Institutionalization of the authoritarian leadership in China: a power succession system with Chinese characteristics?

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To transfer power successfully at the top and prevent a leadership split during this process has always been extremely challenging for authoritarian regimes. Yet, power succession in China has demonstrated a high degree of stability in the past two decades. How did the authoritarian regime in China perform its leadership transition in an orderly and smooth manner? This paper argues that 30 years of institutionalization has resulted in the development of a power succession system with Chinese characteristics. By offering a large amount of primary and secondary data on Chinese elite politics, this paper analyses the institutional development of succession politics and its impacts on regime stability and legitimacy in China. The case of the Chinese succession system provides a dramatic example in understanding ‘authoritarian resilience’.

Keywords: leadership transition; legitimacy; elite politics; Chinese politics; authoritarian resilience; institutionalization

If we don’t carry out this revolution (streamlining organizations) but let the old and ailing stand in the way of young people who are energetic and able, not only will the four modernizations fail but the Party and state will face a mortal trial and perhaps perish. (Deng 1983, p. 397, excerpt from his talk in a Politburo conference)

1. Introduction

Leadership transitions have always been turbulent moments for authoritarian regimes (Clapham 1988, Hughes and May 1988). A challenging task for authoritarian regimes is to prevent a leadership split during the process of power succession. The relevant studies suggest that the majority of authoritarian regimes have failed because of their inability to settle disputes among ruling elites via institutional channels (O’Donnell et al. 1986, Svolik 2012). A smooth leadership transition without violence rarely proceeds in authoritarian regimes. Yet, power succession in contemporary China has demonstrated a high degree of stability in the past two decades. How did the authoritarian regime in China perform its leadership transition in an orderly and smooth manner? This paper argues that 30 years of institutionalization has resulted in the development of a power succession system with Chinese characteristics. In this paper, the institutionalization of power

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succession refers to ‘the creation and perpetuation of formal and informal guidelines that stipulate how and by whom leaders are selected and removed from power’ (Frantz and Stein 2013, p. 2). By offering a large amount of data on Chinese elite politics, this paper studies the institutional development of the Chinese succession system and its impacts on regime stability and legitimacy.

Along with other authoritarian regimes, before institutionalization, the moment of power transfer has ‘always been a moment of crisis’ in China (Nathan 2003). During Mao Zedong’s rule, an uninstitutionalized power system had caused endless fierce power struggles in China. The purge of Mao Zedong’s two successors plunged the country into chaos, which indirectly led to economic stagnation and national upheaval. The lack of an institutionalized power transition system also made the general public wary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the way it operates and thus undermined the regime’s legitimacy. Afraid of elite divisions and brutal power struggles, the CCP has taken great efforts to institutionalize its power succession system. This concern about a split in the leadership was firmed up following the protest of 1989. Arguably, three decades of institutionalization has made power succession much more stable, predictable, and smoother than ever before in the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

The institutional development of power succession in China provides a dramatic example of ‘authoritarian resilience’ – a hotly debated academic discussion inspired by the CCP’s first smooth leadership transition in 2002. While some argue that the institutional changes have made the authoritarian system more sustainable (Nathan 2003, Miller 2008, Shambaugh 2008, p. 176) and served to strengthen the CCP’s rule (Fewsmith 2006, Dickson 2008, Brown 2009), others contend that this view overestimates the strength of the authoritarian system and ignores its vulnerability (Gilley 2003, Shirk 2007, Pei 2008, Li 2012a). The success of the leadership transition in 2012 further supports the existence of authoritarian resilience. In 2002, Jiang Zemin handed over only the posts of PRC President and CCP head and still retained the post of military head until 2004. However, in 2012, Hu Jintao handed over all power, including the position of military head to Xi Jinping. It was the first time that a new CCP head was able to take charge of the Chinese army at the beginning of his term since 1978. The full retirement of Hu Jintao marked a more complete and normalized leadership transition. In this regard, the transition of 2012 is more institutionalized than that of 2002. As such, the transition of 2012 is considered by a US Congress report as ‘one of the very few examples of an authoritarian state successfully engineering a peaceful, institutionalized political succession’ (Dotson 2012, p. 4).

Although there are many doubts about the hidden and intense political struggles among Chinese leaders, an undeniable fact is that the CCP has managed to maintain a critical degree of internal stability for the past two decades. The fall of top officials – Chen Xitong in Jiang Zemin’s era and Chen Liangyu and Bo Xilai in Hu Jintao’s era – suggests that the power struggle within the CCP remains intense; however, the removal of those officials followed certain institutional procedures, such as trial. In Mao Zedong’s era, the interrogation of Mao’s heir apparent and PRC President Liu Shaoqi and his wife was launched without any formal resolution or any written document, as I will discuss below. In this regard, the way of removing top officials is much more institutionalized now than it was in Mao’s era.

More importantly, neither the power struggle nor the removal of those top officials has generated a considerable level of instability and crisis compared with the cruel political purges before institutionalization. This is not to say that the current level of institutionalization is sufficient to guarantee the unity of leadership in the long run. Of course, even institutionalized bodies can be subjected to manipulation, and there are many grey areas, as this paper will examine. This paper does not intend to dispute whether this power succession system can last in the long run or not, but to provide a critical analysis of the institutional development of the Chinese succession system and its implication for regime legitimacy and stability – which has been under-researched in the general literature of political science.
2. Academic debates about power succession in China
In addition to the aforementioned debate over authoritarian resilience, the topic of power succession in China also involves four relevant debates over (1) the relationship between democracy and legitimacy, (2) the CCP’s legitimacy sources, (3) political reform, and (4) institutionalization.

2.1. Is democracy necessary for legitimacy?
The Chinese succession system is related to the debate among contemporary political philosophers over the relationship between democracy and political legitimacy. While many consider democracy necessary for political legitimacy (Buchanan 2002), some proponents of democratic instrumentalism argue that the quality of the democratic outcome is the key to deciding whether democracy is necessary for legitimacy (Raz 1995). For example, pure proceduralism holds that the legitimacy of democratic outcomes simply depends on the fairness of the democratic procedures rather than the quality of such an outcome (May 1952, Manin 1987). In this sense, non-democratic systems are illegitimate as they cannot generate legitimacy. However, as Thomas argues (2014: footnote 9), since ‘one accepts that all democratic systems are not equally legitimate, then it follows that all non-democratic systems are not equally illegitimate and so the corollary must be that non-democratic systems can acquire legitimacy’.

Indeed, the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime in China is widely considered to be strong (Chen et al. 1997, Tang 2001, Shi 2008, Gilley 2009). This view is strongly supported by various cross-national surveys, including the Asian barometer and the World Values Survey. For example, the 2008 Asian Barometer Survey finds that 74% of Chinese respondents responded positively to the statement that ‘whatever its faults may be, our current system of government is still the best for the country’ (Chu 2013, p. 5). This result leads to some doubts about the accuracy of those attitude surveys in China (Feng 2013, pp. 10–11, Huang 2013); however, many studies suggest that this result is reliable and valid (Kennedy 2009, Chu 2013, Yang and Tang 2013). According to Chu (2013, p. 4) and Wang (2010, p. 139), among ‘scholars familiar with the field’ there is a ‘consensus’ agreeing that the CCP enjoys strong levels of legitimacy. As this paper will show, the institutionalization of power succession system in China plays an important role in generating legitimacy, suggesting that democratic procedures are not necessary for legitimacy.

2.2. The debate over regime legitimacy and stability in China
In explaining the CCP’s legitimacy, economic performance has been considered to be a principal (if not the sole) pillar of legitimacy in contemporary China (Shambaugh 2001, Wang 2005, Perry 2008, Zhao 2009). However, my recent study on Chinese intellectuals’ debate on regime legitimacy finds that it is clearly recognized in China that simply relying on economics is not sufficient – even if the economy continues to do well (and of course, there is a clear understanding that bad economic performance will harm legitimacy) (Zeng 2014).

In addition to economic performance, stability is also considered to be important to political legitimacy in China (Breslin 2009); China scholarship mostly uses stability to refer to social stability – an unwritten ‘social contract’ between the party and society. According to this contract, the party delivers material benefits to the citizens as a trade-off for their compliance with the existing political status quo. However, political stability within the CCP has not received sufficient attentions. In the CCP’s discourse, its ruling capacity (执政能力) decides its legitimacy (Party 2004). As a professor of the Central Party School argues, the cadres appointment system is crucial to the CCP’s ruling capacity and thus to its legitimacy (Zhao 2011).
Arguably, the CCP’s ruling capacity is built on its internal stability. In the other words, this internal stability is a prerequisite for the CCP’s ruling capacity to maintain its legitimacy by maintaining social stability, promoting economic growth, and defending national interests. The institutionalization of the leadership transition is a crucial factor in maintaining this internal stability. As Hughes and May (1988) argues, the ‘transfer of political power from one substantive ruler to another is generally regarded as a major test of the stability and legitimacy of a political system’. This paper provides a notable addition to link power succession with regime stability and legitimacy.

2.3. Is there any political reform in China?

The third debate is about whether there were substantial political reforms launched by the CCP or not in the past three decades. Conventional wisdom holds that China has gone through dramatic socioeconomic transformations, while little progress in political reform has been achieved in the past three decades (Li 2012c, p. 3). It is argued that Chinese leaders know that the party needs political reform, but they are either unsure what that political reform should be or nervous about moving ahead with it. On the contrary, a few scholars argue that the CCP has made much progress in political reform (Heberer and Schubert 2006, Schubert 2008, Lee 2010). These two views contrast mainly because of the cleavage in the different understandings of the term ‘political reform’.

The first view tends to use a dichotomy to ‘identify political reform with the approximation of Western democracy’ (Dittmer 2003, p. 347). In this sense, only reforms moving towards liberal democracy counted as political reforms. This understanding hardly captures political transformation in China, because almost no CCP reform has been for the purpose of liberal democracy since 1989. Although some might eventually weaken the authoritarian system, their goals were designed to strengthen rather than democratize the one-party rule. However, can we thus contend that the Chinese political system has not changed in the past three decades? An undeniable fact is that both the Chinese political system and elite politics nowadays are very different from those in the 1980s.

In the Chinese context, political reform represents a much broader spectrum – it refers to any kind of reform in the field of political systems, including administrative reforms and the institutionalization of elite politics. This understanding suggests that democratic reforms are not the only solution for building a better bureaucracy. As Schubert (2008) argues, political reforms have been generating a ‘critical degree’ of regime legitimacy in China. Thus, Schubert (2008) proposes a new research agenda to study the impacts of political reforms on legitimacy. Unlike Schubert’s research agenda that focuses on low-level administrative reforms, this paper provides a critical analysis over political reform at the top (i.e. the institutional development of power succession).

2.4. Is power succession in China more institutionalized?

The fourth debate is about the institutionalization of power succession in the field of Chinese elite studies. On the one hand, many are sceptical of the institutional development of leadership transition in China (Shirk 2002, Zheng and Lye 2003, Fewsmith 2013). For example, Shirk (2001, p. 139) contended that the then key leaders – Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and Zhu Rongji – might not step down under the constraints of institutional rules, and thus Shirk concluded that the ‘trend toward institutionalization might not survive the transfer of power that, under the new rules, is scheduled to occur in 2002 at the 16th Party Congress’. This prediction, of course, proved to be wrong. On the other hand, many have recognized that power succession in China has been increasingly institutionalized (Huang 2008, Lee 2010, Guo 2013, Miller 2013).
Different views on institutionalization in this debate led to contrary understandings of Chinese succession politics. While the proponents of institutionalization argue that institutional rules have become a significant factor in selecting Chinese leaders nowadays, the opponents consider power succession to be a result of factional politics or a ‘black box operation’ (Zheng and Lye 2003, Li 2012c, p. 3, Fewsmith 2013). By using a qualitative comparative analysis, one of my recent studies analyses the selection criteria of Chinese leaders at the most powerful leading body – the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) – in 2012 (Zeng 2013). A key finding is that age combined with the institutional rules was one of the most important factors in selecting top Chinese leaders at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, which lends strong support to the proponents of institutionalization (Zeng 2013). This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the institutional development of the succession system in the past three decades.

3. Before institutionalization, power succession: a source of instability and crisis

Power succession can not only legitimize but also delegitimize political regimes. Power transition before institutionalization was a main source of crisis and instability in China. In Mao Zedong’s era, the lack of an institutionalized succession system led to a cruel power struggle within the party. In order to consolidate his power, Mao launched waves of radical mass campaigns that led to national upheaval and economic stagnation. Similar to succession politics in contemporary North Korea with the fall of Jang Sung-taek, the power struggle was a life and death game in Mao’s China. Mao’s first heir apparent Liu Shaoqi was defeated during the Cultural Revolution and died soon after his fall. The institutional rule in Mao’s era was so weak that the interrogation on the then PRC President Liu Shaoqi and his wife was launched without any formal resolution or written document. After the fall of Liu, Lin Biao became the new heir apparent. In 1969, Lin’s status was confirmed by the CCP constitution, which stated that ‘Comrade Lin Biao is a close ally and successor of Comrade Mao Zedong.’ However, two years later in 1971, Lin mysteriously died with numerous waves of purges of Lin’s supporters. The CCP offered no explanation for nearly two years until 1973, when Lin’s fall was acknowledged at the 10th CCP congress. The fall of Lin disillusioned many Chinese people about Mao’s rule. Although Mao began to emphasize the unity of leaders – ‘stability and unity’ – in 1975 (Mao 1996), he still failed to prevent the crucial power struggle in the then uninstitutionalized political system. One month after Mao’s death in 1976, Hua Guofeng cooperated with military leaders to arrest the Gang of Four, including Mao’s wife Jiang Qing. Afterwards, Hua used Mao’s note – that ‘with you in charge, I am at ease’ – to justify his claim as Mao’s successor.

As socioeconomic affairs were highly politicized and ordinary people were expected to participate in mass campaigns driven by the power struggle in Mao’s China, the long-term political upheaval led by the Cultural Revolution did not only disrupt people’s normal lives but also disrupted many normal economic activities. As Hua (1978) clearly recognized, ‘from 1974 to 1976 … the entire national economy almost reached the brink of collapse’. Economic stagnation made the CCP increasingly incapable of delivering socialist public goods that it had promised before. The widening gap between the poor reality of people’s living standards and the utopia of the communist ideology inevitably led to the Chinese people’s doubt over the CCP and the communist ideals.

Recognizing the necessity to minimize the negative effects of the power struggle, Deng Xiaoping and his supporters launched ambitious projects to formalize the political system in the early 1980s. Various institutional rules of power succession were made at that time. The grand project of ‘four transformations’ is particularly notable, as it marked the starting point of the 30-year institutionalization in China. This project stipulated four criteria to select cadres:
more revolutionary, younger, more knowledgeable, and more professional. Specific guidelines to adhere to these criteria include age limit, tenure system, step-by-step promotion, work experience, and educational qualifications, which I will discuss below.

Compared with Mao’s period, power succession under the watch of Deng had been far less damaging to the party’s rule. After Deng forced Hua Guofeng to step down, Hua was still a respected cadre and enjoyed full personal freedom. The fall of Hua is also the first power transition in the PRC without bloodshed. In addition, there had been some relatively open discussions within the CCP about whether Hua was still suitable as the top leader, which was quite democratic when compared with Mao’s era. This helped to reduce the negative impact of the power struggle on the legitimacy of the leadership. Although Deng laid a foundation for today’s stable power succession, he also expelled two of his heirs apparent – Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. The elite division more or less strangled the decision-making ability of the CCP when dealing with popular protests in 1989, which almost put the party on the brink of collapse. This suggests that the level of institutionalization in Deng’s era was still insufficient to preserve the internal stability of the CCP.

4. After institutionalization, a power succession system with Chinese characteristics

In the post-strongman era, power succession has turned a new page. Elite politics has been much more stable than ever before owing to two key factors: the changing power distribution and the institutionalization of power succession. A plethora of Chinese elite studies focus on the former factor, but the role of institutionalization is widely recognized. As many argue, the fact that no single political group is willing nor able to dominate succession politics is the key to explaining the stable elite politics in contemporary China (Nathan 2003, Li 2005). However, the institutional development also matters. Indeed, learning from the painful lessons about orderless succession that was mentioned above, the CCP has made impressive efforts to institutionalize its power succession in the past three decades. This reflects a key aspect of its authoritarian resilience – the CCP’s ability to learn, which allows the party to adapt to the rapidly changing socioeconomic environment (Tsai and Dean 2013).

This is not just fawning praise over the CCP leadership’s brilliance, because institutionalization is a decision that the CCP leaders have to make. As the PRC founders, the legitimacy of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping came from their personal authority rather than their institutional posts; however, the power of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao – who were promoted from the bureaucratic system – was mainly granted by their official posts instead of personal authority. Thus, contemporary Chinese leaders have to strengthen the existing institutional arrangements for consolidating their power. The continual institutionalization of power succession has formalized the process of selecting and removing leaders and thus developed a power succession system with Chinese characteristics. The following section will explore the institutional development and key features of the Chinese succession system.

4.1. Routinized turnover of political elites

The turnover of political elites reflects the effectiveness of the political system. If the level of political mobility is low, a bureaucratic system occupied by old leaders who refuse to retire will systematically push young elites out of the system and discourage new elites from joining the system. It will indirectly contribute to the rise of external forces that might overthrow the rigid political system. In this sense, a rapid cycle of political elites helps the political system to co-opt young political elites and thus prevents divisions among the elite.
Political mobility is also relevant to the high adaptability of the authoritarian system. Without a high turnover rate of political elites, the political system – occupied by a group of party elders who tend to resist change – is hardly adaptive to the changing environment. In addition, by incorporating younger leaders into the leading bodies, it portrays a positive image of the CCP leadership, as opposed to the image which suggests that the party is governed by a group of party elders. In this sense, the high turnover rates matter to the vitality of the CCP leadership. Chinese leaders considered routinized turnover of political elites to be crucial to maintain the CCP’s rule. As Deng (1983, p. 397) warned:

If we … let the old and ailing stand in the way of young people who are energetic and able, not only will the four modernizations fail but the Party and state will face a mortal trail and perhaps perish.

In order to ensure a rapid cycle of political elites, the CCP has developed and practised two specific rules: term limits and age limits.

4.1.1. Term limits

Putting an end to the tenure of top leaders is one of the most challenging tasks for the CCP in institutionalizing its power succession, because there is no such tradition in Chinese culture. The post of Chairman belonged to Mao Zedong until his death. Before Deng Xiaoping took power, there were no effective institutional rules to regulate the terms of Chinese leaders. Recognizing the importance of term limits, the CCP began to implement a tenure system and incorporated it into the PRC constitution in 1982. This amended constitution ruled that President and Vice-President of the PRC, Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the People’s Congress, and Premier, Vice-Premier, and members of the State Council shall not serve continuously for more than two terms. It officially announced the end of Chinese leaders’ life-long tenure. In order to put this rule into practise, Deng Xiaoping voluntarily set an example to hand over all his institutional posts. Nowadays, this term limit has become highly institutionalized – all Politburo members, except top leaders, have served for no longer than two terms since 1997.

4.1.2. Age limit: retirement and promotion

Unlike term limits that first regulated the top leaders, the early efforts towards establishing an age limit in the 1980s mainly focused on mid-level leaders. In 1982, the CCP announced the relevant rules to institutionalize the retirement system. It rules that the minister-level or equivalent cadres should usually retire at 65 years of age and those at the deputy minister level should usually retire at 60 years (Party1982). This age limit has since been gradually reinforced and developed to regulate the top leaders. In Jiang Zemin’s era, the specific retirement age of top leaders was established and strictly implemented. In 1997, the retirement age for the PSC members was set to be 70 years. In 1998, Qiao Shi retired from the post of People’s Congress Chairman because of this new policy. In 2002, the retirement age was lowered to 68. Li Ruihuan – who had just turned 68 – retired; however, Luo Gan – who was 67 – got promoted into the PSC in 2002. This new retirement age has been retained until now and has widely been called the custom of ‘67 stay and 68 retire’. Many argue that retirement age served as a tool to force Jiang’s political rival to relinquish power (Fewsmith 2003, 2008, 2013, Ou 2012, Shirk 2012). This is valid to a certain point, because there was much room to manipulate this rule during the initial process of its institutionalization. Jiang and his supporters could take advantage of their younger age and the relevant rules; however, to set up a specific rule to regulate retirement is actually an important progress as long as the rule-makers follow this rule themselves.
As mentioned above, some sceptics of institutionalization predicted that Jiang Zemin and his supporters would not follow the age limit rule and step down in 2002. On the contrary, Jiang and his supporters strictly followed this rule, which further strengthened the rule’s authority. In 2002, Zhu Rongji – who is considered a close supporter of Jiang (Miller 1996, Li 2001) – retired from his post as PRC Premier, and Jiang Zemin handed over the top position of power to Hu Jintao – which marked the first smooth leadership transition of the PRC. Zeng Qinghong, who was considered Jiang’s most powerful supporter (Li 2001, Li and White 2003), also retired from his post as the PRC Vice-President when he was just 68 in 2007, – without violating the ‘67 stay and 68 retire’ rule. My recent study suggests that this retirement age limit became one of the most important factors in selecting the 18th PSC members in 2012 (Zeng 2013).

Figure 1 shows the age distribution of the PSC members in the past three decades. It shows that the retirement ages of 68 and 70 have been strictly implemented since the relevant rules were made. The strict implementation of age limits changed the age trends of the PSC and Politburo members. As indicated in Figure 2, in 1982, the oldest member of the Politburo Ye Jianying was 85 years old, in contrast with the youngest member who was 45 years old. The age span among Politburo members reached 36 years in 1982, while it was only 18 years in 2012. After 30 years of institutionalization, the Chinese leaders are now much younger than before. Figure 3 shows the average age of Chinese leaders. The average age of the new PSC members in 2012 is 63.4 and that of the new Politburo members is 61.1, both of whom are 10 years younger than those in 1982. Arguably, the growing institutionalization of term and age limits has achieved one of key goals of ‘four transformations’ – younger leaders.

4.1.3. High turnover rate of Chinese leaders

In addition to younger leaders, the growing institutionalization of age/term limits also led to a rapid turnover of Chinese leaders. Figure 4 shows that the turnover rate of Chinese leaders has been very high since the 1980s. The turnover rates of both the Central Committee and Politburo reached over 60% in 2002 and 55% in 2012. In 2007, four out of the nine 16th PSC members retired; and in 2012, the turnover rate of the PSC exceeded 77% – seven out of the nine PSC members retired, including President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. In 2012, 113

Figure 1. Age distribution of the PSC from 1982 to 2012.
Note: The author’s own tabular representation and data.
members of the 17th Central Committee retired and 91 remained in office; and 15 out of the 25 members of the 18th Politburo were new.

Figure 5 compares the turnover rate of the Chinese Central Committee and Politburo with that of the US Congress from 1973 to 2012. Although these institutions are very different, this comparison still reflects certain aspects of political mobility among powerful politicians in the two largest world economies. It indicates that the turnover rate of Chinese leading bodies has been at least 40% more than that of the US Congress. In 2012, the turnover rates of the US Senate
and House are around 10% in contrast with 56% of the members of the Chinese Central Committee and Politburo.

The high turnover rate of Chinese leaders indicates that the CCP has managed to select and remove its leaders by using its own rules – as opposed to liberal democratic elections. The succession system with Chinese characteristics has been effectively and efficiently recruiting new blood into its leadership, which helps to maintain regime stability and contributes to the CCP’s ‘adaptability’.

Figure 4. Turnover rate of the CCP Central Committee and Politburo from 1973 to 2012.
Note: The author’s own tabular representation.

Figure 5. Turnover rates of American political representatives and Chinese leaders from 1982 to 2012.
Note: The author’s own tabular representation.
4.2. Representation

In democratic countries, the composition of voters would translate to certain kinds of representation in the leadership. Although there are no such kinds of elections in China, the CCP has been keen to build a representative leadership for maintaining stability and legitimacy.

4.2.1. Ethnic minorities

The CCP clearly recognizes the importance of co-opting ethnic minorities. In order to legitimize its leadership, the CCP developed several institutional rules – certain proportion of ethnic minority at various levels of party and governmental organs – to promote systematically ethnic minority elites into its leadership (Mackerras 2003, p. 21, Shih et al. 2012). As evidenced by an empirical study, ethnic minorities are more likely to be promoted in the CCP Central Committee (Shih et al. 2012). Figure 6 shows the proportion of ethnic minorities in the CCP Central Committee. It suggests that ethnic minorities have been slightly over-represented in Chinese leadership compared with the proportion of ethnic minorities in the entire Chinese population – 8.49% (China 2011). Thus, in terms of quantity, ethnic minorities are well represented in the CCP leadership; however, the distribution of ethnic minorities in the Central Committee is imbalanced.

Figure 7 shows the proportion of ethnic minorities in the Central Committee, Politburo and PSC. It indicates that the higher the party rank, the fewer the ethnic minorities. If we apply the population proportion as a standard, ethnic minorities have been over-represented in alternate members of the Central Committee, approximately well represented in regular members of the Central Committee, and under-represented in the Politburo and PSC from 1982 to 2012. A possible interpretation is that: at the lower level, the CCP wants to ensure that a certain percentage of positions are reserved for ethnic minorities; however, at the higher level (e.g. the Politburo and PSC), the CCP are less able to do that because of more intense competition.

Figure 6. Proportion of ethnic minorities in the CCP Central Committee from 1982 to 2012.
Note: The author’s own tabular representation.
4.2.2. Organizational/regional representation

Unlike the symbolic representation of ethnic minorities, the CCP has carefully constructed some checks and balances among organizations and regions. This organizational/regional representation has been institutionalized for ensuring that all major party organs and regions have voices at the highest level. For example, a ‘one province administration, two full seats’ quota has been strictly implemented in the CCP Central Committee since 1997 (Li and White 2003, p. 576). Some Central Committee members might be transferred to other regions or promoted to work in Beijing; however, the equal distribution of membership has been strictly implemented when they are elected into the Committee (Li 2012b). The membership of the Central Committee is evenly distributed to representatives of each region – usually the party chief and governor. The two most important ethnic minority regions sometimes get more seats. Tibet had three seats in 2002 and 2007; Xinjiang had four seats in 2002 and 2007, and three seats in 2012. Notably, all ethnic minority regions have at least one local ethnic minority leader who is also an 18th Central Committee member. It again suggests the CCP’s deliberate efforts to enhance the stability of ethnic minority regions and increase the legitimacy of leadership by co-opting ethnic minority elites.

Needless to say, some key regions are more influential in the top decision-making bodies, as their leaders are usually Politburo members. Figure 8 shows the Politburo members’ bureaucratic affiliations when they were elected. It indicates that the proportion of leaders from provincial administrations and central government organizations in the Politburo has been increasing at the expense of party organizations’ representation. Provincial leaders have been the largest component of Politburo members since 2002. Forty-four per cent of the 18th Politburo members were provincial leaders when they were elected. Table 1 presents the regional representation in the Politburo in the past decade. The representation of three major groups of Chinese regions in the Politburo – municipalities directly under the central government, ethnic minorities’ autonomous regions, such as Xinjiang, and coastal, developed provinces, such as Guangdong – has shown certain signs of institutionalization. This institutionalized representation is perhaps an attempt to protect the interests of key regions in the top decision-making process.

Figure 7. The representation of ethnic minorities in the CCP Central Committee and the Politburo from 1982 to 2012.

Note: The author’s own tabular representation.
The rule – that party chiefs of all four municipalities directly under the Central government are usually Politburo members, and their mayors are at least the Central Committee members – has been institutionalized. Beijing and Shanghai, in particular, are over-represented in the Politburo. As indicated in Table 1, Beijing had two seats in the 16th (Jia Qinglin and Liu Qi) and 17th (Wang Qishan and Liu Qi) Politburos, and both Jia Qinglin and Wang Qishan were promoted into the Politburo in the 18th (Guo Jinglong).

Table 1. Regional representation in the Politburo between 2002 and 2012.

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<td>Zhang Dejiang</td>
<td>Li Yuanchao</td>
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<td>Liaoning</td>
<td>Liangyu</td>
<td>Li Keqiang</td>
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<td>Shandong</td>
<td>Wu Guanzheng</td>
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<td>Sichuan</td>
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<td>Hubei</td>
<td>Yu Zhengsheng</td>
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Source: The author’s own collection.

*Bo Xilai was a Politburo member before he was removed; and therefore this seat can be considered to be reserved for Chongqing Party Chief.*

*It also includes Shanghai and Tianjin.*

*Note: Bold values are to highlight that several key regions have been well-represented in the Politburo.*

The rule – that party chiefs of all four municipalities directly under the Central government are usually Politburo members, and their mayors are at least the Central Committee members – has been institutionalized. Beijing and Shanghai, in particular, are over-represented in the Politburo. As indicated in Table 1, Beijing had two seats in the 16th (Jia Qinglin and Liu Qi) and 17th (Wang Qishan and Liu Qi) Politburos, and both Jia Qinglin and Wang Qishan were promoted into the...
PSC afterwards. Shanghai also had two Politburo seats in 2002 and 2012; and four out of five Politburo representatives of Shanghai have been promoted to the PSC in the past decade. It reflects the overwhelming political influence of Beijing and Shanghai in Chinese politics.

In addition to regional representation, organizational representation is another important factor in selecting leaders. New chiefs of some critical organizations are usually selected from internal candidates. For example, Liu Yunshan was appointed as the head of propaganda, largely because of his career experience in propaganda. This consideration is designed to ensure that the new selected leaders have abundant experience in their assigned specialized areas.

The representation of key organizations in the Politburo has been institutionalized to a certain extent in order to maintain the influence of key organizations in the decision-making at the top. As indicated in Figure 8, the People’s Liberation Army has held two seats (8%) in the Politburo since 1992. Notably, the State Council, rather than the military, is the best-represented organization at the top-level authority, which reflects the CCP’s emphasis on economic development. Five of the 18th Politburo members and three of the 17th Politburo members served in the State Council when they were elected. Figure 9 shows the working units of the 18th Central Committee members. Twenty-six per cent of the 18th Central Committee members worked in the State Council when they were elected compared with 21% of those who worked in the military. Figures 8 and 9 indicate that local governments are the largest component of the Politburo and Central Committee, and the State Council is the second largest. It is notable that the People’s Congress and People’s Political Consultative Conference hold only 2% of the seats in the 18th Central Committee. This low percentage reflects the real political influence of these two organizations in China, although the rule – that their heads are PSC members – has been institutionalized.

5. What remains to be done?

After exploring institutional development over the past three decades, this section analyses two crucial aspects of power succession that need to be institutionalized further. As mentioned, even institutionalization might be subjected to factional manipulation. The current level of institutionalization might not be able to maintain the internal stability of the CCP in the long run, as
evidenced by the challenge from Bo Xilai who had publicly campaigned for a PSC seat. The institutional development of the PSC and the contested elections are particularly noteworthy.

5.1. The institutional development of the PSC

Over the past decades, decision-making at the top has been gradually moving towards a collective leadership with the division of work in China. The institutional arrangement of the PSC was set to formalize a collective leadership. Some respond positively to the institutional development of the PSC. For example, Hu (2012), a prominent policy advisor for the Chinese government, argues that the current institutional setting of the PSC – ‘a collective presidentialism with Chinese characteristics’ – is the key to China’s success in the past decade. It is valid to argue that the institutional settings of the PSC and Politburo have been much more institutionalized now than ever before; however, the extent of institutionalization is not sufficient. Neither the size of the PSC nor its members’ specific division of work is fully institutionalized.

As indicated in Figure 10, the number of PSC members has hovered between five and nine over the past three decades. The recent downsizing of the PSC in 2012 led to many different interpretations. Some argue that it was because the leaders in charge of internal security, especially Zhou Yongkang, were too powerful (Mattis 2012). Li Cheng argues that it is a ‘direct signal that political reform is under way’, because Zhou obstructed the progress of political reform (Report 2012). It is also argued that the downsizing of the PSC might increase the efficiency of decision-making and give more authority to Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang (Report 2012).

Others argue that the changing size of the PSC is simply a result of factional struggles. For example, Fewsmith interprets the expanding membership of the PSC in 2002 as Jiang Zemin’s attempt to restrict Hu Jintao’s power (Fewsmith 2008, Ou 2012), and the downsizing of the PSC in 2012 as a way to prevent Hu’s supporters – Li Yuanchao and Wang Yang – from entering the PSC (Ou 2012). In this regard, that the number of the PSC remain stable is important to leave less room for people to manipulate the result, because political manipulation would undermine the effects of institutional rules.

The division of the PSC members’ work responsibilities also needs to be institutionalized further. Table 2 lists the positions of leadership held by the PSC members. It shows that the

![Figure 10. Size of the Politburo and its Standing Committee from 1982 to 2012.](image)

Note: The author’s own tabular representation.

Source: Miller (2011, Table 1); the information about the 18th Party Congress is updated by the author.
Table 2. PSC members' leadership positions in major institutions from 1982 to 2012.

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<td>Hu Jintao</td>
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<td>Executive Vice-Premier</td>
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<td>Secretary of Central Commission for Discipline Inspection</td>
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<td>Secretary of Central Commission for Politics and Law</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chairman of CPPCC</td>
<td>Chen Yun</td>
<td>Qiao Shi</td>
<td>Qiao Shi</td>
<td>Qiao Shi</td>
<td>Li Ruihuan (1993)</td>
<td>Li Ruihuan (1998)</td>
<td>Li Changchun</td>
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*Zhu was elected as the Vice-Premier in 1991 and he became the first Vice-Premier in 1993.
Note: Bold values are to highlight that PSC did not reserve seats for those four important positions until 1992.
PSC did not reserve seats regularly for the Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), PRC President, or Chairman of the People’s Congress until 1992. The lack of representatives at the top leadership is one reason why the People’s Congress and CPPCC are ‘rubber stamps’. Since 1992, it has become the norm that the PRC President, Premier, Chairman of the Congress, and CPPCC are PSC members; however, the assigned areas of other PSC members – except the Secretary of Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and Executive Vice-Premier – have been changing all the time.

5.2. The practice of uncontested election

The CCP has been practising elections to select leaders since 1957. Chinese elections are very different from those in democratic countries – it is called ‘socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics’ in China. The uncontested (等额选举) and contested elections (差额选举) are the two principal types of elections in China. An uncontested election is a type of election that has the same number of nominees and elected candidates. A contested election or differential election refers to those elections that have more candidates than elected seats. Before 1987, the uncontested election was the only type of election in China. The contested election was officially added into the Party Constitution and experimented with in electing the 13th Central Committee members in 1987, and a few high-level leaders lost this election. Since then, the CCP has gradually institutionalized contested elections in selecting the Central Committee members (Yan et al. 2012).

Figure 11 shows the difference in the proportion of nominated and elected seats in the elected seats of the Central Committee and Central Discipline Inspection Commission in the past decade. It indicates that this proportion has gradually increased with each Party Congress. In this regard, Chinese elections have been improving – but at a very slow pace. Liberal democracy and competitive elections are still very sensitive in China, and those efforts to practise elections were designed to strengthen rather than democratize the party. Nonetheless, the contested elections of Chinese leaders provide a good starting point for practising intra-party democracy. It might be true for the CCP to claim that the immediate implementation of direct elections might cause
tremendous social instability. Thus, the gradual process of increasing the proportion of nominees in the elected seats of leaders might find a balance between the practice of party democracy and maintenance of political stability.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper studies the institutional development of power succession in China over the past three decades. It argues that this institutionalization has developed a power succession system with Chinese characteristics, which has guaranteed a seamless transfer of power that rarely proceeds smoothly in authoritarian regimes. As a result of this institutionalization, the leadership transition since 2002 has been distinct from the previously cruel ‘life and death’ power struggles in Mao’s era. The stable power transition under the authoritarian rule in China provides a dramatic example of authoritarian resilience.

Yet, the CCP’s political reforms have been widely neglected by the existing literature, because many ‘identifies political reform with the approximation of Western democracy’ (Dittmer 2003, p. 347). As Schubert argues (2008), political reforms have been generating a ‘critical degree’ of regime legitimacy in China. This paper shows that the institutional development of power succession plays an important role in legitimizing and stabilizing the authoritarian rule in China. Indeed, legitimacy is both a consequence and cause of institutional change (Gilley 2008). In this sense, the current political system, including the power succession system (i.e. the way to select Chinese leaders), is a result of political legitimacy in China.

It must be acknowledged that the current power succession system in China is still less transparent than those in developed democratic countries nowadays. However, the current succession politics in China has no doubt been more predictable, transparent, and stable now than ever before in the history of the PRC. The institutionalization of the Chinese succession system has managed to overcome the fatal weakness of the authoritarian system – how to transfer power successfully at the top without splitting the leadership. This does not mean that the current level of institutionalization is sufficient to guarantee the authoritarian rule in the long run – the case of Bo Xilai clearly warned of the potential dangers of division among the elites. For the sake of its survival, the CCP is still under enormous pressure to develop its succession system further. Whether this development will lead to democratic elections or not is in the hands of the CCP and – more importantly – the Chinese people.

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Notes

1. Dickson (2011) also argues that ‘this routinized process for replacing ruling elites is a remarkably rare practice among authoritarian regimes’.
2. However, the CCP discourses argue that to strengthen and democratize the one-party rule is mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.
3. The abdication system is ideal, but rarely happened in practice.
4. In addition to the retirement age, a specific age limit for promotion was decided at the 17th Party Congress. The CCP rules that the age of new Politburo members should not exceed 63.
5. Jiang Zemin was 71 in 1997, but he stayed in power because he was the first paramount leader.
6. The term ‘region’ here includes provinces, municipalities directly under the Central Government and autonomous regions.
8. Wen Jiabao, Hui Liangyu, and Bo Xilai.
9. Including two former ministers of the Propaganda Department – Zhu Houze and Deng Liqun.
10. Although these two are not necessarily contradictory.

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Mao, Z., 1996. *The road to Zhongnanhai: high-level leadership group on the eve of the 18th party congress* [通往中南海之路: 中共十八大前高层领导群体]. *People’s Press* [人民出版社].


