Control, Discretion and Bargaining: the Politics of Provincial Leader Rotation in China

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Abstract Using the case of China, this paper illustrates how single-party regimes utilize personnel power to manage the strained relationship between the central and subnational governments. After explaining the sources of central–local tension in the reform-period China, I present descriptive statistics to show how the center stepped up the rotation of provincial leaders as an instrument of centralized political control. Departing from existing studies that see the selective appointment of outsiders as a strategy to tightly control unruly provinces, I argue that the center’s decisions are also conditioned by the imperative to grant provincial discretion essential for local economic development and by the bargaining element inherent in the decision-making process. The relevant hypotheses are tested on an original dataset of provincial leaders. Uncovering the logic of provincial leader rotation is not only important for understanding the evolving balance of power between China’s center and provinces but also have profound policy implications.

Keywords Personnel control · Central–local relations · Rotation · Bargaining · Discretion

1 Introduction

In every society, personnel matters form the meat and potatoes of political life. The process of appointing people to important positions usually entails a tug-of-war between different institutional actors, and influence over the process tends to be a good measure of political clout. In the US, the power to appoint jobs at the highest level of the federal government is an important source of the president’s political capital, but he has to share that power with the legislative branch as various interest

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groups strive to influence the appointment decisions in their favor (Mackenzie 1981). In parliamentary systems, political parties have capitalized on both constitutional power and electoral strengths to jockey for control over the appointment of cabinet members (Strøm 2002; Neto and Strøm 2006). Regardless of the details of institutional design, the study of personnel issues can shed significant light on the allocation of power and strategic interactions between political actors, often with major policy implications.

This paper uses the case of China to illustrate how single-party regimes utilize personnel assignment to manage the relationship between the central and subnational governments. Since it became the ruling party in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), much like the imperial dynasties, has wrestled with the challenge of controlling and integrating diverse territorial units. At the heart of the institutions designed to achieve this goal is the CCP's personnel power over the provinces. The *nomenklatura* system, under which the Party controls career mobility in all public institutions, has long been recognized as a central pillar of communist socio-political order (Harasymiw 1969; Rigby 1988; Walder 1995). This study focuses on one aspect of the CCP's personnel policy: the routine rotation of top provincial leaders across administrative boundaries. While the CCP has always considered the cadre rotation system an effective check on centrifugal tendencies, the policy has been applied to the provinces with varying intensity. The main purpose of this paper is to develop and test a theory that accounts for the selective application of the rotation policy.

My work contributes to the existing studies in two aspects. First, while previous studies of China's appointment system have focused on the provincial party secretaries and governors, my research explores the transfer of a broader set of provincial leaders, namely the members of the CCP's provincial standing committee (PSC). I show that this hitherto untapped dataset offers fresh insight into the dynamics of provincial appointments. Second, earlier studies argue that the geographical variation in the rotation policy reflects the center's attempt to tightly control economically powerful and potentially unruly provinces. By contrast, I argue that the pattern of appointment cannot be explained solely in light of the desire for central control. Instead, the center's appointment decisions are also conditioned by the need to grant provincial leaders sufficient discretion that is essential for local economic development and by the bargaining environment that characterizes central–provincial relations. Specifically, the practice of parachuting outsiders is more constrained towards economically important provinces, but will gain intensity after the removal of a locally rooted party secretary or the disclosure of a major local corruption scandal. In short, my analysis paints a picture of central–provincial interaction that is driven by the conflicting needs for top-down control, deliberate discretion and intergovernmental bargaining.

The rest of the paper will be organized as follows. The next section provides an overview of the tension in China's central–provincial relationship, with particular attention to the exacerbation of localism during the reform period. Then I discuss the importance of the cadre rotation policy as an instrument of bureaucratic control and national integration. Panel data on the composition of the PSC will be presented to show the temporal and cross-regional variation in the implementation of cadre

rotation. Moving on, I articulate a theory of the selective application of cadre rotation that emphasizes the center's willingness and capacity to appoint outsiders to provincial posts. The following section conducts empirical tests of the hypotheses derived from the theoretical discussion. The final section concludes the paper.

2 The Challenge of Localism to National Rule

For regimes that govern a large and heterogeneous territory, centrifugal tendencies are at the forefront of the national leaders' concerns. China is no exception. Historically, China's imperial dynasties employed a wide array of strategies to integrate territorial units with diverse geography, demography and customs. With the CCP's coming to power in 1949, the importation of the Leninist structure from the Soviet Union has arguably enabled China to achieve a degree of centralized control unseen in history. The Leninist norm of "democratic centralism" requires that the orders of the center be obeyed by all inferior party organizations. This principle, combined with the establishment of party committees at every territorial level in China (Lieberthal 2004, p. 173), gives the central party apparatus the normative and institutional resources to control the territorial units.

Although formal institutions grant the center indisputable supremacy, the principal-agent problems inherent in a multilevel bureaucracy make a certain degree of local non-compliance inevitable due to non-competence, random chance or willful disobedience (Wedeman 2001). Thus, signs of localism¹ emerged immediately after the founding of the PRC in 1949. During the 1950s, the center encountered provincial resistance to its sweeping land reform program. In the southern province of Guangdong, the center had to send over 6000 northern cadres to replace their Cantonese counterparts to implement a radical version of land reform (Vogel 1969, pp. 91–125). The central–provincial tension was heightened again in 1957 when a large number of provincial officials were purged for defying the center's collectivization policies (Teiwes 1966).

China's decision to pursue market reform in the late 1970s brought about notable changes in the nature of central–provincial relations. To encourage the provinces to pursue economic development, the reformers adopted the two-pronged strategy of decentralizing power to subnational units and deepening integration with the global economy. The combination of decentralization and globalization, however, has given the problem of localism a new dimension, challenging central supremacy and national unity (Zheng 2006; Sheng 2010).

Since China launched its market-oriented reform in 1978, the central government has granted substantial administrative and fiscal autonomy to local governments (Oi 1992; Montinola et al. 1995). The devolution of power touched upon the control over many state-owned enterprises, the authority to attract foreign capital into local projects, and the retention of a larger portion of local revenues. While the downward transfer of economic powers played a major role in stimulating economic growth,

¹ In this paper, localism refers broadly to the tendency of subnational units to articulate and defend their interest at the expense of national interest. The expression of this tendency may take the form of bargaining for preferential policies, manipulating the speed of implementing central policies, blocking or distorting information flow to the center, etc.

decentralization has also compromised the center's ability of macroeconomic management. In the 1980s, the center faced a formidable challenge to contain the inflationary pressure triggered by the local governments' investment hunger (Huang 1996). More recently, the repeated measures taken by the center to stabilize housing prices encountered stiff resistance from lower-level governments (The author 2012).

The handling of central–local relations was further compounded by the rising cross-regional inequality associated with China's deepened integration with the world economy. In the late 1970s, the success of the export-oriented development model in East Asia inspired the Chinese reformers to embrace global markets with exports and foreign trade. Tapping the comparative advantage of coastal provinces in foreign trade, the central government lavished these provinces with favorable policies such as tax breaks and flexible regulations. Endowed with advantageous location and preferential policies, the coastal provinces came to be head and shoulders above the rest of the country in integration with the global market. Recent studies have made it evident that globalization is closely associated with rising inter-provincial inequality in China (Kanbur and Zhang 2005).

There is little doubt that rising regional inequality was a worrying trend for China's national leaders. The scenario of rich provinces pitted against the poor ones certainly did not bode well for national unity. To achieve a more equitable distribution of wealth among regions, the central government would have to extract more resources from the wealthy provinces and subsidize the poorer ones. Such efforts, however, were hardly appealing to the political and economic elites of the wealthy provinces that would bear heavier tax burdens and receive less revenue. Therefore, in the early 1990s, when the center proposed a fiscal reform to centralize revenue collection and strengthen its redistributive capacity, leaders of the coastal provinces expressed strong opposition to such plans (Sheng 2010). For the near future, the contrasting demands from rich and poor provinces will continue to be a thorny issue for the center to adjudicate.

In short, the problem of localism has persisted throughout PRC history. The challenges posed by the territorial units to the central government have escalated due to the patterns of decentralization accompanying globalization. Although such challenges present no immediate danger of national disintegration, localism is more than capable of thwarting the center's attempt to implement routine policies and deepening social and economic reform on a national scale. Given the magnitude of the challenges, it is natural that the center has employed multiple institutional and policy tools to cope with localism, including fiscal centralization, administrative monitoring and ideological exhortation. Still, the trump card held by the center against localism remains its formal power to appoint top provincial leaders. The importance of personnel control for central dominance will preoccupy us in the next section.

3 The Cadre Transfer System and Central–Local Relations

With some adaptations, the Communist leaders in China adopted the Soviet nomenklatura system of appointing and supervising important office-holders (Manion 1985; Burns 1989). Although the system has undergone several rounds

of adjustments since 1949, the power to appoint top provincial leaders (those above vice-ministerial rank) has remained firmly in the hands of the Party center (Lieberthal 2004, pp. 234–237). The issue of localism may have taken different forms since the CCP came to power, but the central authorities have always considered personnel management an essential tool to induce the compliance of the provinces. In particular, the central leadership has long held the belief that an effective way to contain localism is to transfer officials to work in unfamiliar provinces.

Localism, as the central leaders see it, is closely associated with officials working for long periods of time in a particular province. Allowing officials to be stationed in one place gives them the opportunity to form close ties with the local elites, both in the political circle and in business. Once a provincial leader succeeds in developing extensive factional following, the province starts to resemble his “sphere of influence” and may become unresponsive to central demands. To prevent the establishment of such local strongholds, the central leaders have used their monopoly of personnel power to implement a cadre rotation system. Under this system, officials are routinely transferred to equivalent positions in unfamiliar provinces, denying them the opportunity to form stable bases of power in any locality.

The cadre transfer policy has produced a localist-outsider division in provincial politics. The localists who have spent most of their bureaucratic careers in the same province often face different policy constraints from the rotated officials. Through long service in a geographic or functional area, a politician is often able to cultivate an “influential constituency” whose support may prove crucial for the politician’s career prospects (Dittmer 1978, pp. 28–32). To forge and maintain a support base, the localist has to supply it with monetary rewards, patronage and other benefits. By contrast, an outsider has been cut off from his main support base when transferred to a new province. Since a rotated official only serves a short period of time in one province before leaving for the next destination,² it is unlikely that the outsider would have available to him the long time window necessary to build a local constituency. Also, compared with the localists, the outsiders are much more likely to be promoted to important positions in the central government.³ As such, instead of looking out for the interests exclusive to the province, the outsiders will be keen to please the center by complying with central policies.

Thus, although the rotation of cadres also serves a number of auxiliary aims such as cadre training and reducing regional inequality, the core goal behind the policy remains the control and monitoring of local officials (Eaton and Kostka 2014). As a response to the perceived escalation in localism during the reform era, the center intensified the reshuffling of provincial leaders to strengthen central control (Huang 1996, p. 194; Zheng 1997, pp. 220–221; Bo 2004, p. 85). Moreover, scholars have detected the selective application of the cadre transfer policy to suit the center’s

² In my data set of PSC members, the median tenure for an outsider PSC member is 6 years. In comparison, a typical localist PSC member has spent over 30 years working in the province.

³ In my data set of PSC members between 1997 and 2007, 32 of these PSC members have later been promoted to politburo. 28 or 88 % of them have had the experience of working as an outsider in an unfamiliar province.

needs. If the center considers certain provinces particularly prone to localism, more outsiders could be parachuted to these “trouble spots” to assert central control (Tong 1989; Sheng 2010).

It should be noted, however, that most existing studies drew their data from a very small set of provincial elites, namely the provincial party secretaries and governors.⁴ This approach does little justice to the collective decision-making style of the provincial leadership and limits the amount of cross-provincial variation. To remedy these shortcomings, I broaden the scope of study to include the members of the PSC. The second part of this section will present data to show how the evolution of the cadre transfer policy has transformed the composition of the PSC and how this transformation exhibits curious patterns of regional variation.

3.1 The Appointment of Outsiders to the PSC: 1992–2012

The intensification of the rotation policy in the 1990s was marked by several authoritative documents promulgated by the Party center. In 1990, the Central Committee (CC) of the CCP announced its decision to regularize the practice of cadre transfer.⁵ A provisional regulation promulgated by the CC in 1999 lay out specific rules to guide the transfer of party and state leaders.⁶ According to the regulation, local officials who had held the same position for 10 years must be transferred; those who had served in the leadership group of the same province for 10 years should be duly transferred. Moreover, the regulation singled out a few functional departments to be subject to more routine cross-regional rotation, including the organizational department, the discipline inspection commission and the department of public safety. The emphasis on these functional departments indicates that the center considered personnel management, anti-corruption and public safety the most important issue areas for central control and most susceptible to undue local influence.

Given these clear statements of intent, it would be informative to examine how the rotation policy has been implemented with respect to the PSC. As the highest provincial decision-making body, the PSC is composed of 10–15 committee members, including the party secretary, governor and heads of the most important functional departments. The center’s formal power to select this leadership squad constitutes the primary means of personnel control over the provinces. Since a stronger presence of outsiders in the PSC would imply greater central intervention in a province’s personnel affairs, my analysis focuses on how the proportion of outsiders has varied across time and in different provinces. For this purpose, I obtained the lists of PSC members for each of China’s 31 provincial units during the 1992–2012 period. I also gathered data on the career paths of these members to distinguish between localists and outsiders.

⁴ Zheng (1997) and Bo (2004) did extend their subjects of study to deputy party secretaries and vice governors. Their works, however, are largely descriptive with little analysis of cross-provincial variations in personnel arrangement.

⁵ The General office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. 1990. *Decision on the Implementation of the System of Transferring Leading Cadres in Party and State Organs*.

⁶ The General office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. 1999. *Provisional Regulations on the Transfer Work of Party and State Leading Cadres*.

Fig. 1 Proportion of outsiders in the Provincial Standing Committee: 1992–2012

In this study, an outsider is defined as an official who at the time of becoming a PSC member in a given province, has spent a longer period of his career outside the province than within the province. Any PSC member who does not meet this criterion is coded as a localist. Applying this definition, most cases are clear-cut.⁷ In the rare instance of an official whose previous experience is evenly divided between two provinces or between one province and the center, I took the liberty of placing emphasis on the formative years of his professional career. Overall, this coding scheme is driven by the assumption that one's political and psychological attachment to an institution is greatly affected by the length of service in that institution.

The year-to-year change in the proportion of outsiders in the PSCs is depicted in Fig. 1. The annual figures in the chart are computed by averaging the proportion of outsiders in the PSCs across the 31 provincial units. Despite the 1990 central Party circular to promote the transfer of cadres, the proportion of outsiders stayed close to 20 % between 1992 and 1998. Starting in 1999, the year the center promulgated the provisional regulation on cadre transfer, the proportion of outsiders began a secular trend of increase until it reached a height of 50 % in 2011. This upward trend presents unmistakable evidence of the center's recent attempts to strengthen its control over the provinces through personnel management.

The aggregate trend of PSC members can be compared to that of the top two provincial leaders: provincial party secretary and governor (Fig. 2). Two things may be learned from such a comparison: first, the proportions of outsiders among the top two leaders have been significantly higher than among the PSC members, indicating tighter central control over more important positions. Second, the increase in the number of outsider party secretaries and governors started in 1993, about 5 years earlier than the corresponding rise among the PSC members. Based on these notable differences

⁷ Indeed, most outsiders had no working experience in the province to which they were transferred; most localists had worked exclusively in one province.

Fig. 2 Proportion of outsiders in the provincial leadership: 1992–2012

between the two trends, it seems that cadre policies regarding the provincial collective leadership demonstrate dynamics distinct from those applied to the top two leaders.

Needless to say, the national trend conceals regional differences in the degree to which cadre transfers are practiced. To see the cross-provincial variation in the proportion of outsiders over the studied period, we turn to Fig. 3. In this map, colors with different depth are assigned to the provinces based on the average proportion of outsiders in the PSCs between 1992 and 2012. As the map shows, the practice of transferring outsiders to serve on the PSC has been exercised quite unevenly across the provinces. At one end of the spectrum, provinces such as Hainan and Hebei have been dominated by outsiders who claim an average of 60 % of the PSC seats. At the other, Shanghai and Liaoning have seen the average proportion of outsiders stay as low as 20 % over this period.

These descriptive statistics on the evolution of provincial leadership structure raise many intriguing questions. It is beyond the scope of the paper to examine all of them; instead, I seek to shed light on one central puzzle: why does the center transfer more outsiders to govern some provinces than others? In the next section, I set out to develop a theory to explain this puzzle that takes into account both the center's strategic considerations and the dynamics of central–provincial bargaining.

4 Control, Discretion and Bargaining in the Cadre Rotation System

The management of provincial personnel is a highly centralized process in China's political system. When the top national leaders, assisted by the central organization department,⁸ make decisions about which provincial leader should be transferred to

⁸ The organization department is a functional department within the CCP to provide staff support for the party leaders to deal with personnel issues.

Fig. 3 Average proportion of outsiders in PSCs: 1992–2012

which provincial post, they must adopt a national perspective and take into account a wide range of factors. The grooming of future central leaders with diverse local experience, the exchange of favors between political factions, establishing a provincial leadership squad with the proper combination of skills, experiences and age cohorts—these considerations may all figure prominently in the appointment process. A theory about the operation of the cadre rotation system needs to abstract away from the details of personnel assignments and focus on those factors most important for determining the proportion of outsiders in the PSC.

Although the center's decisions to transfer provincial leaders are always made behind a thick curtain of secrecy, it is reasonable to assume that they are driven by two major factors: the desire of the center to closely monitor the provinces and the bargaining environment that dictates central–provincial relations at a particular time. These two factors capture both the willingness and capacity of the central government to micromanage the structure of provincial leadership. Therefore, the key to understanding the patterns of provincial appointment lies in locating those variables that shape the center's incentives to appoint outsiders and the constraints the center faces in doing so. In light of this analytic framework, I argue that there are four aspects of central–provincial interactions that together determine the intensity of outsider presence in the PSC. These are: the strength and dynamism of a province's economy; the degree of provincial integration with the center through factional ties; the career background of the provincial party secretary; and the anti-corruption measures taken against provincial leaders.

4.1 Provincial Economic Strength

As mentioned earlier, the market-oriented reform has sharply increased the economic inequality between China's different regions. Experts of the Chinese economy has pointed out that:

Under fiscal decentralization, regions with agriculture as the major means of production must rely more on the extraction of levies and compulsory apportionment, which hinder local economic growth. Regions with more diverse economic structure and larger revenue base have a larger degree of freedom to finance their economic development (Kanbur and Zhang 2005, p. 92).

Given the enormous gap in the level of economic development between rich and poor provinces, there is good reason to believe that the center's personnel policy will also vary according to a province's economic fortunes. According to the prevailing explanation, the center will impose tighter personnel control over economically powerful provinces because the latter bear the greatest potential of challenging central authority. More stringent political control over "the winner regions in the global markets", the story goes, allows the center to "extract their fiscal resources for redistribution, pursue balanced regional development, and prolonging their own national rule" (Sheng 2010, p. 10). This argument is generally in line with the school of thought that emphasizes personnel control as the essential magnet that holds China together in the context of economic decentralization (Huang 1996; Naughton and Yang 2004; Landry 2008). Based on this reasoning, we can hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1 The proportion of outsiders in the PSC is larger in provinces with greater economic strength.

However, ensuring compliance with central policies is certainly not the only consideration behind the CCP's personnel policies. During the reform era, the Party has made economic development the regime's top priority, and this policy adjustment calls for provincial leaders adept at delivering local economic growth. As Cheung et al. (1998) demonstrates, the policy vision, pioneering spirits and political astuteness of provincial leaders played a crucial role in China's economic development. One of the many qualities essential for development is the leader's knowledge of local circumstances and networks. Since it usually takes a significant amount of time to gain a good understanding of the industrial structure, resources endowment and capital-labor relations in a province, locally rooted cadres may be in a better position to design feasible development strategies than newcomers. As such, excessive appointment of outsiders to provincial leadership could stymie the engine of growth, especially in wealthy provinces where the know-how of managing modern, complex economy takes a long time to accumulate.

The potential pitfall of placing too many outsiders can be illustrated with the example of economic development in Zhejiang province during the early period of reform. Both before and after the reform started, Zhejiang's leadership was dominated by outsiders, especially natives of Shandong province, from provincial to county level (Zhang 2012). According to Cheung, the outsiders' zealous obedience to the center and their strained relationship with local cadres led to indecisiveness

and conservatism in the province's economic policies. During this period, the Zhejiang leaders “stonewalled on agricultural decollectivization, floundered over urban reform and prevaricated over opening to the outsider world”. In contrast to Zhejiang's experience, the rising local representation in Guangdong's leadership squad allowed the southern province to spearhead market reform and offer valuable lessons for the rest of China (Cheung et al. 1998).

It is reasonable to assume that, during the reform era, the center not only demands provincial compliance but also expects proactive, bold actions to promote local growth. Moreover, it is critical for the economically powerful provinces to maintain robust performance since they are the driving forces of the national economy and account for the lion's share of the center's revenue. It is, therefore, regarding these provinces that the center has to strike a fine balance between tight monitoring and inducing local initiatives. By comparison, the center can place more emphasis on control and supervision towards provinces for which stability, ethnic relations or national security are more important issues than the economy. This argument is consistent with observations of the cadre policy in the USSR. There, the exercise of cadre rotation was limited by “the imperatives of rapid economic growth” and the need of “matching specific problems with specific expertise or experience” (Miller 1983, p. 90) Based on this analysis, we can generate an alternative hypothesis to H1:

Hypothesis 2 The proportion of outsiders in the PSC is smaller in provinces with greater economic strength.

4.2 The Degree of Provincial Integration Through Factional Ties

Although the preceding discussion has underscored the importance of cadre rotation as a tool of controlling the provinces, it must be stressed that the appointment of outsiders is only one of many mechanisms to achieve this goal. To the extent that other factors exist to facilitate the monitoring of lower-level units, the center might attach less importance to personnel control. Among other things, factional ties between central and provincial leaders may very well supplement cadre rotation as a form of vertical integration.

Elite politics in China is often depicted as centering on factional ties between individual leaders and their followers. These ties are founded on an exchange relationship wherein the factional leader secure and distribute rewards to the followers. In return, the members of the faction lend support to the leader in his struggle with other factions (Nathan 1973). As Obsenberg observed, “the cement holding these networks together was the Chinese concept of *guan-xi*, meaning a relationship or an interconnection. A sense of loyalty, mutual obligation, and, given the atmosphere of the times, shared vulnerability bound clusters of the people together” (1982, quoted in Huang 1996, p. 199).

How can factional ties help bridge the central–provincial gulf and reduce the need for personnel control? During the reform era, most top leaders in China accumulated experiences as provincial chiefs before moving to Beijing to assume the most prominent central government posts. Indeed, provincial leadership has

been the pivotal stepping-stone to top national offices in post-Mao China (Li 2010). Through work experience, the future central leaders might have formed close enduring cadre networks in those provinces they served. Assuming that these networks persist after their promotion to Beijing, the central leaders might feel less need to use appointment to monitor their political turfs.

Needless to say, not all provinces enjoy equal opportunities to serve as a training ground for national leaders. Depending on their political and economic importance, some provinces are more likely to see their leaders promoted to top national posts. According to the factional logic, these privileged provinces should be given more discretion to nominate localists to provincial posts, thanks to their closer integration with the center through personal connections. The political fortune of Shanghai, China's financial hub, clearly exemplifies region-based favoritism. Since Jiang Zemin, who spent a significant part of his career in Shanghai, became the general secretary of CCP in 1989, he started to fill important national posts with officials from Shanghai. The strong influence of the "Shanghai gang" during Jiang's reign meant that almost no high-ranking officials were transferred from other provinces to the Shanghai administration (Li 2004, p. 46). When officials from Shanghai were dominating the center, they clearly entrusted their political base to their fellow Shanghainese. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 3 The proportion of outsiders in the PSC is smaller in provinces that are more closely integrated with the center via factional ties.

4.3 The Career Background of Provincial Party Secretary

Despite the center's formal appointment authority, the actual process of selecting a PSC member often involves protracted bargaining and negotiation with the top provincial leaders, especially the provincial party secretary. According to CCP personnel regulations, when someone is to be promoted to the PSC, the PSC should "communicate" with the center to decide on the pool of candidates to be vetted for the post.⁹ When the center wants to transfer someone to a province, it should also consult with the leaders of the receiving province.¹⁰ These procedural requirements allow for the possibility of central–provincial bargaining prior to the appointment decision. The actual dynamics of the bargaining process, however, will depend on the career background of the provincial party secretary. A localist party secretary is likely to lobby for more promotions within the province and against the importation of more outsiders. An outsider party secretary, however, has little incentive to take such a position. The contrasting attitudes are mainly due to the different support base and career incentives that separate localists and outsiders, as discussed above.

⁹ The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. 2002. *Regulations on the selection and appointment of leading party and government cadres*. Article 16.

¹⁰ The General office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. 2006. *Regulations on the Transfer Work of Party and State Leading Cadres*. Article 19.

Burns (1994, p. 471) provided some anecdotal evidence that the center had to negotiate with local leaders before filling an important provincial post, especially when such decisions involved “economically powerful provinces with histories of localism”. In one case, Ye Xuanping, the well connected, localist governor of Guangdong, resisted his transfer to Beijing until the center agreed to replace him with another localist candidate in 1991. Instances like this led Burns to observe that “at all levels of the administrative hierarchy positions on the nomenklatura have been shared out among specific leaders, based on their formal position, Party status and informal authority” (Burns 1994, p. 472). This discussion leads to the fourth hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 The proportion of outsiders in the PSC is smaller in provinces that are headed by a localist party secretary.

4.4 The Anti-corruption Measures Against Provincial Leaders

The political environment in which central–provincial bargaining takes place can also be shaped by the eruption of a corruption scandal involving a high-ranking provincial leader. Political corruption in China has grown in frequency, scale and complexity during the reform period (Gong 1997; He 2000; Wedeman 2005). The Chinese authorities are keenly alert to the corrosive effects of corruption on the regime as they constantly emphasize the importance of anti-corruption work as a “life-and-death matter” for the CCP. To prevent corruption from spiraling out of control, the CCP has taken severe measures against corrupt officials, even those at the highest echelon of the party-state. Between 1988 and 2008, 2231 officials holding senior positions at the bureau or prefectural levels, 65 holding ministerial or provincial leadership positions and two members of the Politburo were charged with corruption. Moreover, the sentences handed down to corrupt officials in China are rather harsh by international standard (Wedeman 2012, pp. 150–152).

A corruption scandal implicating a senior provincial official is likely to have major implications for the central–provincial bargaining environment. In one scenario, when a strong homegrown leader is removed from power, the locality loses a powerful spokesman who could defend the interest of local cadres and resist the importation of outsiders. Meanwhile, the eruption of a high-profile corruption scandal signals the failure of local officials to run a clean and honest government. It thus justifies the arrival of outsiders to scrutinize the exercise of power in the province. Therefore, in the aftermath of a major corruption case, the province has little leverage to bargain with the center on personnel decisions. At this critical juncture, the center will be in the strongest position to appoint more outsiders to the PSC.

To illustrate the potential impact of corruption scandal on personnel assignment, consider the case of Chen Xitong, the party secretary of Beijing from 1992 to 1995. Through his long bureaucratic career in Beijing, Chen effectively turned the nation’s capital city into a stronghold impervious to central influence (Bo 2000). In 1995, Chen was tried and convicted on charges of corruption and dereliction of duty, receiving a sentence of 13 years in prison.

Chen was replaced by Wei Jianxing, a central government official who had no experience working in Beijing's party or municipal government apparatus. The appointment of Wei was followed by the arrival of a succession of outsiders between 1995 and 1996, a scenario completely inconceivable before Chen's dismissal. As shown in Fig. 4, the percentage of outsiders in Beijing's PSC rose from 0 % in 1994 to 18 % in 1995 and peaked at 36 % in 1996. Since then the number has stayed at around 30 %, making the year 1995 a watershed in Beijing's personnel structure.

It is worth pointing out that politics does play an important role in China's anti-corruption measures. Given that the center monopolizes the power to investigate corrupt activities involving PSC members, the CCP may enforce anti-corruption measures selectively to remove local officials who started to assert independence from the center. As such, anti-corruption measures facilitate personnel changes difficult to realize through routine procedures. Whether a case is politically motivated or erupts spontaneously as a result of the routine operation of anti-corruption agencies, our discussion leads us to hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 5 Following a corruption case involving a PSC member, the proportion of outsiders in the PSC will experience an increase.

This section has outlined an explanation for the selective application of the cadre transfer policy. In response to current studies that focus on the center's motives to control important provinces, my analysis draws attention to additional factors that shape the center's personnel decisions, namely the need to delegate economic management to well-informed, locally based cadres and the central–provincial bargaining environment. In particular, I identified four elements in central–provincial interactions that will affect the intensity of outsider appointment in the PSC. The next section will test these *ceteris paribus* arguments with an original dataset of PSC members and their career backgrounds.

Fig. 4 The impact of corruption case on Beijing's PSC: 1992–2012

5 Empirical Analysis

5.1 Data and Method

According to the preceding analysis, the extent to which a province's leadership posts are taken by the outsiders is determined by its economic strength, its integration with the center through factional ties, the career background of its party secretary and the occurrence of a major corruption scandal in the province. The dependent variable of interest is the proportion of outsiders in a province's PSC, a value that ranges from 0 to 1. The list of PSC members are collected from provincial yearbooks and their outsider/localist statuses are coded according to information extracted from official CVs. The data covers the 1992–2012 period. I select this time span to study because systematic data on PSC membership became available in the early 1990s.

Two variables are used to measure the provincial economic strength. The first measure is the natural log of provincial per capita GDP, which serves as a proxy for the level of provincial economic development. Second, since a province's utilization of international capital is generally considered to increase its growth potential, I also measure economic strength with a province's per capita foreign direct investment (FDI). Both measures are lagged by 1 year to allay concerns of mutual causality.

It is difficult to measure accurately the factional ties between center and a particular province. This study adopts the assumption that these ties are mainly formed through the central leader's working experience in various provinces. Thus, a province's ties to the center should be positively correlated with the number of central leaders who have worked in that province. Based on this assumption, I proxy a province's personal connection to the center with the number of Politburo members who had significant working experience (over 3 years) in the province. The Politburo is the CCP's collective ruling body responsible for the country's major domestic and foreign policymaking. The body is composed of about two dozen members and reelected once every 5 years.

The political status of the provincial party secretary is relatively easy to determine. I create a dummy variable that equals 1 if the party secretary is a localist and 0 if he is an outsider. Finally, there is a dummy variable that indicates whether, in a particular year, the province experienced a major corruption scandal, defined as the beginning of the *shuanggui* process on a PSC member or a deputy governor. During this process, the cadre suspected of corruption will be detained at an appointed time and place to "confess" wrongdoings for which the Party's disciplinary body believes there is already substantial evidence. Anti-corruption efforts against less important officials are unlikely to have far-reaching implications for provincial personnel. In the dataset, there are 34 corruption scandals of PSC members and 15 of deputy governors.¹¹

¹¹ Both PSC members and vice governors are ranked at vice-ministerial level (provincial party secretary and governor have full-ministerial rank). However, PSC members are ahead of the vice governors in the CCP's pecking order due to the latter's exclusion from the Party's core decision-making body.

The analysis also takes into account a number of other factors that might affect the dependent variable. For example, the revenue base of a province determines the amount of its fiscal contribution to the center and may also impact the its bargaining power. The models, therefore, control for the province's revenue as a percentage of total local government revenue in China. They also control for whether a provincial party congress was held in a given year. Once in 5 years, each provincial party branch holds elections at the party congress to rubberstamp the candidates designated by the center. It is possible that the center will field more localist candidates in these elections to placate xenophobic feelings, leading to a drop in the proportion of outsiders in the election years. To account for the possibility that the proportion of outsiders has a tendency to increase due to factors the models cannot capture, a trend variable is included that takes the value of 1, 2, 3... up to the last year for which we have observation. Finally, I control for the size of the PSC, which ranges from 10 to 15 depending on year and province.

The unit of observation is province/year. The panel dataset is slightly unbalanced as for 8 of the 31 provincial units data did not become available until around 1997. A common problem that arises when we estimate models with panel dataset is the existence of unmeasured factors associated with each cross-sectional unit. If these unobserved, unit-specific factors are correlated with the independent variables, the estimates will be biased. In this study, I use the fixed-effects models that control for unobserved regional differences by introducing a dummy variable for each cross-sectional unit. To address the presence of autocorrelation in time-series data, I use fixed-effect models with first-order autoregressive disturbance (Greene 2012, pp. 966–969).

When estimating the effect of corruption scandal on the dependent variable, we have to consider when the effect occurs. For example, the impact of a corruption scandal on personnel appointment may be confined to the year in which the scandal erupted. Alternatively, the scandal could increase the proportion of outsiders for the duration of several years. Therefore, I use a finite distributed-lag model by including not only the current value of the corruption variable (X_t) but also its past values ($X_t - 1$, $X_t - 2$...). The intuition is that a temporary change in X at time t will affect not only Y_t but also $Y_t + 1$, $Y_t + 2$ and so on. I truncate the lag to three periods because, as the analysis will show, the effect of scandal becomes insignificant after 3 years. The total effect of a corruption case on the proportion of outsiders should be the sum of the coefficients of X_t , $X_t - 1$, $X_t - 2$ and $X_t - 3$ (Wooldridge 2012, pp. 313–316).

5.2 Results of Analysis

The results of the fixed-effects regressions are reported in Table 1. Model 1 is the baseline estimation that includes all the explanatory variables and the trend variable. Model 2 adds the rest of the control variables (revenue share, party congress and PSC size) while Model 3 also includes the annual dummy variables to control for year-specific fixed effects. The main results are consistent across these models. With respect to the relationship between provincial economic strength and outsider appointment, the results clearly lend support to hypothesis 2. The coefficient for per

Table 1 Estimation of proportion of outsiders: 1992–2012

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Log (GDP per capita)	−0.4638*** (−3.25)	−0.4795*** (−3.00)	−0.5443* (−1.95)
Log (FDI per capita)	−0.0243** (−2.49)	−0.0249** (−2.45)	−0.0219** (−2.05)
Localist secretary	−0.0883*** (−6.18)	−0.0803*** (−5.25)	−0.0854*** (−5.77)
Central ties	0.0072 (0.83)	0.0069 (0.78)	0.0037 (0.43)
Corruption scandal	0.0018 (0.18)	0.0055 (0.52)	0.0043 (0.42)
Scandal ($t - 1$)	0.0277** (2.36)	0.0303** (2.48)	0.0314*** (2.64)
Scandal ($t - 2$)	0.0234* (1.95)	0.0244* (1.95)	0.0249** (2.06)
Scandal ($t - 3$)	0.0115 (1.08)	0.0117 (1.04)	0.0093 (0.85)
Trend	0.0462*** (5.62)	0.0488*** (5.44)	−0.0949 (−0.39)
Revenue		0.0135 (0.52)	−0.0207 (−0.77)
Party congress		0.0020 (0.34)	0.0042 (0.64)
PSC size		−0.0018 (−0.53)	−0.0023 (−0.70)
Year dummies	No	No	Yes
Observations	448	421	421
Adjusted R^2	0.179	0.178	0.233

The dependent variable is the proportion of outsiders in the PSC during 1992–2012

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

capita GDP is negative and highly significant, suggesting that the center does grant more personnel discretion to wealthier provinces, possibly with an eye towards incentivizing local officials to promote rapid growth. The magnitude of the coefficient is also quite large. For the 31 provinces, the average natural log of per capita GDP over the 20 years ranges from 3.48 to 4.52, with a mean of 3.92 and standard deviation of 0.22. According to model 3, holding other variables constant, a one standard deviation increase in per capita GDP will lower the proportion of outsiders by $0.54 \times 0.22 = 0.12$, on average. For a typical PSC with 13 members, this translates into 1.56 fewer outsiders sitting in the province's top decision-making body. The coefficient for per capita FDI is considerably smaller, although still significant and has the expected sign. A one standard deviation increase in per capita FDI (averaged across 20 years) is associated with 0.4 fewer outsiders in a typical PSC, other things being equal. This difference in magnitude indicates that the impact of economic conditions on personnel management is mainly reflected in the general level of development instead of integration into global capital market.

Contrary to the expectation of hypothesis 3, the proxy for factional ties to the center has no significant effect on the outcome variable. Admittedly, the number of central leaders with working experience in a province is only a crude measure of factional ties. The results of analysis might be different with a more accurate measure. However, it is also possible that the reasoning behind hypothesis 3 is simply wrong. Personal relationship formed through working in the same province may be inadequate as a mechanism of bureaucratic monitoring. Following the idea of “where you stand depends on where you sit”, the interests of central and

provincial leaders could be opposed in such a way that it cannot be mitigated by any overlap in previous career experience.

Turning to the variables that capture the central–provincial bargaining environment, the coefficients are statistically significant and consistent with the expectations. Other things being equal, having a localists party secretary reduces the predicted proportion of outsiders by about 0.09, on average. Thus, there is some evidence linking the bargaining power of the province to the career background of its chief executive. This finding also implies that one way to weaken local resistance to the center’s personnel plans is to replace a localist party secretary with an outsider. Indeed, this process of replacement has been largely completed over the course of the 1990s, leaving localist secretaries a rare species in today’s political scene.

The eruption of a major corruption case does not have an immediate impact on the proportion of outsiders, as the coefficient for corruption scandal is not statistically significant. However, the coefficients for the scandal variable of the past two periods are both significant, meaning that the effects of corruption scandal on provincial personnel only start to show in the next year. The coefficient for the scandal variable three periods before is insignificant, so the interpretation would be that the effects of corruption scandal last for two years but disappear thereafter. In model 3, the total effects of the scandal equal the sum of the two significant coefficients, or $0.031 + 0.025 = 0.056$. This amounts to the appointment of 0.728 more outsiders in a typical PSC. The relatively small magnitude of effect is not surprising since corruption cases vary in their nature and some scandals would have greater implications for bargaining power than others. A corruption investigation carefully orchestrated by the center to rein in a recalcitrant province will probably impact personnel assignment much more than cases that result from the routine operation of anti-corruption agencies. Making a distinction between different types of corruption cases in future research will enable us to gauge their consequences with greater accuracy. Lastly, only one of the three control variables—the trend variable—yields positive and significant effects when time dummy variables are not included. This simply corroborates the earlier finding that cadre rotation policy has been implemented with increasing intensity over the studied period.

Table 2 shows the results of three additional tests that check the robustness of the main findings. First, since for eight provinces data on provincial leadership was not available until 1997, Model 1 only includes observations after 1996 to obtain a more balanced panel dataset. Second, Model 2 defines ‘corruption scandal’ more stringently to include only the 34 cases implicating PSC members, who are ranked higher than the vice governors without a PSC membership. Finally, in place of the fixed effects models that compute a fixed unit-specific intercept, Model 3 applies the random effect specification in which the unit effect follows a specified probability distribution. One advantage of the random effects model lies in its ability to include time-invariant independent variables, which are not allowed in fixed effects models due to their collinearity with the group indicators. Two such variables of substantive interests are included in Model 3: minority region, a dummy variable that indicates the five “autonomous regions for ethnic minorities”,¹² and the educational

¹² These minority regions are Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet and Xinjiang.

Table 2 Estimation of proportion of outsiders: 1992–2012

	(1) Year: 1997–2012	(2) PSC corruption	(3) RE model
Log (GDP per capita)	−0.5205* (−1.77)	−0.5235* (−1.89)	−0.0245 (−0.20)
Log (FDI per capita)	−0.0231** (−2.05)	−0.0211* (−1.96)	−0.0211** (−2.18)
Localist secretary	−0.0857*** (−5.27)	−0.0865*** (−5.84)	−0.0838*** (−5.80)
Central ties	0.0085 (0.92)	0.0021 (0.24)	0.0037 (0.48)
Corruption scandal	0.0048 (0.46)		0.0058 (0.55)
Scandal (t − 1)	0.0284** (2.32)		0.0340*** (2.79)
Scandal (t − 2)	0.0242* (1.94)		0.0289** (2.34)
scandal (t − 3)	0.0086 (0.77)		0.0127 (1.13)
Trend	−0.0861 (−0.36)	−0.0950 (−0.40)	−0.0150*** (−2.77)
Revenue	−0.0067 (−0.22)	−0.0185 (−0.69)	−0.0143 (−1.06)
Party congress	0.0044 (0.61)	0.0035 (0.52)	0.0021 (0.31)
PSC_size	−0.0020 (−0.57)	−0.0021 (−0.65)	−0.0016 (−0.48)
PSC scandal		0.0068 (0.56)	
PSC scandal (t − 1)		0.0366** (2.54)	
PSC scandal (t − 2)		0.0280* (1.90)	
PSC scandal (t − 3)		0.0157 (1.21)	
Minority			−0.1256*** (−2.91)
Education			−0.0229 (−0.02)
Year dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	385	421	452
Adjusted R^2	0.183	0.234	

Robustness checks

The dependent variable is the proportion of outsiders in the PSC during 1992–2012

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

resources in a province when the provincial leaders received their formal education, measured by the average percentage of population enrolled in secondary schools between 1960 and 1975.¹³ However, the results of the random effects model should be taken with caution because the estimates of parameters will be biased unless the unit-specific effects are uncorrelated with the independent variables, a rather strong assumption to make.

The results of primary interest are largely robust to different samples and model specifications. In the random effects model, the coefficient for GDP per capita becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero, although FDI per capita still has a significant effect. It is worth noting that, when we confine the corruption cases to those involving PSC members, their impact on provincial personnel becomes greater. In

¹³ The reason for including the education variable is that, when a province has a large pool of well-educated local leaders, it may be subject to the transfer of fewer outsiders. The 1960–1975 historical period is chosen because most provincial leaders under study completed their formal education during this period.

Model 2, the fall of a PSC member has a statistically significant positive effect on the outcome, and the long-term effect accumulates to $0.037 + 0.028 = 0.065$. This implies that political earthquakes of greater magnitude will have larger personnel implications. Finally, the status of minority region has a significantly negative effect on the proportion of outsiders. This finding is consistent with the Communist Party's long-standing policy of allowing more localist representation in ethnic minority regions. The placement of minority cadres in highly visible but often less powerful positions is intended to showcase the autonomy of ethnic minorities and enhance political stability (Miller 1977). In these regions with greater potential for ethnic tension, the symbolic representation of minority groups is complemented by the insertion of Han outsiders into key, sensitive positions.

6 Conclusion

Starting from the early 1990s, the Chinese Communist Party has gradually stepped up the cross-regional transfer of local leaders with the purpose of better controlling and monitoring the provinces. At the same time, the implementation of the rotation policy exhibits substantial variations across provinces, as manifested by the different proportions of outsiders in the PSC. While previous studies interpret the selective application of personnel policy mainly as a strategy to elicit provincial compliance with central authority, I argue that the center's appointment decisions are also conditioned by its dependence on sustained economic growth that demand well-informed, locally rooted cadres and the bargaining element inherent in the decision-making process. To demonstrate the relevance of discretion and bargaining for personnel assignment, I developed several testable hypotheses about how the proportion of outsiders may be linked to a province's economic strength, its factional ties to the center, the career background of its party secretary and the incidence of major corruption scandal.

Testing these hypotheses with an original dataset of provincial leaders has provided broad support for my argument. From the negative relationship between economic strength and the proportion of outsiders, we can infer that the center deliberately grants more personnel autonomy to wealthy provinces, bearing in mind that too many outsiders could undermine their economic performances. Noticeably, the same empirical pattern may also be interpreted to support the bargaining thesis: wealthier provinces enjoy more leverage in negotiation with the center over personnel matters. In this case, deliberate discretion and bargaining are two sides of the same coin: both the center's scruples about appointing outsiders and the provinces' bargaining strength stem from their importance for the national economy and rich supply of cadres with economic expertise. Meanwhile, a province's bargaining power is reinforced with a localist secretary but weakened in the aftermath of a major corruption case. It should be pointed out, though, that high-profile corruption cases run the risk of antagonizing the regime's loyal followers and must be initiated with extreme caution.

Studying the pattern of provincial-level appointment is not only important for understanding the strategic interactions and evolving balance of power between

central and provincial governments. The proliferation of outsiders in local governments should also affect public policies in a profound manner. In their study of the implementation of environmental policy, Eaton and Kostka (2014) argue that cadre rotation has a major impact on the officials' incentives and implementation capacities. For example, the short time horizons of the transferred cadres often lead them to pursue short-term, highly visible projects while ignoring long-term, complex initiatives. Moreover, outsiders usually lack local knowledge and networks necessary to draw local business into green growth programs. In another paper, I also demonstrated that a greater proportion of outsiders in provincial leadership are associated with more vigorous anticorruption enforcement, indicating the effectiveness of rotation policy as a monitoring device (The author 2014). Whether these findings can be generalized to other countries and how the policy implications of official rotation may vary across issue areas remain fascinating topics to be examined in future research.

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