

# Making Bureaucracy Work: Patronage Networks, Performance Incentives, and Economic Development in China



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**Abstract:** Patron–client networks are widely found in governments of transitional societies and are often seen as an impediment to effective governance. This article advances an alternative view that emphasizes their enabling effects. I argue that patron–client relations can be used to improve government performance by resolving principal–agent problems within political hierarchies. I substantiate this claim by examining how patronage networks shape economic performance of local governments in China. Using an original city–level panel data set between 2000 and 2011, and a new method that identifies patronage ties based on past promotions, I show that city leaders with informal ties to the incumbent provincial leaders deliver significantly faster economic growth than those without. I conduct additional analyses to rule out several important alternative explanations and provide evidence on the incentive-enhancing mechanism. These findings highlight the importance of informal institutions for bureaucratic management and authoritarian governance.

formal accountability mechanisms (Stokes 2005). The negative assessment of the effect of political patronage also figures prominently in comparative analyses of states' successes and failures in promoting development, especially as an explanation for the poor economic performance of many developing countries (Goldsmith 1999; Ilkhamov 2007; Zon 2001). Outside of academia, a central theme of the civil service reform advocated by international donors similarly emphasizes replacing traditional, patronage-based administrations with a modern government bureaucracy that features meritocratic principles and rule-based management (United Nations Development Programme 2004).

This article advances an alternative view about the role of patron–client networks in political organizations. Instead of viewing them as inherently backward or counterproductive traits, I argue that patron–client networks can help *improve* the performance of government bureaucracies.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, I argue that the capacity of patron–client relations to coordinate actions in the absence of formal, third-party enforcement enables them

and Liu 2012). As in the general literature, most existing research on Chinese politics views these informal relations as a flaw of the system (e.g., Shih, Adolph, and Liu 2012) and explains China's success by its merit-based selection institutions (Bell 2015; Li and Zhou 2005; Xu 2011). Instead, my argument suggests that these informal elements actually serve as an important tool for incentivizing performance of lower-level officials, especially when good performance entails costs and uncertainties that cannot be fully captured by the formal, institutional arrangements.

Empirically, I analyze an original panel data set for city-level administrations in China between 2000 and 2011. Although the secrecy of authoritarian politics makes it difficult to discern political alignments among the elites, I overcome this challenge by working with a new biographical database and a novel strategy that infers patron–client relations from past promotions. Exploiting variations in connections between cities and provinces induced by the constant reshuffling of officials at both levels, I estimate how patronage connections with higher-level lead-

incentives, I also analyze several other data sources, including a new data set on government policy priorities. I find that connected city leaders do indeed place greater emphasis on development-related issues in articulating their policy plans, as well as exert a higher level of effort on other important governing tasks, such as revenue collection and legislation.

By demonstrating that patron–client relations can help generate strong incentives for promoting economic growth in the world’s largest developing country, this study contributes to a large literature on the relationship between states’ organizational characteristics and governance outcomes. The general view of this literature is that effective governance requires the presence of certain strong, well-functioning political and bureaucratic institutions. The influential literature on the developmental state, for example, argues that a merit-based, Weberian-style bureaucracy is the key institutional prerequisite for successful state-led development (e.g., Evans and Rauch 1999; Rauch and Evans 2000; Woo-Cumings 1999). In contrast to this view, my analysis suggests that momentum

This study also speaks to a burgeoning literature on the sources of durability in authoritarian regimes. Existing studies on authoritarian survival tend to focus primarily on *formal*, semi-democratic institutions, such as parties, legislatures, and elections (Blaydes 2010; Boix and Svulik 2013; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008), but have paid relatively limited attention to *informal* institutions, which presumably play a much more important role than formal rules in nondemocratic regimes (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). This study provides new evidence on how informal institutions enable the Chinese regime to effectively pursue key economic and policy goals that are central to its popularity. Although the growth-promoting impact of patronage networks may be specific to the regime’s distinct, performance-based mode of legitimation (Yang and Zhao 2015), the general finding about the regime-strengthening effects of informal institutions is relevant for understanding the sources of resilience in other autocracies, where similar networks have been found to help regimes accomplish other key tasks, such as repression (Hassan 2017), voter mobilization (Magaloni 2006), or

effects it has on promotion, patronage could also have a more subtle way to influence political selection that works through, rather than against, the formally meritocratic institutions.

## **Patron–Client Relations and Principal–Agent Problems in Government Hierarchies**

The central theoretical claim that I advance in this article is that informal institutions such as patron–client relations can play a critical role in improving the performance of government bureaucracies. This claim is based on the premise that a major challenge to government performance lies in the conflicts among actors *within* its hierarchies. It has been well recognized by a large body of political science and economics research that in hierarchical organizations, lower-level agents' objectives are not always in line with those of their principals (Downs 1967).

portant tool for political principals to align the interests of their agents. These relations represent, in essence, a form of voluntary, reciprocal exchange between two individuals with unequal status, whereby the individual of higher status (i.e., the patron) provides concrete benefits, such as resources and protection, to the individual of lower status (i.e., the client) in exchange for the latter's services in the forms of skills, support, or general assistance (Scott 1972). The exchange usually encompasses a variety of goods and services and lasts for an extended period of time. Most notably, cooperation in patron-client relations is enforced not by any third-party adjudicator but through the shared interest in maintaining a valuable long-term relationship. As a result, these relations have been widely used for organizing activities that are not formally supported or even sanctioned by existing legal or social institutions (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984).

While the existing political science research on patronage networks has focused mainly on their negative consequences, such as corruption (Rose-Ackerman 1999)

## Patronage Networks and Performance Incentives in China

Patron–client relations have long been an integral part of Chinese politics, with their historical roots dating back to the imperial time.<sup>5</sup> This practice was only reinforced with the advent of the CCP and the establishment of a powerful, all-encompassing state that became the natural habitat for particularistic relations. In a system that emphasizes political unity and selfless devotion while forbidding any open political competition, informal networks provide a key mechanism for elites to articulate interests, pursue personal ambitions, and organize collective undertakings (Dittmer 1978; Nathan 1973).<sup>6</sup> Whereas the formal authority relations in the Chinese bureaucracy may be “brief and expediential” (Dittmer 1978, 29), informal alliances cultivated within the formal organizations are often more durable and can serve as one’s real base of power. Patron–client ties are colloquially referred to as “lines (*xian*)” by government

promotion system to generate incentives for local government agents. According to this view, informal factions and cliques represent the more corrupt and pathological aspects of the system and pose a threat to the proper functioning of the meritocratic institutions (e.g., Bell 2015; Nathan 2003; Xu 2011). Contrary to this perspective, I argue that there are several ways by which patron–client ties can enhance, rather than weaken, the performance incentives of government agents.

First, patronage ties can strengthen agents’ performance incentives by increasing the credibility of rewards from their principals. Although a number of empirical studies have investigated whether performance can have a de facto impact on officials’ career prospects, it is worth noting that the Chinese bureaucracy has no universal policy that directly links economic growth with political promotions (Su et al. 2012). The official evaluation guidelines from the Central Organization Department emphasize a range of personal qualities aside from substantive performance,<sup>9</sup> and higher-level decision makers often enjoy considerable discretion over how to interpret

fact have stronger incentives to perform because there is a greater chance that their good performance will be valued.

Relatedly, patrons' ability to offer extra-institutional protection also matters for clients' incentives. Like many other transitional/authoritarian systems, the formal structure of the Chinese government contains many rules and regulations that are designed to prioritize stability and political control over economic efficiency.<sup>11</sup> To promote development, local officials often have to find ways to circumvent these inefficient constraints and undertake actions that fall outside of the officially sanctioned domains (Ang 2016). These violations, however, may jeopardize one's career if they are exposed at critical moments and taken seriously by higher-level officials.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, rapid growth itself may also increase the likelihood of various types of hazards, including mass protests (due to land expropriation), safety incidents, and corruption investigations, which can negatively affect career prospects of local officials.<sup>13</sup> In such an environment, having trusted patrons who are willing to condone their mistakes and defend them from critics at high-level meet-

a policy agenda, for example, his or her clients are usually expected to be the most active ones in executing it. If they can produce good results, it helps reinforce the leader's authority and puts pressure on other officials to follow suit.<sup>16</sup> From the clients' perspective, delivering good performance is an important way to credibly signal their personal loyalty to the patron. If they do not respond to their patron's calls with sufficient enthusiasm or perform poorly on tasks that their patron values, they may be seen as lacking gratitude or sense of responsibility, and negative perceptions as such may cost them the trust of their patron and lead to the loss of valuable benefits in the future.<sup>17</sup>

Historically, patron-client relations have been used as a key instrument of mobilization by CCP elites to achieve various political and policy tasks. Depending on a patron's own goals and preferences, however, the outcome could be either detrimental or beneficial to societal welfare. Mao Zedong, for example, used a group of personal loyalists to carry out several political campaigns with disastrous economic consequences, such as the Great Leap Forward (Yang, Xu, and Tao 2014) and the Cultural

## Empirical Design

### The Subnational Context

My empirical analysis focuses on interactions between provinces and cities. The main patron of interest here is the provincial party secretary, who is the head of the provincial party committee and de facto leader of a province. To effectively govern, a provincial secretary needs support from lower-level officials, who control important administrative and financial resources in China's highly decentralized system. For clients, I focus on officials serving in city leadership positions—that is, the city party secretary and the mayor, who are the first and second most powerful figures in a city, respectively.<sup>19</sup> City leaders are appointed mainly by the provincial authority under the current *one-level-down* personnel management system.<sup>20</sup> They enjoy considerable de facto power over policymaking and resource allocation within their own jurisdictions, and their incentives can have direct implications for the pace of local development (Landry 2008). Whereas a motivated, hardworking city leader can use

is evidence that the public attributes credit for performance asymmetrically across different levels of government; the higher level typically receives more legitimacy gains from good performance than the lower level (Lü 2014). While political legitimacy is ultimately a concern of the national leadership (Yang and Zhao 2015), provincial leaders, by virtue of their closeness to the central leaders, are much more likely to internalize this preference than lower-level officials.<sup>21</sup> Second, the assignment of punishment in the system also follows a highly asymmetric pattern. Higher-level political leaders are usually far less likely than their local subordinates to suffer politically from hazards caused by rapid growth (e.g., protests, accidents, corruption investigations).<sup>22</sup> In the later part of the analysis, I also directly examine how the performance premium varies with patrons' governing preferences.

## Data

**Economic Performance.** The main indicators I use to

municipal, provincial, and national leaders in China since the late 1990s. For each leader, the database provides standardized information about the time, place, organization, and rank of *every* job assignment listed in his or her curriculum vitae, which is collected from government websites, yearbooks, and other trustworthy Internet sources (see Appendix A in the SI). I match each city-year spell in the panel data set with a city secretary and a mayor. In cases where multiple leaders held the same post within a given spell, the person with the latest entry date is chosen.

### Measuring Patronage Ties at the Subnational Level

Measuring informal relations in authoritarian regimes has always been a challenge for empirical researchers. In the study of Chinese politics, the most commonly used approach thus far is to identify ties based on shared work and school experiences or home origins (Jia, Kudamatsu, and Seim 2015; Shih, Adolph, and Liu 2012). While shared

sibility” (*diyi zeren ren*) by the higher authority when it comes to provincial-level personnel issues.<sup>27</sup>

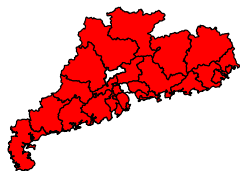
My measurement strategy is thus to identify patron-client relations by linking lower-level officials to provincial secretaries who were in power when those officials were first promoted to key city leadership positions. I focus on city leadership positions because they are highly valuable posts within the Chinese system in terms of both power and upward potential. For example, 17 out of the 25 Politburo members of the 18th Central Committee had experience as city leaders earlier in their careers. Given their value and importance, it is reasonable to expect that among officials who are promoted to these posts for the first time, many will have close relations with their provincial secretaries. Even if some of them are not, we can at least assume that the party secretaries have taken a neutral stance toward their advancement, and the presence of measurement error is likely to attenuate the results toward zero.

More formally, I define a city leader  $C$  as a client of a provincial leader  $P$  if and only if the following condition

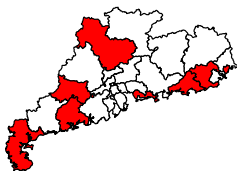


**FIGURE 1 Variation in Connection Status: Guangdong Province, 2007–13**

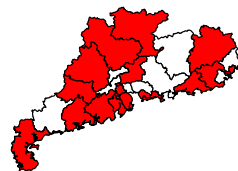
**2007**  
Provincial Secretary: Zhang Dejiang



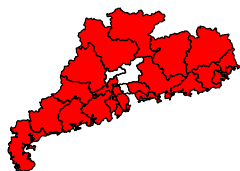
**2008**  
Provincial Secretary: Wang Yang



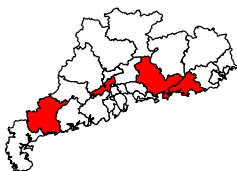
**2010**  
Provincial Secretary: Wang Yang



**2012**  
Provincial Secretary: Wang Yang



**2013**  
Provincial Secretary: Hu Chunhua



*Note:* This figure illustrates the over-time change in political alignments in Guangdong province.

TABLE 1 Baseline Results

	Growth at $t + 2$ (Last Year = 100)					
	(1) Overall	(2) Overall	(3) Overall	(4) Agriculture	(5) Manufacturing	(6) Service
Connected to provincial secretary	0.389* (0.191)	0.749** (0.199)	0.382** (0.126)	0.009 (0.207)	0.740* (0.315)	0.210 (0.153)
City and province-year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City economic controls		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
City leader controls			✓	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.45	0.48	0.51	0.25	0.36	0.40
Number of cities	326	326	326	326	326	326
Observations	3,907	3,891	3,693	3,691	3,691	3,691

*Note:* This table presents the effects of patronage ties to provincial secretaries on economic growth. The dependent variables are overall and sector-specific GDP growth rates at  $t + 2$ . City economic controls include *Net Transfer*( $t + 1$ ) and the following pairs of variables evaluated at both the city secretary's and the mayor's predecessors' final year of service: *GDP Growth*, *Log GDP*, *Log Population*, and *Log Investment*. City leader controls include the following variables (for both the city secretary and the mayor): *Age*, *Education*, *Gender*, and dummies for having served for less than 1 year, between 1 and 3 years, and between 3 and 5 years (with more than 5 years being the reference group) in one's current position. Robust standard errors clustered at city level are reported in parentheses. FE = fixed effects.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed test).

FIGURE 2 Dynamic Effects of Connection on Growth

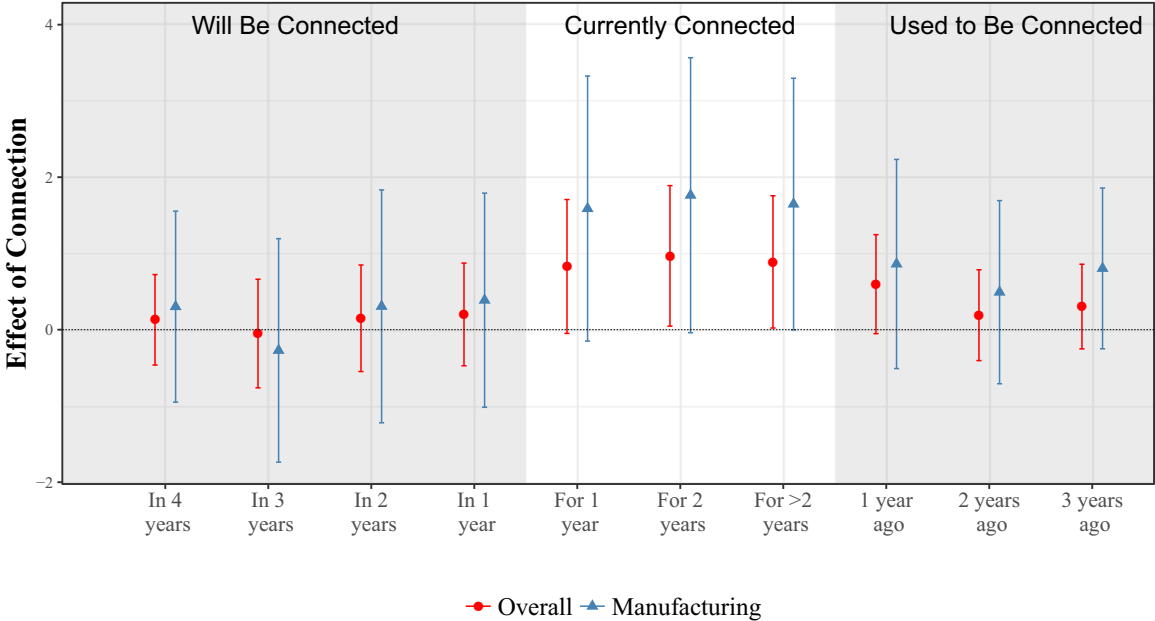


TABLE 2 Effects of Connection on Data Falsification

	Growth Difference between GDP and ... $t + 2$ (Last Year = 100)			
	(1) Freight	(2) Power	(3) Brightness	(4) $\frac{\text{Freight} + \text{Power} + \text{Brightness}}{3}$
Connected to provincial secretary	−0.055 (0.053)	0.012 (0.067)	0.013 (0.028)	−0.011 (0.052)
City and province-year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
City economic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
City leader controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.12	0.04	0.78	0.34
Number of cities	284	284	326	284
Observations	3,144	3,107	3,693	3,077

*Note:* This table presents the effects of patronage ties to provincial secretaries on the difference between reported GDP growth and the growth rates of alternative economic indicators. The specification is based on column 3 of Table 1. The dependent variable is standardized (with mean = 0 and SD = 1) to facilitate interpretation. Robust standard errors clustered at city level are reported in parentheses. FE = fixed effects.

\*p < .05, \*\* p < .01 (two-tailed test).

subsequent connection status (Table A.7), and that the

Distributive Favoritism

**TABLE 3 Effects of Connection on Distribution of Government-Controlled Resources**

	Tangible Resource ( $t + 1$ )		Policy Support ( $t + 1$ )	
	(1) Log Loan	(2) Log Land Quota	(3) National SEZ	(4) Provincial SEZ
Connected to prov sec	−0.001 (0.016)	−0.008 (0.047)	0.012 (0.021)	0.005 (0.005)
City and province-year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
City economic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
City leader controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.98	0.83	0.45	0.01
DV period	2004–2013	2003–2011	2000–2006	2000–2006
Number of cities	284	325	326	326
Observations	2,801	2,816	2,071	2,071

*Note:* This table demonstrates that patronage ties do not significantly affect the distribution of several key productive resources controlled by the government, including land, bank loans, and approval for special economic zones. The main specification is based on column 3 of Table 1. Robust standard errors clustered at city level are reported in parentheses. SEZ = special economic zone; FE = fixed effects.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed test).

discussed above, although there is little prior reason to time was relatively close. I show that connected leaders

TABLE 4 Effects of Connections on Policy Priorities

	% of Work Report Topics ( $t + 1$ )			
	(1) Development	(2) Welfare	(3) Culture	(4) Administration
Connected to provincial secretary	0.002* (0.001)	−0.003 (0.002)	−0.000 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
City and province-year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
City economic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
City leader controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.49	0.23	0.14	0.33
Number of cities	315	315	315	315
Observations	2,455	2,455	2,455	2,455

*Note:* This table shows that patronage ties make local governments more development oriented in stated policy priorities. The main specification is based on column 3 of Table 1. The sample starts in 2004 because the missing rate in government reports is too high for the earlier period. FE = fixed effects.

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01 (two-tailed test).

will depend on whether patrons have an encompassing interest in promoting growth. I use two proxies to capture a

affect other observed behaviors of local officials. First, I examine the effect of connections on local governments’

Weingast 1996), yet the presence of high-powered incentives is inherently puzzling in light of a government bureaucracy ridden with patron–client networks. This article argues that informal institutions such as patron–client relations can actually make positive contributions to the effectiveness of the Chinese government by mitigating the conflicts of interest between the political principals and agents. Focusing on subnational administrations, my empirical analysis demonstrates that patronage ties with incumbent provincial leaders significantly improve the economic performance of city-level officials. Additional analyses further suggest that this improvement in performance is most consistent with a story of patron–client ties providing additional incentives for local leaders to exert efforts on challenging economic development tasks.

Findings from this study have implications for our understanding of the institutional causes of China's development. The predominant narrative on China's economic success to date focuses on its formal, merit-based institutions, such as interjurisdictional tournaments and the cadre evaluation system (e.g., Li and Zhou 2005; Xu

development. To the extent that patronage ties are also hotbed for corruption and various other illegitimate activities, the short-term economic gains may, in the long run, be overshadowed by the less observable efficiency loss caused by endemic corruption. More importantly, as discussed above, one crucial political prerequisite for patronage networks to have beneficial social consequences is the existence of some degree of alignment between patrons' survival imperatives and the interests of the public. In the case of China, the presence of performance-based legitimacy is a fundamental mechanism that ensures this alignment. In other countries, domestic political competition and external foreign threats might serve similar functions (e.g., Doner, Ritchie, and Slater 2005). However, the situation would be very different if political survival does not require the elites to maintain broad societal support through the delivery of concrete economic or policy achievements. Although patronage networks may still be useful for patrons to stay in power in those cases, the services that they provide may not necessarily improve the welfare of the society at large.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Appendix A:** Details of the CPED Database

**Appendix B:** Validating the Promotion-Based Measure

**Appendix C:** Additional Information and Robustness Checks

**Appendix D:** Qualitative Examples on Development and Risk-Taking in China

**Appendix E:** Details on Extension Analyses

**Appendix F:** Themes and Topics from Government Work Report

**Appendix G:** Particularistic Reward for Performance from the Patron