

6

The Institutionalization of the Authoritarian Leadership in China

6.1 Introduction

A core argument in this book, as established in the Introduction chapter, is that the institutionalization of power succession in China plays a key role in maintaining the CCP's internal stability and its capability to maintain legitimacy. Leadership transitions have always been turbulent moments for authoritarian regimes (Clapham, 1988; Hughes and May, 1988). A challenging task for authoritarian regimes is to prevent the division between ruling elites during the process of power succession. Leadership transition rarely proceeds without violence in authoritarian regimes. Yet, owing to institutionalization, power succession in contemporary China has demonstrated a high degree of stability in the past two decades. This chapter studies the institutional development of the Chinese succession system and its impacts on party cohesion and legitimacy.

Before institutionalization, power transfer had caused endless and fierce power struggles and thus national chaos in China. The purge of Mao Zedong's two successors plunged the country into chaos, which indirectly led to economic stagnation and national upheaval. Afraid of elite divisions and brutal power struggles, the CCP has made great efforts to institutionalize its power succession system. This concern about a split in the leadership was firmed up following the protest of 1989. Arguably, decades of institutionalization has produced a relatively stable and predictable power-succession system.

The institutional development of power succession in China provides a dramatic example of "authoritarian resilience" – a hotly debated academic discussion inspired by the CCP's first smooth leadership transition in 2002. As Chapter 3 discussed, while some argue that the

institutional changes have made the authoritarian system more sustainable and served to strengthen the CCP's rule, others contend that this view overestimates the strength of the authoritarian system and ignores its vulnerability. The success of the leadership transition in 2012 further supports the existence of authoritarian resilience.

Although power struggles within the party remain intense in contemporary China, the institutionalization has undermined the negative effects of political struggles. Compared with power struggles before the institutionalization, the falls of Chen Xitong, Chen Liangyu, and Bo Xilai did not generate considerable levels of political instability and crisis. In addition, the removal of those high-level leaders followed certain institutional procedures, while the interrogation of Liu Shaoqi and his wife was launched without any formal resolution or any written document, as this chapter examines.

6.2 Regime legitimacy and power succession in China

The CCP's survival is determined by party cohesion and popular legitimacy, as has been established in the Introduction chapter. Obviously, institutionalization of power succession is crucial for minimizing the negative effects of power struggles and thereby maintaining the unity of the CCP leadership. Equally important, the institutionalization of power succession also plays a role in deciding the CCP's legitimacy. As Hughes and May (1988) argue, the "transfer of political power from one substantive ruler to another is generally regarded as a major test of the stability and legitimacy of a political system."

In the CCP's discourse, its ruling capability decides its legitimacy. Arguably, the CCP's ruling capability is built on its internal stability. In other words, this internal stability is a prerequisite for the CCP's ability to maintain its legitimacy by providing social stability, promoting economic growth, and defending national interests. The institutionalization of the leadership transition is a crucial factor in maintaining this internal stability. Thus, the institutionalization of power succession is a prerequisite for the CCP to maintain its legitimacy. As a professor of the Central Party School argues, the cadres' appointment system is key to the CCP's ruling capacity and thus to its legitimacy (Zhao, 2011). Figure 6.1 summarizes the argument raised above.

Most of the existing literature focuses on the CCP's popular support as a whole (i.e., its overall legitimacy). However, how has the CCP gained and lost its legitimacy? As Schubert (2008: 194) argues, "deficits in legitimacy which might occur at one point within this system

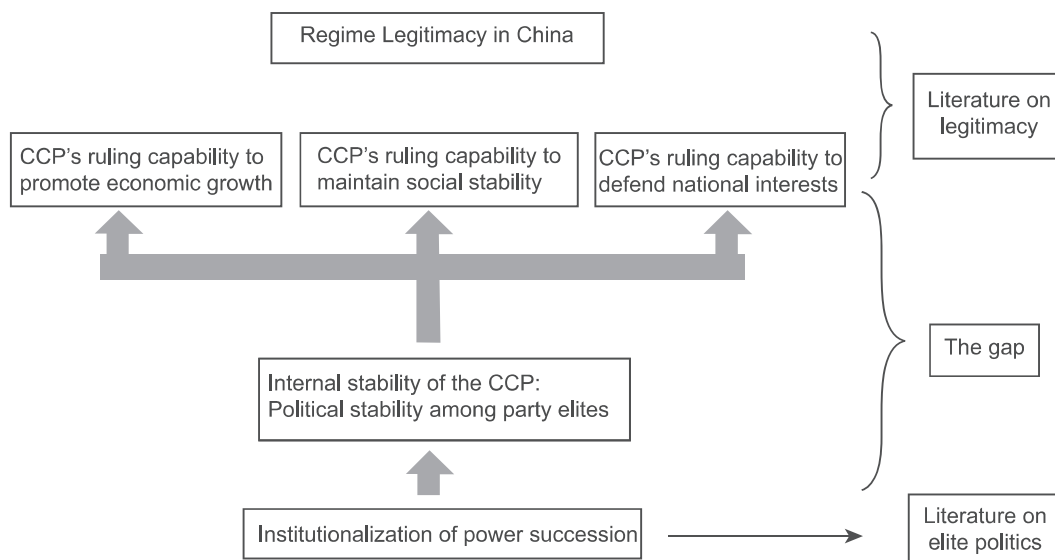


Figure 6.1 Regime legitimacy and the institutionalization of power succession

can be compensated by gains in legitimacy, at another point, resulting in overall regime support.” This is particularly true in China. Empirical studies show that the central government enjoys strong support in contrast with the relatively low legitimacy of the local states (Cai, 2008; Gilley, 2008; Saich, 2005; Tong, 2011; Wang, 2005a). In other words, the legitimacy of the central state has been compensating for the legitimacy deficit of the local states. As discussed in Chapter 3, because of the propaganda campaigns, the regime’s disaster relief and post-disaster reconstruction after the Wenchuan earthquake led to the increased legitimacy of the central government and the decreased legitimacy of local governments. Thus, partial legitimacy – of which the overall regime legitimacy is made up – is important to understand the CCP’s rule.

In order to analyze this partial legitimacy, it is necessary to disaggregate the Chinese political system and to examine potential “zones of legitimacy” at different levels of the bureaucracy (Schubert, 2008: 194). In studying this partial legitimacy in China, scholars propose different research agendas. On the one hand, some argue that the political elites are more important than the masses in determining regime legitimacy (Sandby-Thomas, 2014). The Weberian typology of legitimacy disaggregates society into three principal groups: chiefs, staff and masses. When applying this classification to the case of China, Sandby-Thomas identifies chiefs as the political elites who are at the administrative rank of county/division or above, and the staff as those cadres who are below the administrative rank of county/division, and the masses as the ordinary

people (Sandby-Thomas, 2014). Sandby-Thomas (2014) claims that, in terms of their significance to regime legitimacy, the rank should be the relationship between the elites and cadres, the relationship between the elites and masses, and the relationship between the cadres and masses. Sandby-Thomas's model makes a valuable contribution in highlighting the importance of the political elites; however, the administrative ranks of the Chinese political system are much more complicated, and therefore undermine the value of Weber's three strategic groups when applying to the case of China.¹

On the other hand, Schubert (2014) argues that the "elites and masses" and "cadres and masses" relationships are as important as the "elites and cadres" relationship, and the most important factor in partial legitimacy is "the lowest administrative level of the Chinese political system." Thus, Schubert's (2008) new research agenda emphasizes the micro-level of the political system, such as villages and counties. It is valid to a certain point that the local levels of the political system are important to regime legitimacy; however, in the highly centralized authoritarian system, party leaders have the overwhelming power to determine the legitimacy of the regime. In addition, as mentioned above, the central government has been compensating for a legitimacy deficit in the local states. This suggests that the partial legitimacy of the political system at the top is crucial to the overall legitimacy of the regime. As Walder (2004: 197) argues:

[T]he political elite of 500,000 cannot rule the country unless it can retain the obedience of 40 million state cadres... and if the elite maintains the discipline of state bureaucrats and the allegiance of the party members, it can withstand challenges from other groups in society, even in periods of economic hardship and social upheaval.

In this regard, the present chapter emphasizes the institutional development of the CCP hierarchy at the top level, in particular the party leaders whose administrative ranks are at vice-ministerial level or above. Arguably, in the highly centralized authoritarian system in China those party leaders are much more influential than any others in determining the legitimacy of the CCP.

So far, there is still no consensus over whether power succession in China is more institutionalized than in the past, or not. On the one hand, many are skeptical of the institutional development of leadership transition in China (Fewsmith, 2013; Shirk, 2002; Zheng and Lye, 2003). For example, Susan Shirk (2001: 139) contended that the

then key leaders – Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and Zhu Rongji – might not step down under the constraints of institutional rules, and thus Shirk concluded that the “trend toward institutionalization might not survive the transfer of power that, under the new rules, is scheduled to occur in 2002 at the 16th Party Congress.” This prediction, of course, proved to be wrong. On the other hand, many have recognized that power succession in China has been increasingly institutionalized (Guo, 2013; Huang, 2008; Lee, 2010; Miller, 2013; Teiwes, 2001).

Different views on institutionalization in this debate are related to contrary understandings of Chinese succession politics. While proponents of the claim that there is increased institutionalization argue that institutional rules have become a significant factor in selecting Chinese leaders nowadays, the opponents consider power succession to be a result of factional politics or a “black box operation” (Fewsmith, 2013; Li, 2012c: 3; Zheng and Lye, 2003). One of my studies finds that a candidate’s age (combined with the institutional rules) was one of the most important factors in selecting top leaders at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, a finding that lends strong support to the proponents of increased institutionalization (Zeng, 2013). Following this debate, the present chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the institutional development of the succession system in the past three decades.

6.3 Before institutionalization, power succession: a source of instability and crisis

Power succession can not only legitimize but also delegitimize political regimes. Power transition before institutionalization was a main source of crisis and instability, as in Mao Zedong’s era, when the lack of an institutionalized succession system led to a cruel power struggle within the party. In order to consolidate his power, Mao launched waves of radical mass campaigns that led to national upheaval and economic stagnation. In Mao’s China, similar to succession politics in contemporary North Korea (e.g., the fall of Jang Sung-taek), the power struggle was a life and death game. Mao’s first heir apparent, Liu Shaoqi, was defeated during the Cultural Revolution and died soon after his fall. Institutional rule in Mao’s era was so weak that the interrogation on the then PRC president Liu and his wife was launched without any formal resolution or any formal written document.

After the fall of Liu, Lin Biao became the new heir apparent. In 1969, Lin’s status was confirmed by the CCP constitution, which stated that “Comrade Lin Biao is a close ally and successor of Comrade Mao

Zedong.” However, two years later in 1971, Lin mysteriously died, his death coinciding with numerous waves of purges of his supporters. The CCP offered no explanation for nearly two years, until 1973, when Lin’s fall was acknowledged at the 10th CCP congress. The fall of Lin disillusioned many Chinese about Mao’s rule. Although Mao began to emphasize the unity of leaders – “stability and unity” – by 1975 (Mao, 1996), he still failed to prevent the power struggle in the then un-institutionalized political system. One month after Mao’s death in 1976, Hua Guofeng cooperated with military leaders to arrest the “Gang of Four,” including Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing. Afterwards, Hua used Mao’s note – that “with you in charge, I am at ease” – to justify his claim as Mao’s successor.

As discussed in Chapter 2, mass campaigns combined with endless waves of political purges during Mao’s rule had caused long-term political upheaval in China. The Cultural Revolution in particular seriously disrupted people’s normal lives and reduced normal economic activity. It also made the CCP less capable of delivering public goods to the society. As a result, the CCP’s popular support had significantly decreased, even before Mao died.

Recognizing the necessity of minimizing the negative effects of the power struggle, in the early 1980s Deng Xiaoping and his supporters launched ambitious projects to formalize the political system. Various institutional rules of power succession were formulated at that time. The grand project of “four transformations” is particularly notable, as it marks the starting point of the 30-year institutionalization in China. This project stipulated four criteria for selecting cadres: more revolutionary, younger, more knowledgeable, and more professional. Specific guidelines to adhere to these criteria include age limit, tenure system, step-by-step promotion, work experience, and educational qualifications, which are discussed below.

Compared with Mao’s period, power succession under the watch of Deng was far less damaging to the party’s rule. After Deng forced Hua Guofeng to step down, Hua was still a respected cadre and enjoyed full personal freedom. The fall of Hua was the first power transition in the PRC without bloodshed. In addition, there had been some relatively open discussions within the CCP about whether Hua was still suitable as the top leader, which was quite democratic when compared with Mao’s era. This helped to reduce the negative impact of power struggles on the legitimacy of the leadership. Although Deng laid a foundation for today’s stable power succession, he also expelled two of his heirs apparent – Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. The division among the elite had undermined the decision-making ability of the CCP when dealing

with the popular protests in 1989. This suggests that the level of institutionalization in Deng's era was still insufficient to preserve the internal stability of the CCP.

6.4 After institutionalization, power transition: predictable, smooth, orderly, and stable

In the post-strongman era, power succession has turned a new page. Elite politics has been much more stable than ever before owing to two key factors: the changing power distribution and the institutionalization of power succession. The existing literature on the subject of Chinese elite politics focuses on the former factor, but the role of institutionalization is not widely recognized. Many emphasize the fact that no single political group being willing or able to dominate succession politics is key to explaining the stable elite politics in contemporary China (Li, 2005; Nathan, 2003). However, institutional development also matters. Indeed, learning from the painful lessons of orderless succession, as mentioned above, the CCP has made impressive efforts to institutionalize its power succession in the past three decades. This reflects a key aspect of its authoritarian resilience – the CCP's ability to learn, which allows the party to adapt to the rapidly changing socioeconomic environment (Tsai and Dean, 2013).

In order to stay in power, institutionalization is a decision that the CCP leaders have to make. As the PRC's founders, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping acquired legitimacy from their personal authority rather than from their institutional posts; however, the power of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao – who were promoted from the bureaucratic system – was mainly conferred by their official posts instead of arising from their personal authority. Thus, contemporary Chinese leaders have to strengthen the existing institutional arrangements for consolidating their power. The continual institutionalization of power succession has formalized the process of selecting and removing leaders and thus developed a power-succession system with Chinese characteristics. The following section explores the institutional development and key features of the Chinese succession system.

6.4.1 Routinized turnover of political elites

The turnover of political elites reflects the effectiveness of the political system. If the level of political mobility is low, a bureaucratic system occupied by old leaders who refuse to retire will systematically push young elites out of the system and discourage new elites from joining

the system. It will indirectly contribute to the rise of external forces that might overthrow the rigid political system. In this sense, a rapid cycle of political elites helps the political system to co-opt young political elites and thus prevents divisions amongst the elite.

Political mobility is also relevant to the adaptability of the authoritarian system. Without a high turnover rate of political elites, the political system – occupied by a group of party elders who tend to resist change – can hardly be adaptive to a changing environment. In addition, incorporating younger leaders into the most prestigious bodies portrays a positive image of the CCP leadership as opposed to an image that suggests the party is governed by a group of party elders. In this sense, the high turnover rates is important to the vitality of CCP leadership. Chinese leaders clearly recognize the importance of routinized turnover of political elites. As Deng Xiaoping (1983: 397) warned:

If we...let the old and ailing stand in the way of young people who are energetic and able, not only will the four modernizations fail but the Party and state will face a mortal trail and perhaps perish.

In order to ensure a rapid cycle of political elites, the CCP has developed and practiced two specific rules: term limits and age limits.

Putting an end to the tenure of top leaders is one of the most challenging tasks for the CCP in institutionalizing its power succession, because there is no such tradition in Chinese culture.² The post of chairman belonged to Mao Zedong until his death. Before Deng Xiaoping took power, there were no effective institutional rules to regulate the terms of leaders. Recognizing the importance of term limits, the CCP began to implement a tenure system and incorporated it into the PRC constitution in 1982. This amended constitution ruled that president and vice-president of the PRC, chairman and vice-chairman of the People's Congress, and premier, vice-premier, and members of the State Council shall not serve for more than two consecutive terms. It officially announced the end of leaders' life-long tenures. In order to put this rule into practice, Deng Xiaoping set an example in handing over all his institutional posts. Nowadays, this term limit has become highly institutionalized – all Politburo members, except top leaders, have served no longer than two terms since 1997.

Unlike term limits that first regulated the top leaders, the early efforts (in the 1980s) towards establishing an age limit mainly focused on mid-level leaders. In 1982, the CCP announced the relevant rules to regulate the retirement system: minister level or equivalent cadres should usually

retire at 65 years old, and those at the deputy-minister level should usually retire at 60 years old (CCP, 1982). This age limit has since been gradually reinforced and developed to regulate the top leaders.

In Jiang Zemin's era, the specific retirement age of top leaders was established and strictly implemented. In 1997, the retirement age for the PSC members was set at 70 years old. In 1998, Qiao Shi retired from the post of People's Congress Chairman because of this new policy.³ In 2002, the retirement age was lowered to 68. Li Ruihuan – who had just turned 68 – retired; however, Luo Gan – who was 67 – was promoted into the PSC. This new retirement age has been retained and has widely been called the custom of “67 stay and 68 retire.” Many argue that retirement age served as a tool to force Jiang's political rival to relinquish power (Fewsmith, 2003a; Fewsmith, 2008; Fewsmith, 2013; Ou, 2012; Shirk, 2012). This is valid to a certain point, because there was much room to manipulate this rule during the initial process of its institutionalization. Jiang and his supporters could take advantage of their younger age and the relevant rules; however, to set up a specific rule to regulate retirement is actually significant progress as long as the rule-makers follow this rule themselves.

As mentioned above, some skeptics of institutionalization predicted that Jiang Zemin and his supporters would not follow the age-limit rule and step down in 2002. On the contrary, Jiang and his supporters strictly followed this rule, which further strengthened the rule's authority. In 2002, Zhu Rongji – who is considered a close supporter of Jiang (Li, 2001a; Miller, 1996) – retired from his post as the PRC premier, and Jiang Zemin handed over the top position of power to Hu Jintao – which marked the first smooth leadership transition of the PRC. In 2007, PRC vice-president, Zeng Qinghong, considered Jiang's most powerful supporter (Li, 2001a; Li and White, 2003), also retired from his post when he was just 68, not violating the “67 stay and 68 retire” rule. In the leadership transition of 2012, this retirement-age limit has become one of the most important factors in selecting the 18th PSC members (Zeng, 2013). In addition to the retirement age, a specific age limit for promotion was made at the 17th Party Congress: the age of new Politburo members should not exceed 63.

Figure 6.2 shows the age distribution of the PSC members in the past three decades. It shows that the retirement ages of 68 and 70 have been strictly implemented since the relevant rules were made. The strict implementation of age limits changed the age trends of the PSC and Politburo members. As indicated in Figure 6.3, the oldest member of the Politburo Ye Jianying in 1982 was 85 years old, in contrast with the youngest

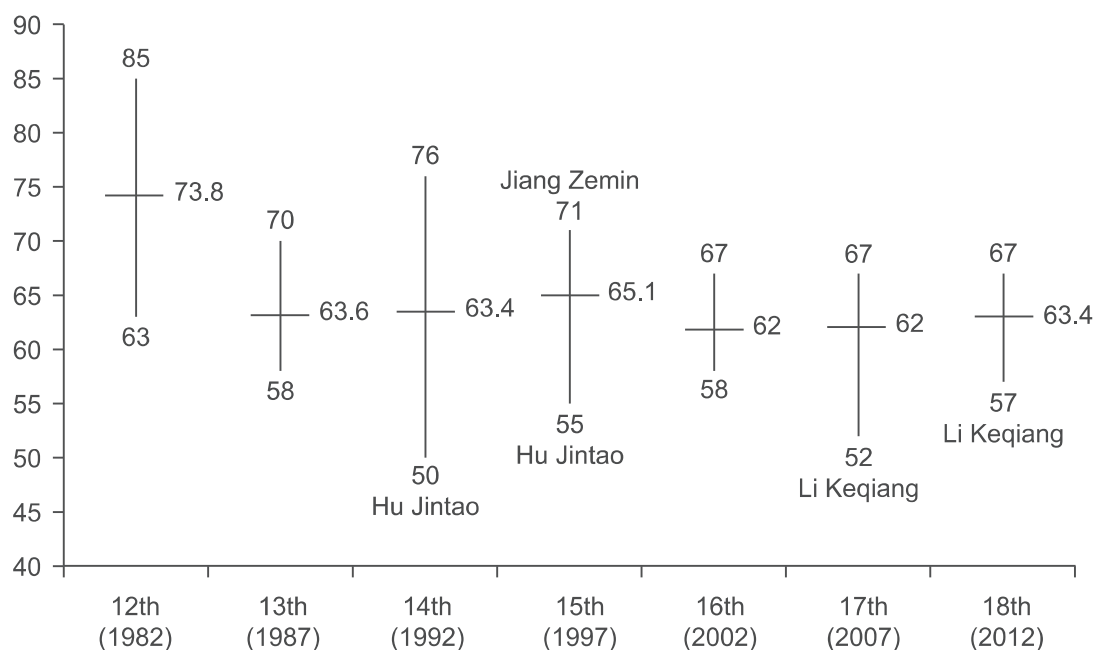


Figure 6.2 Age distribution of the Politburo Standing Committee (1982–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

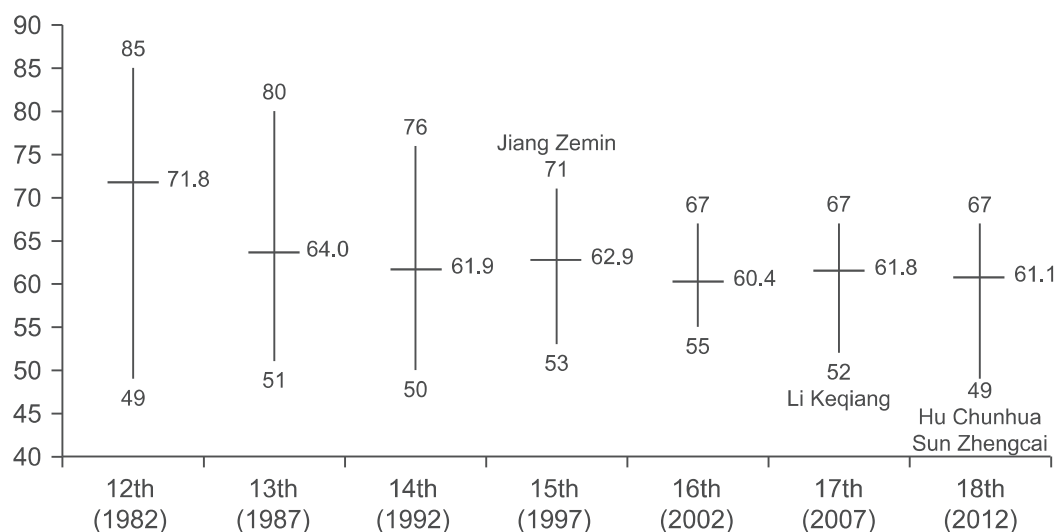


Figure 6.3 Age distribution of Politburo members in China (1982–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

member, who was 49 years old. The age difference between oldest and youngest Politburo members reached 36 years in 1982, compared with only 18 years in 2012. After 30 years of institutionalization, Chinese leaders are now much younger than before. Figure 6.4 shows the average age of leaders. The average age of the new PSC members in 2012 is 63.4 and that of the Politburo members is 61.1 – both averages are ten years

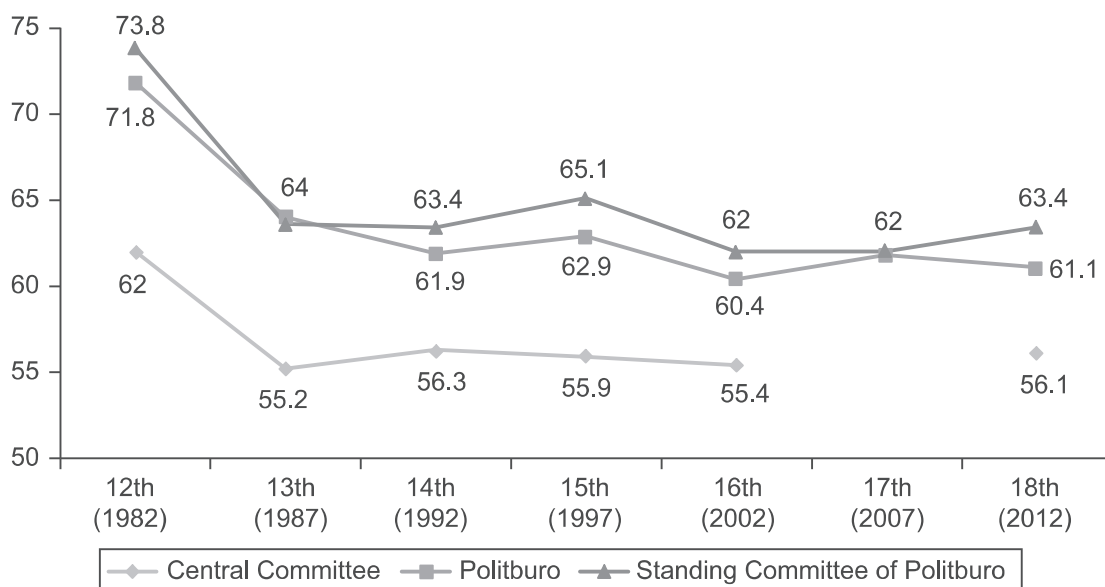


Figure 6.4 Average age of Chinese leaders when they were appointed (1982–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

younger than in 1982. Arguably, the growing institutionalization of term and age limits has achieved one of the key goals of “four transformations” – younger leaders.

In addition to younger leaders, the growing institutionalization of age/term limits also led to a rapid turnover of the leaders. Figure 6.5 shows that the turnover rate of Chinese leaders has been very high since the 1980s. The turnover rates of both the Central Committee and the Politburo reached over 60% in 2002 and 55% in 2012. In 2007, four out of the nine 16th PSC members retired; and in 2012, the turnover rate of the PSC exceeded 77%: seven out of the nine PSC members retired, including President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. In 2012, 113 members of the 17th Central Committee retired, and 91 remained in office; and 15 out of the 25 members of the 18th Politburo are new.

Figure 6.6 compares the turnover rate of the CCP Central Committee and the Politburo with that of the US Congress from 1983 to 2012. Although these institutions are very different, this comparison still reflects certain aspects of political mobility among powerful politicians in the two largest world economies. It indicates that the turnover rate of Chinese leading bodies has been at least 40% more than that of the US Congress. In 2012, the turnover rates of the US Senate and House were around 10%, in contrast with 56% of the members of the CCP Central Committee and the Politburo.

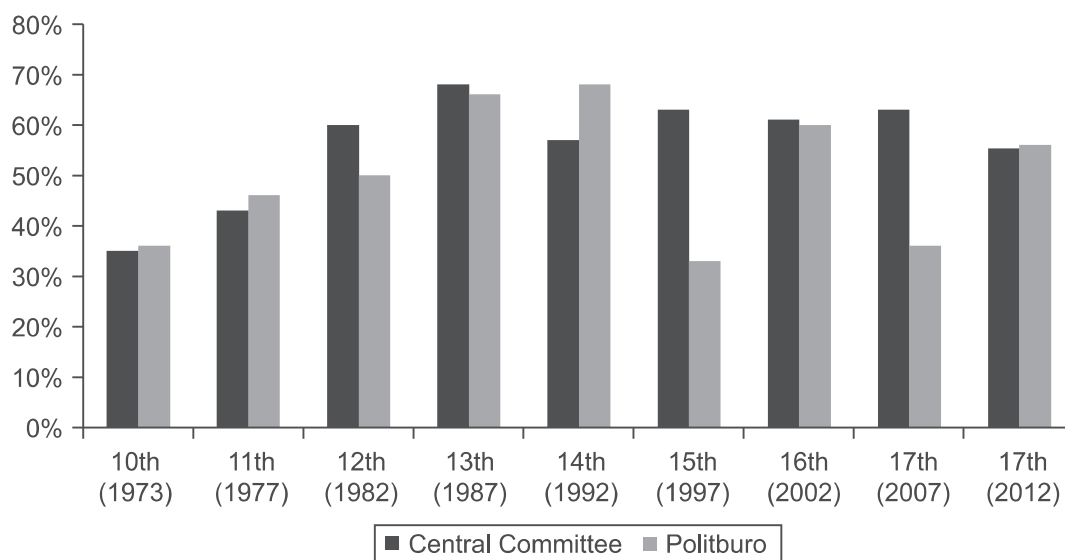


Figure 6.5 Turnover rate of the CCP Central Committee and the Politburo (1973–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

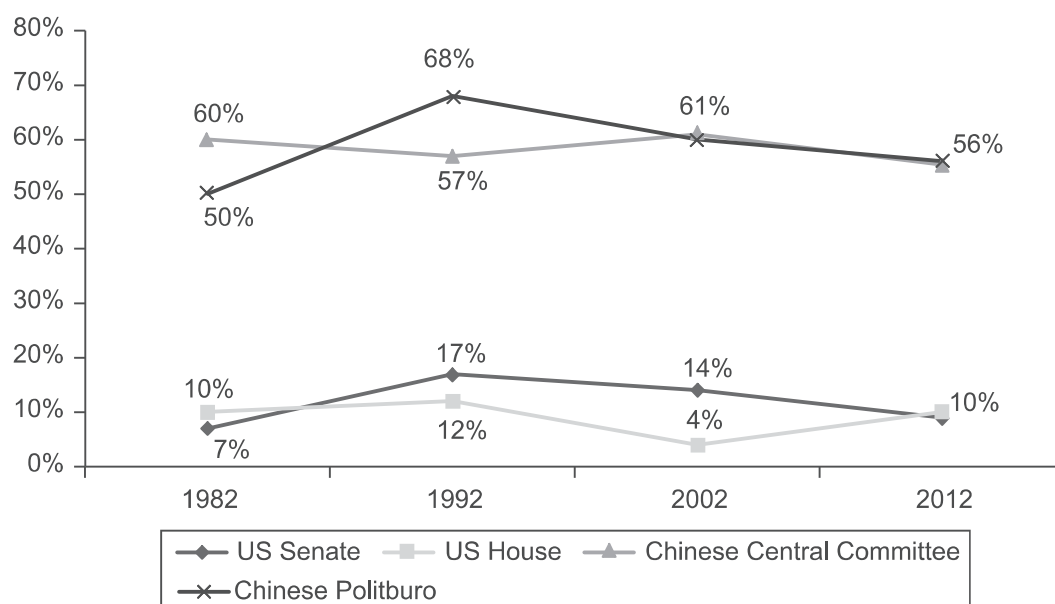


Figure 6.6 Turnover rates of American political representatives and Chinese leaders (1982–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

The high turnover rate of Chinese leaders indicates that the CCP has managed to select and remove its leaders by using its own rules – as opposed to liberal democratic elections. The succession system with Chinese characteristics has been effectively and efficiently recruiting new blood into its leadership, which helps to maintain regime stability and contributes to the CCP’s “adaptability.”

6.4.2 Meritocratic bureaucracy

As discussed in Chapter 5, political meritocracy is closely relevant to legitimacy. Without democratic elections, the selection procedures cannot provide as much procedural legitimacy as democratic procedures do; thus the legitimacy of the succession system heavily relies on the outcome (i.e., a meritocratic bureaucracy) rather than on procedures (i.e., elections). Chinese culture highly values the performance of rulers rather than how they come to power. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Chinese understanding of democracy has been shaped by Confucian doctrine – *minben*. A key difference between *minben* and liberal democracy is that the doctrine of *minben* assesses regime legitimacy according to the government's performance rather than to how the government ascends to power, while liberal democracy highly relies on the procedures of democratic elections to assess regime legitimacy. In this sense, the good performance of the cadres can compensate for the non-democratic procedures of their selection. In other words, high performance legitimacy can compensate for low procedural legitimacy and thus maintain the overall legitimacy of the regime.

Notably, before institutionalization, the selection and removal of leaders – such as Gao Gang and Rao Shushi – took place on a whim, depending on whether or not they were on the right side of the prevailing political climate. The number of provincial leaders who lost their jobs under Mao's rule was startling. It seemed that merit and ability were unimportant when it came to developing a political career, while personal contacts and factions were key. Nowadays, institutional rules have become a central factor in selecting PSC members, while patron–client ties have become less important. Specific institutional rules for training Chinese leaders include step-by-step promotion, the exchange of local cadres, and the succession track of heirs apparent.

Step-by-step promotion means that aspiring leaders usually advance level by level. For instance, in order to be eligible for Politburo membership a candidate should usually be a regular or alternate member of the Central Committee or a minister-level official. This promotion mode helps the leaders to broaden their visions, increase their leadership experiences, and hone their skills. Since the 1990s, most regular members of the Politburo have followed the step-by-step promotion mode. Almost all leaders have followed this promotion mode except in establishing heirs apparent.

Many argue that top Chinese leaders are well-trained and experienced before they assume power, owing to step-by-step promotion (Bell, 2012;

Zhang, 2012). Theoretically, this institutional rule also provides a way of filtering out incapable leaders, because there are many opportunities to test their ability. Provincial administration is an important ground upon which to examine leaders' capability and skills. With China's rapid economic growth, many provinces are now much bigger than many countries, not only in terms of population but also in terms of total economic output (Li, 2010a; Zhang, 2012). Thus, Zhang (2012) argues that "it takes extraordinary talent and skills to govern a typical Chinese province, which is on average the size of four to five European states. Indeed, with the Chinese system of meritocracy in place, it is inconceivable that people as weak and incompetent as George W. Bush or Yoshihiko Noda of Japan could ever get to the top leadership position."

The exchange of local cadres is also used to curtail the localism and to broaden the vision and experience of local leaders. The transfer of cadres in different departments and provinces (except for Shanghai) has been effectively implemented since Jiang's era. Most PSC members have abundant experience in administering provinces. Hu Jintao, in particular, used to serve as secretary of the Communist Youth League and also was the head of Gansu province and Tibet. All the 18th PSC members (except Liu Yunshan) had been committee heads of at least two provinces or key cities. Xi Jinping used to be the head of Fujian Province, Zhejiang Province, and City of Shanghai; and Li Keqiang had been the head of Henan and Liaoning.

Built on step-by-step promotion and the exchange of local cadres, the succession track of heirs apparent has been increasingly institutionalized since Jiang's era. Many posts are reserved for heirs apparent of the general secretary and premier in order to make them better prepared. As indicated in Table 6.2, Hu Jintao was appointed to the roles of vice president of the PRC in order to be exposed to foreign affairs; to vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) to gain military knowledge; and as chancellor of the Central Party School in order to handle ideological affairs before becoming the top leader. Xi Jinping followed the same succession track. Zhu Rongji, Wen Jiabao, and Li Keqiang served as vice premiers for more than four years before they became premiers. Now, the CCP seems deliberately to normalize the rule that heirs apparent of the general secretary and premier should serve in the PSC for at least one term before succession. This is designed to make the new general secretary and premier more familiar with national affairs before they inherit the top posts.

The CCP has also been keen in selecting well-educated cadres. Knowledge is one of the four criteria for selecting leaders in the "four

transformations” project. Partly because of this project, more and more educated cadres have been appointed into the top leadership since the 1980s. Figure 6.7 shows the changing educational credentials of Politburo members in the past decades. In 1982, when “four transformations” had just been incorporated by the party constitution, only 4% of Politburo members had received a college education. Twenty years later, only 4% of Politburo members had not received a higher education. In 2012, over 68% of the 18th Politburo members held masters’ or doctorate degrees. In particular, both the new president and premier hold doctorates from the top two Chinese universities: Xi Jinping received a PhD in law from Tsinghua University, and Li Keqiang was awarded a PhD in economics from Peking University.

Another important change in leaders’ educational qualifications is the academic discipline (the majors of the leaders’ highest academic degree). Most leaders of the third and fourth generations are technocrats who studied engineering or natural sciences in higher education, in contrast with the mainstream majors of social sciences and humanities in the fifth generation. Figure 6.8 shows the academic disciplines of PSC members from 1992 to 2012. This figure indicates that most of the 14th to 17th PSC members studied engineering or natural sciences. In the 18th PSC, only Yu Zhengsheng was an engineer, and the remaining six members studied social sciences and humanities. In the past two decades, the high growth rate of the Chinese economy benefited from the leaders’ technocratic

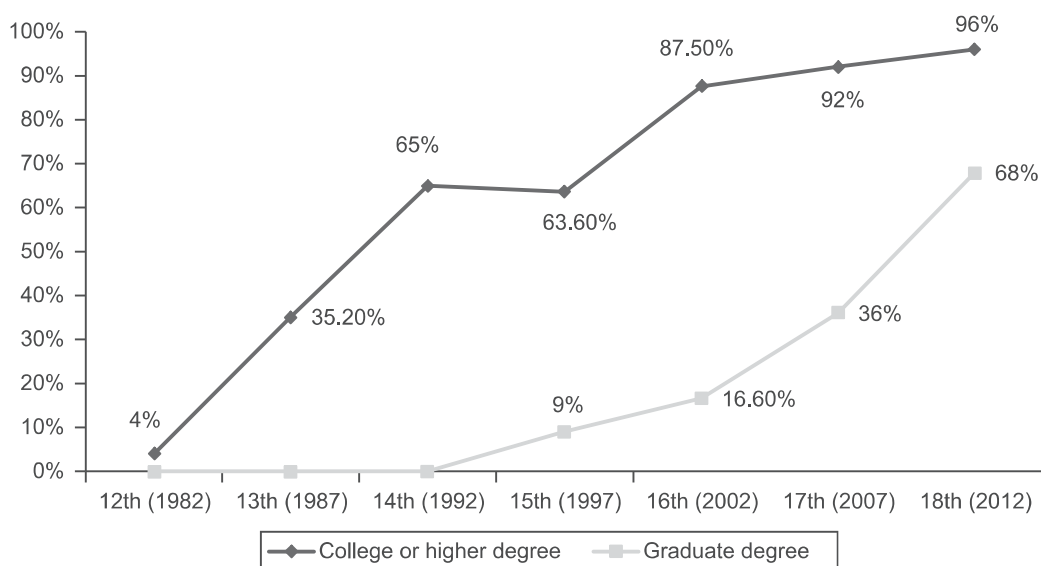


Figure 6.7 Changing tendency of educational qualifications of Politburo members (1982–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

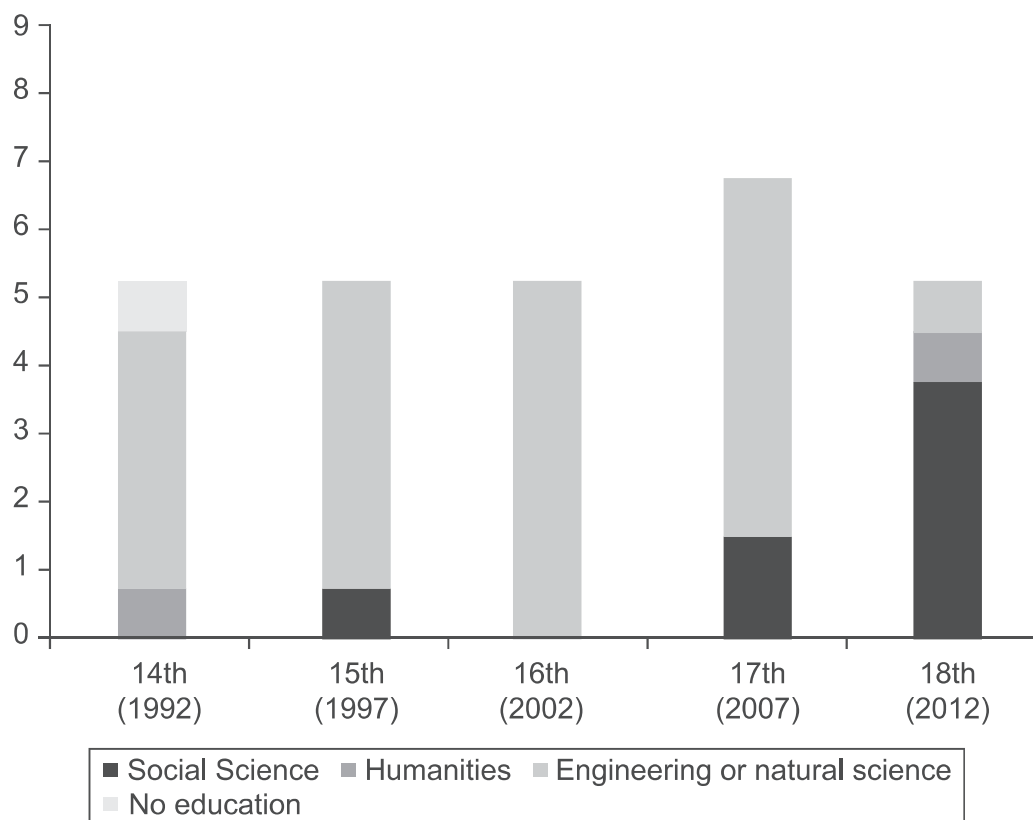


Figure 6.8 Academic disciplines of PSC members (1992–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

backgrounds, enabling them to encourage economic efficiency. However, this economic growth also created a huge gap between poor and rich. The changing expertise of leaders might help the state to increase its emphasis on economic equality. Some Chinese intellectuals argue that the new leaders who studied social sciences and humanities will emphasize social justice, rule of law, and governance (Sun and Hu, 2012).

Notably, the value of Chinese officials' qualifications has been widely questioned (Li, 2008a; Pei, 2012). Many Chinese cadres attended their graduate programs when they still worked full time as busy officials; many of their qualifications were awarded from part-time program or party schools; and some cadres even asked secretaries to write their dissertations. Thus, the real value of their educations is questionable. Pei (2012) argues that, in terms of their education, Chinese officials have cheated in order to compete for power. Nonetheless, an undeniable fact is that the educational level of the Chinese leadership has been significantly improved in the past three decades. There is little doubt that Xi Jinping's leadership team has been much more educated than was the revolutionary generation.

Nowadays, educational qualification has become an important criterion for selecting Chinese cadres. Empirical studies show that educational

qualifications have boosted the chance of promotion in China (Lee, 1991; Shih, *et al.*, 2012; Sun and Hu, 2012). Improving one's resume is a practical reason for Chinese cadres to pursue part-time educational qualification; however, we should not ignore the fact that the CCP is a learning party. The party has institutionalized a learning system to organize lectures and study groups for the Politburo members in order to train their leaders (Tsai and Dean, 2013). Many senior officials did not receive a full education when they were young, mainly because of the political unrest and limited educational resources at that time. In light of China's becoming increasingly difficult to govern, it is reasonable for them to attend training or degree programs in order to meet work needs. The proportion of part-time or party-school degrees will definitely decline with generational change in the future.

6.4.3 Representation

In democratic countries, the composition of voters would translate to certain kinds of representation in the leadership through regular elections. Although there are no such kinds of elections in China, the CCP has been keen to build a representative leadership for maintaining stability and legitimacy.

The CCP clearly recognizes the importance of co-opting ethnic minorities. In order to legitimize its leadership, the party developed several institutional rules – certain proportions of ethnic minorities at various levels of party and governmental organs – to promote ethnic minorities elites systematically into its leadership (Mackerras, 2003: 21; Shih, *et al.*, 2012). Empirical study shows that ethnic minorities are more likely to be promoted in the CCP Central Committee (Shih, *et al.*, 2012). Figure 6.9 shows the proportion of ethnic minorities in the CCP Central Committee. It suggests that ethnic minorities have been slightly over-represented in Chinese leadership compared with the proportion of ethnic minorities in the entire Chinese population (8.49%) (China, 2011). Thus, in terms of quantity, ethnic minorities are well-represented in the CCP leadership; however, the distribution of ethnic minorities in the Central Committee is in imbalance.

Figure 6.10 shows the proportion of ethnic minorities in the Central Committee, the Politburo and the PSC. It indicates that the higher the party rank, the fewer the ethnic minorities. If we apply the population proportion as a standard, from 1982 to 2012 ethnic minorities have been overrepresented in alternate members of the Central Committee, approximately well-represented in regular members of the Central Committee, and underrepresented in the Politburo and the PSC. A

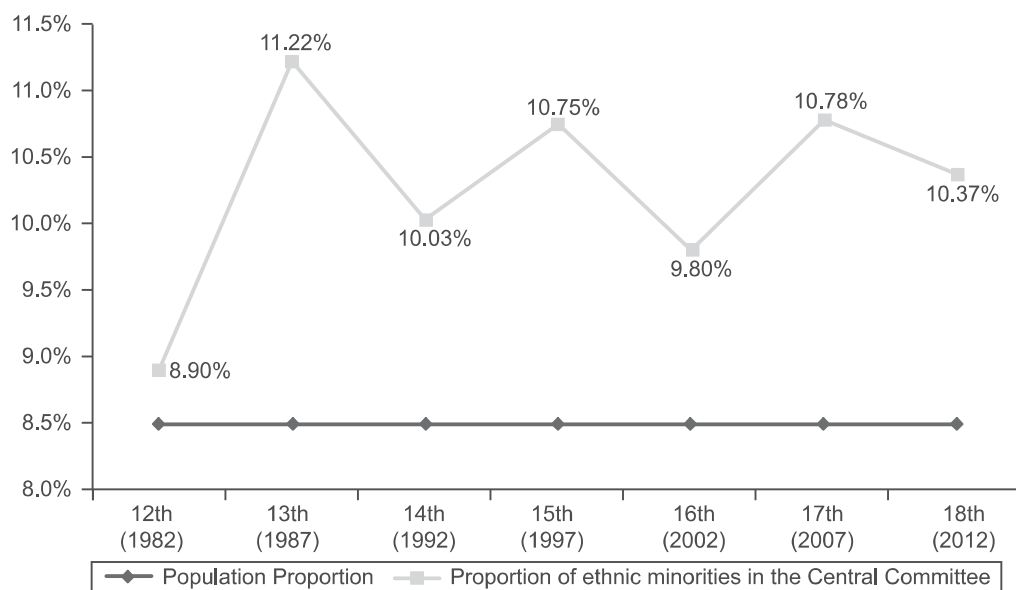


Figure 6.9 Proportion of ethnic minorities in the CCP Central Committee (1982–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

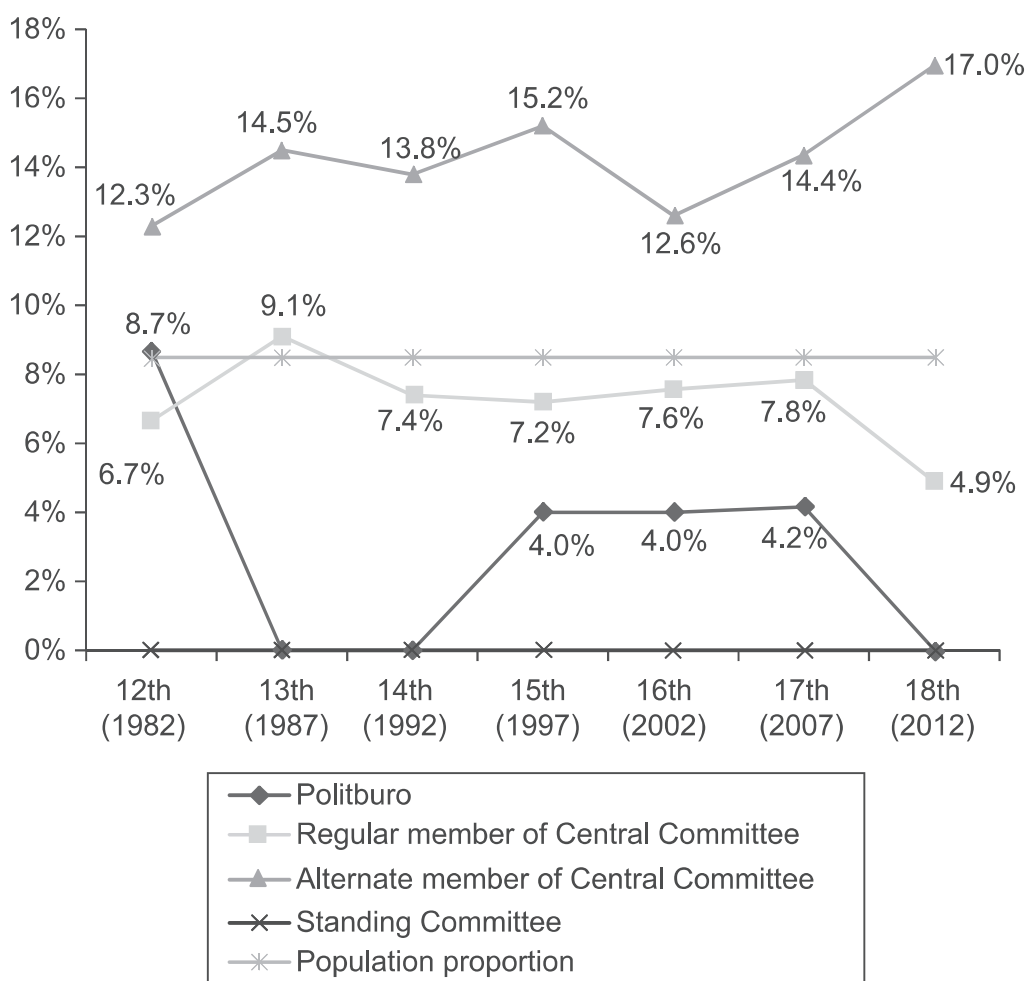


Figure 6.10 The representation of ethnic minorities in the CCP Central Committee and the Politburo (1982–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

possible interpretation is that, at the lower level, the CCP wants to ensure that a certain percentage of positions are reserved for ethnic minorities; however, at the higher levels (e.g., the Politburo and the PSC), the CCP is less able to do that because of more intense competition.

Similar to the representation of ethnic minorities, the CCP has also been keen to build a symbolic image of female representation. A higher representation of women in leadership positions would also help to improve governance. Bell (2012), for example, argues that a higher representation of women in the Chinese leadership will help the government to “rule in a compassionate and humane way.” Indeed, Chinese women are underrepresented at all levels of cadres. Figure 6.11 compares the proportion of the mid- and high-level female cadres in 2000 with those in 2009. It indicates that the proportions of female cadres slightly increased by 2009 but they are still underrepresented in the Chinese government. Notably, the Organization Department of the CCP has made institutional rules to stipulate the proportion of women in various levels of government. In order to obey this rule, local governments have to select women into their leadership, but they are more likely to appoint women into the deputy position (*fu zhi*) or to symbolic posts (*xu zhi*) (Wei, 2012).

Figure 6.12 presents female representation in the leadership. It indicates that the distribution of female leaders is similar to that of ethnic

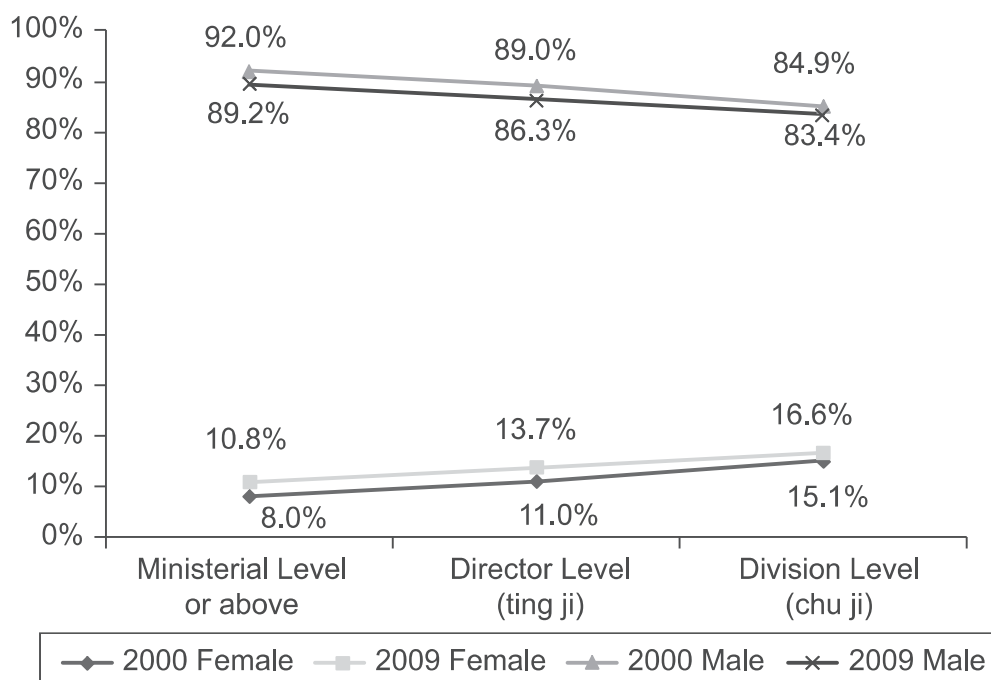


Figure 6.11 Proportion of mid- and high-level female cadres (2000–2009)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

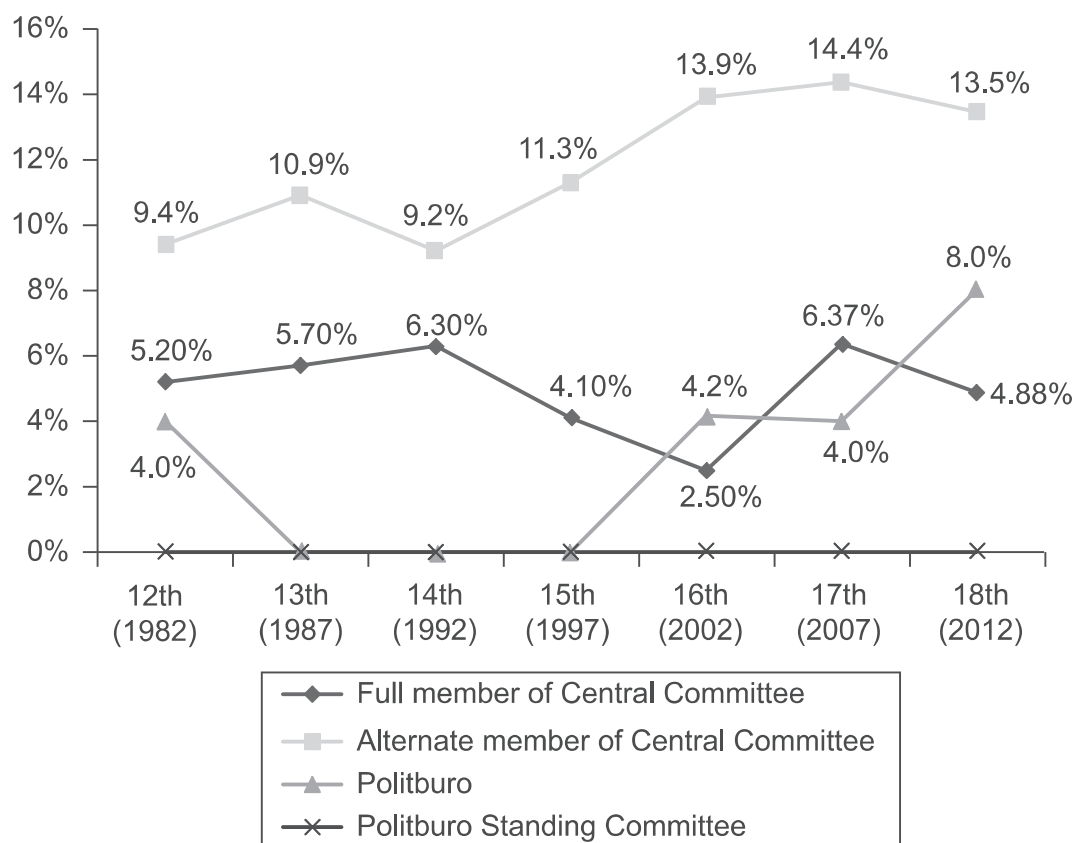


Figure 6.12 Female representation in Chinese leadership (1982–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

minorities – the higher the party rank, the lower the proportion. This is perhaps also because the competition becomes more intense the higher the party rank, and thus the party is less able to concern itself with gender representation.

Unlike the symbolic representation of ethnic minority and female, the CCP has carefully constructed some checks and balances among organizations and regions. This organization/regional representation has been institutionalized for ensuring that all major party organs and regions have voices at the highest level.⁴ For example, a “one province administration, two full seats” quota has been strictly implemented in the CCP Central Committee since 1997 (Li and White, 2003: 576). Some Central Committee members might be transferred to other regions or promoted to work in Beijing; however, the equal distribution of membership has been strictly implemented when they are elected into the Committee (Li, 2012b). The membership of the Central Committee is evenly distributed to representatives of each region – usually party chief and governor. The two most important ethnic minority regions sometimes get more seats. For example, Tibet had three seats in 2002 and 2007; Xinjiang had

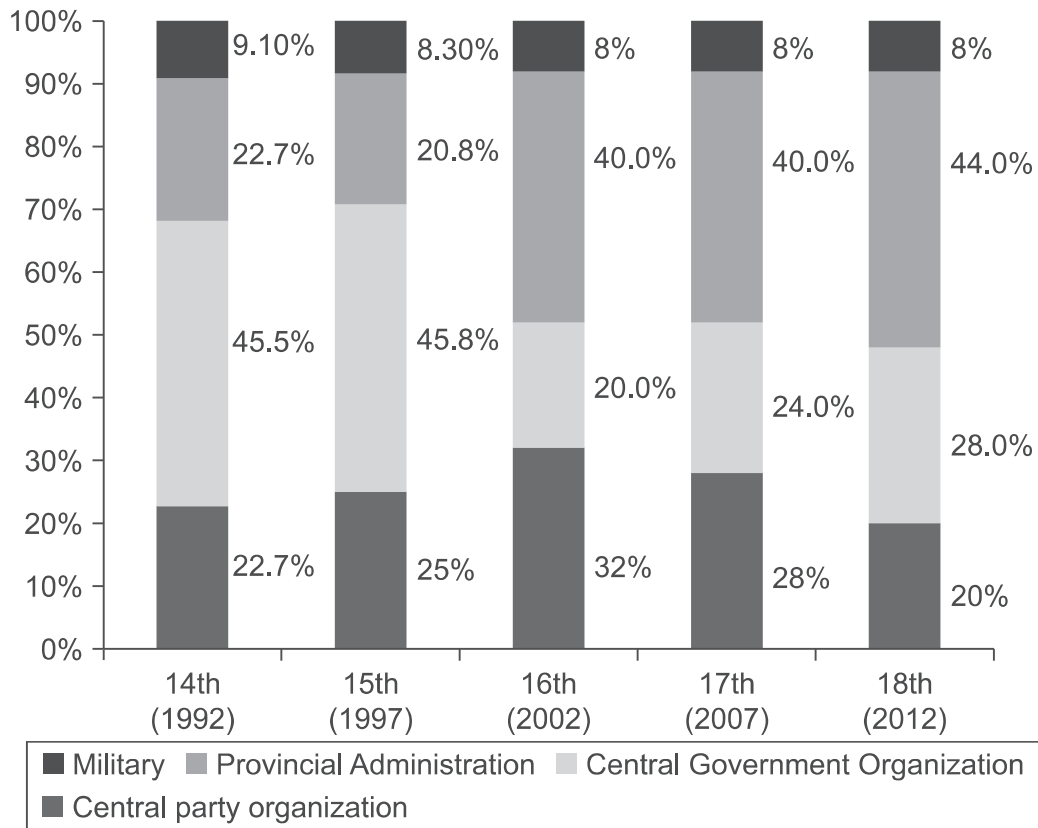


Figure 6.13 Organizational representation of Politburo members (1992 –2012)
 Source: Zeng, 2014b.

four seats in 2002 and 2007, and three seats in 2012. Notably, all ethnic minority regions have at least one local ethnic minority leader who is also an 18th Central Committee member. It again suggests the CCP’s deliberate efforts to enhance the stability of ethnic minority regions and increase the legitimacy of leadership by co-opting ethnic minority elites.

Needless to say, some key regions are more influential in the top decision-making bodies as their leaders are usually Politburo members. Figure 6.13 shows the Politburo members’ bureaucratic affiliations when they were elected. It indicates that the proportion of leaders from provincial administrations and central government organizations in the Politburo has been increasing at the expense of party organizations’ representation. Provincial leaders have been the largest component of Politburo members since 2002. 44% of the 18th Politburo members were provincial leaders when they were elected. Table 6.1 shows the regional representation in the Politburo in the past decade. The representation of three major groups of Chinese regions in the Politburo – municipalities

Table 6.1 Regional representation in the Politburo (2002–2012)

		16th Politburo (2002)	17th Politburo (2007)	18th Politburo (2012)
Municipalities directly under the central government	Beijing	Jia Qinglin, Liu Qi	Wang Qishan, Liu Qi	Guo Jinglong
	Shanghai	Huang Ju Chen Liangyu	Xi Jinping	Han Zheng, Yu Zhengsheng
	Chongqing		Wang Yang	Zhang Dejiang ⁷
	Tianjin	Zhang Lichang	Zhang Gaoli	Zhang Gaoli
Ethnic minorities autonomous regions	Xinjiang Inner Mongolia	Wang Lequan	Wang Lequan	Zhang Chunxian Hu Chunhua
Coastal provinces (includes Shanghai and Tianjin)	Guangdong	Li Changchun	Zhang Dejiang	Wang Yang Sun Chunlan
	Fujian			
	Zhejiang	Zhang Dejiang		
	Jiangsu	Hui Liangyu	Li Yuanchao	
	Liaoning		Li Keqiang	
	Shandong	Wu Guanzheng		
	Sichuan	Zhou Yongkang		Liu Qibao
	Jilin			Sun Zhengcai
Shannxi			Zhao Leji	
Hubei	Yu Zhengsheng	Yu Zhengsheng		

Note: Bo Xilai was a Politburo member before he was removed, and therefore this seat can be considered to be reserved for the Chongqing party chief.

Source: (Zeng, 2014b).

directly under the central government, ethnic minorities' autonomous regions (e.g., Xinjiang), and a coastal, developed province (e.g., Guangdong) – has shown certain signs of institutionalization. This institutionalized representation is perhaps an attempt to protect the interests of key regions in the top decision-making process.

Also institutionalized is the rule that party chiefs of all four municipalities directly under the Central government are usually Politburo members, and their mayors are at least the Central Committee members. Beijing and Shanghai, in particular, are overrepresented in the Politburo. As indicated in Table 6.1, Beijing had two seats in the 16th (Jia Qinglin and Liu Qi) and the 17th (Wang Qishan and Liu Qi) Politburos, and both Jia Qinglin and Wang Qishan were promoted into the PSC afterwards. Shanghai also had two Politburo seats in 2002 and 2012; and four out of five Politburo representatives of Shanghai have been promoted to the

PSC in the past decade. It reflects the overwhelming political influence of Beijing and Shanghai in Chinese politics.

In addition to regional representation, organizational representation is another important factor in selecting leaders. New chiefs of some critical organizations are usually selected from internal candidates. For example, Liu Yunshan was appointed as the head of propaganda, largely because of his career experience in propaganda. This consideration is designed to ensure that the new leaders have abundant experience in their assigned specialized areas.

The representation of key organizations in the Politburo has been institutionalized to a certain extent in order to maintain the influence of those organizations in the decision-making at the top. As indicated in Figure 6.13, the PLA has held at least two seats (8%) in the Politburo since 1992. Notably, the State Council, rather than the military, is the best-represented organization at the top-level authority, which reflects the CCP's emphasis on economic development. Five of the 18th Politburo members⁵ and three of the 17th Politburo members⁶ served in the State Council when they were elected. Figure 6.14 shows the working units of the 18th Central Committee members: 26% of the 18th Central Committee members worked in the State Council when they were elected compared with 21% of those who worked in the military. Figures 6.13 and 6.14 indicate that local governments are the largest component of the Politburo and the Central Committee, and the State

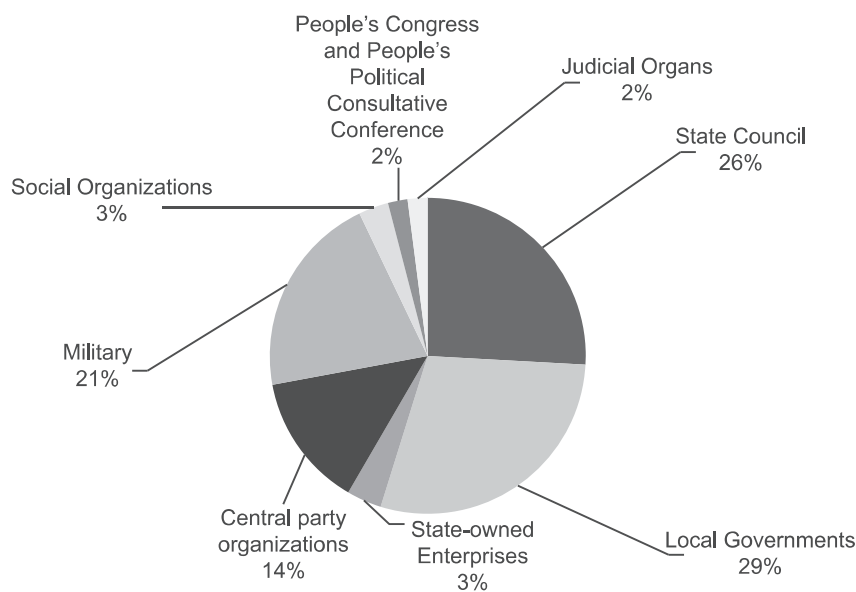


Figure 6.14 Working units of 18th CCP Central Committee members

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

Council is the second largest. It is notable that the People's Congress and People's Political Consultative Conference hold only 2% of the seats in the 18th Central Committee. This low percentage reflects the real political influence of these two organizations in China, although the rule – that their heads be PSC members – has been institutionalized.

6.5 What remains to be done?

After exploring institutional development over the past three decades, this section analyzes two crucial aspects of power succession that need to be institutionalized further. As mentioned, even institutionalization might be subject to factional manipulation. The current level of institutionalization might not be able to maintain the internal stability of the CCP in the long run, as evidenced by the challenge from Bo Xilai, who had publicly campaigned for a PSC seat. The future development of the PSC and the contested elections are particularly noteworthy.

Over the past decades, decision-making at the top has been gradually moving towards a collective leadership in which power and responsibility is divided. The institutional arrangement of the PSC was set to formalize a collective leadership. Some respond positively to the institutional development of the PSC. For example, Hu Angang (2012a) argues that the current institutional setting of the PSC – “a collective presidentialism with Chinese characteristics” – is key to China's success in the past decade. It is valid to argue that the institutional settings of the PSC and Politburo have been much more institutionalized than ever before; however, the extent of institutionalizations are not sufficient. Neither the size of the PSC nor its members' specific division of work are fully institutionalized.

As indicated in Figure 6.15, the number of PSC members has hovered between five and nine over the past three decades. The downsizing of the PSC in 2012 led to many different interpretations. Some argue that it was because the leaders in charge of internal security (especially Zhou Yongkang) were too powerful (Mattis, 2012). Li Cheng argues that it is a “direct signal that political reform is under way,” because Zhou obstructed the progress of political reform (Report, 2012). It is also argued that the downsizing of the PSC might increase the efficiency of decision-making (Hart, 2012; Report, 2012) and give more authority to Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang (Report, 2012).

Others argue that the changing size of the PSC is simply a result of factional struggles. For example, Fewsmith interprets the expanding membership of the PSC in 2002 as Jiang Zemin's attempt to restrict Hu Jintao's power (Fewsmith, 2008; Ou, 2012), and the downsizing of the

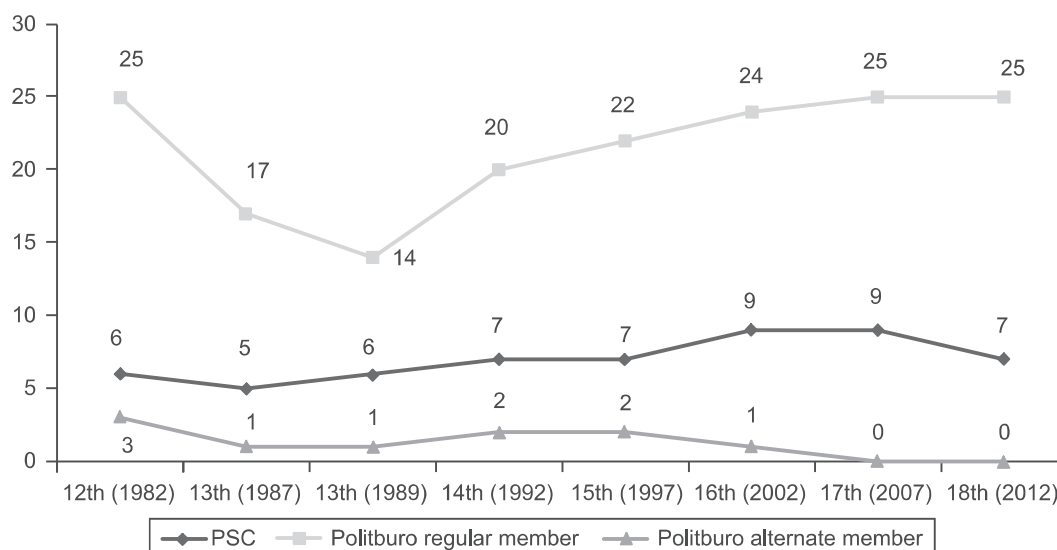


Figure 6.15 Size of the Politburo and its Standing Committee (1982–2012)

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

PSC in 2012 as a way to prevent Hu's supporters – Li Yuanchao and Wang Yang – from entering the PSC (Ou, 2012). In this regard, as political manipulation might undermine the effects of institutional rules, it is important to maintain a stable number of the PSC in order to leave out rooms for political manipulation.

The division of the PSC members' work responsibilities also needs to be institutionalized further. Table 6.2 lists the positions of leadership held by the PSC members. It shows that not until 1992 did the PSC reserve seats regularly for the chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the PRC president, or the chairman of the People's Congress. The lack of representatives at the top leadership is one reason why the People's Congress and the CPPCC are "rubber stamps." Since 1992, it has become the norm that the PRC president, the premier, the chairmen of the Congress and the CPPCC are PSC members; however, the assigned areas of other PSC members – except the secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the executive vice-Premier – have been changing all the time.

Moreover, the practice of the contested election is also notable. The CCP has been practicing elections to select leaders since 1957. However, Chinese elections are very different from those in democratic countries: this refers to the official discourse of "socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics." The uncontested election (*deng e xuanju*) and the contested election (*chae xianju*) are the two principal types of Chinese elections. An uncontested election is a type of election that

Table 6.2 Politburo Standing Committee members' leadership positions in major institutions (1982–2012)

	12th (1982)	13th (1987)	13th (1989)	14th (1992)	15th (1997)	16th (2002)	17th (2007)	18th (2012)
General Secretary of Central Committee	Hu Yaobang	Hu Yaobang	Jiang Zemin	Jiang Zemin	Jiang Zemin	Hu Jintao	Hu Jintao	Xi Jinping
President of PRC	Li Xiannian (1983)			Jiang Zemin (1993)	Jiang Zemin	Hu Jintao (2003)	Hu Jintao	Xi Jinping (2013)
Vice President of PRC					Hu Jintao (1998)	Zeng Qinghong (2003)	Xi Jinping (2008)	
Chairman of CMC	Deng Xiaoping		Jiang Zemin	Jiang Zemin	Jiang Zemin	Hu Jintao (2004)	Hu Jintao	Xi Jinping
Chairman of People's Congress	Ye Jianying			Qiao Shi	Li Peng (1998)	Wu Bangguo (2003)	Wu Bangguo	Zhang Dejiang
Premier	Zhao Ziyang	Li Peng	Li Peng	Li Peng	Zhu Rongji (1998)	Wen Jiabao (2003)	Wen Jiabao	Li Keqiang (2013)
Executive Vice- Premier		Yao Yilin	Yao Yilin	Zhu Rongji ⁸	Li Lanqing (1998)	Huang Ju	Li Keqiang (2008)	Zhang Gaoli (2013)
Chancellor of Central Party School				Hu Jintao (1993)	Hu Jintao	Zeng Qinghong	Xi Jinping	Liu Yunshan
Secretary of Central Commission for Discipline Inspection	Chen Yun	Qiao Shi	Qiao Shi		Wei Jianxing	Wu Guanzheng	He Guoqiang	Wang Qishan
Secretary of Central Commission for Politics and Law		Qiao Shi	Qiao Shi			Luo Gan	Zhou Yongkang	
Chairman of CPPCC				Li Ruihuan (1993)	Li Ruihuan (1998)	Jia Qinglin (2003)	Jia Qinglin	Yu Zhengsheng
Other posts		Hu Qili	Song Ping	Liu Huaqing (VP of CMC)		Li Changchun	Li Changchun	
In total	6	5	Li Ruihuan 6	7	7	9	9	7

Note: Zhu was elected as the vice premier in 1991 and became the first vice-premier in 1993.

Source: (Zeng, 2014b).

has the same number of nominees and elected candidates. A contested election or differential election refers to those elections that have more candidates than elected seats. Before 1987, the uncontested election was the only type of election in China. The contested election was officially added into the party constitution and experimented with in electing the 13th Central Committee members in 1987, and a few high-level leaders, including two former ministers of the Propaganda Department, Zhu Houze and Deng Liqun, lost this election. Since then, the CCP has gradually institutionalized contested elections in selecting the Central Committee members (Yan, *et al.*, 2012).⁷

Figure 6.16 shows the difference in the proportion of nominated and elected seats in the Central Committee and the Central Discipline Inspection Commission in the past decade. It indicates that this proportion has gradually increased at each party congress. In this regard, Chinese elections have been improving – but at a very slow pace. Liberal

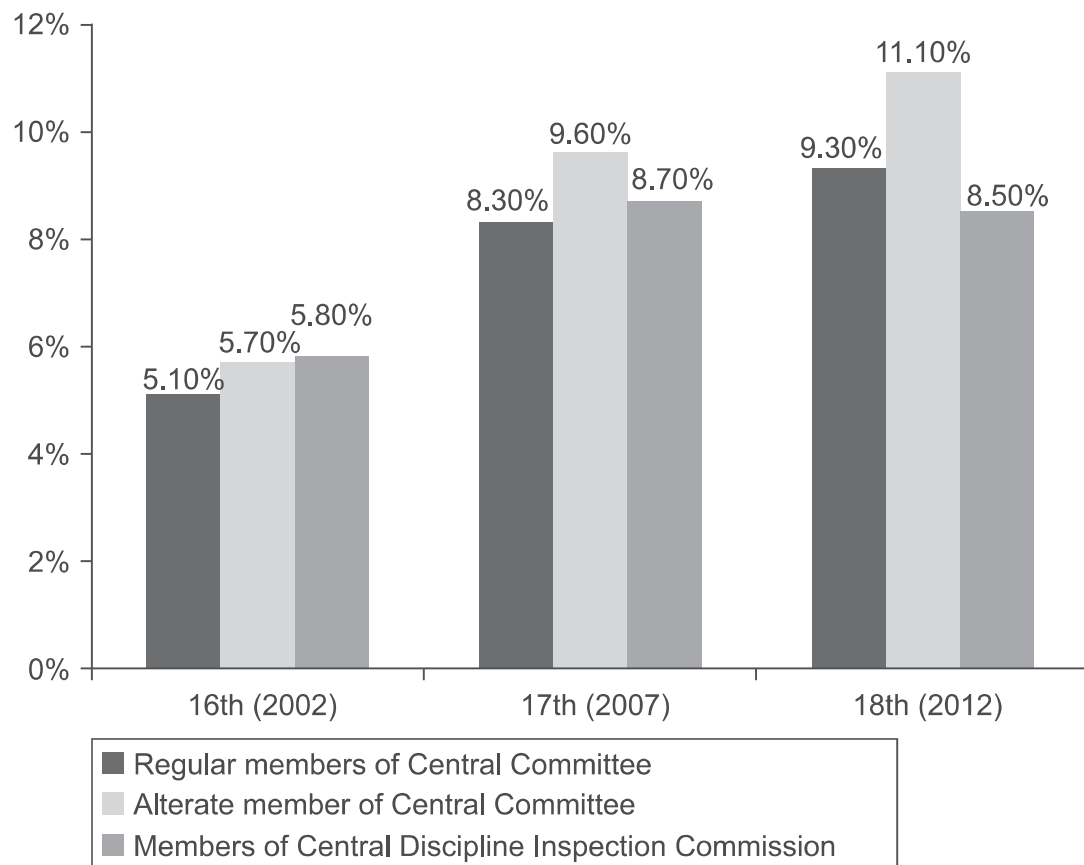


Figure 6.16 Ratio showing the difference between the number of nominees and the number of elected seats (cha e bi li) in the Central Committee and the Central Discipline Inspection Commission

Source: Zeng, 2014b.

democracy and competitive elections are still very sensitive in China, and those efforts to practice elections were designed to *strengthen* rather than *democratize* the party – although these two are not necessarily contradictory. Nonetheless, the contested elections of Chinese leaders provide a good starting point for practicing intra-party democracy. It might be valid for the CCP to claim that the immediate implementation of direct elections might cause tremendous social instability. Thus, the gradual process of increasing the proportion of nominees in the elected seats of leaders might find a balance between the practice of party democracy and the maintenance of political stability.

6.6 Summary

This chapter studies the institutional development of power succession in China over the past three decades. It argues that this institutionalization has developed a power-succession system with Chinese characteristics that has guaranteed the seamless transfer of power – which rarely proceeds smoothly in authoritarian regimes. As a result of this institutionalization, the leadership transition since 2002 has been distinct from the previous “life and death” power struggles in Mao’s era. The stable power transition under authoritarian rule in China provides a dramatic example of authoritarian resilience. As this chapter shows, the institutional development of power succession plays an important role in legitimizing and stabilizing authoritarian rule in China, which strongly supports Schubert’s (2008) argument that political reforms have been generating a “critical degree” of regime legitimacy in China.

It must be acknowledged that the current power-succession system in China is still much less transparent than those in developed democratic countries. However, the current succession politics in China have no doubt been more predictable, transparent, and stable than ever before in the history of the PRC. The institutionalization of the Chinese succession system has managed to overcome the fatal weakness of the authoritarian system – how to transfer power successfully at the top without splitting the leadership. This does not mean that the current level of institutionalization is sufficient to guarantee authoritarian rule in the long run – the case of Bo Xilai clearly warned of the potential dangers of division among the elites. For the sake of its survival, the CCP is still under enormous pressure to develop its succession system further.