

How China Promotes Its Military Officers: Interactions between Formal and Informal Institutions

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Abstract

How does China promote its military officers? We present a qualitative study on the determinants (connections versus performance) of the selection of military officers. Drawing on 48 in-depth interviews with serving and retired military officers, we argue that the inability of the rule-based personnel system to assess candidate performance (professional competence and political integrity) leads to the rise of the informal institution of *guanxi* – a Chinese version of personal connections – in promoting military officers. *Guanxi* both substitutes for and competes with the formal personnel system. Information received through *guanxi* networks is used by superiors to evaluate subordinates' professional competence and political integrity. *Guanxi* is also used by corrupt officers to distort democratic procedures and facilitate the buying and selling of military positions. We conclude that the co-existence of a rule-based personnel system and *guanxi* leads superiors to promote competent candidates within their *guanxi* networks.

Keywords: China; corruption; formal–informal institutional interaction; *guanxi*; political integrity; professional competence; promotion; the PLA

The overarching goals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in establishing its army are “winning the war” (*da de ying* 打得赢) and absolute control over the military (*bu bian zhi* 不变质).¹ The promotion system of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) aims to serve these two objectives by identifying and rewarding military officers who meet the dual standards of political integrity and professional competence (*decai jianbei* 德才兼备). Owing to the secrecy of the Chinese military and the dearth of reliable sources, the study of the promotion of military officers has not received much attention. How the CCP promotes its military officers, however, is a fundamental question in Chinese politics, the

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1 Ji 2015a.

answer to which improves our understanding of both the way in which the Party controls the army and the distribution of power in the military, and enables researchers to conduct comparative studies of cadre evaluation in the army and other Party and administrative systems.

The political science and economics literature examines the impact of economic performance and political connections on the promotion of county-level, municipal and provincial Party secretaries and governors. Three models for examining the selection of officials in China have been presented by researchers on Chinese politics: the performance model, the political connection (factionalism) model, and the cross-track model. A growing body of literature supports the notion of a performance-based evaluation system, employed by the CCP to appraise and reward officials who have managed to improve public welfare,² achieve higher economic growth,³ and increase fiscal revenue.⁴ However, a number of China scholars who study the evolution of the cadre evaluation system find that better economic performance is not always rewarded with career advancement,⁵ while factional ties (*guanxi* 关系) with top political leaders is key to achieving the upward mobility of political elites.⁶

Based on the performance model and the factionalism model, Eun Kyong Choi puts forward a cross-track model to explain the ways in which factionalism and performance interact, arguing that “although factional members have advantages in career mobility, their promotion also depends on performance.”⁷ In parallel, Ruixue Jia, Masayuki Kudamatsu and David Seim together explore the complementary roles of connections and performance, and propose that “connections foster loyalty of junior officials to senior ones, thereby allowing incumbent top politicians to select competent provincial leaders without risking being ousted.”⁸ The cross-track model employed by the CCP, as Choi observes, is helpful for solving the problems of dual paths (separation between the performance path and the factionalism path) to power: choosing subordinates only based on performance improves economic growth and social welfare but creates a risk of betrayal; promoting subordinates based only on their loyalty to rulers solves the problem of betrayal but may weaken the government’s ability to supply public services and undermine performance legitimacy.⁹

This study departs from the previous literature in four important ways. First, rather than examining the promotion mechanisms for local cadres at the provincial, municipal, county and township levels, we look at military officers and examine how their chances of promotion depend on their connections with

2 Zuo 2015.

3 Li, Hongbin, and Zhou 2005.

4 Lü and Landry 2014.

5 Landry 2008, 6, 31.

6 Hillman 2010; Nathan 1973; Shih, Adolph and Liu 2012.

7 Choi 2012, 968.

8 Jia, Kudamatsu and Seim 2015, 631.

9 Choi 2012.

superiors and/or their performance. Second, in a departure from past work that focuses on the relationship between the ability to achieve performance targets and officers' career advancement, we investigate two dimensions of performance, political integrity (*de* 德) and professional competence (*cai* 才), and investigate how the two factors, combined with personal connections (*guanxi*), determine the career advancement of military officers. Third, we make use of rich interview data collected from incumbent and retired military officers and present one of the first qualitative studies of the military personnel system in China. Fourth, in order to understand the logic behind the selection of military officers, we analyse the interaction between the informal institution of *guanxi* and the formal personnel system, paying special attention to the impact of the informal institution on the formal system of promoting military officers.

Drawing on empirical data collected in China, we find that the PLA's cadre evaluation system does not effectively identify and reward military officers who possess both professional competence and political integrity, encouraging superiors to employ the informal institution of *guanxi* to promote subordinates. The impact of *guanxi* on the formal military promotion system is twofold. On the one hand, *guanxi* provides an alternative mechanism for superiors to collect private and trustworthy information and assess the political integrity and professional competence of candidates; on the other hand, *guanxi* weakens democratic procedures and undermines the formal personnel system by facilitating corrupt exchanges. Similar to Choi's cross-track model, we suggest that the promotion of military officers is largely based on the strength of social ties with their superiors, but performance is a prerequisite for promotion. In other words, superiors tend to promote competent officers who are in their *guanxi* networks in order to secure subordinates' loyalty, balance interests inside and outside *guanxi* circles, and meet standards of military training.

Formal–Informal Institutional Interactions

Guanxi as an informal institution

In order to investigate what determines the upward mobility of military officers in China, this article focuses on interactions between the formal personnel system and the informal institution of *guanxi*. Informal institutions are defined by Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky as “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels,” while “formal institutions are rules and procedures that are created, communicated, and enforced through channels widely accepted as official.”¹⁰ *Guanxi* has been widely viewed by China scholars as an important form of informal institution, coexisting and interacting with formal institutions.¹¹

10 Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 727.

11 Schramm and Taube 2003; Xin and Pearce 1996; Yang 2002; Zhan 2012.

The interpersonal behaviour and social exchanges of Chinese people follow the social and cultural norms of *guanxi*, the key components of which are *renqing* 人情 (obligatory reciprocity) and *mianzi* 面子 (face or social prestige).¹² *Renqing* is understood by Chinese people to mean the social norms of giving and returning favours within one's *guanxi* networks, a process through which individuals generate a strong sense of obligation and indebtedness.¹³ *Renqing*, as a moral force, psychologically affects a person's decision-making process, making it difficult to "decline a request for help or fail to repay a debt of *renqing*."¹⁴

Guanxi functions as an assurance structure for social exchanges within the *guanxi* network, because *guanxi* members can continuously observe and comment on each other's behaviour.¹⁵ Following the *renqing* rule leads to the maintenance of "personal harmony and social order among persons situated in hierarchically structured relationships," while violating the rule is associated with a severe social punishment: the loss of *mianzi* (social position and prestige) in one's local community.¹⁶ In this case, the informal institution of *guanxi* makes power-holders feel obliged to distribute benefits to members of their *guanxi* networks rather than to outsiders and to give priority to members with strong *guanxi* ties over those with weak *guanxi* ties.¹⁷

In theory, the *guanxi* norm should not be applied in formal institutions that promote social justice and stability through laws, constitutions, legal regulations and official procedures. Formal institutions, including China's military personnel system, should be organized according to Max Weber's rational-legal principle¹⁸ that the allocation of resources and the distribution of promotion opportunities should be based on each individual's contribution and performance.¹⁹ In reality, the chance of promotion and the distribution of rewards and resources in China's state-sponsored institutions are influenced by both the *guanxi* norm and the rational-legal principle.²⁰ It is therefore important to examine the interactions between *guanxi* and formal institutions.

*Three dimensions of guanxi: substitutive, complementary and competing*²¹

Helmke and Levitsky identified four types of formal–informal institutional interaction: complementary, substitutive, accommodating and competing.²² The first

12 Hwang 1987; Luo 1997.

13 Qi 2013; Zhai 2013.

14 Yang 1994, 69.

15 Barbalet 2014.

16 Hwang 1987, 946.

17 Zhan 2012.

18 Max Weber (1946) argues that bureaucracies are organized according to rational principles in order to efficiently attain their goals. The promotion and selection of public officials are based on impersonal or meritocratic rules; that is to say, officials are selected on the basis of their ability and specialized qualifications.

19 Leventhal 1976; Weber 1946.

20 Potter 2002; Yang 1994.

21 No existing literature views *guanxi* as an accommodating informal institution; this article therefore neglects this subcategory.

22 Helmke and Levitsky 2004. See also Grzymala-Busse 2010; Horak and Restel 2016.

observation made by Helmke and Levitsky is that where informal institutions produce a similar outcome to that produced by formal institutions, the formal–informal institutional relationship is either complementary or substitutive. Informal institutions play a complementary role when formal institutions are effective, while informal institutions substitute for their formal counterparts when formal institutions are viewed as ineffective.

Their second observation is that where following informal rules leads to a different outcome, the formal–informal institutional relationship is either accommodating or competing. Helmke and Levitsky further point out that “accommodating informal institutions are often created by actors who dislike outcomes generated by [effective formal institutions] but are unable to change or openly violate those rules,” while competing informal institutions are used by these actors to ignore or violate formal rules and procedures when formal institutions are ineffective.²³

In the 1980s and early 1990s, when China started its economic reform and legal institution building, *guanxi* functioned as a substitute for weak formal institutions.²⁴ Because the government has gradually improved the effectiveness of formal institutions, the role of *guanxi* in the new century has shifted from substitutive to complementary.²⁵ *Guanxi* plays a positive role in helping formal institutions achieve the following goals: protecting property rights, gaining access to desirable resources, safeguarding economic transactions, and solving disputes.²⁶

However, *guanxi* does not always produce positive outcomes as desired by formal institutions. *Guanxi* can “compete with formal institutions” and “hamper formal institutional development.”²⁷ The negative side of *guanxi*, as existing literature shows, is its close association with corruption.²⁸ Businesspeople and gang bosses follow *guanxi* norms to build close ties with public officials in order to seek protection and obtain corrupt benefits, while corrupt public officials use *guanxi* to identify reliable and trustworthy exchange partners.²⁹

Helmke and Levitsky’s theory of formal–informal institutional interaction is a valuable conceptual and explanatory tool when *guanxi* researchers limit their focus to examining one dimension of *guanxi* (either the positive or the negative side of *guanxi* practice) in their case studies.³⁰ Nevertheless, *guanxi* is a multifaceted socio-cultural phenomenon. Is there a case for *guanxi* to be substitutive/

23 Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 729.

24 See Bian and Ang 1997; Peng 2003; Xin and Pearce 1996.

25 See Poppo and Zenger 2002; Potter 2002.

26 Guthrie 1998; Wank 1999; Yang 2002.

27 Horak and Restel 2016, 13.

28 Gong and Xiao 2017; Li, Ling 2011; Luo 2008; Manion 2004; Wedeman 2012; Zhan 2012; Zhu 2008b.

29 Wang 2014; 2017.

30 Researchers either interpret *guanxi* as a positive institution that complements or substitutes for formal institutions without considering its negative side, or they simply equate *guanxi* with corruption. This, however, oversimplifies the practice of *guanxi* in the real world and undermines the local and cultural meaning of *guanxi* in the Chinese context.

complementary and competitive at the same time? Drawing on rich interview data, this study of the interactions between *guanxi* and the formal military promotion system complements the existing *guanxi* literature by exploring the multi-dimensional nature of *guanxi* in practice.

The extent to which *guanxi* affects the selection and promotion of military officers is largely determined by the effectiveness of the formal military promotion system. If formal institutions are well established, and rules and procedures are strictly enforced in practice, the PLA will mainly rely on the rational-legal principle rather than the *guanxi* norm to select officers, and candidates with a high performance in both professional competence and political integrity will be promoted. If formal institutions are weak, *guanxi* will play a major role in officer promotion, and *guanxi* ties with senior officers will become a determining factor.

A study of the ways in which the PLA selects and promotes its military officers cannot ignore the twofold influence of *guanxi* on this process. *Guanxi*'s dual character can be understood as follows. On the one hand, *guanxi* is employed by superiors to obtain confidential information to assist with assessing candidates' political integrity and professional competence; in this case, *guanxi* complements or substitutes for the formal institution. As Jing Vivian Zhan observes, *guanxi* functions as "a transmitter of information and allows [*guanxi* members] to share certain information" that is not publicly accessible.³¹ Because an individual's behaviour is continuously and closely observed by other *guanxi* members, information regarding character and trustworthiness is quickly shared within *guanxi* networks. The efficient flow of information within the *guanxi* network provides "rapid feedback, directly and indirectly, on the performance" and true character of a *guanxi* member.³²

On the other hand, *guanxi* competes with and undermines formal institutions by facilitating corrupt exchanges.³³ *Guanxi* norms (for example, reciprocal exchanges of favours) encourage and sometimes force power-holders to distribute resources and promotion opportunities to *guanxi* members regardless of law, regulations and official procedures, because failure to follow *guanxi* norms leads to the loss of *mianzi* (social prestige), which further results in the loss of future exchange opportunities.³⁴

Data and Methods

Research into the career advancement of military officers in China is challenging owing to the lack of reliable information. In order to investigate how China promotes its military officers, we started this ambitious project in early 2015 and chose to collect empirical data through interviews. Two long-term close friends

31 Zhan 2012, 98.

32 Standifird and Marshall 2000.

33 Li, Ling 2011; Zhan 2012.

34 See also Hwang 1987; Qi 2013.

(an incumbent military officer and a retired officer) were persuaded to act as middlemen, bringing us to visit their colleagues, friends and superiors. Close *guanxi* ties between interviewees and the middlemen made interviewees feel obliged to accept invitations and offer their perceptions and understanding of military promotions, even though most of them realized that the topic was extremely politically sensitive. In order to create a relaxed and comfortable environment, the middlemen were used to ask most of the questions; the investigators only made notes during the interviews and asked a few follow-up questions. This strategy ensured the validity and reliability of the data collected. We also obtained great help from Lily, a researcher in Beijing who had extensive connections with military researchers. Thanks to the generous help of these three individuals, we managed to conduct 48 in-depth semi-structured interviews with incumbent and retired military officers, as well as with researchers. Transcripts of the interviews total 280,854 words.

Most interviewees are or were mid- to low-ranking military officers. They offered valuable information about career advancement for officers at these levels. We tried to gain access to senior officers at vice-army rank or above but failed because of the lack of personal connections and because the investigators were not from the locality. Despite the challenge of data collection, we managed to obtain insights into the upward mobility of senior officers by interviewing three mid-level officers who are incumbent or former secretaries to PLA generals. Rich interview data provide the opportunity to examine the effectiveness of the formal promotion system and the ways in which *guanxi* interacts with, or changes, the formal institution.

Ideology versus Reality: Why the Formal Institution Fails

In order to realize the goal of building a modern and professional army, the post-Deng civilian leaders (Jiang Zemin 江泽民, Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 and Xi Jinping 习近平) have regarded meritocracy as “the core value of PLA professionalism.”³⁵ The introduction of meritocratic ideology (similar to Weber’s rational-legal principle) to the PLA has led to the establishment of a rule-based personnel system, which is supposed to facilitate the promotion of officers with a high degree of professional competence. As You Ji argues, “meritocracy converts one type of scarcity of resources – specialized knowledge and professional skills – into another: social status and material rewards.”³⁶ Political integrity is another essential component of meritocracy. This is because political integrity guarantees that “the guns are in the hands of those who are politically reliable.”³⁷ Promoting officers with political integrity and loyalty is an important way for the CCP to retain the PLA’s status as “Party–Army.”³⁸

35 Ji 2015b, 129.

36 Ji 2014, 43.

37 Godwin 1999, 88.

38 Chase et al. 2015.

Military regulations require that the appointment and promotion of officers should give equal weight to professional competence and political integrity. As Article 4 of the Regulations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army on the Military Services of Officers in Active Service states, "in the selection and use of officers, [senior officers should follow] the principles of appointing people on their merits, stressing both political integrity and professional competence, and attaching importance to actual performance."³⁹ Having meritocratic criteria for selecting officers is one thing; being able to enforce them is quite another. Fieldwork data offer valuable first-hand resources to examine whether these rules for promoting military officers are strictly implemented. Effective implementation of the rule of merit marginalizes factional ties, while ineffective implementation leads to the rise of the informal institution of *guanxi*.

Professional Competence

Political leaders in local government are "rewarded or punished based on the fulfilment of [explicit] targets," which include GDP per capita, economic development, income, urban employment, public security, nine years of compulsory education, healthcare, environmental protection, investment in technology and innovation, population and family planning, and resource conservation.⁴⁰ Similarly, the PLA has set up performance targets (mainly military training targets) for its officers including operational officers, political officers, logistics officers and specialized technical officers.⁴¹ As one interviewee reported:

The army has already established relatively comprehensive assessment criteria. For example, selecting a division commander from a number of regiment-level cadres is based on whether the regiment you belong to is a top-notch combat unit, whether it is a fist unit and whether it is capable of fulfilling the requirements of the annual military assessment. All these are established standards; all relevant performances are documented and can be verified. The indicators of the army's annual assessment are also relatively defined. They are divided into the areas of politics, military, logistics and equipment. Political assessment questions include: have any disciplinary mistakes been committed? Have any anti-Party remarks been expressed within the unit? Has political education been properly implemented? Have any advanced models been established? Is there any formal recognition of achievement, such as recommendations, praise announcements or awards bestowed within the army? As for military assessment, [they consider] whether your unit has participated in any major military exercises and military operations, what progress has been made towards completing the military training programme, have the main targets of the military training programme been completed, what rankings have been obtained by the unit in various military contests. In terms of logistics, the main consideration is the effectiveness of the provision of supplies. The provision of supplies also entails many detailed standards such as fuel consumption, spending control, army personnel's degree of satisfaction with the supply of clothing, food, accommodation, and transportation.⁴²

39 The translation is provided by Peking University's legal information centre: LawInfoChina at <http://www.lawinfochina.com/>.

40 Zuo 2015, 959.

41 "China's incomplete military transformation," a research report from the RAND Corporation, offers detailed information on the missions and targets of the PLA and identifies a number of the PLA's weaknesses. For details, see Chase et al. 2015.

42 Skype interview with former military officer N-48, July 2016.

The PLA has also set up a list of criteria that must be met when promoting officers such as age, education, experience as principal military commander or political officer, and the ability to think strategically (obtained through intensive study). Meritocratic criteria for evaluation and promotion have been well established by the PLA, but the cadre evaluation system, as fieldwork data show, is not strong enough to identify and credibly reward competent officers owing to the absence of opportunities to gain combat experience.

Actual combat experience helps the army to identify leadership and training problems, develop officers' professional competence and test their political integrity. In the PLA, "combat experience has long been regarded as the most valuable criterion for the selection and promotion of senior leaders."⁴³ However, the PLA has not fought a war since the end of the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979. About four decades of peace have seriously weakened the PLA's personnel selection system, because alternative strategies – training exercises and non-combat missions – do not offer effective ways to evaluate officers' professional competence.

Long-term peace leads to laxity in combat training.⁴⁴ RAND's assessment of the weaknesses of the PLA clearly points out that "peacetime soldiers and peacetime commanders" have long been subject to a training culture: "a culture of engaging in insufficient training, of training in insufficiently challenging or realistic circumstances, and of striving to avoid failure in training by ensuring that success is prearranged through scripted exercises rather than embracing failure as an opportunity to learn."⁴⁵ Before training exercises, each unit is "provided with meticulous training plans that detail every step."⁴⁶ This common practice deprives PLA soldiers of the opportunity to learn to deal with more complicated and realistic warfare scenarios. Pursuing perfection during combat exercises leads to fraud and corruption in military training, as indicated by a retired military officer:

After the 1980s, that is, after the Sino-Vietnamese war, bogus training became increasingly prevalent in the army. By the 1990s and 2000s, this type of bogus training had become more and more outrageous. Military drills had turned into dramatic performances, where everything was scripted and prepared in advance, and would start all over again if it did not work. For instance, when soldiers practised shooting, if they missed the target, someone else would secretly make up the missed shots; when attempting to blow up a bunker on a hill during tank exercises, explosives were planted underneath the bunker in advance in case the tank missed its target ... The air force only emphasized the issue of safety in their flight training. In earlier days, because of aging aircraft, there were a lot of crashes. The only response to this type of safety incident is the dismissal of the officer in charge. Consequently, to ensure safety in flight training, there was a period of time when jet fighters just flew regular routes like civilian aircraft. The aircraft circled in the sky, one loop after another. Most of the tactical combat actions would not be performed. They did not drop bombs, shoot any targets, or do any acrobatic manoeuvres. They just did circles in the sky until they completed the prescribed flying hours.⁴⁷

43 Ji 2014, 49.

44 Martinson 2016.

45 Chase et al. 2015, 48.

46 Kaufman and Mackenzie 2009, 108.

47 Skype interview with former military officer N-1, March 2015.

Interview data further suggest that although there are significant differences in candidates' personal ability,⁴⁸ the absence of wartime challenges and the lack of realistic training render the military personnel system unable to efficiently evaluate candidates' command skills and managerial competence.⁴⁹ According to an interviewee:

Without war, without any major military operations, relying solely on training and exercises to carry out the evaluation and selection of capable candidates has resulted in very little difference among the candidates in the demonstration of their abilities. Every candidate is more or less the same in terms of ability; no one is much better than the others. Everyone has a bachelor's or a master's degree, has received professional training in academies or schools, has engaged in military exercises, has gained experience as principal military officers or political officers, and has worked in administrative and functional departments. Hence, in reality, it is very difficult to evaluate candidates' professional competence.⁵⁰

A further problem pointed out by interviewees is that superiors (principal military and political officers) have extensive discretionary power over personnel issues, and evaluation results are not always heavily and equally weighted in career advancement.⁵¹ The common practice employed by superiors is to design tailored standards and selectively use evaluation methods or results in order to get their preferred candidates chosen.⁵²

To change the PLA's organizational culture of corruption and insufficient training, President Xi Jinping initiated his military reform soon after assuming office in early 2013. Xi has strengthened the function of political work in cultivating *xuexing* 血性 (courage) among military officers and requires the PLA to conduct military training in complex and harsh conditions so as to develop its ability to defeat powerful adversaries such as the US and Japan.⁵³ Moreover, skill in performing a wide array of non-combat operations has become an increasingly important criterion for the selection of competent army officials. Prompted by instructions from Xi, China's armed forces have accelerated their global interactions by participating in "combined drills, international peacekeeping, naval escorts, humanitarian aid, [anti-terrorism] and other non-war operations."⁵⁴ Nevertheless, since changing an organization's culture needs continuous efforts and a long-term process of institution building, Xi and his successors have a long way to go to establish an effective personnel system and a modern army. In the short term, the status quo will remain.

48 Interview data show that owing to the failure of formal institutions, unit leaders usually use information exchanged between *guanxi* members to assess individuals' professional competence and political integrity. This will be explained in more detail later.

49 Interview with former military officer N-2, April 2015; interview with former military officer N-12, April 2015; interview with military officer N-45, December 2015.

50 Interview with military officer N-8, April 2015.

51 Interview with military researcher N-41, December 2015.

52 Interview with military researcher N-36, November 2015.

53 Martinson 2016.

54 Allen 2015, 10; see also Erickson and Allen 2017.

Political Integrity

Political integrity is a compulsory criterion for the appointment and promotion of Party members in China.⁵⁵ In order to tighten Party control over the army, political integrity has been especially important in choosing military officers.⁵⁶ Article 8 of the Regulations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army on the Military Services of Officers in Active Service stipulates the basic requirements for military officers, of which three out of four items are directly relevant to political integrity:

Officers must meet the following basic requirements: (1) being loyal to the motherland and to the Communist Party of China, cherishing firm revolutionary ideals and convictions, serving the people wholeheartedly, and devoting themselves to the cause of national defence; (2) observing the Constitution, laws and regulations, implementing state principles and policies and the Army's rules and regulations, and obeying orders and commands; ... and (4) cherishing the soldiers, setting a good example with their own conduct, being fair and upright, being honest and clean in performing their duties, working hard, and fearing no sacrifice.⁵⁷

Interview data suggest that the assessment of candidates' political integrity focuses on three aspects: political loyalty (*zhongcheng* 忠诚), integrity (*lianjie* 廉洁), and mass base or peer assessment (*qunzhong jichu* 群众基础).⁵⁸ First, one of the key functions of political work in the army is to provide political education to soldiers and officers at all levels and instil political loyalty in them.⁵⁹ Loyalty to top Party leaders is essential for senior military officers to obtain promotion, and loyalty to military and political superiors is important for the promotion of mid- and low-ranking officers.⁶⁰ Second, the Regulations on the Clean Governance of the Cadres of the Army of China, issued by the Central Military Commission in May 2011, have become a powerful mechanism for assessing candidates' integrity, because the Regulations outline various types of action that can be defined as corruption. Despite the fact that the criteria of political loyalty and integrity serve as veto points in the evaluation, these criteria, as the interviewees argued, do not offer an effective way to distinguish candidates, because almost all officers are able to meet these requirements. As one military researcher pointed out:

It is not possible to quantify the assessment of political loyalty and integrity. During the selection process, the way to evaluate political integrity is by exclusion. This means that if you have not committed any acts in violation of political discipline, have not been in breach of the Regulations on the Clean Governance of the Cadres of the Army of China, have not expressed any remarks that diverge from the general political direction of the Party, have not shown any anti-Party tendencies, have no intention to commit treason, it will be seen as fulfilling the loyalty and integrity standards.⁶¹

55 Zhu 2008a.

56 Zang 2004.

57 The translation is provided by Peking University's legal information centre.

58 Skype interview with former military officer N-48, July 2016.

59 Allen, Chao and Kinsella 2013.

60 Interview with former military officer N-33, June 2016.

61 Interview with military researcher N-30, June 2016.

When discussing how the PLA evaluates political integrity, a retired senior military officer offered a similar viewpoint by saying that:

Regarding the assessment of an officer's political integrity, as long as he has committed no mistake, he will be considered as qualified. Everyone is on the same level; there is no ruling as to whose political integrity is better or worse. No comparison can be made. There is only pass or not pass, since there is no way to quantify political integrity for comparison.⁶²

Mass base or peer assessment is the third criterion for evaluating candidates' political integrity. "Democracy within the army" is an important principle in the PLA that grants all members of a unit equal rights to participate in decision-making on major issues, including appointments and promotions.⁶³ All unit members have the right to critique candidates, offer suggestions, and report candidates' violations of laws and Party regulations. The participation of all unit members in decision making is intended to help identify officers with high political integrity, but in practice, this does not help upright and honest officers gain promotion. As an interviewee pointed out,

Intra-Party democratic assessment is highly subjective in nature. All participants have set off from their own interests. This usually makes the assessment result incompatible with the actual situation. Some military officers have good professional competence and treat others impersonally; however, this type of officer is more likely to offend others. As a result, many colleagues will have negative comments about him, leading to a poor result in his intra-Party democratic assessment. On the other hand, some officers follow the social and cultural norms of *guanxi*; they pay a great deal of attention to creating obligatory reciprocity by forming close circles among colleagues and ignoring Party disciplines and military rules when handling affairs. These kind of individuals will, on the contrary, receive a high appraisal.⁶⁴

To sum up, although the PLA's formal cadre evaluation system has established meritocratic criteria for promotion and appointment on paper, it fails in practice to effectively assess and reward military officers with high professional competence and political integrity. The ineffectiveness of the formal personnel system encourages officers who have the power to appoint and remove army officials to employ the informal institution of *guanxi* to appraise and promote their subordinates.

***Guanxi*'s Dual Roles in Promoting Military Officers**

Both interview data and the existing literature show that *guanxi* substitutes for the rule-based personnel system when selecting PLA officers.⁶⁵ *Guanxi* as an institution is neutral,⁶⁶ but the outcome of practising *guanxi* can be very different. Interview data suggest that *guanxi* is an important mechanism used by superiors to evaluate candidates' professional competence and political integrity, contributing to the promotion of meritorious officers; on the other hand, *guanxi* distorts

62 Skype interview with former military officer N-48, July 2016.

63 Kaufman and Mackenzie 2009.

64 Interview with former military officer N-28, June 2016.

65 Kaufman and Mackenzie 2009; Wang 2016.

66 Chen and Chen 2004.

formal selection procedures and facilitates the buying and selling of military positions. Furthermore, we found that power-holders tend to distribute promotion opportunities to competent officers within their *guanxi* networks. It is undeniable that many officers obtain promotions through corrupt practices, but this does not mean they are incompetent, because power-holders have to balance *guanxi* norms and meritocratic criteria.

Increasing efficiency

The Regulations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army on the Appointment and Dismissal of Active Duty Officers, issued by the Central Military Commission in 2009, state that senior officers are personally responsible for all appointment and promotion recommendations they make. This means that a senior officer's career prospects "would be adversely affected if his appointee commits an erroneous conduct."⁶⁷ This regulation places an enormous burden on senior officers, because they have to promote the right officer even though the formal personnel system offers insufficient information for identifying capable officers. In order to lower the risk of making a wrong decision, senior officers usually rely on *guanxi* networks to collect information and evaluate candidates' professional competence and political integrity.⁶⁸

In a *guanxi* network, members continuously observe and comment on each other's behaviour and performance.⁶⁹ Socializing offers opportunities for superiors and candidates to discuss work-related problems and share advice on personal issues, giving senior officers a clear understanding of a candidate's character and professional competence. Comments from other *guanxi* members on a candidate's morality and ability can be used to verify and test perceptions.⁷⁰ Moreover, candidates who have close *guanxi* ties with unit leaders have more chance of participating in important training exercises and non-combat missions, receiving intensive training to improve their ability to think strategically and achieving awards bestowed by the army; as a result, they are highly ranked in the assessment of professional competence.⁷¹ It can therefore be argued that *guanxi* has become a major tool employed by unit leaders to identify proper candidates and cultivate competent military officers.

Promoting officers who have close ties with superiors also increases the efficiency of the organization, as an interviewee explained:

If you choose someone you are familiar with or someone who belongs to your *guanxi* network, you will have a better understanding of your subordinates, and a good rapport will already have been established between leader and subordinate. This rapport ensures that the subordinate will

67 Ji 2014, 46.

68 Skype interview with former military officer N-17, December 2015.

69 Barbalet 2014; Li, Ling 2011; Zhan 2012.

70 Skype interview with former military officer N-15, June 2015.

71 Interview with military officer N-6, April 2015; Skype interview with former military officer N-24, April 2016; interview with military officer N-29, June 2016; interview with military officer N-38, December 2015.

obey the leader's commands. If, on the contrary, someone who does not belong to the leader's *guanxi* network is promoted, the leader will lack a clear understanding of this individual's ability and character; it will take a long time for them to adapt to each other's working styles. If this individual is incompatible with the leader, conflict can easily arise, which means that military operations cannot be completed effectively.⁷²

Facilitating corruption

The employment of *guanxi* in selecting officers undermines "intra-Party democracy," which is a fundamental measure used by the Party to control corruption. As Qingjie Zeng argues, the aim of intra-Party democracy is to introduce "expansive participation in the selection process" by involving both Party leaders and ordinary Party members.⁷³ The effective implementation of intra-Party democracy prevents unit leaders from monopolizing officer appointments and promotions; however, in practice, the use of *guanxi* in recommending and selecting officers seriously weakens the implementation of intra-Party democracy.⁷⁴ During an interview, a principal military commander revealed how leaders of military units use *guanxi* practices to monopolize officer promotion:

Before the recommendation of candidates for promotion, unit leaders usually organize a series of private meetings or informal conversations with close associates and members of the unit Party committee. Through private conversations, all participants are well aware of unit leaders' first- and second-preference candidates (officers A and B), and gossip and rumours about unit leaders' intentions rapidly spread within the unit. During the process of democratic recommendation and consultation before final decisions, all Party members have to give *mianzi* (show respect) to unit leaders, and therefore officers A and B are recommended and highly praised ... no Party member has the courage to openly oppose unit leaders' preferences and recommend other candidates, because it will cause problems with his own future promotion.⁷⁵

Unit leaders are able to determine which subordinates will be promoted through private communication and exchange among *guanxi* members, making democratic procedures (nomination, evaluation and appointment) no more than window dressing. The concentration of the power to hire and promote in the hands of unit leaders is a major cause of corruption in the Chinese military.⁷⁶ Interview data show that the concentration of personnel power in the hands of unit leaders leads to a widespread phenomenon: the character and integrity of a unit leader determine that unit's internal culture, greatly influencing lower-level officers' behaviour. As a retired military officer explained:

Whether a unit's organizational culture is good or bad depends mainly on its leader. There is a great proverb: "if the upper beam is crooked, the lower beam cannot be straight." As soon as they join a unit, new members will identify the leader's way of doing things: some leaders will only get things done when they receive bribes; some will not get things done even after receiving bribe money; some will neither take bribe money nor get things done. If the unit leader has a high level of integrity, this unit will have a clean organizational culture: there will be fewer corrupt practices and subordinates will have less motivation to buy promotion. If the

72 Interview with former military officer N-33, June 2016.

73 Zeng 2016.

74 Interview with military researcher N-39, December 2015.

75 Interview with military officer N-8, April 2015.

76 Interview with former military officer N-3, April 2015; interview with former military officer N-12, April 2015; Skype interview with former military officer N-16, October 2015.

organizational culture is corrupt, you need to carefully figure out your next step: give money to superiors at the right time and create opportunities to flatter your superiors.⁷⁷

Before Xi Jinping launched his anti-corruption campaign in the PLA in 2014, the buying and selling of military positions had become a serious problem, especially from 2002 to 2012, when Xu Caihou 徐才厚 had control of the PLA's personnel assignments. The interview data indicate that corrupt officers frequently use *guanxi* to identify preferred transaction partners, while buyers of corrupt benefits who are not within power-holders' *guanxi* networks have next to no chance of gaining promotion. As an interviewee related:

He [the unit leader] would not accept your bribes if you were not in his networks. This is because there is no *jiaoqing* 交情 (felt obligation) between you and the unit leader.⁷⁸ He is not familiar with your personal character, morality and ability. Why does he have to accept your bribes and agree to help you?⁷⁹

When seeking promotion, *guanxi* members need to pay bribes in the form of cash and expensive gifts. This is because money is perceived as the most valuable thing by most Chinese people, and therefore bribe payment becomes the most efficient way for promotion seekers to demonstrate their appreciation, respect and loyalty to their superiors.⁸⁰

Balancing *Guanxi* and Meritocracy

Close *guanxi* ties with superiors and bribe payments are the key prerequisites for gaining promotion, but this does not mean corrupt military officers are incompetent; senior officers have to balance *guanxi* norms and meritocratic criteria. As leading military researcher You Ji argues, senior officers in the PLA “can be both corrupt and competent,”⁸¹ and “even if a candidate is strongly favored by his mentor for a leadership role, he has to pass the first test of meritocratic requirements specifically set on performance, expertise and education credentials.”⁸² Interview data suggest that *guanxi* norms encourage unit leaders to promote competent officers, as an interviewee noted:

Unit leaders have to select officers with high professional competence because they care about their *mianzi* (social prestige and position) in their *guanxi* circles as well as their career prospects. If a unit leader only promoted his close associates regardless of their ability, it would be very difficult for the unit to reach its performance targets. Moreover, the leader's subordinates would look down on him; higher-level officers would perceive him as incompetent and unreliable, because a unit leader should have the ability to balance his interests inside and outside *guanxi* networks. As a result, he would lose *mianzi* and have less chance of gaining further promotion.⁸³

77 Interview with former military officer N-12, April 2015.

78 The words *jiaoqing* and *renqing* are used interchangeably by Chinese people.

79 Interview with military officer N-8, April 2015.

80 Interview with former military officer N-2, April 2015; Skype interview with former military officer N-16, October 2015.

81 Ji 2015a, 55.

82 Ji 2014, 47.

83 Interview with former military officer N-33, June 2016.

Selecting competent officers who are within superiors' *guanxi* circles is the most cost-effective strategy.⁸⁴ It meets both the standards of meritocracy and the need for harmonious *guanxi* ties between superiors and subordinates, which increases the efficiency of the whole organization. It also creates an incentive structure for lower-level officers to develop professional competence and cultivate personal connections with superiors. Interview data further indicate that unit leaders usually make clear distinctions between important and unimportant positions and apply different criteria when assigning these positions.⁸⁵ Important positions such as head of the cadre department, chief of staff, or head of auditing and finance are assigned to candidates who possess good professional skills and have shown great personal loyalty to the unit leader. The allocation of unimportant positions, such as head of publicity and many deputy positions, is more flexible.⁸⁶ An interviewee summarized the logic of power distribution in the military:

Strength of social ties with superiors and one's professional competence are determining factors for obtaining important positions ... but gaining unimportant positions can be very different. Unit leaders usually devise "fair" competition to enhance organizational vitality: some leaders assign positions based mainly on a candidate's performance, while others make decisions based solely on how much you pay.⁸⁷

To sum up, the informal institution of *guanxi* plays a significant role in appraising and promoting officers in the Chinese military. Interview data illustrate both the positive and negative impacts of *guanxi* on the formal personnel system: superiors rely on *guanxi* networks to unearth valuable information about candidates, and promoting *guanxi* members increases the efficiency of the organization, but *guanxi* practice weakens democratic procedures and leads to the monopoly of power over personnel by superiors, creating fertile soil for corruption. Balancing *guanxi* norms and meritocratic criteria is a major task for unit leaders. As a result, competent military officers who are also loyal to their superiors are selected for promotion to important positions.

Conclusion

Although quantitative researchers have played an important role in the study of contemporary Chinese politics, qualitative scholars can also make significant contributions to the literature. Qualitative researchers utilize intellectual and practical skills to access valuable sources that are not publicly available and present the complex lived realities of the Chinese political system. The Party's strict control of the content of news media suggests that the open data used by quantitative researchers are selective, and sometimes biased; as such, politically sensitive questions can be better addressed using qualitative methods. The advantage of qualitative interview data lies in the data's ability to offer a richly detailed

84 Interview with former military officer N-7, April 2015; interview with military officer N-40, April 2016.

85 Interview with military officer N-8, April 2015.

86 Skype interview with former military officer N-15, June 2015.

87 Skype interview with former military officer N-16, October 2015.

explanation of political behaviour that is embedded in specific cultural and political contexts.

Promoting military officers in the PLA is an important but understudied research area. The secrecy of the military and the lack of information strongly discourage researchers from exploring this topic. Having managed to acquire rich interview data, we examined the ways in which power is distributed in the Chinese military, contributing to the literature on contemporary Chinese politics. The CCP has established a rule-based personnel system in order to promote the best-qualified officers, but fieldwork data suggest that the formal personnel system fails to assess and credibly reward officers with high professional competence and political integrity. This is partly owing to the lack of combat experience and realistic military training to develop and assess candidates' abilities, and partly owing to the absence of scientific criteria for evaluating political integrity.

The study of how China promotes its military officers demonstrates the multi-dimensional nature of *guanxi*: *guanxi* can be a substitutive ("positive") and competing ("negative") informal institution at the same time. *Guanxi* is a double-edged sword in the selection of PLA officers. On the one hand, it identifies competent officers and improves organizational efficiency by supplying an effective alternative channel through which to obtain valuable information for evaluating candidates' professional skills, moral character, and political consciousness. On the other hand, it distorts democratic procedures designed to promote the fair, transparent and objective selection of officers. The embeddedness of recommendation, evaluation and appointment in *guanxi* networks leads to the concentration of power in the hands of unit leaders and the creation of favourable conditions for the growth of corruption.

This research suggests that the practice of buying and selling military positions is deeply embedded in *guanxi* networks. This finding concurs with existing studies of personnel management in local governments. For example, Ben Hillman observes that the ability to pay is an informal screening criterion when selecting civil servants, and superiors usually make use of patronage networks to distribute promotion opportunities in order to lower the risks of being punished.⁸⁸ Compared with the local state, the military suffers from a more serious corruption problem owing to several factors. First, the importance of secrecy, emphasized by the government, makes the military personnel system extremely opaque. Second, all ranks of military officers face enormous stresses that are created by the "up or out" mechanism, as a result, they are more willing to buy promotions.⁸⁹ Third, the lack of wartime challenges to assist with the selection of competent officers significantly weakens the rule-based personnel system, and

88 Hillman 2014. See also Wang 2014; Zhu 2008b.

89 In the Chinese military, "each grade level is associated with a mandatory retirement age" and military officers must "either be promoted or leave the military" when they reach that age (Kaufman and Mackenzie 2009, 74).

thus senior officers have to rely on the informal institution of *guanxi* when selecting and appointing officers.

This research further finds that the importance of *guanxi* in the selection of Chinese military officers does not mean that professional competence is not important. The selection and promotion of military officers are dependent on two highly related but different systems: the rule-based personnel system and the informal institution of *guanxi*. This co-existence forces superiors to balance *guanxi* norms with meritocratic criteria. As a result, candidates who finally obtain promotion will not only have close *guanxi* ties with superiors but will also possess high levels of professional competence. This finding is parallel with Choi's cross-track model that emphasizes the importance of both personal connections and performance when the Chinese government promotes public officials.

The significant challenge for the Chinese government is how to transform *guanxi* from a substitutive to a complementary institution and how to minimize the negative influence of *guanxi* on formal institutions. The embeddedness of cadre selection in *guanxi* networks creates an incentive mechanism, according to which military officers have to spend time, energy and sometimes money to build *guanxi* ties with senior officers in order to make these senior officers aware of their morality, character and ability. This may lead to the creation of a vicious circle: the more officers the *guanxi* network includes, the more powerful the *guanxi* network is; the more powerful the *guanxi* network is, the less useful the rule-based promotion system becomes. As a result, the Chinese government needs to strengthen its rule-based personnel system by gradually establishing a scientific assessment system based on realistic military training and non-war operations, progressively creating an effective system to evaluate officers' political integrity, and strictly implementing intra-Party democracy.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank the anonymous referees, Jing Vivian Zhan, Ling Li, Ken Allen, Cai Vera Zuo, Cheris Chan, Li Li, Hilary Wright and staff seminar participants at the department of sociology, the University of Hong Kong, for their valuable comments and suggestions. All errors remain ours.

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摘要: 中国是如何提拔军官的? 本文是对影响军官选拔因素(关系 vs 能力)的质性研究。我们认为正式的人事提拔制度不足以全面衡量候选人的

绩效（专业能力和政治廉洁），这导致了“关系”在提拔军事人才过程中发挥作用。“关系”与正式的人事制度是替代和竞争的关系。上级领导可以利用“关系”网络来获取可靠信息从而衡量下级军官的专业能力和政治廉洁。“关系”也可能成为腐败官员扭曲民主集中制和达成腐败交易的工具。我们的结论是：“关系”与正式制度的并存导致上级领导提拔关系网里有能力的人。

关键词：正式与非正式制度互动；关系；政治廉洁；专业能力；提拔

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