

SYMPOSIUM

Public Employees' Perceived Promotion Channels in Local China: Merit-based or *Guanxi*-orientated?

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Do performance or personal ties (guanxi) matter more in the promotion of local public employees in China? In this paper, we examine public employees' perceptions of the roles played by merit and guanxi in promotion. We adopt a configurational approach to classify public employees' perceptions of the reasons for their promotion into four groups: merit-based, guanxi-orientated, ambidextrous (both), and fatalistic (neither). A recent survey of 886 public employees shows that around 40% see promotion as merit-based and 20% as guanxi-orientated, with 10% perceiving promotion to be ambidextrous and 30% fatalistic. Younger employees with higher rank are more likely to perceive promotion to be merit-based, whilst highly educated and highly ranked employees with strong public service motivation are more prone to see promotion as ambidextrous. Those who perceive promotion to be ambidextrous are more satisfied with promotion fairness, suggesting that a subtle balance needs to be maintained between merit-based and guanxi-orientated promotion channels, rather than rejection of any guanxi element.

Key words: *meritocracy, guanxi, promotion channel, career advancement, fairness*

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Career mobility lies at the heart of public sector personnel management, and it is important to identify its antecedents, characteristics, and consequences both in terms of theory and practice to strengthen employee motivations and maximize organizational performance (Ferris et al. 1992). Organizational personnel decisions are usually made ostensibly through formal procedures based on specific criteria, but organizational members may hold different points of view on what matters in career advancement (Beehr et al. 1980). If employees perceive that work performance plays an important role in personnel decision-making, they are likely to

work hard to achieve a promotion. However, if they regard factionalism as the key to career advancement, they may instead choose to concentrate on pleasing those in power. What influences or determines the appointment and promotion of public employees? Does merit matter, or do personal ties (*guanxi*) dominate? These issues are important in all contexts, but are particularly pertinent to a transitional China, where Party-state cadres play dominant roles in many arenas (Edin 2003).

Two competing perspectives dominate the current debate over cadre career advancement in China, namely, merit-based promotion and *guanxi*-orientated appointments (Choi 2012). However, only a limited number of studies have been published in this arena, and our knowledge of the operation of both perspectives at the local and grassroots levels remains in its infancy. In addition, existing studies often consider the two promotion channels in isolation, largely overlooking their interactive effects. In this paper, we adopt a configurational approach classifying public employees' perceived promotion channels, and use survey data to examine their determinants and consequences. Although our study is exploratory, our findings add to the literature by applying an alternative approach and providing some empirical evidence from China.

Context

Dynamics of CPC Cadre Personnel Management

The Communist Party of China (CPC), the sole ruling party in authoritarian China, has developed an ingenious personnel management system to control and manage its massive body of local agents who are dispersed across the country's vast territory and to control the whole civil service (Manion 1985). The civil service system is largely politicized without the distinction between politics and administration commonly implemented in Western countries (Podger and Yan 2013). The State Council promulgated the Provisional Regulations on State Civil Servants in 1993 to establish a relatively independent civil service system. The State

Civil Service Law enacted in 2005 and that became effective in 2006, however, 'repoliticized' the civil service system by collapsing the distinction between cadres and civil servants (Chan and Li 2007). The term 'civil service' in China usually refers to employees in political entities (CPC, People's Congress (PC), Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), and various democratic parties), judicial and procuratorial authorities (Court and Procuratorate), and various government apparatuses. Personnel in mass organizations (e.g. CPC Youth League and Federation of Women) and public service units (*shiyew danwei*) with administrative functions are also managed by reference to the State Civil Service Law. In other words, the full scope of civil service is not restricted to Party and state personnel but encompasses all employees in equivalent public organizations. It does not, however, encompass employees in pure service entities (e.g. schools, hospitals, and universities), state-owned enterprises, and military, because these organizations have adopted different personnel management systems from the civil service system. The scope of cadres examined in this paper is all those subject to the State Civil Service Law, including Party and state civil servants as well as employees in public service units and mass organizations. We use the terms 'public employees', 'cadres', and 'civil servants' interchangeably in the remainder of the paper.

Cadre personnel management in China is characterized by the *nomenklatura* system borrowed from the former Soviet Union, in which key positions are appointed by the central authority (Chan 2004). In 1984, the Organization Department of the Central Committee of the CPC replaced 'two-level-down management' (*xiaguan liangji*) with 'one-level-down management' (*xiaguan yiji*) to decentralize cadre management, giving some more autonomy to local governments. Under the new system, the central authority controls provincial cadres, the provincial authorities control prefecture-level cadres, and so forth (O'Brien and Li 1999). In the absence of inter-party competition and direct elections that prevail in Western democracies, China's Party-state cadres are appointed

by their superiors. As these cadres' career prospects are controlled primarily by their immediate superiors, they are strongly motivated to please upper-tier authorities. According to Zhong (2003: 109), to recruit and promote 'revolutionary, younger, more educated, and more technically specialized' cadre corps, 'the official criteria for cadre promotion in China are still the *sihua* (the four transformations) standards introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and early 1980s: revolutionariness, knowledge, youthfulness and professionalism', but cadre promotion is a complicated process that is also affected by other factors including 'job performance, seniority, and *guanxi*, or acquisition of official positions by connections or by graft'. In other words, cadres may survive the promotion tournament through two key channels, namely, performance and *guanxi*.

Guanxi, or personal connections, is pervasive in China, reaching every corner of Chinese society, and neither the government nor its members can escape its penetration and overwhelming influences (Bian 1997). In some situations, *guanxi* is necessary and conducive to smooth managerial transition and leadership succession. It is also helpful in establishing personalized mutual trust amongst organizational members. At the same time, however, cadres may exploit their personal connections with powerful patrons to acquire a promotion, thus creating an unfair and stifling climate that impedes organizational development. *Guanxi*-orientated promotion is a key component of organizational politics that may erode a healthy organizational culture (Ferris and Kacmar 1992). Unfair practices such as nepotism may hinder employees' work enthusiasm and organizational commitment, and ultimately undermine organizational integrity and values. Although many measures, including peer opinion polls and public scrutiny before appointments, have been introduced to weaken the monopoly power of higher authorities, cadres vying for promotion are still forced to compete in traditional ways.

Promotion opportunities are scarce, and cadres vie for them as if they were competing in a tournament. Performance-based promotion theory suggests that higher authorities

rate subordinate cadres by their relative performance on a pre-set battery of key performance indicators such as economic growth and revenue collection, which are weighed as key parameters in the promotion process (Li and Zhou 2005). In the target-based responsibility system commonly used in China, cadres are motivated to achieve these performance targets to become eligible for promotion (Burns and Zhou 2010). Performance-based promotion in the political tournament is advocated as one key to China's economic miracle and the social transformation it has undergone in the past few decades (Bo 2002). The Great Leap Forward and resulting famine of the late 1950s, however, are also ascribed to the distortion that political tournament can introduce (Kung and Chen 2011). In reality, the processes of career mobility are complicated, with many factors such as family background, political loyalty, and work speciality also playing important roles.

An expectation of merit-based promotion and performance-based compensation is likely to incentivize individuals to work hard, whereas patronage-based and *guanxi*-orientated career advancement may distort and add dysfunction to the incentive process. Public employees cannot rely solely on either merit- or performance-based promotion in pursuing career advancement owing to the highly politicized complexities of the promotion process. As these cadres' promotion-related expectations and perceptions shape their attitudes and behaviours, it is important to identify the antecedents and consequences of the two aforementioned promotion channels.

Literature Review

Career advancement and its determinants shape the motivational base and incentive structure of local cadres, and it is thus vital to understand the rationale for and characteristics of promotion criteria as they apply in practice.

The seminal work of Li and Bachman (1989) and Bo (2002) initiated a stream of research on cadre promotion in China. Earlier studies emphasized the role played by patronage in promotion, as cadre personnel management in the

pre-1980 historical context was largely under-institutionalized and characterized by rule by man rather than the rule of law (Li and Walder 2001). 'Factors such as graft and connections (*guanxi*) play a significant role in one's being placed on the list and eventually being promoted to the designated position', writes Zhong (2003: 109). According to Huang (2006: 74), '[a]lthough talent and virtue (which means loyalty to the Party) are always stressed, and a "cadre examination system" was introduced in the mid 1980s, what really counts in a cadre appointment is the appointee's *guanxi* to his superior; ability and virtue are of secondary importance'. Recent analysis of provincial leaders found personal connections with the central officials (e.g. shared work experience) to be the most important factor in their promotion, whilst economic performance was found to have a marginal effect (Oppen et al. 2012). Similarly, a study of CPC Central Committee members showed that it is factional ties with top leaders rather than economic performance that play the key role in members' Party rankings (Shih et al. 2012). As vividly depicted by Feng (2010), localized clan linkages can dominate the cadre promotion process. This stream of research suggests that *guanxi* and factional ties are indispensable nutrients in the cadre promotion process.

The disclosure of cadre profile data and development of related theory have enabled scholars to dig deeper into the underlying mechanisms of cadre promotion. For example, Bo's (2002) investigations of provincial leaders suggest that economic performance is a significant factor in their promotions, whilst Li and Zhou's (2005) analysis reveals that the economic growth rate and personal ties with the central government are key predictors of the career mobility of provincial leaders. Several follow-up studies have corroborated and extended their findings to further develop a performance-based promotion tournament theory (Ma 2012). A recent study of provincial leaders showed that both performance and *guanxi* matter for promotions, although they play subtly different roles in the promotion of Party and state cadres (Choi 2012). Landry (2008) and Lin (2012) investigated cadre

promotion at the prefectural level and confirmed the profound role played by economic performance, whereas Goo (2007) found economic performance, and more particularly revenues raised, to be an important factor in the career mobility of county-level cadres. In sum, the literature has revealed the existence of performance-based promotion at almost all levels of government.

The limitations of the existing literature are twofold. First, most studies focus on leading Party-state cadres at the provincial or prefectural level, leaving us with a limited understanding of the promotion of ordinary cadres and employees. The advantage of focusing on higher level leaders is accessibility to their profile data and the ease of combining jurisdictional factors to elicit the key antecedents to their career advancement. Because the career mobility of top-tier cadres is highly politicized and contingent upon many uncontrollable and invisible factors, however, the real determinants of their promotions are generally difficult if not impossible to identify. As Su et al. (2012) argued recently, most studies simplify economic growth as one of the key performance indicators assigned to top leaders, largely ignoring the consequences of many other performance indicators. However, simulating actual cadre performance appraisals is complicated and is not conducive to such simplification (Shih et al. 2012).

Second, the literature highlights performance and personal ties as the two predominant variables affecting cadre promotion, but the relationship between them has largely been overlooked (see Choi 2012 for an exception). Most studies have treated them as two mutually exclusive factors, and thus modelled them in isolation. Such a dichotomous perspective has served to separate scholars into two camps, leaving the interdependence of the two promotion factors seldom addressed. Public employees cannot rely solely on performance or *guanxi* to gain a promotion; instead, the two factors often interact to advance their careers. To uncover the mechanisms of cadre promotion, we need to adopt a more-appropriate approach that simultaneously incorporates both performance and *guanxi*.

In addition to a number of analyses using secondhand data, several studies have carried out structured interviews to elicit cadres' perceptions of promotion attribution. These studies found that cadres differ in their perceptions of promotion channels, suggesting a rather complicated and nuanced picture of the cadre promotion process. For example, in a survey of 121 cadres working at the departmental or bureau level, performance (52.1%), opportunity (21.5%), and *guanxi* (18.2%) were chosen as the top-three determinants of career advancement of the eight options respondents were presented with (Xie and Qing 1999).¹ A survey of more than 2500 cadres across 15 provinces revealed that 50.44% perceived personal capacity and work performance as the most crucial factors influencing their elevation, whilst 37.72% emphasized the pivotal roles played by family background and *guanxi* (Shi 2010).² As cadres are in a position to experience firsthand the personnel decision-making concerning themselves and others, their perceptions may be more revealing than reliance on analyses based on cadre profiles.

The surveys and case studies carried out to date have uncovered public employees' perceptions of the reasons for promotion, but research delving into the antecedents and consequences of such perceptions is rare. To address these research gaps, we have made use of a new dataset to examine local cadres' perceived promotion channels.

Theory

Perceived Promotion Channels: Guanxi or Merit?

The top-three job mobility channels identified in the literature are performance, race/sex, and luck/favouritism (Beehr et al. 1980). Performance is an internally controlled promotion channel because employees can work harder or smarter to improve their performance, whereas race/sex and luck/favouritism are externally controlled non-performance factors that are largely beyond employees' control. As previously discussed, merit and *guanxi* are the two

predominant and competing cadre promotion channels in China. They may be roughly equivalent to performance and favouritism, as identified by Beehr et al. (1980), respectively.

Merit and *guanxi*, however, are not mutually exclusive career mobility channels. Individuals may perceive either, both, or neither. Choi (2012) reported that both economic performance and factional ties influence the promotion of provincial Party secretaries, whereas the former alone is a factor in the promotion of provincial governors. To compare the distinct effects of merit and *guanxi*, we adopted a configurational approach to construct the variable of perceived promotion channels. Configuration refers to 'any multidimensional constellation of conceptually distinct characteristics that commonly occur together' (Meyer et al. 1993: 1175). The configurational approach is a useful framework for theorizing the organizational phenomena involved with multiple interrelated variables. Organisational observations are generally distinguished in terms of their relative position with regard to two or more characteristics or attributes, and configuration helps theorists to generate more finely tuned typologies and taxonomies.

We use the configurational approach to distinguish four perceived promotion channels based on respondents' preference for performance or *guanxi* (see Figure 1). First, if public employees chose work competence and performance as the sole criterion of career advancement, we labelled their perceived promotion channel as merit-based promotion. Second, if they perceived favouritism or nepotism as the sole criterion, we coded their perceived promotion channel as *guanxi*-orientated promotion. Third, those choosing both merit-based and *guanxi*-orientated factors were assigned to the ambidextrous category. Finally, public employees choosing externally controlled factors such as race, sex, and luck (which are neither merit-based nor *guanxi*-orientated) were labelled fatalistic.

Different from previous studies focusing separately on either performance or personal ties, our study adds to the literature by incorporating the two into an integrated framework. The configurational approach enables us to

Figure 1. A Configurational Approach of Perceived Promotion Channels

		<i>Guanxi</i>	
		No	Yes
<i>Merit</i>	Yes	Merit-based (40.41%)	Ambidextrous (9.37%)
	No	Fatalistic (30.93%)	<i>Guanxi</i>-orientated (19.30%)

classify perceived promotion channels into four categories: merit-based, *guanxi*-orientated, ambidextrous (both), and fatalistic (neither). We expect different patterns of promotion attribution to be shaped by different variables, and also to possibly affect respondents' propensities, attitudes, and behaviour.

Antecedents of Perceived Promotion Channels

Numerous factors may influence perceptions of career advancement. Some of them pertain to individual demographics and dispositions, whilst others refer to organizational and environmental attributes. We focus on the following individual factors that may affect perceived promotion channels.

- *Public service motivation (PSM)*. As one of the core values of public employees, PSM refers to the propensity to serve the public, engage in public policy, and contribute to society. Employees with stronger PSM are characterized by altruism and such values as collectivism, conscientiousness, and an altruistic orientation towards benefiting others, and

are more likely to devote themselves to public service. Merit-based promotion has been found relevant to PSM (Alonso and Lewis 2001), and we hypothesized that public employees with different levels of PSM would ascribe promotion channels to distinct factors. For instance, stronger PSM may encourage individuals to perceive merit-based promotion rather than *guanxi*-orientated promotion, as such an attribution provides a better fit with their intrinsic values.

- *Gender*. The prevalence of gender discrimination and the so-called 'glass ceiling' in career mobility makes gender a key factor in promotion attribution (Beehr and Juntunen 1990). Women are underrepresented in the government workforce in China, and their presence diminishes the further up the hierarchy one moves (Rosen 1995). Women seldom hold top management positions in the Party or in government agencies, and they may ascribe their underrepresentation to the traditional culture of masculinity rather than to issues of personal capacity and performance. Female employees who have successfully climbed the career ladder,

however, may be more likely to emphasize that their promotions were merit-based.

- *Age.* Elderly public employees with lengthy career experience are usually more familiar with the political process underpinning promotion relative to their younger counterparts, and thus may be more likely to attribute promotion to *guanxi* and externally controlled factors. Although seniority increases with age, elderly employees may perceive less career opportunities, bleaker expectations about mobility, and lower satisfaction with the promotion system, which in turn elicit them to attribute career mobility to non-merit factors (Vardi 1980). Younger public employees without rich career experience, in contrast, may more often naively consider merit and performance to be the key determinants of promotion.
- *Education.* As educational qualifications are increasingly highlighted by the CPC departments of various organizations as one of the key components of quality cadres, public employees who have attained a high level of education are more likely to be promoted. Highly educated employees thus may be more likely to ascribe promotion to merit-based factors.
- *Party membership.* CPC members usually have a greater chance of being promoted in organizations dominated by their comrades. They may be more likely to perceive competence and performance as key promotion factors. Non-CPC members, in contrast, as minorities within their organizations, may more often consider promotion to be strongly connected with CPC membership and thus emphasize the importance of non-performance factors.
- *Administrative rank.* Public employees of a higher rank are more likely to ascribe career advancement to work competence and performance to justify their current standing in the hierarchy, whereas their subordinates seem likely to give the opposite response (Beehr and Juntunen 1990). Employees at the receiving end of favourable promotion outcomes are likely to perceive the promotion process to be

merit-based. Lower-level public managers with a lengthy service record, in contrast, may tend to attribute their inability to rise within the organization to factors beyond their control.

- *Sector affiliation.* Employees affiliated with different sectors may have different career trajectories and prospects, and those sectors may shape their attitudes towards promotion. Employees working in CPC committees and government agencies usually have considerably more promotion opportunities than their counterparts serving in PC, CPPCC, judicial authorities, and public service units, and may be more likely to attribute promotion to merit-based factors.

Promotion Channels and Fairness Perceptions

Perceptions concerning promotion channels may affect a variety of attitudes and types of behaviour. We focus our attention on public employees' perceptions of promotion fairness. A key component of a healthy human resource management system, promotion fairness has been revealed to exert a positive effect on organizational commitment, with employees who perceive the promotion process to be fair more likely to work hard (Lemons and Jones 2001). If employees regard personnel decision-making as unfair and unrelated to their competence or performance, their morale is likely to suffer. Unfair promotion perceptions may also strengthen organizational politics and damage organizational cohesion (Ferris and Kacmar 1992).

Employees' perceptions of the fairness of promotion practices are largely influenced by the procedural justice of promotion and their construction of promotion channels. Studies have found employees consider performance-based promotion to be fair and promotion based on non-performance criteria to be unfair (Beehr et al. 2004). Accordingly, we posited that public employees' perceived promotion channels would affect their level of satisfaction with promotion fairness and that the four aforementioned perceived promotion channels would

have distinct effects on that satisfaction. For instance, we expected that merit-based promotion would generally be perceived as fair and *guanxi*-orientated promotion as unfair.

Methods

Sample and Data Sources

We examine the predictors and effects of public employees' perceived promotion channels in the context of Chinese local government. It is very difficult to randomly survey public employees in China, particularly concerning such a politically sensitive topic. 'Undertaking surveys of party cadres and civil servants in China is complex, and access is difficult', (Christensen et al. 2012: 801) because the researchers usually face many methodological challenges such as the choice of survey locations and agencies, questionnaire distribution and collection, and respondents' confidentiality concerns (Robertson et al. 2007). Manion (1994) suggested that it is appropriate to use non-random samples to examine local cadres if your purpose is to test the correlations amongst sensitive variables. We thus used a convenience sampling method to recruit respondents and did our best to ensure its representativeness.

China is structured politically into five tiers or levels (centre, province, prefecture, county, and township), and we focused on ordinary public employees working in county-level governments and equivalent organizations. Our data were collected in 2009 and 2010 using a written questionnaire that had been pretested and revised to ensure that its wording and length were acceptable. Respondents were assured of anonymity and asked to complete the survey after providing informed consent.

We adopted two approaches, field and auxiliary surveys, to recruit respondents. To increase the representativeness of the sample, we first purposively selected the provinces to be included in the survey. Chinese provinces are usually classified into one of three regions, the eastern coastal region, central region, and western inland region, which vary in descending order in terms of economic openness, wealth,

and social development. We selected two typical provinces in each region, including eastern Zhejiang and Guangdong, central Hubei and Hunan, and western Gansu and Ningxia. We then chose the prefectures and counties in which the survey was to be implemented, according to their variations of economic development. In each county or district, with the help of the local CPC Organization Department, we recruited public employees from representative sectors. The sample size was determined by sector type and organisational size. In the field survey in six selected provinces from April to September in 2009, we distributed 750 copies of the questionnaire and received 551 responses (a response rate of 74%).

In the auxiliary survey from January to February in 2010, we extended the scope of the survey using the snowball approach. We asked graduate and undergraduate students at a public university in Hubei Province to distribute the questionnaires to public employees in their hometowns across six provinces during the winter vacation. We also distributed the questionnaires to public employees attending training sessions in Hubei, Zhejiang, Gansu, and Ningxia. Four hundred and fifty copies of the questionnaire were distributed, and 331 were completed (a response rate of 73.56%).

In total 1200 copies of the survey instrument were circulated in 11 provinces in geographically diverse regions of China, and 886 valid responses were received (a response rate of 73.83%).³ The support from local government leaders can partially explain the high rate of response. Owing to the unavailability of national data, we are unable to make any claims about the representativeness of our sample. It is an exploratory study using non-random and cross-sectional survey data and no statistical and causal inferences could be made, but such a local survey is reasonable to be used to test the correlations amongst variables.

Perceived Promotion Channels

We used one multiple-choice question allowing multiple answers to gauge the respondents' perceived promotion channels: 'In your opinion, what are the key factors determining cadre

promotion in contemporary officialdom?’ In line with the literature and in consideration of the research context, respondents were given six options: work competence, *guanxi*, performance, core leader intentions, luck, and characteristics of the cadre personnel management institutions. The first three factors are internally controlled promotion channels, whilst the second three are externally controlled. By providing check boxes next to the options, the question allows one or more options to be chosen by respondents. The options chosen by respondents were coded 1, otherwise 0.

We merged work competence and performance, as both pertain to the merit-based promotion channel, and used *guanxi* as an indicator of the *guanxi*-orientated promotion channel. The other three factors were combined as the fatalistic category. If a respondent chose performance but left *guanxi* unchecked, we coded him or her as merit-based. If a respondent chose *guanxi* but unchecked performance, we coded him or her as *guanxi*-orientated. If a respondent chose both performance and *guanxi*, we denoted him or her as ambidextrous. If a respondent chose neither merit-based nor *guanxi*-orientated promotion channels, we coded him or her as fatalistic. We created three dummies to label the merit-based, *guanxi*-orientated, and ambidextrous promotion channels, treating fatalistic as the reference category.

Other Variables

PSM was measured by three five-point Likert-type scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item is ‘Civil servants must serve the people wholeheartedly’. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to merge them into a single factor gauging PSM.⁴

The perceived fairness of cadre promotion was measured with a five-point Likert-type scale item. Respondents were asked to rate their degree of satisfaction with promotion fairness on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly dissatisfied) to 5 (strongly satisfied). The results revealed 32.96% of the respondents to be strongly or moderately dissatisfied with the fairness of

the promotion process, whilst 43.91% were strongly or moderately satisfied.

We coded men 1 and women 0, and assigned respondents to one of four age categories (20–30, 31–40, 41–50, and 51–60) coded from 1 to 4. Educational credentials were classified into four tiers: high school or below, some college, Bachelor’s degree, and postgraduate degree. CPC membership was a dummy variable, with CPC members coded 1 and non-CPC members coded 0. Administrative ranks were classified into six tiers: from highest (6) to lowest (1), division-level (*chu*), deputy division-level (*fu-chu*), section-level (*ke*), deputy section-level (*fu-ke*), section member (*keyuan*), and office clerk (*banshi yuan*). Sector affiliation was measured with four dummies for CPC branch, PC or CPPCC body, government sector and judicial authority, with public service unit used as the reference group. We also controlled for provincial dummies in our models to mitigate the heterogeneity threat. We created two dummies for the eastern and western regions, treating the central region as the reference category.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

We first report the descriptive statistics of the sample with regard to demographic representativeness.⁵ Women comprised only a quarter (25.8%) of the sample, not surprising given their underrepresentation in the civil service (Rosen 1995). Thanks to the CPC’s strategy to hire younger and more-educated cadres, most respondents fell into the 31–40 (36.7%) and 41–50 (34.7%) age groups, and the majority held a Bachelor’s degree (62.7%). The respondents were overwhelmingly CPC members (88.1%), and most worked in the CPC branches (34.5%) and various government sectors (38.3%). In terms of administrative rank, most of our respondents can be described as grassroots cadres, with 35.3% of them section members and 35.9% chief or deputy section-level cadres.

With regard to what matters in cadre promotion, approximately 28.67% of the respondents

considered *guanxi* to be one of the key channels. The results show that 28.10 and 25.62% of the respondents ascribed cadre promotion to work competence and performance, respectively, with a total of 49.77% perceiving merit factors to be important. Characteristics of cadre personnel management institutions was the most frequently selected external factor (29.35%), whereas core leader intentions (10.84%) and luck (9.93%) were the least. In total, 42.78% of the respondents chose factors other than *guanxi* or merit as the key determinants of cadre promotion.⁶ Although it was a multiple-choice question, 76.64% of the respondents chose only one option, with 19.53% selecting multiple options and 3.84% failing to select an option. Figure 1 shows that 40.41% of the respondents were merit-based, whilst *guanxi*-orientated promotion accounting for 19.30%. The ambidextrous category accounted 9.37%, and about 30.93% fall into the fatalistic group.

Regression Models of Perceived Promotion Channels

We first ran a regression model to estimate the variance in promotion attribution perceptions by PSM, demographic factors, and socioeconomic variables. As the dependent variable was a discrete set of more than two choices, a multinomial logistic regression model was used. We then predicted perceived promotion fairness by promotion attribution perceptions and other variables using an ordinary least squares (OLS) model.

The multinomial logistic regression models reported in Table 1 produced mixed results. In the *guanxi*-orientated model, none of the independent variables were statistically significant, suggesting that these factors were roughly equivalent between *guanxi* and the three externally controlled channels. In the merit-based model, administrative rank, age, and the eastern region dummy were statistically significant. For the ambidextrous model, PSM, education, and administrative rank were statistically significant. In sum, the models were well explained by the group of independent variables (Wald $\chi^2 = 58.62$, $p \leq 0.01$).

The results confirmed that PSM was negatively related to perceptions of *guanxi*-orientated promotion but positively related to perceptions of merit-based and ambidextrous channels. Its coefficient was significant only in the ambidextrous model ($\beta = 0.544$, $p < 0.01$), implying that people with stronger PSM not only perceived promotion to be merit-based, but also perceived that *guanxi* is a key factor in climbing the career ladder. The results suggest that employees with stronger PSM may be more perceptive about the actual promotion practices in which performance is intertwined with *guanxi*.

The effects of gender were negative, albeit statistically insignificant, in all three models. Age was negatively associated with all three promotion channels, but it was significant only in the merit-based model ($\beta = -0.314$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, younger employees are more likely to perceive the existence of merit-based promotion opportunities. One reason may be that older employees experienced promotion routines before the recent civil service reforms, and their opinions of past practices may affect their perceived promotion channels. Formal education had positive effects in all three models, but these effects were statistically significant only in the ambidextrous model ($\beta = 0.533$, $p < 0.1$). Administrative rank was also positive in all three models, but significant only in the merit-based and ambidextrous models. Highly ranked employees had a stronger propensity to perceive that merit plays the main role in career advancement ($\beta = 0.154$, $p < 0.1$). More-senior employees also are more likely to have a pragmatic perception of the roles of both *guanxi* and merit in achieving success in the high-level promotion tournaments ($\beta = 0.360$, $p < 0.01$). None of the effects of CPC membership or the sector dummies was statistically significant, and the two regional dummies were also only weakly related to perceived promotion channels.

Regression Models of Promotion Fairness

The results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) show that ambidextrous employees (Mean = 3.337, SD = 0.901) are significantly more

Table 1. Multinomial logistic regression models of perceived promotion channels

Variable	<i>Guanxi</i> -orientated	Merit-based	Ambidextrous
PSM	0.0198 (0.108)	-0.00876 (0.0913)	0.544*** (0.163)
Gender (male = 1)	-0.228 (0.250)	-0.0301 (0.215)	-0.350 (0.333)
Age	-0.0222 (0.146)	-0.314** (0.124)	-0.150 (0.226)
Education	0.188 (0.193)	0.126 (0.153)	0.533* (0.293)
CPC (CPC member = 1)	0.272 (0.335)	0.467 (0.284)	0.361 (0.509)
Rank	0.126 (0.0959)	0.154* (0.0846)	0.360*** (0.126)
CPC branch	0.0745 (0.383)	0.343 (0.315)	-0.355 (0.446)
Government sector	0.144 (0.356)	0.161 (0.302)	-0.503 (0.447)
PC/CPPCC body	0.251 (0.495)	0.0827 (0.440)	-0.414 (0.640)
Judicial authority	0.329 (0.487)	0.100 (0.422)	-0.679 (0.705)
Eastern region	0.306 (0.346)	0.490* (0.297)	-0.187 (0.483)
Western region	-0.0664 (0.236)	-0.202 (0.196)	-0.199 (0.314)
Constant	-1.420* (0.737)	-0.346 (0.590)	-3.104*** (1.053)
Pseudo R ²	0.0318		
Wald χ^2	58.62***		

Notes: N = 758. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.
***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10.

satisfied than those in the other three groups (merit-based (Mean = 3.084, SD = 1.066), *guanxi*-orientated (Mean = 3.023, SD = 1.122), and fatalistic (Mean = 3.029, SD = 1.089); $F = 5.34$, $p < 0.05$), but the three groups are not statistically different from each other. The OLS regression results shown in Table 2 suggest that promotion fairness is not fully explained by the group of independent variables ($R^2 = 0.086$) and other important but immeasurable predictors are at play. The *guanxi*-orientated promotion channel was negatively correlated with promotion fairness, whilst the merit-based and ambidextrous channels were both positively correlated. Only the coefficient of the ambidextrous channel, however, was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.259$, $p < 0.05$). The higher level of promotion fairness perceived by ambidextrous employees

may be partially explained by their pragmatism in recognizing the cadre promotion routines prevailing in the existing personnel management practices.

In line with our expectations, PSM was positively and significantly associated with perceived promotion fairness ($\beta = 0.184$, $p < 0.01$). We found both age and education to be significantly negatively related to perceived promotion fairness, implying that experience and knowledge may encourage scepticism and cynicism about formal personnel management institutions and practices. Older employees still working at lower levels may be more discontented with their status, and may attribute their grievance to unfair promotion procedures. More highly educated employees may be more ambitious, so that stagnation in lower ranks may dampen their enthusiasm. The effects of

Table 2. OLS regression model of perceived promotion fairness

Variable	Model
<i>Guanxi</i> -orientated	-0.00250 (0.111)
Merit-based	0.0253 (0.0908)
Ambidexterity	0.259** (0.125)
PSM	0.184*** (0.0410)
Gender (male = 1)	-0.0282 (0.0859)
Age	-0.164*** (0.0531)
Education	-0.120* (0.0668)
CPC (CPC member = 1)	-0.134 (0.126)
Rank	0.0452 (0.0346)
CPC branch	0.221* (0.134)
Government sector	0.220* (0.127)
PC/CPCC body	0.544*** (0.183)
Judicial authority	-0.198 (0.178)
Eastern region	0.256** (0.110)
Western region	-0.203** (0.0863)
Constant	3.601*** (0.263)
R ²	0.0859
F	4.85***

Notes: N = 757. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10.

gender, CPC membership, and administrative rank were all statistically insignificant. In comparison with the respondents from public service units, those affiliated with the CPC, government, or PC/CPCC bodies perceived significantly higher levels of promotion fairness. There was no significant difference, however, between the respondents from public service units and the judicial authorities. Public employees in the wealthier eastern region were significantly more satisfied with promotion fairness, and those from the poorer western region significantly less satisfied.

Discussion

Promotion is one of the core issues in the cadre personnel management system of contemporary China, and it is thus pertinent to identify its key channels and determinants. By applying an alternative approach and generating some empirical evidence from China, this study's contributions are twofold. First, we add to the literature on cadre personnel management by drawing on an alternative approach. Different from previous studies dichotomizing

performance and factional ties, we integrate them into a coherent model using a configurational approach. This typology is informative in helping us to understand the complexity of promotion attributions, and it could be extended to and applied in other contexts. We also develop a preliminary model to explain these four perceived promotion channels and their influence on perceived promotion fairness.

Second, we report new empirical evidence on the antecedents and consequences of public employees' perceived promotion channels. PSM, age, formal education, administrative rank, and geographic region were found to be significantly correlated with perceived promotion channels, whilst gender, CPC membership, and sector affiliation turned out to be insignificant. A follow-up analysis revealed that perceived promotion channels, PSM, age, formal education, sector affiliation, and geographic region were significantly related to employees' satisfaction with promotion fairness, whilst gender, CPC membership, and administrative rank were insignificant. Specifically, ambidextrous employees were the most satisfied with promotion fairness.

To some extent, these results echo traditional Chinese culture, in which a subtle balance needs to be maintained between merit-based promotion and *guanxi*-orientated career advancement, rather than rejection of any *guanxi* element. It is perhaps not surprising that a *guanxi*-orientated society does not have a solely merit-based civil service insulated from any influence of factionalism. However, it would be reasonable to expect Chinese authorities to keep the extent of favouritism in the civil service under some degree of control to better safeguard its integrity. Such a delicate balance is, of course, difficult to achieve and sustain, and it may not be surprising that elderly and highly ranked employees with rich experience and accumulated wisdom were most likely to recognize it, as our results seem to show. Public employees who realize that both merit and *guanxi* matter to some extent in their promotion are more pragmatic about and perceptive of current personnel management practices prevailing in the civil service system. Their personal fit with the existing cadre

promotion climate and the public personnel management circumstances at large can partially explain their relatively higher level of satisfaction with promotion fairness.

The findings suggest that public employees perceive promotion channels in a variety of ways. Our approach may help personnel management practitioners better understand perceived promotion channels and to address concerns. Cadres' perceptions of the paths to career advancement exert a significant effect on their degree of satisfaction with promotion fairness, and personnel managers would thus be wise to monitor and guide those perceptions and, where possible, ensure a more transparent and fair process in practice. For instance, using the approach as a barometer of civil service personnel management practices, periodic surveys could be arranged to identify perceived promotion channels across regions, sectors, and administrative ranks. These data would help the authority to monitor the extent of meritocracy in cadre promotion and find ways to improve employees' confidence in promotion fairness and thereby increase their organizational commitment.

Nearly half of the respondents highlighted the importance of merit in cadre promotion, and the result is highly consistent with previous studies finding a strong performance-promotion nexus. Given the sampling limitations in this study, we still found a large portion of employees perceived an important role played by *guanxi* in promotion. The results partially revealed the risk and tendency of favouritism in current promotion practices. It may be that *guanxi* as an ingredient of China's civil service system cannot be totally eliminated, but its role in promotion must be contained if promotion fairness is to be assured. Personnel management institutions, particularly the criteria and procedures used in career mobility decision-making, should be made more transparent and merit-based in nature if public employees are to gain greater trust in the system and perceive the promotion process to be fair. It may also be noteworthy that China's cadre management system does not distinguish between 'political' positions and 'administrative' ones, whereas in Western

democracies formal merit requirements apply only to civil servants in administrative roles.

The study is exploratory and several limitations need to be addressed in future studies. First, our data were derived from a non-random sample, and we encourage other scholars to employ random sampling methods, or at least more structured convenience approaches, to test and extend our findings. Second, the study was based on cross-sectional analysis, and causal inferences are thus impossible. Longitudinal datasets would be the optimal way to examine causal relationships between perceived promotion channels and other variables. Third, owing to the use of multiple-choice question, we are unable to distinguish the relative importance of each promotion channel, although we hope that future research will be able to do so. Fourth, our findings were reached in the unique context of China, and thus they may not be generalizable to other countries and regions. It would be interesting in future research to compare our findings with the patterns of promotion attribution in other contexts (e.g. Australia). The findings reported here, although exploratory given the aforementioned limitations, provide new perspectives and insights on cadre promotion processes in local China.

Endnotes

1. The other five factors are education, age, speciality, economic strength, and lifestyle.
2. The other factors, including length of service, luck, reputation, bribery, and others, were seldom selected by the respondents.
3. The sample size and response rate of field and auxiliary surveys in each province are available from the first author upon request.
4. The results are available from the first author upon request.
5. The descriptive statistics are available from the first author upon request.
6. Because it is a multiple-choice question, the subtotals of merit and other factors are smaller than the sum of its components. Because the percentages are rounded to two decimal places,

their sum could be less than 100%. The specific results are available from the first author upon request

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