elections, the only route of recruitment at higher levels of the political hierarchy in the Party is an official promotion (Gang, 2007). Who gets promoted and why are the key questions to answer if we are to understand the underpinnings of China’s growth.

The end of the 1980s brought the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the socialist economy. At the same time, China, one of those socialist countries, started its economic growth, unmatched in the post-World War II period. The Tiananmen crisis of 1989 shaped the subsequent Chinese politics by shattering the confidence of the Chinese people toward their government. “This crisis of legitimacy transformed the regime into a performance-based authoritarian regime from an ideology-based revolutionary regime” (Zhao, 2009, p. 417), signifying the importance of social stability. However, things could have gone much differently had the government’s response been different.

Social stability, or lack thereof, has been suggested as an important determinant for politicians’ careers (Saich, 2011; Zhang, 2014). Student protests in the late 1980s had fatal consequences for two General Secretaries of the CCP, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, while social unrests in Xinjiang Autonomous Region in the late 2000s influenced the career of Wang Lequan, a province party leader and the Politburo member (Saich, 2011; Zhang, 2014; Zhao, 2009). Additionally, after the Tiananmen crisis, Party veterans did not promote Li Peng or Yao Yilin, who were the Politburo members at the time, who had played key roles during the repression (Zhao,
2009). On the contrary, Jiang Zemin, and later Zhu Rongji, local reform stars from Shanghai, were the ones who received a coveted promotion (Saich, 2011; Zhao, 2009). The Party elders were particularly impressed with how Jiang maneuvered protests in Shanghai (Saich 2011). As the Beijing party leadership was discredited by their brutality, the Shanghai leadership handled protests peacefully. At the same time, the Shanghai leadership protected the regime by shutting down the city’s liberal newspaper (Saich, 2011). It was not just Jiang Zemin who was noticed by Deng Xiaoping. For instance, Hu Jintao’s management of Tibet by imposing the martial law at an early stage quelled the dissent and avoided the bloodshed of Tiananmen (Saich, 2011).

To prolong the CCP’s rule, the Party leaders appear to have decided that provincial officials, who fostered economic growth while also peacefully resolving social discontent, had an advantage over those, who were loyal to the regime, but eroded people’s confidence in the government by using force. Does the CCP systematically promote provincial leaders who tend to bring social stability without too much force and unnecessary brutality or were the promotions of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Zhu Rongji a lucky accident? While scholarship has uncovered many determinants of promotions in China, this paper argues that researchers have overlooked social stability as one of the key criteria, according to which provincial party leaders are promoted to higher levels of the CCP.

This thesis furthers our understanding of the importance of political performance of, Chinese high-ranking officials. While there is clear evidence that economic development increases the stability of authoritarian regimes (Przeworski, Alvarezm, Cheibub, and Linongi, 2000), after the Tiananmen crisis, the Chinese government has also emphasized other aspects of administrative performance, such as erasing corruption, increasing professionalization, and improving responsiveness (Ortmann & Thompson, 2014; Zhao, 2009; Zhu, 2011). Successful execution of
these aspects should bring social stability that is necessary for solving the problem of authoritarian control, thus maintaining its privileged position in the Chinese society. Consequently, we should expect that those provincial leaders who deliver social stability would receive a promotion to the most prestigious position in the hierarchy, the Politburo. Furthermore, at the provincial level, party secretaries are responsible for social stability, thus, avoiding unrest should matter more for the promotion of party secretaries than governors, whose domain is economic growth.

To evaluate my argument, I employ event history analysis of promotions of provincial leaders, who held office between 2003 and 2017. I examine which career achievements and personal characteristics of party secretaries and governors led to their promotion to the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party. The data come from the network builder of the CCP elite database (Shih, Meyer, & Lee, 2016), the CCP’s Central Committee database (Lu & Ma, 2015), China Strikes (Elfstrom, 2017), China Labour Bulletin, and National Bureau of Statistics of China.

As a measure of social unrest, in this paper, I use labor strikes. I find that provincial leaders’ inability to minimize labor strikes decreases their chance of promotion: as the number of strikes increases, chances for the promotion decline. While this effect is substantively large in all model specifications, its statistical significance varies from 99% confidence level in nested models to 90% confidence in fully specified models. In addition, consistent with my expectation, I find that good economic performance (measured as higher per capita regional product and lower unemployment rate in a province) matters more for governors than for party secretaries. Finally, being in charge of certain provinces (Directly Controlled Cities) helps provincial leaders in their pursuit of the highest government positions.

In what follows, I first describe the structure and hierarchy of the CCP, as well as why it is important to understand its system of promotion. I then introduce the current state of the literature
and point out the gaps that need to be addressed to better understand the system of promotion. Third, I present my argument and hypotheses. Finally, I introduce the data and discuss my empirical findings.

**The Hierarchy of the Party**

The Communist Party of China sits atop China’s political power structure, controls all political institutions, and commands the military. One’s position in the Party Nomenklatura determines the power that a person possesses in the state structure. The hierarchy of the CCP is strict. At the top of the Party sits the Central Committee, a body that elects the Politburo members out of its own members. The Politburo is considered the most important decision-making body in China (Liu, 2003), and it consists out of twenty five people, where top seven (or nine) individuals are part of a more elite Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). The Politburo Standing Committee includes the General Secretary of the Communist Party, who serves as China’s top leader, the president of People’s Republic of China, who is also a member of the Politburo Standing Committee. The second highest-ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee serves as the Premier of the State Council and is effectively China’s top economic official (Lawrence, 2013).

In order to understand China, Bo (2003) argues that we need to understand the political structure within China’s provinces. The highest-ranking official at the provincial level is a party secretary, leaving a governor of a province as second in command, replicating the division of labor from the national level onto provinces.

The CCP may appear as a monolithic structure. However, the Party is not a unified entity. The fragmented structure of China’s political system consists of many special interest groups that coexist within this dominant political entity. A change of ruling groups causes a shift in the balance
of interests. However, all those special interest groups have one shared goal: a “harmonious society”, in which social stability allows them to pursue their special interests (Walter & Frasier, 2011).

Thus, understanding how performance of party officials in one-party regimes is evaluated, and how they climb the ranks, may lead us to understanding the process of legitimacy building and bargaining among the elites. This in turn may explain why those regimes have proven to be more resilient and adoptable compared to other authoritarian regimes.

Determinants of Promotion in the CCP

Two main approaches are offered as explanation for advancement inside the Communist Party of China. The first one is usually labeled as the factional politics school, which focuses on informal connections between high officials and those who aspire to reach the highest levels (Keller, 2016; Ma, 2016; Meyer, Shih & Lee, 2016; Shih, 2008; Shih, Adolph & Liu, 2012; Zhang, 2014). The second approach is known as the meritocratic bureaucracy school; it emphasizes personal qualities and performance of candidates as main selection criteria of Chinese leaders (Guo, 2007; Hongbin & Zhou, 2004; Lü & Landry, 2014; Nathan, 2003; Su et al. 2012; Xu, 2011). While empirical evidence partially supports both of these approaches (Gueorgiev & Shuler, 2015), on their own, neither of these two approaches can fully explain the promotion system inside the CCP. It would be hard to explain the rapid economic growth of the last four decades if leaders are promoted only based on personal connections to other leaders. Nevertheless, if patronage relations have no impact on promotion, we would struggle to explain why purges of high-ranking officials are usually followed by removal of lower level officials connected to those high-ranking officials.
(Keller, 2016). Lately, we have witnessed the emergence of literature that is combining both approaches (Jia, Kumadatsu, & Seim, 2015; Landry, Lu, & Duan, 2017; Shih et al. 2012).

In this section, I, first, introduce current state of literature on both; the faction politics school and the meritocratic bureaucracy school, as well as the literature that is combining these two approaches. Second, I point out certain gaps in the current literature and offer a potential solution to address them.

The faction school emphasizes the role of informal social connections in promotion of the CCP officials. Social ties, guanxi (关系), constitute one of the central ideas in Chinese society (Choi, 2012; Clark, 2015). A faction is a “set of mutually beneficial ties between multiple clients and a patron which aim at maximizing the patron’s power” (Meyer, et al., 2016, p. 43). Connections to the Party Secretaries, even those officially retired, play a major role in the promotion to the Central Committee. While all of the Party Secretaries recruited their coworkers, others used a broader coalition-building process, promoting candidates based on shared birthplace and school (Meyer, Shih and Lee, 2016). Among elites, economic performance did not lead to promotion, while social connections to various top leaders, tax collection, and educational qualification, played a substantial role in promotion (Shih et al., 2012). “Informal politics is better conceptualized as a process of alliance formation shaped by an underlying social (network) structure” (Keller 2016, p. 17). Furthermore, not all social connections are equal. Even though province and school ties play a certain role, their influence is not as important as coworker networks among the Chinese political leaders (Keller, 2016). Finally, strong ties to one faction could be detrimental to one’s promotion, as it may be perceived as a threat to a rival faction (Zhang, 2014).
The meritocratic bureaucracy school insists that personal qualifications and successful performance in office lead to promotion. Xu argues that economic performance is “a matter of life and death” for Chinese officials (2011, p. 14). Performance criteria are better defined for lower level officials than those at the higher sub-national levels, and officials are personally held responsible for achieving the goals set by the higher-ranking officials. Economic performance of provincial leaders has been demonstrated to increase their chances of promotion, while decreasing the probability of their demotion (Hongbin & Zhou, 2004). This leads to Hogbin and Zhou’s (2004) comparison of the Chinese economy to large western corporations, where provincial leaders have a role of middle management whose career advancement is controlled by the central government, playing the role of the board of directors, and is dependent on providing economic results. In addition, revenue growth increases the chance of promotion for county level leaders (Guo, 2007; Lu & Landry, 2014).

Recently, an emerging literature has combined these two theories (Jia et al. 2015; Landry et al. 2017; Shih et al. 2012). Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013) explain that recruitment standards are based on meritocracy in many Asian countries, in order to build strong and loyal bureaucracy, shaping an elite class capable of leading the country. However, many of those countries face the problems of corruption and patron-client relationship in recruitment and promotion (Poocharoen & Brillantes, 2013). Empirical evidence backs these claims. Performance increases the likelihood of promotion at the lower administrative level of government (prefectural and county levels), while personal connections trump performance at higher levels (province) (Landry et al. 2017). Similarly, Jia et al. (2015) show that a correlation between performance and promotion exists, but, on average, politically connected officials are more likely to be promoted compared to those who lack connections. The result is a promotion of competent local leaders that are well connected, too.
While enormous progress has been made in uncovering the determinants of promotion in the CCP, current quantitative work in the field disregards political performance of the Party officials, treating these candidates’ political performance as one and the same as their achievements of economic growth. This is not the first paper to argue that avoiding social unrest is important for promotion within the CCP, as qualitative work has emphasized the importance of political performance. The overall performance targets for CCP officials include: 1) soft targets, e.g., cultural and social development; 2) hard targets, typically drawn from the economic plan; and 3) priority targets with veto power, that are often political, such as keeping social order (Edin, 2003; Xu, 2011). Veto power implies that if leaders fail to achieve priority targets, all the other performance, no matter how successful, would be cancelled (Edin, 2003; Xu, 2011). Despite this theoretical understanding, the current quantitative literature disregards how well candidates comply with their political targets.

In summary, the extant scholarship finds empirical evidence that province-level leaders’ informal connections, as well as their economic performance, increase the chances of promotion to the Politburo. The literature, however, disregards the party officials’ political performance in establishing social order, a gap that this paper fills.

Social Stability and Promotion

The quantitative literature reviewed in the previous section omits leaders’ achievement of political targets, which is an important part of cadre evaluation; however, it is vaguely defined and mainly has been the focus of qualitative studies of the CCP (Edin, 20013; Xu, 2011). Leaders’ ability to attain social stability is a crucial part of their promotions in CCP (Edin, 2003; Xu, 2011).
Without social stability, the Party would have a hard time maintaining its sole grasp and control over Chinese society. In this section, I present the argument for why we should expect that successful fulfilment of political targets, specifically social stability, would increase the chance of promotion for province-level party secretaries, while economic performance of the governors should matter more for their advancement in the Party’s hierarchy.

China, like other authoritarian regimes, faces two problems that fundamentally shape authoritarian politics (Svolik 2012). The first problem is managing popular discontent to preclude mass uprisings; this is the problem of authoritarian control. The second problem is managing the discontent among the ruling elites who may orchestrate a coup, thus coup-proofing represents the problem of authoritarian power-sharing (Svolik 2012).

To solve these two fundamental problems, authoritarian rulers rely on political institutions, and China is no exception (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Mgaloni & Kricheli, 2010; Svolik, 2012). The most stable type of autocracy is a single-party system, which has also been the most common type of authoritarian regime since the second half of the twentieth century (Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010). A single-party authoritarian design serves two intertwined functions which make it superior to other autocracies: 1) a bargaining function, allowing dictators to use within-party politics to bargain with political elites; and 2) a mobilizing function, allowing dictators to mobilize mass support through the party machine (Magaloni, 2008; Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010).

In order to battle these two problems, the Communist Party of China decided to employ a pragmatic, utilitarian strategy of “performance legitimacy” (Ortmann & Thompson, 2014; Zhao, 2009; Zhu, 2011). Performance legitimacy is defined as a state strategy to achieve concrete goals, such as economic growth, social stability, and national unity (Zhu, 2011). These are attained
through “good governance”, which consists of three components: leadership motivation, administrative competence, and government performance (Zhao, 2009; Zhu, 2011).

The most important crisis of legitimacy for the CCP was the Tiananmen crisis of 1989. This crisis influenced Chinese politics in a great manner transforming the regime into aforementioned performance based regime (Zhao, 2009). To enhance its legitimacy, perform more effectively, and prolong the regime, the CCP ruling elite has been emulating the Singapore model (Ortmann & Thompson, 2014).

For the political leaders of China, especially conservative ones, the ruling party of Singapore, People’s Action Party, accomplishes two objectives. First, it defies predictions that modernization will inevitably lead to democracy, combining advanced economic development and stable one-party rule. Second, it shows that authoritarian regime may be better suited in accomplishing social stability in the Confucian context. Singapore serves as an example that it is possible to combine the best of both worlds: institutions of the West (which allow prosperity) and values of the East (which allow social stability). That is, on the one hand, Singapore enjoys the rule of law, institutional supervision, and strict legislation like most liberal democracies. On the other hand, there is authoritarian efficiency and stability combined with the obedience of higher ranked officials, in line with the traditions of Chinese society and Confucianism. In the process of the party’s transformation, the conservative political elites strive to emulate ‘good governance’ from Singapore model, which consists of three elements: erasing corruption, increasing professionalization, and improving responsiveness (Ortmann & Thompson, 2014). By accomplishing these goals, conservative reformers believe they are stabilizing one-party regime, prolonging its longevity.
The CCP carries out this goal through promoting people who will defend the regime and bring economic development. There exists a solid theoretical understanding of how political performance shapes promotion at higher levels, but until recently, empirical work has not studied it, perhaps, due to data constraints. An important process of Party institutionalization is adhering to the rules that regulate intra-party succession and privilege (Edin, 2003; Meyer et al. 2016; Xu, 2011). Party cadres are evaluated based on their accomplishments in achieving cultural and social development targets, economic development targets, such as tax revenue collection and economic growth; and political targets, such as keeping social order and family planning policy (Edin, 2003; Xu, 2011). Sub-province-level cadres are held responsible for soft targets, such as cultural and social development; those targets are usually deemed unimportant for higher-level officials. Province-level cadres are in charge of achieving economic and political targets (Edin, 2003; Xu, 2011).

As officials climb up the hierarchy of the Party, especially to the positions of province-level leaders, the promotion rules become less clear, allowing Party leaders to put emphasis on performance that is not solely based on economic results. Professional achievements are considered the most important criteria for promotion, accounting for 60 to 70 percent of the evaluation of officials. However, these are not the only criteria, since other aspects, such as political integrity, competence, and diligence are also considered. Edin (2003) and Xu (2011) conclude that achievements of all targets are important for bonuses, whereas the completion of economic targets and political targets affects political rewards. In this way, the party leadership can promote those who perform successfully at a lower level (Landry et al. 2017), sustaining the country’s economic growth, while putting more weight on political performance of high-level

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1 Liu, Howard (under review); Wang and Elfstrom (2017);
officials, prolonging the longevity of the CCP’s regime. Promoting competent officials, who in turn deliver successful economic results that promote stability of the regime (Przeworski et al., 2000), whereas the top positions in the Party belong to those officials who will not jeopardize its legitimacy, prolonging the life span of the CCP regime. This system of promotion solves the problem of authoritarian control.

Provincial leaders’ ability to minimize social unrest is the most important political target. Social unrest may manifest in a range of events from online criticism to violent protest. One example of social unrest is the number of labor strikes in a province, yielding successful political performance of province-level leaders as their ability to minimize labor strikes. Since the Tiananmen crisis, the government managed to keep social stability in the country in general. Labor strikes could disrupt that, as this type of unrest is on the rise in China (Wang & Elfstrom, 2017). Furthermore, the leaders of labor strikes have been shown to espouse democratic values (Wang & Elfstrom, 2017), which likely contributes to why the CCP may view these protests as a potential threat to the regime.

In China, labor strikes are not only a product of economic grievances. Consider figures 1a-1f, which display the scatter plots of per capita labor strikes and different economic characteristics of provinces. A correlation between various measures of economic development (GDP per capita, number of people employed by private enterprises, number of healthcare institutions, possession of private vehicles, and annual household consumption) and the number of labor strikes (per million capita) is positive, not negative. In other words, more developed provinces suffer from more labor unrest than do poorer parts of the country. The correlation coefficient for gross provincial product per capita is \( r=0.56 \). Car ownership per capita has an even higher correlation with labor strikes per capita (\( r=0.67 \)). Other parameters have lower yet still positive correlation
with strikes: number of healthcare institutions \( (r=0.22) \), number of people employed by private enterprises \( (r=0.39) \), and household annual consumption \( (r=0.062) \). The unemployment rate in urban areas is the only measure that has a negative correlation coefficient \( (r=-0.31) \) with strikes. On the surface, these results may suggest that strikes do not occur in the poorer regions of China, where one would expect the population to have greater economic grievances. However, more developed regions have significantly more enterprises, therefore we should expect that a sample of labor strikes is not randomly distributed across the country; thus we should be aware of the selection bias: richer provinces are more likely to experience labor unrest, which is why I control for the levels of economic development.

Furthermore, it is not just the increasing number of these strikes per capita that is posing a threat to the government. Far more dangerous to the regime is the changing nature of labor protest from defensive to offensive that challenges the Party’s dominance over Chinese society. Workers demand better workplace conditions, more respect from employers, higher wages, etc. (Elfstrom & Kuruvilla, 2014; Wang & Elfstrom, 2017). “Union leaders who believe that ‘strong capital, weak labor’ is coming to an end and who identify a high level of disputes as a key aspect of today’s industrial relations” are more likely to believe in the necessity of political reform in the near future, demanding the separation of powers and a greater popular participation in local politics (Wang and Elfstrom 2017, p.85). This trend in labor protest presents a serious challenge to the stability of the CCP’s regime, because political pluralism would undermine the CCP’s sole grasp on power.
Authoritarian regimes place a priority on preventing protests from taking place or limiting them to small-scale actions (Koesel & Bunce, 2013). These regimes often use police brutality to quell any form of collective action. In China, violent repression is part of the regime’s arsenal (French, 2005; HRW, 2014; Koesel & Bunce, 2013). Examples of violent repression of social protests in China abound (Li, 2017). Workers, particularly those from rural areas, face threats of...
job termination, as well as threats of deportation from urban areas if they engage in protests (Cheng et al. 2014). For instance, a clash between police and protesters outside of Hong Kong resulted in 20 deaths on December 9, 2005 (French, 2005), or the excessive use of force by police against environmental protests in Guangdong province resulted in hundreds of injured on March 30 and 31, 2014 (HRW, 2014). The threat of violence makes any protest potentially more costly.

However, the regime emphasizes preemptive suppression through censorship over brutality (O’Brien, 2008). Having analyzed the content of millions of social media posts from over a thousand of Chinese social media websites before and after some of those posts were censored, King et al. (2013) conclude that posts with criticism of the state were not subject to censorship, yet posts that in some way urged social mobilization were more likely to be censored. Therefore, the goal of the censorship program is not to suppress criticism of the state, but to minimize the probability of collective action (King et al., 2013). To prolong its rule and protect its regime during and after the 2010-2011 Arab uprisings, the government blocked such terms as “Egypt”, “freedom”, and “jasmine” in the search engines (Koesel & Bunce, 2013). These examples illustrate that the CCP spends resources to prevent collective activities, thus, the Party leaders should notice those provincial officials who manage to reduce the number of social protests. Therefore, I argue that a provincial leader who manages to minimize labor strikes will increase her/his chance of promotion.

**Hypothesis 1: All else equal, fewer labor strikes will increase the chance of promotion for provincial leaders.**

Recall that the government structure in provinces mimics the dual structure of the central government in China. One’s hierarchical standing is based on one’s position in the government (Lawrence, 2013). The highest position in the provincial Party hierarchy, the post of party secretary, corresponds to the position of president of People’s Republic of China, while the second position
in the provincial Party hierarchy, the post of governor, corresponds to that of Premier. There is a clear division of labor between these two positions. The President is usually more responsible for political matters, while the Premier and the cabinet are responsible for delivering economic results (Lawrence 2013; Walter & Howie 2011). This structure is followed in provinces, as well (Bo, 2003). Since at the national level, the economic domain is the responsibility of the Premier, the same should be expected at the province level: governors should be viewed as responsible for economic growth, while party secretaries should be accountable for providing social stability, a precondition for economic development. I argue that there is an interaction between performance and the type of the position held. The ability to minimize social unrest is more important for evaluating the provincial party secretaries than governors, while the ability to deliver economic progress is more important in promoting governors than party secretaries.

Hypothesis 2a: All else equal, political performance should matter more for a party secretary of a province than for a governor.

Hypothesis 2b: All else equal, economic performance should matter more for a governor of a province than it should for a party secretary.

Data and Method

To test my hypotheses, I employ event history analysis of promotions of provincial leaders, who held office between 2003 and 2017. I examine which over-time career achievements and personal characteristics of party secretaries and governors lead to their promotion to the center of political power in China, the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party. My dependent variable, promotion to the Politburo, is time-dependent, thus Cox event history analysis is a flexible and appropriate statistical tool for this research (Zhang 2014).
The data about provincial leaders come from the network builder database of the CCP elites (Lu & Ma 2015; Shih, Meyer, & Lee 2016). The data concerning labor protests come from China Strikes data set (Elfstrom, 2017) and China Labour Bulletin, while the information on provinces is drawn from the National Bureau of Statistics of China. My unit of analysis is a provincial leader – year.

**Dependent Variable.** I study the time until a leader is promoted to Politburo or not (a value of “1” is assigned in those years when promotion occurred). Leaders who were not promoted by the year of 2017 are right-censored. Figure 2 shows that majority of provincial leaders do not get promoted to the Politburo. In addition, figure 2 shows as in which year at their current position and how many provincial leaders were promoted.

**Explanatory Variable.** In order to assess how social political stability, or lack thereof, influences promotion of party CCP officials, I use number of labor unrests per million residents for each province in certain year. Based on figure 3a, we can see that data is right skewed, and for that reason, the natural logarithm of number of unrests seems as more appropriate measure (3b).

**Control Variables.** Using the databases for the ruling elites (Lu & Ma 2015; Shih, Meyer & Lee 2016), I control for a variety of social connections of provincial leaders by using a series of dummy variables where a leader is assigned value of “1” if she/he has a family tie or was a personal secretary to one of high level party officials.
The success in economic performance is crucial to career advancement in the CCP (Xu, 2011). To control for economic performance, I create a series of continuous variables that account for the economic growth, collected revenue, number of unemployed persons, and total profit of state-owned enterprises (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017).
Figure 3. A distribution of strikes (per million capita)

It is more likely that the promising cadre would be put in control of significant autonomous regions (Zhang, 2014). Some regions are more significant, because of their size, wealth and political influence. Four regions are considered more significant than others are. Those are the four Directly Controlled Cities - Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing. In order to control for this, I create a dummy variable where a provincial leader is assigned a value of “1” if he/she is in control of one of the four Directly Controlled Cities (DCC), and “0” otherwise.

Social stability is important to the Party. Minorities constitute about 10% of Chinese population, and they mostly live in one of the five Minority Autonomous Regions - Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Guangxi. Frequent changes in a leadership of these regions could bring instability, and since the Party prefers consistency, these leaders rarely change their position (Gang, 2007). To control for this, I create a dummy variable where a provincial leader is assigned a value of “1” if he/she is in control of one of the five Minority Autonomous Regions (MAR), and “0” otherwise.
To control for personal characteristics, I create a variable that accounts for provincial leader’s age, since there is mandatory age-based retirement by the rules of the Party (Ma, 2015; Zhang 2014). Furthermore, I control for a local leader’s seniority in the Party. These two variables are continuous variables. To control for minority status, I create a dummy variable where a provincial leader is assigned a value of “1” if belongs to any minority group, and “0” otherwise.

Rule by experts is deeply imbedded in Chinese political tradition through the civil service examination system (Ortmann & Thompson 2014; Porter 2016; Spence 2013). Consequently, the civil service examination system resulted in “a hierarchy based on a meritocracy of knowledge, not an aristocracy by birth” (Porter, 2016, p.221). To account for importance of education, I create two categorical variables (Shih, Meyer and Lee, 2016). The first one takes into the account obtained degree. A provincial leader is assigned a value of “0” in case he/she does not have a bachelor’s degree; a value of “1” is they possess a bachelor’s degree; and a value of “2” if they possess a graduate degree. The second measure will account for the substantive specialization a provincial leader to account for domination of certain professions in the Politburo (Zhang 2014), such that “1” represents attaining a major in humanities; “2” in social sciences; “3” in hard sciences; “4” in engineering; “5” in management; “6” in agriculture; “7” in medicine; and “8” in military.

Results

Table 1 displays the results from Cox duration models, examining the leadership turnover from 2003 to 2017 in five different model specifications. Models 1, 3, and 5 represent nested models for all provincial party leaders, party secretaries, and governors, respectively. Models 2 and 4 represent full models with the most important control variables for all party officials and party secretaries. The full model for governors was inconclusive, since there were just three
promotions among one hundred and eleven cases. Since every provincial party official has multiple observations in the data, the standard errors are clustered on individual leader.

The empirical results show that social stability is an important criterion for career advancement, consistent with hypothesis 1. The count of per capita strikes is substantively and statistically significant in all models. While it is significant at 95% or 99% levels in nested models, it drops to 90% significance in full models. Nonetheless, a leader’s inability to minimize labor unrest decreases his/her chances of promotion in a meaningful way. For example, in the fully specified models 2 and 4, a one-unit increase in the number of strikes decreases a leader’s chance of promotion by 33%. The effect is even more pronounced in nested models, as it decreases one’s chance of promotion between 50% and 66%.

Next, the meritocratic logic of promotion varies in the event history analysis. Gross provincial product per capita is statistically significant only in nested models. In both nested and full models, a one-unit increase (of 1,000 yuan) in GDP per capita generates an increase in the probability of promotion from 1.1% to 7.7%. This effect is substantively important, as the standard deviation of provincial GDP per capita is almost 23 units. Unemployment rate in a province is both statistically (95% confidence level) and substantively important for provincial leaders’ promotion to the Politburo. A one-unit increase in the unemployment rate decreases one’s chances of promotion between 42% and 48% (models 2 and 4, respectively). Contrary to those variables, a leader’s level of education has a statistically negligible effect on promotion (surprisingly, the effect is negative but since it is statistically unimportant, I do not read too much into this negative correlation). A leader’s age has no statistically meaningful effect on promotion either; age also has a substantively negative effect on promotion, but that is expected because of age limits.

Table 1
**Cox event history analysis for the career path of Chinese provincial party leaders**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Full sample</th>
<th>Party secretaries</th>
<th>Governors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Log of strikes per capita</td>
<td>-0.76***</td>
<td>-0.78***</td>
<td>-0.67*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.28)</td>
<td>(0.30)</td>
<td>(0.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
<td>0.02**</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princeling</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.57)</td>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private secretary</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.76)</td>
<td>(0.81)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-0.76</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.70)</td>
<td>(0.74)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.70</td>
<td>-0.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.57)</td>
<td>(0.62)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAR</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCC</td>
<td>1.78**</td>
<td>1.36*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.71)</td>
<td>(0.80)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
<td>-0.55**</td>
<td>-0.71**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(0.31)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log pseudolikelihood</td>
<td>-103.22</td>
<td>-92.91</td>
<td>-77.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R2</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Failure is coded as the promotion to the Politburo. Numbers in cells are coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses and clustered on individual leader.

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Furthermore, social connections have a substantively large positive effect on promotion, as being a princeling or personal secretary to a high-ranking official more than doubles one’s chances of promotion. However, neither of these variables is statistically significant after we account for the per capita strikes in a province. Finally, being in charge of certain provinces
increases the probability of promotion. Leaders of directly controlled cities have a four (model 4) to six (model 2) times greater chance of promotion compared to those leaders, who are in charge of twenty seven other provinces. Additionally, in both of these models, these coefficients are statistically significant at 95% level for all leaders (model 2) and 90% for party secretaries (model 4). Contrary to my expectation, being in charge of a minority autonomous region increases one’s probability of promotion by 120% and 70% in models 2 and 4 respectively.

Table 2 compares nested models for governors (models 1, 3 and 5) with models for party secretaries (models 2, 4, and 6). These results are inconclusive because only a few governors were promoted to the Politburo, making my findings only suggestive. With that in mind, these results support hypotheses 2a and 2b. In each model that employs the subsample of governors, the effect of labor strikes is not statistically discernible, albeit labor strikes decrease a governor’s chance of promotion. By contrast, the effect of labor strikes is statistically significant at 95% or 99% confidence level in each model that employs a subsample of party secretaries. In addition, a one-unit increase in labor protests decreases a party secretary’s probability of promotion by 39% to 51%. This is consistent with my hypothesis 2a.

Recall that hypothesis 2b proposed that the provincial economic performance will have a greater influence on the promotion of governors rather than party secretaries. Table 2 reveals that greater economic achievements have a positive and statistically important effect on promotion, such that the substantive impact of economic performance—consistently with hypothesis 2b—is greater for governors than party secretaries. In particular, a one-unit increase (100 million Yuan) in the total profit of SOEs and tax revenue collected by a local government, boosts the probability that a governor vs. a party secretary is promoted by 0.19% vs. 0.13% and by 0.055% vs. 0.032%, respectively. The unemployment rate has a similar effect. A one-unit increase in the unemployment
rate decreases a governor’s chance of promotion by 85%, but the same increase in the unemployment would damage a party secretary’s chance by 56%.

Table 2

*Cox event history analysis of economic performance (governors vs. party secretaries)*

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Log of strikes per capita</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.49*</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>-0.67**</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>-0.70**</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
<td>(0.38)</td>
<td>(0.23)</td>
<td>(0.37)</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Profit of SOE</td>
<td>0.00*</td>
<td>0.00*</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tax revenue of province government</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00*</td>
<td>0.00*</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate (urban)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.89**</td>
<td>-0.82*</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.67)</td>
<td>(0.33)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>476</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log pseudolikelihood</td>
<td>-11.68</td>
<td>-77.56</td>
<td>-11.71</td>
<td>-78.68</td>
<td>-8.48</td>
<td>-77.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R2</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.06</td>
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Note: Failure is coded as the promotion to the Politburo. Numbers in cells are coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses and clustered on individual leader. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Figure 4 describes further substantive effects of explanatory variables and other covariates on provincial leaders’ chances of promotion. Graphs a-d of Figure 4 are built using model 2 of Table 1, while graphs 4e-f are built using model 1 and model 2 of Table 2. The cumulative hazard of promotion in Figure 4 reflects the substantive effect of the number of strikes per capita (graphs a-d) and gross provincial product per capita (graphs e-f), while holding all other covariates at their means or medians. This allows me to construct a hypothetical average provincial Party leader, who is a male Han Chinese at the age of 60, in possession of graduate degree, and without social ties with high-ranking Party officials.
In all graphs of Figure 4, the dash line represents the cumulative hazard for a hypothetical average provincial leader. In graph (a) of Figure 4, the solid line represents the cumulative hazard for a hypothetical (otherwise average) leader who managed to keep labor strikes to a minimum. By contrast, the solid line in graph (b) charts the chance of promotion for an average leader, who had the maximum number of labor strikes. The comparison of graphs (a) and (b) reveals that while a hypothetical average leader has a small cumulated hazard of promotion, these likelihood of promotion increases by a factor of five (from .065 to .330) if she/he is capable of keeping labor unrest at the minimum level.

In the second row of the Figure 4, I repeat this same exercise with one change: I examine the probability of promotion for a hypothetical average provincial leader, who also happens to be a princeling. A local leader with family ties has a higher baseline chance of promotion over the time, compared to a leader without such ties. Still, the effect of social stability is similar for princelings as it is for non-princelings (compare graphs c and d). We observe an interaction effect: those princelings who deliver social stability have a much greater chance of promotion, compared to a princeling that does not control labor strikes.

In the third row of the Figure 4, I compare the influence of gross regional product per capita on the likelihood of promotion of governors (e) and party secretaries (f). The solid line represents a hypothetical governor (e) and a hypothetical party secretary (f), with the number of
Figure 4. Cumulative hazard of promotion to the Politburo.

Note: From left to right: first row: a-b; second row: c-d; third row: e-f). In each graph, the vertical axis represents the cumulative hazard of promotion; the horizontal axis represents years in office. The curve is based on the Cox model 2 from table 1 (a-d) and the Cox models 1 and 2 from table 2 (e-f); Number of strikes per capita, GDP(pc), and UR are set to their means, while all binary and categorical variables are set to their medians.
labor strikes and GDP per capita set to the mean levels. The dash line in graphs (e) and (f) represents a provincial leader with GDP per capita at the maximum rate, while labor strikes are held at the average level. We observe that GDP growth is more important for governors than for party secretaries.

Discussion

Since late 1980s, China has boomed, while other socialist economies collapsed. This success would be hard to explain if one assumed that authoritarian regimes promoted political officials solely based on their loyalty to the regime. At the same time, while many communist regimes across the world fell, the CCP has an undisputed control over China. The CCP controls the politics, the economy, and the military sphere in China. Because of the CCP’s highly centralized structure, political leaders in China possess vast power. Since its Reform and Opening era, the Chinese economy is getting more and more intertwined with the global economy, and the decisions made by the Party leaders affect both China and the rest of the world. In order to understand the longevity of the CCP’s regime as well as its economic achievements, we need to examine the promotion system in the Party. Furthermore, understanding the system of promotion in the CCP may help illuminate how authoritarian regimes build legitimacy and why some regimes have proven to be more adaptable and last longer than other authoritarian states.

The extant literature on promotion in the CCP focuses on the role of informal connections and economic growth, disregarding political performance. In my thesis, I argue that political performance of province-level leaders, specifically their ability to avoid social unrest, plays an important role in who becomes a top politician in China. Furthermore, at the provincial level, party
secretaries are responsible for social stability, thus, avoiding unrest matters more for the promotion of party secretaries than governors, whose domain is economic growth.

To examine my theory, I assembled and analyzed a data set of provincial leaders’ promotions, both at the level of party secretaries and governors, who held office between 2003 and 2017. As a measure of social unrest, I used the number of labor strikes per million residents to account for differences in population between provinces. I find that provincial leaders’ ability to minimize social unrest increases their chance of promotion. While this effect is substantively large in all model specifications, it is statistically significant at 95% and 99% confidence level in nested models and at 90% level in fully specified models.

In addition, I find that better economic performance matters, as increases in gross regional product (per capita) improves one’s chance of promotion, while an increase in the unemployment rate dampens those chances.

Finally, I compare the likelihood of advancement of party secretaries and governors to check if political performance is more important for the party secretaries, and if economic performance is more important for the governors. My findings here are inconclusive: very few governors received a promotion to the Politburo, which makes my analysis only suggestive. Overall, compared to party secretaries, positive economic performance increases governors’ chances of promotion to a greater degree and their negative performance, too, decreases their chances to a greater extent.

This work has a number of limitations that I plan to address in my future research. First, labor strikes represent only one type of popular unrest (O’Brien, 2008). The CCP may see other types of unrest (e.g., land protests, injustice protests, or environment protest) as more challenging
or potentially more damaging to the CCP rule. In short, it is possible that my measure of social stability does not capture the true extent of how much the CCP values a provincial leader’s ability to manage unrest. At the same time, if true, then my results may have a conservative bias.

Second, there is a lot of variation in the amount of political damage that different labor strikes may generate. Some protests attract more people than others, and consequentially more media attention. Some are directed against state-owned enterprises, while others target private enterprises. In addition, the CCP may not care too much about workers protesting foreign firms, relative to domestic companies. In addition, not all strikes provoke the same reaction from the government: there is a large variation in the type of response that police employ. In my future work, I plan to measure these aspects of labor strikes to reflect the significance of labor protests, not only their count.

Third, while there is no denial that the Politburo is the center of political power and that its membership is the pinnacle of any official’s career, there are other types of promotion that this thesis disregards. Receiving a position of party secretary, or the same position in a more prestigious region, or becoming a member of the State Council could be considered as advancement in one’s career, and I plan to consider those types of promotion in my future work.

While economic performance is easier to quantify and, as a consequence to understand, political performance is important for the CCP officials’ career advancement (Edin, 2003; Xu, 2011). In this thesis, I have shown that one’s ability to minimize labor strikes is a contributing factor in the promotion of party secretaries to the Politburo. Thus, by evaluating the political performance of provincial leaders, the Party leaders signal that promoting social stability is important for the CCP’s rule, as this is one of the ways in which the CCP maintains a firm control over the Chinese society.
References


