

How the CCP has Determined its Successors: The Third Echelon's Construction Process and Signification

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<Abstract>

This article discusses the construction process and results of the Third Echelon of cadres. This was the first generation of the cadre reserve system, which has served as the CCP's cadre recruitment mechanism. It also examines how the CCP resolved various cadre management challenges after the Cultural Revolution, and a generational shift from old and less-educated revolutionaries to young and better-educated professionals who could implement the Reform and Opening Up policies. Through a three-year nationwide cadre selection project, also known as the Third Echelon Construction, the CCP fostered more than 110,000 cadres, from the county level to the provincial level, and these cadres played a crucial role in both economic growth and regime maintenance between 1989 and 1991, when the socialist bloc around it crumbled.

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party; the Third Echelon of Cadres; reserve cadres; elite politics; resilient authoritarian regime

How did Xi Jinping become the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s successor? This article addresses this question by examining the inception, and the result, of the system that incubated China's current leadership in the 1980s. It discusses the construction process of the Third Echelon of Cadres (*di san tidui* 第三梯队), the first generation of the Reserve Cadre System (*houbei ganbu zhidu* 后备干部制度), which has been serving as the CCP cadre recruitment mechanism up to the present. It also explores its impact on the perpetuation of the modern CCP's resilient authoritarian regime.¹ The construction of the Third Echelon was an inflection point in the transition of China's political hierarchy. Currently, Third Echelon members are at the center of power. The fact that 12 out of 14 of the 17th and 18th Standing Committee members were included in the Third Echelon underscores its importance.² Therefore, a closer look at the decision-making and implementation processes of this policy will provide insight into the CCP's succession system. By constructing the Third Echelon, China produced approximately 1,000 key cadres at the working level who could adhere to short-term reform and the Opening-up Policy. This was the moment at which China's ruling elite of "Revolutionary Cadres" was replaced by the "Bureaucratic Technocrats" who would spearhead China's reform and opening. Thanks to the officials fostered by this policy, China was able to continue its Reform and Opening Up, even when the Soviet Union and Eastern socialist countries collapsed between 1989 and 1991. This was possible not only due to the will and judgment of supreme leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, but also because there was a large pool of reformist working-level leaders who supported it from below.

However, despite its significance, few studies have focused on the construction of the Third Echelon—the first generation of the Cadre Reserve System which has persisted to the present day. These include the work of Chen (2013) and Gao (2014). Chen's research focuses on the construction process, a decision by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to resolve the generational change problem of cadres in the early stages of reform. This entailed examining the preparation and implementation process of the Third Echelon Construction decision. Gao's study evaluates the Third Echelon Construction as a solution to the "four principles (*ganbu sihua* 干部四化)". This study describes the crisis the CCP faced following the Cultural Revolution, and evaluates how the Party effected a generational shift through the construction of the Third Echelon, while maintaining policy continuity and consistency. However, it is difficult to say that all of the above studies have dealt with the three-dimensional process of the construction of the Third Echelon, due to the limitations of the data, as well as political considerations. Therefore, in addition to the preceding studies in China, for the present study, I have secured internal statistical data on the CCP's Youth Cadre Bureau of the Central Organization Department (*Zhongyang zuzhibu qingnian ganbuju* 中央组织部 青年干部局) from the 1980s. In

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¹ Andrew Nathan insists that the Chinese political system shows the robust extent of adaptation, in this sense, it can be defined as a resilient authoritarian regime. See Nathan 2003.

² Yang, Min. 2014, "Disan tidui mingdan jianshe qianhou: qiyong yidai xinren" (Before and after the construction of the "Third Echelon" list: use a new generation), *Zhongguo xinwen zhouban*, 8 September. 26.

addition, I evaluate the construction process and results of the Third Echelon list more objectively, by using as many memoirs as possible. The authors of each memoir used in this study were either Li Rui 李锐 who was not only renowned as the former secretary of Mao Zedong, but also was in charge of the construction of the Third Echelon or Cui Wunian 崔武年 who served in the Youth Cadre Bureau between 1983 and 1990 as a working-level leader when the construction began; and Yan Zhun 阎淮 who had a personal relationship with Chen Yun—chief architect of the Third Echelon project – due to Yan’s family background, known as a member of the “second red generation” (*hongerdai* 红二代); he was able to write its memoir with diverse personal stories related with the supreme leaders such as Chen Yun.³ Although their memoirs are of great historical significance, only Cui’s memoirs have been cited in several articles. Furthermore, it has become more difficult to use these memoirs, as each memoir has been out of print or banned in both Hong Kong and Mainland China. Therefore, this study can be seen as the first case of comparing and analyzing the data of working-level officials who directly participated in the Third Echelon Construction.

The Background of the Third Echelon Proposal and its Far-Reaching Signification

The Deng Xiaoping regime was established at the 12th Party Congress in 1982. Around this time, there was a movement toward decentralization, the establishment of a retirement system, and an attempt to institutionalize the succession system, along with a plan to foster successors. The Third Echelon, the subject of this article, was a successor training project which has remained influential even up to the present—it fostered 12 of the 14 standing members of the Central Politburo who were elected at the 17th and 18th CCP Party Congresses.⁴ As this project was institutionalized as a cadre reserve system (*houbei ganbu zhidu* 后备干部制度) and is in use as a cadre recruitment mechanism to this day, it is important to examine its construction process and results, as well as its origin. In this way, this study is more than a simple study of the system that fostered leaders of the time such as Xi Jinping. Rather, it explores the question, ‘How did the CPC’s political power persist after the Reform and Opening Up, despite the fall of so many socialist countries?’.

There are many views on the above question, but one common explanation is that the establishment of the Cadre Reserve System through the construction of the Third Echelon enabled China to develop without collapsing, despite the Reform and Opening Up. Young-nam Cho said that China’s continued Reform and Opening Up during the collapse of the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc countries between 1989 and 1991 was not only due to the strong will and accurate judgement of supreme leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, but also due to the existence of the large cohort of reformed working-level cadres that supported the policy.⁵ Tsai and Kou also point to the “Reserve Cadre System”—the successor policy of the third echelon—as the reason why the CCP did not collapse like other socialist countries in Eastern Europe.⁶

History is paradoxical. The middle-level cadres raised by Chen Yun’s 陈云 initiative of the Third Echelon and the Cadre Reserve System eventually supported the Deng Xiaoping-style opening policy. Chen Yun had opposed this policy, and ultimately the cadres trained between 1989 and 1991 became major factors in China’s success with Reform and Opening Up, as socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe crumbled. This is because when those countries collapsed, China had continued its Reform and Opening Up, and become a pillar of economic growth and systematic stability.

After the 12th Party Congress, there were two remaining issues regarding personnel management. One was the recruitment of middle-level leaders to promote Reform and Opening Up policies at the practical level, and the other was the retirement of incumbent senior cadres. A task intertwined these two was the training of successors. Due to the dire problems of an aging population and low education levels, Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun placed great emphasis on the selection of young cadres and the cultivation of a successor group. In addition to this problem, another factor that irritated Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun was the “three kinds of people” (*san zhong ren* 三种人) problem. These individuals had been recruited on a large scale during the Cultural Revolution, and had spread throughout the Central and local levels. While visiting some provinces in July and August 1979, Deng Xiaoping realized that a change in cadres would be necessary.

While presiding over the Central office in 1975, Wang Hongwen 王洪文, a member of the Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution, said, “We will see in 10 years.” Deng emphasized “Now there are problems to look at in ten

³ Li 2016. For details, see 51-53, Li 1985, Cui 2003, and Yan 2017.

⁴ Yang 2014, 26.

⁵ Cho 2016, 78.

⁶ Tsai and Kou 2015.

years. The influence of Lin Biao (林彪) and the Gang of Four on our party should not be underestimated. We should not think too naively. Think far away. We must take advantage of our time to select good successors, use those comrades who have performed well, train them for several years, and see them grow up.”⁷ In 1975, Deng was 71 years old and Wang was 40. For this reason, at the expanded meeting of the Political Bureau in August 1980, Deng suggested, “setting four standards (sihua 四化)—lowering the average age, intellectualization, specialization, and revolutionization” as the criteria for selecting cadres. With that, he began the ousting of followers of the Cultural Revolution. These four standards were included in the “Historical Resolution” (*lishi jueyi* 历史决议) which passed at the 6th Plenary Session of the 11th Party Congress in June 1981. It was also included in the Communist Party Constitution passed at the 12th Party Congress in 1982 as a criterion for selecting cadres, and has remained a criterion for cadre selection up to the present.

The selection and training of young cadres was promoted in earnest after the 12th Party Congress in 1982. This was the construction of the “Third Echelon”, which began in July 1983. In this context, “echelon” is a military term meaning an organized unit. The first echelon refers to the front-line units, the second echelon refers to the rear units, and the third echelon refers to the reserve units. Therefore, the construction of the Third Echelon means “organizing a rank of young cadres who can become successors from among the backbones of the Party and state at various levels in accordance with the “four standards set for cadres” policy. In other words, it can be seen as a project for selecting and nurturing prospective leading cadres.⁸ The concept of the third echelon was established by Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦, the general secretary of the CCP. In a discussion session held during the first session of the 6th People’s Congress in May 1983, Hu said, “The elder comrades are the first echelon members, and they devised a plan and set the Party and state policies. The current Central Secretariat and comrades working in the front-line of the State Council are the second echelon. But they are not young. Therefore, it is necessary to decide on the third echelon, select people who possess both character and ability, and let young and energetic cadres enter the leadership group at each level.”⁹ In addition, during a visit to Tokyo, Japan in November 1983, Hu clarified, “Those 70 and older are the First Echelon (Deng Xiaoping), the second are me and Zhao Ziyang (60’s), and those in their 40s and 50s are the Third Echelon.” As we can see, the reserve unit consisted of cadres in their 40s and 50s.¹⁰

In July 1983, the Central Organization Department (*zhongyang zuzhibu* 中央组织部) held a national organization work conference, and officially commenced the Third Echelon project. In September of the same year, related documents were delivered. According to the documents, the general selection of the Third Echelon cadres was conducted in the following manner: “the mass line, investigation of the organization department, group discussion by the Party committee, and review and decision by the superior organization department.” The criteria for selecting them were the four standards, and according to this, the three qualifications of politics, age, and education level were enforced to select young cadres. Then, from 1983 to 1986, there was a nationwide selection of preliminary officers divided into provincial, prefecture, and county levels. As a result, at the fourth Plenary Session of the 12th CPC Central Committee in 1985, 64 reserve cadres from the Third Echelon were elected either members or alternate members of the CPC Central Committee. Afterwards, the Cadre Reserve System was established, and China produced young, highly educated mid-level cadres who could continue the Reform and Opening-up.

The 12th Party Congress and the Cultivation of the Next Generation Proposal

This chapter examines the CCP leadership’s desperation for internal politics and cadre replacement following the Cultural Revolution, and the background of plans to train successors differently than in the previous era. The CCP’s priority, which persisted up through the early 1980s, was to solve the Cultural Revolution problem. On October 6, 1976, Zhang Qing 江青, Zhang Chunqiao 张春桥, Wang Hongwen 王洪文, and Yao Wenyuan 姚文元, the so-called “Gang of Four”, were arrested, ending the Cultural Revolution which lasted 10 years. The leadership, which had been vacant due to Mao Zedong’s death, had a “Hua Guofeng 华国锋 regime”.

The central figures of the “Hua Guofeng regime” were Hua Guofeng, Ye Jianying 叶剑英, and Wang Dongxing 汪东兴, who led the arrest of the Gang of Four. After Deng Xiaoping’s official reinstatement at the Central Working

⁷ Deng 1994, 192.

⁸ Cho 2016, 68-69.

⁹ Wunian, Cui, 2018. “Li rui he “di san tidui” jianshe” (Li Rui and “The Third Echelon” Construction), Huaxia zhiqing, 13 April, <http://www.hxqz.net/aspshow/showarticle.asp?id=10213>. Accessed 1 April 2021.

¹⁰ Kou 2011, 145-148.

Conference in March 1977, Deng was officially reinstated at the Third Plenary of the 10th Party Congress in July 1977. Moreover, as Chen Yun made a splendid return to the Politburo meeting, the leadership of the “Hua Guofeng regime” collapsed. During the two years and six months from the 11th Third Plenary session in December 1978 to the 11th Sixth Plenary session in June 1981, Deng Xiaoping’s forces succeeded in forcing Hua Guofeng to resign and seizing power. This was a significant event, because it was a turning point in redesigning China after the Cultural Revolution, as Hua Guofeng and his associates, the beneficiaries of the revolution, resigned. Since the Hua regime had found their legitimacy in Mao Zedong, it would have been impossible for them to deny the revolution. In that sense, it became a crucial issue for Deng, who himself had been a victim of the revolution, to establish a strong succession system that would continue their Reform and Opening Up, while denying the revolution.

The reform forces led by Deng Xiaoping faced two problems in personnel affairs within the Party. One was the aging problem of cadres caused by “cleaning up” three kinds of people (*qingli sanzongren* 清理三种人) and the rehabilitation of victims of the revolution, and the other was the problem of the cadres’ low educational levels, which made it difficult to promote Reform and Opening Up policies. The turning point in the all-out efforts to solve this problem was the 12th Party Congress held in September 1982. This was where Deng first proposed “building socialism with Chinese characteristics”, and then presented three missions for China. The first was the acceleration of the Socialist Modernization Drive (*shehuizhuyi xiandaihua jianshe* 社会主义现代化建设); the second was unification with Taiwan, and the third was opposition to hegemony and the promotion of world peace. Deng presented the four tasks to achieving the missions at the same time. The first was to cultivate revolutionary, better-educated, professionally, more competent and younger cadres by promoting institutional reform and reforms to the economic system. The second was to build a “spiritual civilization” along with a socialist material civilization. The third was the fight against crime in the economic sphere and other spheres. The last was to study the revised Party Constitution and to rectify the style and organization of the Communist Party. The three missions and four tasks described above were central to Hu Yaobang’s political report.¹¹

In this way, the Deng Xiaoping regime was established to promote reform and opening up through the 11th Third Plenary Session, the Politburo meeting in 1978, and the 12th Party Congress in 1982. During this time span, as the CCP began to attempt to resolve personnel-related problems, discussions on fostering successors began. The Party’s immediate challenge was to resolve the shortage of mid-level cadres who would promote Reform and Opening Up policies at the practical level, and to solve the aging problem cause by cadres who had returned to their posts through the rehabilitation after the Cultural Revolution. In July and August 1979, Deng Xiaoping visited Shandong, Shanghai, and Tianjin, and continued to say, “The ideological and political lines have already been established. In particular, selecting a successor is a problem, and it is necessary to select a professional and relatively young cadre.” In November 1979, Deng again emphasized, “The problem that our country currently faces is not whether the four modernization lines or policies are right or wrong, but that there are a lot of talented people who can implement them.”¹² Statistics reveal how serious the situation was. In 1978, only 18% of Party cadres had a college education or higher, and 49.5% had an educational level at or below junior high school. In 1980, the average age of major leaders in 30 units in state institutions was 63 years, and among these leaders, only 9% were under the age of 55; 40% were over the age of 66.¹³ Since most of the key leaders at the time, including Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun, were in their 70s, this would be a critical challenge with little time to solve. the solution to these problems was training successors. Even if Deng and the elders were to retire, the establishment of a succession system that could maintain the Reform and Opening Up, and lead without wavering, emerged as a priority for the CCP in the early 1980s. Thus, Deng Xiaoping warned, “Choosing a successful successor is a strategic issue and a big issue related to the long-term interests of our party and the country, and if we don’t solve this problem within three to four years, we do not know what will happen in 10 years.”¹⁴ In addition, the “three kinds of people”, who were recruited on a large scale during the Cultural Revolution and spread throughout the central and local levels, was also a priority for the leadership at the time. In 1975, when Deng Xiaoping presided over the central affairs, Wang Hongwen said, “We will see in 10 years”. At that time, Deng was 71 years old and Wang was 40. Considering this age difference, the elders figured that if the leaders and followers of the Cultural Revolution were not eradicated, it was possible that the Reform and Opening Up would be reversed after the death of elders such as Deng Xiaoping. For this reason, the “cleaning up” of the three kinds of people was implemented in two rounds. In addition to the arrangement, Deng Xiaoping proposed the formation of the third-generation leaders at all levels at the 12th Party Congress. Accordingly, between the Third Plenary

¹¹ Cho 2016, 484-485.

¹² Yang, Qiuping, and Ren, Jiahui, 2021. “Ganbu duiwu “sihua” fangzhen: wei shixian sige xiandaihua xuanba jixu rencai” (The Principle of the “Four Modernization” of a Cadre Team: Selecting Talent Urgently Needed to Realize the Four Modernizations), *zhongguo zuzhi renshibao*, 2 April, <http://renshi.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0402/c139617-32068552.html>. Accessed 10 April 2021.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ Cho 2016, 62.

Session of the 11th Central Committee and the 12th Party Congress, a total of 50,000 young cadres were added to the leadership group, at or above the county-level.¹⁵ In this way, the CCP began the process of selecting and nurturing successors through the four standards set for leading cadres and “cleaning up” the three kinds of people.

Among them was the theme of the present article—“Third Echelon”. This term was coined in May 1983, when Hu Yaobang presented the concept of the “Third Echelon” at the forum of the 6th People’s Congress. He said, “The elder comrades are the first echelon, and the comrades in the Central Secretariat and the State Council are the second, and they are not young. Thus, we need to decide to create the Third Echelon and let them enter the leadership groups at each level.”¹⁶

Establishment of the Youth Cadre Bureau of the Central Organization Department, and the decision to build the Third Echelon

As the Party’s priority was to select and train middle-aged cadres, on May 8, 1981, Chen Yun wrote in Hangzhou, “Selecting and cultivating middle-aged and young cadres is the Party’s urgent priority”. He argued that the Youth Cadre Bureau should be established under the Central Organization Department. Chen Yun returned to Beijing on May 20 and sent this document to Deng and Hu. Deng related “the matter related to the elders has not been resolved yet.” At the expanded meeting of the Politburo in June 1981, Chen again requested the official ratification of the document, but it was not accepted. At the symposium of provincial secretaries in early July, Chen finally convinced Deng, and gave a speech titled “Selecting Thousands or Tens of Thousands of Middle-aged Cadres”. At the same time, he insisted that “the central, provincial, prefecture, and country governments should all establish a youth cadre organization.” Deng agreed with Chen.¹⁷ On August 7, 1981, the Central Organization Department issued a notice titled “Several tasks concerning the implementation of the instructions of the Central Committee on the adjustment of the leading group and the selection of outstanding middle-aged and young cadres”. This notice was an announcement regarding the details of the Youth Cadre Bureau which would be in charge of the selection and training of middle-aged and young cadres.¹⁸ In March 1982, the Central Committee of the CPC officially ratified the establishment of the Youth Cadre Bureau. Li Rui, a former secretary of Mao Zedong, was initially the director of the bureau. Afterwards, as Li Rui transferred to minister of standing at the Central Organization Department in July 1983, Li Zhimin took over the post of director at the age of 45. In the second half of 1983, the Central Committee prepared a list of provincial/ministerial reserve cadres, and Hu Yaobang called it “the third echelon list”.¹⁹

The bureau consisted of three divisions: the General Division, the first division, and the second division. The first division managed the subcommittees of the State Council, and the second division managed the provinces. By the time the task force began in 1983, there were a total of 15 cadres working, and usually between 15 and 18 other cadres.²⁰ One characteristic of the bureau was that it was operated under Chen Yun’s management. The list of cadres working in the bureau had to be reported to Chen, and the youth cadre division’s personnel for each province, autonomous region, and municipality were registered in the form of a report by the Central Organization Department. The department’s approval was required for key personnel.²¹

The bureau primarily oversaw five tasks. The first was to build a provincial/ministerial reserve cadre, and this was “the Third Echelon”. At this time, when the bureau had just been established in 1983 and started working, the goal was to prepare a list of 1,000 of the echelon cadres and submit it to the Central Committee by July 1984.²² The second was to be good at keeping on “records” (*jilu zaian* 记录在案). These records were an official documents that comprehensively evaluated and recorded the behavior and expressions of university students during the Cultural Revolution, and the political views of the time in 1983.²³ The third was dispatching high-achieving university graduates (primarily student

¹⁵ Chao and Li 2017, 154-155.

¹⁶ Yan 2017, 211

¹⁷ Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi (Literature Research Office of the CCP Central Committee) eds. 2000, 273-278.

¹⁸ Hou 2005, 114.

¹⁹ Yang 2014.

²⁰ The original plan was to organize a group of 20 cadres, but the bureau never reached capacity. In addition, the requirements for cadres working in the bureau were strict, and they had to pass the same level of investigation as provincial/ministerial-level cadres, *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² However, it was completed in 1985 since there was a shortage of cadres in the process of selecting personnel who met the Four Standards policy.

²³ This task was outlined on April 23, 1983 when the Central Organization Department issued the “Opinions on the Recording Work of Important Leaders of Student Rebel Organizations in Colleges and Universities during the “Cultural Revolution”” (hereinafter “the Record”).

cadres) to the base to train and nurture them over the long term. The fourth was to foster young cadres in the Central government organization and to dispatch them to the provinces to gain experience through various channels. The last was to scrutinize and establish a cadre reserve system. This included the cadre rank system and work system, implementation inspections, and operation promotion.²⁴

Following its establishment in March 1982, the bureau held its first working session in August. Li Rui, director of the bureau at the time, insisted on immediate delivery of documents instructing the establishment of the youth cadre divisions and sections in each province and city.²⁵ In September 1982, the 12th Party Conference was held, and “the Four Standards for leading cadres—which included revolutionary, intellectualization, specialization, and youth—were inserted into the Party constitution, establishing the standards for cadres during the reform period. At the same time, Hu Yaobang proposed age and educational requirements (to be fulfilled at the present, and, three, five, and eight years in the future) to the Organization Department and leading cadres. Naturally, this requirements became the task of the Youth Cadre Bureau. At that time, only had 6% received college-level education out of 810,000 county/division cadres; 22% were high school graduates. On the other hand, 72% were middle school graduates. Moreover, considering that the vast majority of leading cadres were over 50, Hu’s requirements that “the current number of cadres under 50 years of age and college graduates is one-third, so that in three years, all newly appointed provincial/ministerial cadres should be under 50 years of age and college graduates” was a radical order.²⁶

In October 1982, the Central Institutional Reform Small Group was launched and began the task of selecting young cadres who possessed both character and ability (*decai liangjian* 德才两兼), and putting them to work in the Central and State Council. The leader of the group was Song Renqiong 宋任穷, who was the head of the Organization Department. In addition, the adjustment work for the provincial leadership group began immediately after the appointment of new cadre leaders at the Central level. After this preliminary work, in the second half of 1983, the Central Committee decided to draft a list of reserve cadres at the provincial/ministerial levels. The first task of the Youth Cadre Bureau mentioned above was decided in this way.

The Introduction of the age system and tenure system, and the establishment of the retirement system

A prerequisite for the recruitment of young cadres was the retirement of the elders. However, around 1983, when the Third Echelon project began, the retirement system was not yet in effect, and in the case of senior cadre leaders, a system similar to a life tenure system was maintained. Moreover, as a large number of cadres who had been the victims of the Cultural Revolution were rehabilitated, the issue of senior cadres’ retirement became a major challenge the CCP needed to overcome. If an age system and tenure system were not implemented, the Party could not appoint young cadres to the proper positions. With this background, the age system and tenure system were implemented in 1982. In 1982, the Constitution was changed so as to stipulate for the first time the tenure length for officials of national institutions such as the National People’s Congress, Local People’s Congress, State Council, Local Government, Courts and People’s Procuratorate. Public officials with a five-year term of office could be reappointed in the same position, and if they could not be promoted, they had to retire after the second term. That is, the maximum tenure in one position was 10 years. However, the President, Vice-President and members of the Central Military Commission were not subject to these reappointment provisions.

Both national institutions and the CCP itself established a retirement system through internal regulations at this time. In 1982, the Central Committee issued the “Decision of the Local Authorities of the Communist Party of China on Establishing a Retirement System for Veteran Cadres”.²⁷ This “decision” stipulated that the retirement age at full provincial level was 65, and at the vice provincial and department levels, it was 60. However, in the case of these cadres, various privileges were guaranteed, even after retirement. The privileges they received included access to Party documents and attending important meetings. In addition, members of the Central and Provincial Advisory Committees, which were established in 1982, received the same material treatment (salary) as they had while they were in office. According to the above-mentioned retirement regulations, a total of 7,260 high-ranking cadres retired in 1982. This was equivalent to 81% of all high-ranking cadres.²⁸ However, in the “decision”, there were exceptions for senior cadres such as Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun. The “decision” guaranteed the activities of some revolutionary elders by stipulating that “even though they have reached the retirement age, they can perform their normal duties and, if necessary for work, can assume leadership duties for a certain period after approval.”

²⁴ Cui 2003, 11-12.

²⁵ Yan 2017, 186.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 187.

²⁷ See the full text at <http://www.smaqsb.com/ltxdzz/info/1146/1200.htm>. Accessed by 5 May 2021.

²⁸ Xiao 2008, 352-353; Wu 2010, 385-387.

The construction of the Third Echelon and cadre selection

As the preparation of the list of reserve cadres at the provincial level began in 1983, the Organization Department issued a notice of selection of reserve cadres to the Central agencies and to the Party committees, and organizational departments of provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions. Selection for the provincial level reserve cadre group was dictated by the “four principles and eight gates” (*sihua bamen* 四化八门). These four principles mean “younger in age, more revolutionary, better educated, and more professionalized” candidates, and the eight gates refer to the area of each industry group. Three conditions were enforced upon reserve cadre selection at the provincial level. First, candidates could not exceed the age of 50. Second, although it was not evaluated solely by education level, in principle, candidates had to have a bachelors’ degree or higher. Third, candidates had to be prefectural/departmental level cadres. However, the most important condition was that they had been “candidates who behaved well during the Cultural Revolution”. Those who “behaved well” meant that they had rejected the Cultural Revolution, or at least had not participated in the “disturbance”. In other words, the “cleaning of three kinds of people” was also performed.²⁹

<Table 1> Overview of CCP membership in 1983

Age (years)	Proportion (%)	Education	Proportion (%)
Under 35	35.2	Technical college or higher	21.1
36-45	30.7	Technical secondary school (中专) or higher	28.5
46-55	28.2	High school or higher	13.6
56 or older	6	Middle school or higher	36.8

Source: Cui 2003, 64.

<Table 2> Percentage of student body that was Party members in major Chinese universities, 1983

University	%	University	%
Peking	1.93	Beijing Agricultural	0.92
Tsinghua	2.51	Beijing Medical College	0.84
Renmin	2.94	Fudan	0.59
Beijing Normal	1.11	Shanghai Jiaotong	0.87
Chinse University of Science and Technology	0.55	Xi’an Jiaotong	0.72

Source: Cui 2003, 65.

In July 1983, the Third Echelon’s construction began in earnest. In July, the Central Organization Department held a National Symposium on organizational work and officially commenced construction. On December 10, Hu Yaobang checked the progress of the Third Echelon cadre list with Politburo member Song Renqiong, former head of the Organization Department. As such, the creation of the Third Echelon list received a great deal of attention from CCP leadership. This attention was due to the fact that it had been the first time the CCP had implemented a national-level cadre selection project of this magnitude since the country was established in 1949. During Hu’s visit on December 10, Li

²⁹ However, there was a tolerant response to the disposition of the Old Red Guards. Most were children of high-ranking cadres, and this tolerance was because there were not enough professionalized (technical expertise) and well-educated cadres like them at that time. Thus, it would have been a formidable task to secure a cadre pool for the reserve cadre list if the Old Red Guards had been excluded. In addition, there is a testimonial that background factors influenced the college entrance exam. At that time, among the science and engineering majors, high energy physics and wireless electrical engineering were departments where security was crucial. Therefore, strict screening was conducted in the admissions process, and most who were picked were children of cadres. Furthermore, Chen Yun also stipulated that these old Red Guards were not “the three kinds of people” (Yan, Yinsheng, 2008; Yan 2017, 203-204).

Zhimin, director of the Youth Cadre Bureau, reported that 13 provinces had agreed to submit lists by the end of the year, and 10 other provinces had announced that they would submit partial lists by the end of the year; the remaining four provinces pledged to submit lists by the end of January or February the following year. At this time, Song Renqiong emphasized “We need to select a list of reserve cadres well, and even lists with only one person we need those too”. This was because there had been a plan to use the list as a basis for appointing new Central Committee members in 1985. After the report on December 10, the Third Echelon project became the top priority of the Central Organization Department for the year. Additionally, the department was instructed to mobilize all of its capabilities to investigate the list. Furthermore, in addition to reporting to the Party Central Committee, they were instructed to send a written report to each provincial/ministerial level department to facilitate and guide related work. Finally, the department was instructed to refine their work through a conference call on December 16.³⁰

In response to this time pressure, on December 16, the Central Organization Department held the first nationwide provincial-level conference call attended by the heads (ministers) and administrative vice ministers (directors) of each department (ministry), and the directors of the department of personnel. The conference call was presided by Chen Yeping 陈野苹, the head of the Central Organization Department. At this meeting, a proposal to form the first central investigation group (*zhongyang kaochazu* 中央考察组) was agreed upon by mobilizing all capabilities of the Central and local organizational departments. Based on this practice of assigning personnel, three central investigation groups left to investigate areas of Beijing, Heilongjiang, and Jiangsu in 1984. In this investigation process, the group attempted to investigate every single candidate for around a month. The subjects of the investigation included senior, peer and lower cadres, and interviews were focused on those who had disagreed with the list.³¹

In February 1984, the investigation group returned and reported that in Heilongjiang Province, 25 cadres had been investigated and 22 had passed, for a pass rate of 88%; in Jiangsu, 40 cadres were investigated and 32 passed, for a pass rate of 80%. Finally, in Beijing, 25 out of 37 candidates passed, for a 68% pass rate. In the first investigation, due to limited time, biographical references (*renwu xiaozhuan chankaoziliao* 人物小传参考资料) could not be written. However, since then, records consisting of about 500 Chinese characters were composed for each cadre on the list. These documents were written by referring to the method of evaluating a person by selecting 14 articles from *Historical Records*, by *Sima Qian*, *Zizhi Tongjian*, *Book of Later Han*, and *Red Star over China*. Around May 1984, the Third Echelon selection status of some provinces was as follows. First, in the case of Shanghai, a list of 40 provincial-level Third Echelon cadres was reported to the Party’s Central headquarters, and 3,000 prefectural-level reserve cadres and 10,000 reserve cadres were selected at the county-level.

What was noteworthy was the high-achieving college student selection, which occurred simultaneously with the Third Echelon project. College students were dispatched to township-level rural areas to train. Among them, high-achieving students were selected and included in the list of reserve cadres. Around 250 college students were selected as reserve cadres each year.³² A closer look at this is as follows. In May 1983, the Central Organization Department issued a “Notice on Selecting and Transferring Fresh and Outstanding College Graduates to the Grassroots Training and Exercise”. This was according to the results of the “Central Organization Department’s Working Meeting on Selected Transfer Students” (*zhongzubu xuandiao sheng gongzuohuiyi* 中组部选调生工作会议) attended by the heads of the provincial-level organization departments and the directors of the youth cadres divisions. On February 17 of the same year, Li Rui, then executive vice head of the Central Organization Department and director of the Youth Cadre Bureau, said to Xi Zhongxun, standing secretary of the Secretariat of the Central Committee, “Starting this year, some college graduates from each province will be selected and dispatched from construction to battalions and factories. After training them for several years, we will select high-achieving people and raise them to leadership positions at each level, which is a strategic move.”

As a result, by 1985, about 12,700 college students had been selected and dispatched to the grassroots units. However, the evaluation of this policy was divided. In early 1986, the Central Organization Department temporarily suspended the dispatch of college students, but this was overturned due to opposition from the Youth Cadre Bureau.³³ In

³⁰ Cui 2003, 22-23.

³¹ According to Yan Zhun’s records, among the cadres who had been subject to investigation in the Northeastern provinces at the time, those who were later promoted to members of the Politburo were Zhang Dejiang 张德江, Li Tiejing 李铁映, and Li Changchun 李长春, Yan 2017, 313-319.

³² Cui 2003, 53.

³³ At that time, cadres from the Youth Cadre Bureau, such as Cui Wunian and Yan Zhun, sent a direct petition to Hu Yaobang, the general secretary of the CCP, and requested that the policy be maintained. Yan 2017, 308-309; Cui 2003, 224.

2000, the Central Organization Department issued the “Notice on the Further Improvement for Selected Transfer Students” and revised the policy. They confirmed that according to the *People’s Daily* report, in 2005, 6,800 of the selected college graduates from 20 provinces had been working as country-level cadres, and 420 had been working at the prefectural or departmental level, and 7 had been working at the provincial or ministerial level.³⁴ This system in which college students were selected, dispatched to a grassroots unit, and promoted to leadership positions at various levels through training is still in place as a mechanism for recruiting CCP cadres.

In April 1984, the second Central Investigation group was sent to Sichuan, Guangdong, and Inner Mongolia. During the investigation, a “career throughout the Cultural Revolution” was generally considered a significant factor. Regarding the cadres’ careers during the 10-year Cultural Revolution, Chen Yun stated, “The political standard must be consistent, and when it comes to the ‘three kinds of people’, only one kind of person should not be selected. Also, those who have already been selected must be expelled from their leadership positions. Even if the current expression of these people is good, when the time comes, presuming that there is any wind or wave within the Party, such a person will inevitably cause trouble.” Chen’s remark demonstrates the investigation group’s mission. Among “the four principles of cadres”, the group had focused on revolutionization.³⁵ Through these two investigation processes, around 1985, 855 cadres at the provincial-level, and 17,690 cadres at the prefectural-level had entered into the Third Echelon list. Among the cadres on this list during this period were Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, who are now the president and premier of China, respectively, as well as Zhang Dejiang and Li Changchun, who both served as standing members of the Central Politburo during the Hu Jintao period.³⁶

<Table 3> Statistics on Cadres from the Third Echelon List (1984)

Education	N/%	Family Origin	N/%
Master’s and above	33/5.22	Cadre	33/5.22
Technical college and above	539/85.28	Exploiter (剥削家庭)	72/11.39
High School (Secondary Specialized School Inclusive)	45/7.12	Non-exploiter (非剥削家庭)	527/83.39
Middle School	14/2.21	-	-
Problems related to the Cultural Revolution	N/%	Current Work Organization	M/%
Victim	249/39.4	Provincial-level organization	276/43.67
No damage	290/45.89	Prefecture level cities and counties	304/48.1
Boycott and struggle experience	86/13.61	Enterprise	52/8.23
Who’s at fault?	7	-	-
Current Position	N/%	Gender	N/%
Provincial/Ministerial	9	Male	543/86.92
Office/Bureau Main	165/26.11	Female	89/14.08
Office/Bureau Vice-Main	357/56.49	-	-
County/Department	98/15.51	-	-

Source: Cui 2003. 78

In May 1984, the Symposium on the Youth Cadres Work of Eight Provinces was held by the Youth Cadre Bureau. At this time, Zhang Xumin 张序敏, head of the youth division of the Shanghai Municipal Organization

³⁴ Yan 2017, 309.

³⁵ “Jiakuai ‘sihua’ bufa Dadan qiyong yidai xinren Zhongyang zuzhibu fuzeren da xinhuashe jizhe he benbao jizhe wen” (Accelerate the pace of the “four modernizations” of cadres. Bold use of a new generation of people: The head of the Central Organization Department answered questions from Xinhua and our reporters), *Renmin Ribao*, 11 February 1985, page 1.

³⁶ Yang 2014; Yan 2017; Cui 2003.

Department, introduced the method of quantitative cadre evaluation in Shanghai. This was different from the traditional interview investigation method, and this new method was based on novel sociology and psychological theories. Afterwards, the Youth Cadre Bureau held a discussion with scholars such as Xu Lianchang, director of the Psychological Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and Chen Li, a professor of psychology at Zhejiang University, on how to use quantitative techniques to increase efficiency among large-scale cadre investigations. As a result, the bureau independently designed its own public opinion method, and created an evaluation method based on quantitative factors that derived about 10 items, including education, expressive ability, political morality, and operation talent. This was used to conduct a sampling survey on 110 prefectures and cities in 11 provinces. In the end, this led to the publication of *Collection of Abstract Investigation Reports on the Construction Process of the "Four Modernization" for Leading Groups at Prefecture and County Levels*.³⁷

**<Table 4> “Reserve Forces” selected as
a result of the construction of the Third Echelon (1985)³⁸**

Level	Scale (N)		Percentage
	Central	Local	
Provincial/Ministerial	855	261	0.74
		594	
Office/Bureau	17,690		15.32
County/Department	96,945		83.94
Total	115,490		100

Source: Ahn, 2011, 16.

In 1984, the Central Investigation Group conducted an investigation of the Third Echelon list. The Central Organization deliberated over it as well, and once again it was subjected to rigorous examination by Hu Yaobang. Then in August 1984, the Central Organization Department sent a research report on the Third Echelon to the Party’s Central Committee. In the fall of 1984, the first list of 1,100 cadres was confirmed. However, the list was flexible and adjusted from time to time. Persons who had already joined the leadership group had been removed from the list, and new cadres had been appointed and added to it. The completed Third Echelon list was managed under the Central Committee and Central Organization Department. Hu suggested that the young cadres elected quarterly be arranged and placed at the central Party institutions. One cadre from each province participated in the central investigation work and daily meetings on a yearly basis to broaden the horizons and improve their understanding of the Party Central Committee’s operations and policymaking. The Youth Cadre Bureau frequently conducted reviews and interviews with the cadres on the list to help them manage their careers. After consultation with the bureau and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, about 10 cadres were dispatched overseas and to the Rural Policy Research Center in Durunsheng (杜润生), and entrusted with their work. After the list was created, in principle, a cadre’s appointment had to come from a person on the list. To select a person who was not on the list, that person had to be entered to the list first, and only then could they be selected. However, in practice, this was not followed to the tee, but in most cases, it was true that the person on the list took precedence.

In May 1985, the Party Central Committee began coordinating the leadership group in 15 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities, including Zhejiang, Beijing, Shanxi, and Inner Mongolia. At this time, 44 of 59 Party government cadres whose ages had exceeded the retirement age were retired, and 65 new cadres from the Third Echelon had filled the positions. After the adjustment, the average age of the 15 secretaries in the provinces was 59.2 years—5.5 years lower than before the adjustment. In addition, the Party Central Committee had clarified its policy on the recruitment of young cadres, including the Third Echelon. This was the “Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Economic System Reform”, which was passed at the Third Plenary Session of the 12th Central Committee in October 1984. In Article 9 of the decision, the Central Committee stipulated, “to appoint a new generation and to create a grand line of socialist economic management.” This was revised three times, in 1985, 1986, and 1987, based on “the Third

³⁷ This report consisted of a total of three volumes, and cited various statistical sources regarding cadres obtained by the Central Organization Department at the time. Zhongyang zuzhibu qingnian ganbuju (*The Youth Cadre Bureau of the Central Organization Department*) eds. 1987.

³⁸ Professor Chi-young Ahn’s figures differ slightly from those of Cui Wunian. As of 1985, Cui recorded that there were 1,019 provincial-level reserve cadres, 18,000 prefecture-level reserve cadres, and 9,6000 county-level reserve cadres., See Cui 2003, 213.

Echelon list”. In the end, the preparation of “the Third Echelon list”, which began in earnest in 1983, was completed in 1985. The result was an adjustment in 1985.

<Table 5> Comparison of educational level, major, and career of the 8-12th and 13-17th Central Committee of the CCP³⁹

Session (year)	Educational Level (1, 2)		Career (first rank, %)	Majors in College (inclusive technical college) (first rank, %)
	1	2		
8 (1956)	2.91	3.58	Party Organization, 37.3	Humanities and social sciences, 70.5
9 (1969)	2.42	3.03	Military, 47.1	Natural and applied sciences, 58.6
10 (1973)	2.56	3.2	Military, 34	Natural and applied sciences, 41.6
11 (1977)	2.74	3.44	Military, 34.5	Military, 42.6
Total(Average Value)	2.66	3.31	-	-
12 (1982)	3.37	4.13	Military, 25.9	Natural and applied sciences, 38.9
13 (1987)	3.74	4.51	Engineer, 23.5	Natural and applied sciences, 56.2
14 (1992)	4.02	4.82	Engineer, 28.8	Natural and applied sciences, 64.3
15 (1997)	4.22	5.04	Engineer, 30.9	Natural and applied sciences, 61.7
16 (2002)	4.21	5.28	Engineer, 27	Natural and applied sciences, 55
17 (2007)	3.9	5.44	Party Organization, 39.4	Natural and applied sciences, 58.1
Total (Average Value)	3.91	4.87		

Source: <CCP Political Elite Database (1921~2012)>, Jang-Hwan Joo, *The Second transition of Chinese Political elite from “Technocrats” to “General Cadres”* (Osan: Hansin University Press, 2017), p. 105.

This adjustment occurred at the 13th Party Congress in 1987, when a full-scale replacement of old and new was implemented. This was because the scope of replacement was too wide, and therefore it was judged that gradual replacement would be stable. In addition, beginning in this period, many revolutionary elders began to retire from the Central Committee, the Advisory Committee, and the Discipline Inspection Committee. In this way, a shift occurred in the mainstream political elite leading the CCP, and the shift from revolutionary cadres to technocrats was underway. Starting with the change in 1985, it was the result of this transition that the preeminent career in the Central Committee had become engineering by 1987, and natural and applied sciences majors accounted for the majority from this point onward.

Conclusion

From 1983 to 1985, China was able to bore three major fruitful results through “reserve cadre selection” including the preparation of “the Third Echelon list”. The first was that “cadre modernization based on the four principles”, which started in 1982, and was able to achieve the results. Through several investigations, it had reduced the scope for hindering reform and opening up by preventing cadres with problems during the Cultural Revolution from joining the leadership group, and selecting those with basic understandings (i.e., education levels) who could take charge of the practical work

³⁹ According to Professor Jang Hwan Joo, the education levels are averages. In addition, educational level 1 refers to educational levels before the start of the official career, while educational level 2 refers to the educational level at the start of the career. Coding consists of None-0, elementary school graduate-1, middle school graduate-2, high school graduate-3, college graduate-4, and masters’ or higher-5. The careers were divided into military, Party organization, mass organization, government organization, engineering, education, and others. The majors were divided into natural and applied sciences, military, humanities and social sciences., Joo 2017, 105.

of economic construction. By selecting those with technical expertise, rather than expertise in Party affairs, the Party was able to break away from the ‘politicization of everyday life’—a remnant of the Cultural Revolution—and implement the policy of “Seek Truth from Facts (shishi qiushi 实事求是)” in their daily lives.

The second is that by establishing the “Cadre Reserve System”, the Party had secured a mechanism to recruit competitive cadres from within, on a rolling basis. With the successful Third Echelon Construction, which had been the first attempt, the Party had established an internal cadre reserve system, and through a gradual standardization process, it had become a means to nurture successors. This was indeed a remarkable achievement. The “Cadre Reserve System” was the driving force that allowed the CCP to both achieve economic growth, and maintain political power, despite the collapse of most of the socialist bloc from the late 1980’s to the early 1990s.⁴⁰ This was because the core of this system was the “records” and “periodic education at various levels of Party schools”. The records are a documentary source of about 1,500 words each regarding cadres kept in the organization department at each level. This began with the systematization of the records for each cadre along the dimension of “cleaning three kinds of people” in 1982. It remains a factor in cadre evaluation. “Periodic education at Party schools at each level” also started with group study of the cadres selected on the Third Echelon list at each Party school’s training group. In this respect, the ‘Third Echelon’ can be evaluated as the birthplace of the CCP’s modern cadre recruitment mechanism.

Finally, through the short-term effort over the three years from 1983 to 1985, the CCP was able to nurture about 1,000 key cadres with practical skills. This ensured that the transition from the existing “revolutionary cadres” to “technocrats” leading the Reform and Opening Up would be successful. As a result, this transition perpetuated China’s resilient authoritarian regime, producing 12 out of 14 members of the Central Standing Committee of the CCP elected at two Party Congresses, in 2002 and 2007.

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⁴⁰ Tsai and Kou 2015, 1–20.

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