

UNDERSTANDING CHINESE MERITOCRACY

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Executive Summary

1. That China has been enormously successful and yet exceedingly corrupt is a China paradox that few could explain.
2. Apart from the reform policies and development strategies, meritocracy has been singled out as the key contributing factor to the Chinese success. “Enlightened authoritarianism” is thought to have certain advantages.
3. However, many have countered that the corruption-infested system operates on patronage instead of merit. In such a system competent leadership emerges by chance instead of by merit.
4. The Chinese political system (many others as well) does not distinguish between politicians and career civil servants. The careers of politicians and bureaucrats are structured in the same career hierarchy. This greatly complicates the idea of meritocracy in China
5. However China does have in place an elaborate system of cadre promotion consisting of six procedures: “democratic nomination”, “democratic assessment”, “public opinion poll”, “analysis of actual achievements”, “individual interview” and “comprehensive deliberation”.
6. Party-state officials and civil servants are regularly evaluated for job performance and promotion. Existing studies on whether merit or patronage/*guanxi* is more important in career advancement have yielded conflicting results.
7. When asked on what they considered the most important factor in their career advancement, cadres overwhelmingly identified “recognition and appreciation from superiors” as the most important factor; “social stability” was at least as important as “economic growth.” They generally had positive opinions on the cadre evaluation and promotion system currently in place.

8. However, a superior can be impressed either by outstanding job performance or by loyalty and other personal qualities unrelated to job performance, or by both. A principal-component analysis was conducted to assess the relative weight of merit and patronage.
9. The result indicates that what impress the superiors is more along the line of competence and achievement than patronage. Between merit and patronage the scale is tipped to the former.
10. Even corrupt officials have to deliver and be competent. Competence is the bottom line but corruption is not. The system may not always favour the most competent but it is geared towards performance. The Chinese cadre system is thus more merit-oriented than patronage-based.