



Meritocracy as Authoritarian Co-Optation: Political Selection and Upward Mobility in China

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Why does an authoritarian regime adopt meritocracy in its political selection? I argue that meritocracy can be used to co-opt large numbers of ordinary citizens by providing them with an opportunity of socioeconomic advancement instead of income redistribution, as long as the selection process is viewed as inclusive and rule-based. Focusing on the civil service examination in contemporary China, I examine how this meritocratic selection has shaped the relationship between college graduates and the Chinese regime. Exploiting a spatial-cohort variation in applicant eligibility, I find that the exam boosts college graduates' perceived upward mobility, which in turn weakens their demand for redistribution even in the face of growing inequality. These findings point to an alternative mode of authoritarian co-optation and highlight the role of upward mobility in regime stability.