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A Relational Image of Chinese Bureaucracy

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I have enjoyed reading Professor Xueguang Zhou's (2021) insightful think-piece, 'Chinese Bureaucracy Through Three Lenses: Weberian, Confucian, and Marchian'. Zhou's rich discussion of how Chinese bureaucracy can be understood and studied from these different theoretical frameworks is highly useful to *MOR* readers, including myself, most of whom are inherently interested in Chinese bureaucracy. It has created a valuable opportunity for us to rethink some of the fundamental questions about Chinese bureaucracy: What exactly is it and in what ways is it different from Western bureaucracies? How can we reconcile the puzzling features of and seemingly conflicting mechanisms of operation in Chinese bureaucracy? Why do these features and mechanisms coexist in the Chinese context under a durable Communist party-state?

For the past three decades or so, I have learned a great deal from Zhou's publications, in English as well as Chinese outlets, and the present think-piece helps me see through the complexities of Chinese bureaucracy. Zhou is an accomplished organizational and institutional sociologist with both local knowledge of and scholarly insights into Chinese bureaucracy, and I anticipate that this think-piece will generate fruitful research from scholars and students alike around the *MOR* community. Encouraged by some of his insights, in this commentary I take it one step further to sketch a relational image of Chinese bureaucracy.

A RELATIONAL VIEW OF CHINESE BUREAUCRACY

Reading through Zhou's think-piece, I have gained the following reflections on Chinese bureaucracy. Chinese bureaucracy is an organizational structure set up to carry out the directives of a durable Communist party-state, whose power is, after all, arbitrary. It is arbitrary not merely because all authoritarian regimes necessarily retain the absolute and ultimate decision-making powers over national and local affairs of public nature (Eagleton, 2014), but also because China's Communist centralized system has both the institutional inertia and the built-in capacity to crystalize all forms of arbitrary power onto its paramount leader in

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any given historical era: Mao Zedong before 1977, Deng Xiaoping and his appointed heirs from 1978 to 2012, and Xi Jinping since 2013 (Schurmann, 1973; Yang, 2017). For the past eight years, we have observed that Xi exercised his arbitrary power to realize his vision of the party-state's missions in 21st century China.

A paramount leader relies on a close-knit network of buddies and followers to implement the missions of the party-state (Bian, 2019). Mao, for instance, built his core network of political and military alliances around the Long March (1934–1936), and this network was instrumental in helping him wipe out foes and contain rivals inside the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) before and after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 (Spence, 1999). Mao's core network was substantially recomposed when he needed radical ideologists to execute the leftist policies of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). To remission the Party for an economic development agenda in post-Mao years, Deng formed his core network of political realists at the central and provincial levels to push forward new policies of reform and open-up, and subsequently the core networks of top politicians were, time and again, in reformation processes when new paramount leaders were identified to rule the CCP and the country in post-Deng eras (Vogel, 2013).

Under a relational image, I consider the arbitrary power of the party-state to be fully reflected upon its paramount leader of a given time. Consequently, the patrimonial mode of domination (a Weberian feature of Chinese bureaucracy as discussed by Zhou) can be seen as a logical outcome of the reformation of core networks around paramount leaders. Conceivably, the network reformation of an emerging paramount leader faces relatively low institutional resistance under a bureaucratic state of organized anarchy (a Marchian feature), as compared to a typical Weberian bureaucracy in which rational arrangements are routinized to counteract efforts of restructuring for political purposes as observed, for example, in the US State Department under the Trump administration (Bolton, 2020). Therefore, it is highly expected and culturally normalized that the informal relationships of politicians and bureaucrats (a Confucian feature) are the primary mechanisms of operation in Chinese bureaucracy (Bian, 2019). Following these understandings, I would argue that capturing network dynamics of paramount leaders is a central research task to carry out in an empirical study of Chinese bureaucracy from Weberian, Marchian, and Confucian lenses.

Three Key Elements of a Relational Model

Chinese bureaucracy is a geographically gigantic, hierarchically multi-layered, and structurally complex system. But one needs not to study the whole system as the unit of analysis, nor to study organizations in Beijing necessarily. What I suggest is that we apply the relational image I just sketched out to any conveniently available organization as far as it meets the minimum standards of Chinese

bureaucracy: It is a Chinese organization with a multi-layered bureaucratic structure, public or private. For my own convenience, a nationally prestigious Chinese university can be a good case study for this analytic purpose.

For the past two and a half decades, I have had the privilege of working in three Chinese universities, as a visiting professor, regular faculty member, department chair, research institute director, co-leader of an internationally influential program, and dean of school of social sciences. These different roles and positions have given me some invaluable opportunities to closely observe, as an everyday participant, how Chinese bureaucracies operated within a university context. Using this experience, I briefly discuss three key elements of a relational model of Chinese bureaucracy.

No. 1 (一把手, yi ba shou). The CCP secretary of the university is institutionally designated No. 1 power holder, having the highest political authority within the university system. This No. 1 position, though at a lower level and confined to the university organization, mimics the paramount leader of the party-state discussed in the previous section. If more senior and more skillful, the university president, No. 2 (二把手, *er ba shou*) of the university, can have a substantial share of the decision-making power, especially when it is on academic or administrative matters. But regardless of personal strengths and weaknesses, the CCP secretary plays a pivotal role in personnel decisions over key positions of the university, including members of the CCP standing committee of the university (the university's decision-making body), vice presidents of the university (each having a specific administrative responsibility), chiefs of staff or directors of functional offices of the university, and deans and CCP secretaries of academic schools, student colleges, and other mid-level units of the university. Formally, these personnel decisions are made collectively by the CCP standing committee of the university through a voting rhetoric, but it is the CCP secretary, no one else, who has the arbitrary power to both administer the nomination/selection processes and chair the meetings of the CCP standing committee of the university. Strategic planning, skillful execution, and timely manipulation, when needed, are some of the cards in the hands of No. 1. My close colleagues remind me, then and now, that China is a country of No. 1 politics.

Core networks of most important alters. To exercise the arbitrary power as No. 1, the CCP secretary tends to trust loyalists over non-loyalists in personnel decisions, and such a tendency is expected to be stronger and more visible when the CCP secretary's career trajectory is non-academic. Like universities around the world, in Chinese universities learned scholars and students of academic excellence also value knowledge, scholarly competence, and academic achievements while generally devaluing ideological orientation, political performance, or personal loyalty to authorities (Sautman, 1991). This implies that creative scholars with national or international prominence are usually not selected by a politics-driven

No. 1 to head an academic unit or functional office unless and until they bow out to the underlying relational politics in the selection and appointment process. Therefore, to capture the core networks of the university's No. 1 power holder is to uncover loyalty-trust bonds having been weaved, whether proactively or reactively, between No. 1 and other strategic players of the university organization.

Network reformation in power shifts. In a normal case scenario, a nationally prestigious university's CCP secretary, as well as president, can hold the position for up to two 5-year terms before retirement at the age of 65. Therefore, the succession of No. 1 is a periodic phenomenon, and the frequency of succession is higher when No. 1 is reallocated, promoted, or removed (in cases of scandal) before a term comes to an end. The succession is an event of power shifts from the old power holder to the new, which is perfect timing to study the network reformation of No. 1 in transition. Over a span of more than two decades, I had a few opportunities to observe this event happening at all three Chinese universities where I worked. In one of these events, someone from outside the university was appointed the CCP secretary, along with a newly appointed president coming from a different nationally prestigious university of equal hierarchical rank, and within the first six months of their arrival the following events happened consecutively:

(1) All six vice presidents under the previous CCP secretary stepped down and returned to their regular faculty positions, and the six VP slots were filled by newly selected candidates, each of whom had quickly shown their loyalties to the new CCP secretary. I gained this impression from both their public speeches that consciously and purposely praised the new No. 1 and their frequent interactions within a short period of time after his arrival;
(2) Ten out of the thirteen members of the CCP standing committee of the university were replaced by new faces. The two vice-CCP secretaries who nominally continued to hold their seats in the standing committee were quickly reallocated to new positions outside the university system, a practice of the CCP to allow party cadres to gain local working experience at different localities around the country, and the vacated seats were refilled by the newly 'elected' members of the CCP standing committee;
(3) All chiefs of staff of the university's functional offices were reallocated to different positions in academic schools or functional offices, and a handful of the most important positions, including those of general staff, planning, personnel, finance, propaganda, research funding, and graduate school, were headed by the newly selected; and
(4) Reappointments of school deans and other mid-level units followed in a similar pattern as outlined above.

It is important to note that before these reappointment decisions were made, the new CCP secretary spent a significant amount of time conducting one-on-one conversations with each of the candidates in the reserve. It would be useful to

establish oral histories with these candidates on the contents of behind-closed-doors conversations, as the information recovered from them can be of analytic utility to understanding the hidden relational mechanisms for personnel decisions.

FURTHER ELABORATION AND TENTATIVE PROPOSITIONS

The relational model I briefly discussed in the previous section is centered around the egocentric network of core alters for a university's No. 1 authority, the CCP secretary. The three key elements of this egocentric network include: ego, ego-alters ties, and network reformation. Here, the ego is the CCP secretary in the center of his/her network of core alters, who are subordinates directly reporting to the CCP secretary with whom they have established strong trust-loyalty bonds. To analyze the formation and reformation of this egocentric network of the university CCP secretary, a catching moment is when a new CCP secretary is appointed. This is the time to observe the chain of events about the frequency, duration, and depth of contact, publicly and personally, between the CCP secretary and other strategic players of the university organization. It would be analytically valuable to record, or retrospectively reestablish an oral history of, the one-on-one conversations between them, as the information gained can be coded to allow for a quantitative analysis of how various trust-loyalty bonds are formed from void or recovered and reformed from past interactions of personal significance. It has been reported that 'event contacts' are of fundamental significance to *guanxi* networks of Chinese entrepreneurs (Burt & Burzynska, 2017), and I have believed that the relational importance of event contacts is universal (Bian, 2017).

To elaborate this relational model more theoretically, but still infer from my limited observation of the three Chinese universities where I worked in the past, I propose a tentative set of theoretical propositions about some empirical implications of my relational image for patterns of career opportunity within Chinese bureaucracy.

The significance of career trajectory proposition. An egocentric network is a personal network, and ego's personal character is important in network formation and reformation. The homophily principle dictates that people with similar attributes, backgrounds, experiences, interests, tastes, values, and/or personalities tend to like each other, thus having a greater probability to build interpersonal trust between them than those with high dissimilarities (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). A reversal to this tendency may suffice in a Chinese bureaucratic system, where heterogeneous subordinates rationally show personal loyalties to their superiors to gain high trust from the latter, thus creating harmonious relationships instrumental for career evaluation and advancement. From perspectives of both superiors and subordinates, *it is more likely to establish trust-loyalty bonds if superiors and subordinates have more similarities than dissimilarities, especially if they have a common career trajectory.*

The significance of intimate interactions proposition. Trust-loyalty bonds between superiors and subordinates are not structurally determined. Rather, actions, interactions, and intimate exchanges on personal levels matter immensely for winning the trust of superiors in subordinates and the loyalty of subordinates to superiors, as vividly described by Feng (2010) in a case study of local officials within a large county government system. These officials are, by and large, from two career trajectories: administrative-political careers (having no professional specialization) and professional-political careers (having a clearly defined professional specialization). As a matter of fact, these are the two typical career trajectories for political leaders found in any organizational setting in the Chinese context (Walder, 1995). If a common career trajectory is a good structural basis to develop trust-loyalty bonds between superiors and subordinates, it is the intimate interactions that are of pivotal significance to the establishment of such bonds when superiors and their subordinates come from different career trajectories. A general proposition is as follows: *the more intimate interactions on personal levels between superiors and their subordinates, the more likely it will be to establish trust-loyalty bonds between them, especially when they come from different career trajectories*.

The significance of trust-loyalty bonds proposition. To a rational actor, such as a highly motivated administrator, manager, or professional, climbing a career ladder is of greater importance than just maintaining a career because promotion determines one's future within a bureaucracy (McCue, 1996). Thus, holding other things constant, *the greater trust-loyalty bonds one establishes with the pivotal decision-maker, the greater probability of getting ahead in career advancement*.

CONCLUSION

Professor Zhou's think-piece has motivated me to think about Chinese bureaucracy relationally. The relational image of Chinese bureaucracy I sketched out in the previous sections begins with the identification of a central player or paramount leader in a given bureaucratic system, and for illustration I have used the CCP secretary of a university organization to discuss several key elements of his/her network formation and reformation in the event of leadership succession, and I have used my limited observations of nationally prestigious Chinese universities to propose a tentative set of theoretical propositions about the significance of trust-loyalty bonds between superiors and subordinates for patterns of career advancement within Chinese bureaucracy. This relational image needs not to be confined to a university context, nor to a high-level government system, but its analytic utility along with the derived propositions should be explored, examined, and tested in different forms of Chinese bureaucracy and at all levels of the organizational hierarchy.

NOTE

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