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Getting Ahead in Rural China: the elite–cadre divide and its implications for rural governance

GRAEME SMITH*

This article will outline the politics and pathways of promotion among government officials working in a rural county in Anhui province and their attitudes towards elite status. It will analyze the implications these processes and pathways have for the operation of local government in rural China. Drawing on interviews and relationships spanning a ten-year period (2004–2013), this article primarily relies upon the personal experiences of colleagues and friends who have attempted to rise through the ranks of government and business in Benghai County, with varying degrees of success. While the article will focus on political elites, in Benghai it is impossible to separate business from politics. This article will delineate strategies adopted for career advancement and attaining elite political status, and the effects these strategies have on the relationship between political elites and ordinary cadres.

Introduction

Despite the reintroduction of a nationwide civil service examination system, personalized control of promotion opportunities by leading Party officials continues to be the norm in rural China. If access to resources is the primary concern of business elites, access to posts is the currency of political elites. The centrality of the control of promotion by the CCP in shaping the nature of rural governance is missed, even in excellent overviews of how the Party is evolving.¹ This is

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1. Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers* (London: Allen Lane, 2010); and David Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press, 2008). David Shambaugh notes that ‘most studies of Chinese politics today focus on increasingly smaller units of analysis and fail to generate broader views about China’s or the CCP’s future’ (p. 23); I would counter that without understanding the motivations and frustrations of ordinary cadres and entrepreneurs, one misses underlying tensions that decide whether or not the regime survives, thrives or perishes. That we can see China’s political landscape in a finer grain should be celebrated, not lamented.

unfortunate as understanding the management and manipulation of promotion incentives is crucial to deciding who makes up the political elite, how the political elite motivates ordinary cadres, and how local government functions throughout rural China.

To support this argument, I will examine academic and popular literature on the status of the political elite (leading and *gongwuyuan* cadres) and ordinary cadres (service and enterprise staff) within the political system to demonstrate that these tensions are not unique to Benghai County,² and attempt to draw out the wider implications that this inherent, residual tension has for rural governance in China. Much of the information contained in this article is well known to Chinese citizens whose relatives or friends work in local government, but little of this material has been discussed in the English-language literature, and never on the basis of a ten-year longitudinal study of a county government. As previous scholars have argued,³ the relationship between political elites and ordinary cadres is crucial to understanding the resilience and legitimacy of authoritarian regimes, and yet compared to other Weberian relationships (elites–masses and cadres–masses) this link is difficult to access and analyze.

While the article focuses on the relationships between political elites and local government personnel, it must be emphasized that their positions are not separate from the market. Local government in China is a market player. Everyone working within local government, from the county party secretary down to a township forestry station worker, has a broad network of relationships that extend well beyond formal government structures. The benefit which accrues to (and through) these informal connections, that I refer to collectively as ‘the shadow state’,⁴ makes the considerable personal and emotional cost of securing a government post worthwhile, if you have the financial *and* social capital to secure it. Pushing to have a family member in a secure government post does not indicate a lack of ambition; rather it complements the business strategies of elite and aspiring elite families in Benghai. Succeeding in business in Benghai is possible for outsiders, particularly well-resourced enterprises in sectors that rely less on the cultivation of connections, but it is far more of a closed shop than urban centers, even inland cities such as Chengdu, the setting for John Osburg’s masterful anthropological study of Chengdu’s business elites.⁵

The political elite: leading cadres and *gongwuyuan* cadres

Obtaining the ‘right’ government post is complicated by the nuances of status between different government and Party organizations. It is not a simple matter to

2. Due to the need to protect sources, Benghai is a pseudonym. For a further analysis of the political system in Benghai County, see Graeme Smith, ‘Political machinations in a rural county’, *The China Journal* 62, (2009), pp. 29–59; Graeme Smith, ‘The hollow state: rural governance in China’, *China Quarterly* 203, (2010), pp. 601–618; and Graeme Smith, ‘Measurement, promotions and patterns of behavior in Chinese local government’, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40(6), (2013), pp. 1027–1050.

3. Peter Sandby-Thomas, ‘How do you solve a problem like legitimacy? Contributing to a new research agenda’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(88), (2014), pp. 575–592.

4. Smith, ‘Political machinations in a rural county’.

5. John Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China’s New Rich* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

decide who is 'elite' and who is an ordinary cadre. Staff working within the same bureaucratic system (or *xitong*) of local government enjoy different standings, depending on whether they are classified as leading cadres (*lingdao ganbu*), *gongwuyuan* cadres (*gongwuyuan*), service⁶ staff (*shiye ganbu*) or enterprise staff (*qiye ganbu*). Within these categories there are further distinctions, which depend on the status of one's organization within the county. These can change over time with shifts in bureaucratic priorities and economic conditions, which are often specific to a given county or township. For the purpose of this analysis I take 'leading cadres' and 'gongwuyuan cadres' as representatives of the political elite in Benghai County, as they are the two groups with the formal capacity to mobilize funds, personnel and materials within the Leninist political system.

Leading cadres

The core of leading cadres in local government form the county Party Standing Committee, a group of around a dozen cadres that performs a function similar to the Politburo at the national level, with the county party secretary as the most powerful figure.⁷ These are the county's undisputed political elite, and the gatekeepers of promotion for other officials (aside from those sent down from higher levels). At the township level, the core group of the political elite is smaller, being limited to the township party secretary, the township head and a handful of deputies.⁸ Although they control government functions, this small group can be considered as politicians, rather than government officials. Their motivations are different to government staff, whose careers are generally confined to within the borders of their home county.⁹

Leading cadres, particularly at the county level, are often sent down or parachuted in from higher levels—the prefecture, province or even the central government—in the hope that a period being tempered in local government will lead to more rapid promotion. From the perspective of the central state, it is hoped that cadre exchange will lead to a less corrupt and more disciplined Party organization.¹⁰ From the perspective of ordinary government staff, the view that the most powerful figures in their county hail from outside the county does little to build loyalty towards leading cadres. One strategy specific to Anhui is the practice of sending cadres from the south of the province to serve north of the Huai River, and cadres from the north to the south. The hope was that the unruly northerners would learn the ways of their prosperous and politically pliant southern cousins. Such a strategy, of course, is just as likely to spread the networks of the northern political elite.

6. I translate *shiye* as 'service' as these staff are meant to serve the government and the public. Alternative translations (such as economic or non-profit) make no sense.

7. Smith, 'Political machinations in a rural county'.

8. Maria Edin, 'State capacity and local agent control in China: CCP cadre management from a township perspective', *China Quarterly* 173, (2003), pp. 35–52; Smith, 'The hollow state'.

9. This holds true for other rural counties. See Chen Lijun, *Building Local State Capacity in China*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2004, p. 436. It is common for government employees to find better-paid work in the private sector, and in some counties they are actively encouraged to do so.

10. Dali Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan: Market Transition and the Politics of Governance in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

Locals in Benghai distrust leaders who hail from neighboring counties, particularly counties that have enjoyed less economic success. The poverty of these regions is often linked to the alleged corrupt and slothful moral tendencies of their inhabitants, and by extension, Benghai's political leaders. One neighboring county, the home of a longstanding but unloved Benghai party secretary, was the focus of ire. It was widely believed that a 'gang' or 'clique' (*bang* 帮) from this county had taken control of the county and the prefectural governments. While there was some evidence that a former county tax bureau head (known as 'local tax big brother'), now promoted to the prefecture, was exerting influence on appointments, many tales about this clique (which in some accounts reached as high as the Central Military Commission) were far-fetched. Yet the currency given to these rumors by ordinary government staff was significant. This dislike of 'outsiders' among their political elite even extended to a particular township that spoke a dialect close to one common in parts of eastern Hubei and southern Anhui. Natives of this township were characterized as 'sharp talkers' and 'cunning businessmen'.

Such xenophobic reactions always surprised me, as when studying the personal histories of Benghai's leading cadres, adherence to the spirit of the 'law of avoidance' (*huibi zhidu*, whereby one cannot serve as the party secretary or county head in one's home county) seemed loose. The county leaders had typically worked in the county earlier in their careers, usually at the township level. Hailing from neighboring counties, they usually had friends and relatives in Benghai, and they had spent time at the prefectural Party School with natives of Benghai. Yet they were often seen as untrustworthy outsiders by ordinary government staff. These distinctions appeared impossibly small. Nonetheless, non-native leading cadres were at pains to cultivate a local image. They would promote Benghai's 'speciality products' in the media, demonstrate their mastery of the local dialect at banquets, and echo ordinary cadres' stereotypes of Benghai's virtues—thrift, hard work and small families—back to them.

The motivations of leading cadres are the subject of a substantial body of literature that examines leading cadres from the township, county, city, provincial and central government levels. A variety of factors have been identified, such as competition for promotion through the formal assessment system,¹¹ tournament competition around economic performance,¹² the revenue imperative,¹³ the deployment of factional ties¹⁴ and personal enrichment.¹⁵ While named in appreciation of Shi, Adolph and

11. Pierre Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China: The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Susan Whiting, 'The cadre evaluation system at the grassroots: the paradox of Party rule', in Barry J. Naughton and Dali Yang, eds, *Holding China Together: Diversity and National Integration in the Post-Deng Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 101–119; Edin, 'State capacity and local agent control in China'; Stephen Green, *What Makes 10 Million Local Officials Tick?* (Standard Chartered Bank, 2013), available at: <https://research.standardchartered.com/researchdocuments/Pages/ResearchArticle.aspx?R = 105510> (last accessed 11 June 2013).

12. Hongbin Li and Li-An Zhou, 'Political turnover and economic performance: the incentive role of personnel control in China', *Journal of Public Economics* 89, (2005), pp. 1743–1762.

13. James Kai-Sing Kung and Ting Chen, *Career Incentives under Authoritarianism: Evidence from China's Local Leaders*, Discussion Paper (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 3 May 2013).

14. Victor Shih, Christopher Adolph and Mingxing Liu, 'Getting ahead in the Communist Party: explaining the advancement of central committee members in China', *American Political Science Review* 106, (2012), pp. 166–187; Ben Hillman, 'Factions and spoils: examining local state behaviour in China', *The China Journal* 62, (2010), pp. 1–18.

15. Smith, 'Political machinations in a rural county'.

Liu's article, 'Getting ahead in the Communist Party', which studied how members of the Central Committee secured their promotions, the focus of this article is ordinary government staff, with little prospect of promotion beyond the county borders. The motivations of the leading cadres do, of course influence their strategies for 'getting ahead' in Benghai County.

Gongwuyuan cadres

Only created as a formal category in 2006 with the passage of the Civil Service Law (the draft regulations had been in place since 1993), *gongwuyuan* are considered 'the elite strata of functionaries in party-state hierarchy'.¹⁶ At base, the special status of *gongwuyuan* continues to rely, not on Communist Party membership *per se* (largely universal in the upper ranks of the county and township bureaucracies), but on the fact that one's primary identity is as a representative of the Party, rather than the government. The role of the Party was strengthened compared to the draft regulations that created the category of 'gongwuyuan' in 1993.¹⁷ They can be thought of as similar to the *nomenklatura* of the former Soviet system.¹⁸

The commonly used translations for *gongwuyuan* cadres, civil servants or administrative staff, are both unsatisfactory. Following Yuan Yuan Ang's terminology (she refers to 'core bureaus'), 'core cadres' comes close to a satisfactory translation, but for this article I use the original term. 'Civil servant' is inadequate, because it implies a Weberian concept that covers all staff working at all levels of the government bureaucracy. It also misses the dual allegiance of *gongwuyuan* to Party and government organs. In China, even leaving aside the role of the CCP, there are at least five different types of civil servants, and *gongwuyuan* cadres are the most privileged and secure category. Administrative staff is also an inadequate label, for while the bulk of *gongwuyuan* cadres' work involves administration or management of staff, staff within public service units who work exclusively on management or administrative tasks are not necessarily *gongwuyuan* cadres; most commonly they will simply be 'administrative officials' (*xingzheng guanyuan*), no matter how many staff they manage. Around eight million cadres are said to be *gongwuyuan* cadres,¹⁹ although 'counting cadres' is a contentious business. At the county level, a high percentage of cadres belong to the *gongwuyuan* category, while at the township level, only the leading Party cadres and the heads of various Party-affiliated offices and departments enjoy this status.

To illustrate, the head of a Township Family Planning Office, which reports primarily to the Party (the County Women's Federation is considered a Party organ), is a *gongwuyuan* cadre, while the head of the township Agricultural Extension

16. Yuen Yuen Ang, 'Counting cadres: a comparative view of the size of China's public employment', *China Quarterly* 211, (2012), p. 679.

17. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, 'Governing capacity and institutional change in China in the reform era', *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 28(1), (2010), p. 29.

18. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, 'Institutional reform and the *bianzhi* system in China', *China Quarterly* 170, (2002), p. 363.

19. Jiantao Ren, 'Gongwuyuan daiyu ying zouxiang "pinminhua"' ['Cadres' benefits should become more "civilian"], *Huanqiu Wang*, (8 April 2010), available at: <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/dialogue/2010-04/771539.html>.

Station, which reports primarily to government organs, is not. At the county level, by contrast, within the same department one often finds higher proportions of *gongwuyuan* cadres. In the county Agricultural Department, the head and the deputy heads of the department are *gongwuyuan* cadres. The leading decision-making body is the Agricultural Committee (*nong wei*), which is staffed almost entirely by *gongwuyuan* cadres. In Benghai, the Agricultural Committee reports to a deputy county head on the Party Standing Committee. The minority of service staff who do sit on the committee are outranked and outnumbered by *gongwuyuan* cadres. The service staff of the Agricultural Department at the county and township levels are answerable to these *gongwuyuan* cadres, who set their performance goals and work priorities. The heads of county agricultural extension centers, who often manage over 100 agricultural field officers, are not *gongwuyuan* cadres, even though they directly supervise one of the largest groups of local government workers. Positions such as these, where service staff have large responsibilities, recognized expertise, but limited agency, are fault lines in the local political landscape.

Despite numerous streamlining campaigns, landing a job as a *gongwuyuan* cadre is still seen at the township and county level as the closest thing to an iron rice bowl, making this a sought-after status, even for the children of families who already enjoy commercial success and elite status in Benghai County.²⁰ Having a family member obtain *gongwuyuan* status—particularly in an influential economic office (such as the Finance or Tax Departments), or an organ with influence over appointments (such as the Organization Department)—facilitates the entrepreneurial activities of friends and other family members. Relative to appointments in economic bureaus, Party organization work is less sought after than it was in the Maoist era, but it is also a less risky proposition.²¹

The primary attractions of *gongwuyuan* status are security of tenure, often—but not always—higher wages and the prospect of gray income, a guaranteed pension that they are not required to contribute towards,²² and more generous subsidies (such as for housing). A *gongwuyuan* cadre can become a member of service staff without any barriers, although it would be extremely unlikely that they would wish to, but it is difficult to move in the other direction. Typically a period of study at a Party School is required, examinations must be sat, money must be paid, and time and effort must be spent banqueting the right intermediaries.

20. The security of *gongwuyuan* status was revealed in 2011, when it was admitted that only 4,000 *gongwuyuan* cadres had been terminated over the previous five years, around 0.05% of the workforce. Cheng Lu and Hu Tao, 'Contracts fail to break China's iron rice bowl', *Xinhua*, (5 May 2014), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2014-05/05/c_126465041.htm (last accessed 22 September 2014).

21. Writing in 1966, Barnett noted of county-level cadres, 'the majority of ambitious young cadres tended to feel that the best prospects lay in Party organization work . . . as the best stepping stones to posts at higher levels. . . . The competition for advancement was greater in these fields than in others, and because they involved important and politically sensitive work, there tended to be a greater risk that a cadre could make a costly mistake which would seriously damage his career. By contrast, various types of economic work, as in commercial agencies of the government, were not generally regarded as giving cadres unusual access to power and influence' (A. Doak Barnett, *Cadres, Bureaucracy, and Political Power in Communist China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 182).

22. There are indications that this will be reformed. 'Bigger pensions win little praise', *Xinhua*, (25 January 2014), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-01/25/c_133073500.htm (last accessed 22 September 2014).

Ordinary cadres: service and enterprise staff

Service staff

Service staff (*shiye ganbu*) work in public service units (*shiye danwei*) and they outnumber *gongwuyuan* cadres by a margin of roughly four to one; they are said to number around 30 million.²³ In the Weberian sense, they occupy the position of ‘ordinary cadres’ in contrast to the leading and *gongwuyuan* cadres who make up the political elite. While they are sometimes referred to as ‘quasi-*gongwuyuan* cadres’ (*zhun gongwuyuan*), their working and retirement conditions are quite different. At the township level, those below the rank of deputy section chief (*fu keji*) are appointed by the government Personnel Department, while the Party-affiliated Organization Department assigns those above this rank. Service organizations and economic enterprises also have some *gongwuyuan* cadres in leading positions.²⁴

Their salaries depend on the status of their organization, as is the case for government workers who are assigned to enterprises. Fully-funded public service units pay their staff entirely from Finance Department monies, while partially funded units (*cha’e danwei*) pay staff a portion of their salaries, while the rest must be raised through commercial activities or levying fees. In the case of county hospitals, salaries are covered, while operating costs must be recovered from patients or by other means (in Benghai, salaries are designated as 60% of the hospital budget). Other public service units are entirely self-funded (*zi shou zi zhi*). One might expect that self-funded units would be among the least desirable, but the reverse is often the case. In Benghai, the Real Estate Management Bureau levies a range of fees for its services, allowing it to support 52 full-time staff and five casual staff, even though its official staff quota (set back in 2003) remains at 16.

The funding situation of staff within the same department can be complex: it is not uncommon for staff of the same rank, working in the same office, to belong to completely different categories. Some may be *gongwuyuan* cadres, some may be fully funded service workers, some partially funded, some entirely self-funded and others working off budget. As an example, in the Benghai County Records Department, which is classed as a service unit, all staff hired before 1 July 1997 were classified as ‘consulting’ (*canzhao*) *gongwuyuan* cadres,²⁵ while those hired after that date were classified as service staff, much to the bemusement of staff, who didn’t believe the change in status was related to any policy change. Other staff members were also hired off budget. Such situations create both tensions between staff and opportunities for leading cadres to motivate staff with the prospect of status change.

While it is difficult to bring *gongwuyuan* cadres onto the books, it is relatively easy to increase the number of service staff. When there is a sudden influx of funding to an area that is deemed to be a national priority, such as rural education, or areas that are easily able to self-fund, such as health clinics and hospitals, an opportunity arises for

23. Ren, ‘Cadres’ benefits should become more “civilian”. Putting an exact figure on this is nearly impossible; estimates vary by several million depending on which sources are used. See Ang ‘Counting cadres’, pp. 692–694.

24. Brødsgaard, ‘Institutional reform and the *bianzhi* system in China’, p. 364.

25. They are referred to as ‘consulting’ because the Record Bureau serves the Party, rather than the government. Yet the terms of their employment—and status—are the same. Similarly, some staff in the Party School, the Party History Office and mass organizations are classed as consulting *gongwuyuan* cadres.

the political elite to strengthen their patronage networks and repay debts of obligation, either directly or indirectly. Those who have the authority to bring in new staff are under constant pressure to bring in friends and relatives, initially as service staff, and after several years working in local government or as a 'sent-down' village cadre, with the prospect of promotion (*tiba*) to *gongwuyuan* status. This is an important way for them to build the loyalty of their subordinates and a valuable supplementary source of income. While diversion of funds from higher levels tends to disproportionately benefit the political elite, service and enterprise staff at the county and township levels generally accept the practice, because it is seen as vital for guaranteeing salaries and operating budgets.²⁶

It is also common for staff to be drafted in from other, less powerful departments. During the course of my research, the best-trained agricultural technician in Benghai spent most of his time working for the county Organization Department on tasks unrelated to agriculture. When told of this situation, another county official explained,

It's not as though the Organization Department is short of staff. It's just that all of the people who've managed to get onto the payroll are useless, and have no interest in doing their job. So as a powerful department, they poach the most capable staff from other work units. When they're finished with him, they'll just send him back to the Agricultural Department. No matter how capable he is, there's no way he'll get onto the *gongwuyuan* cadre payroll.²⁷

In this case, workers are paid the salary of their original department, regardless of the actual work they are engaged in, or how long they have been with their new department. Such workers often attempt to transfer out of their original department, but this process requires considerable time and expense, which is not always rewarded.

Indeed, this staff member was sent back to his original workplace. Eight years after my colleague made the above prediction, he was still there. Although he was promoted to a higher rank, received training at two different Party Schools, was sought after as a consultant on national and international projects, and won several prefectural and provincial-level awards for technical achievement, he was still unable to attain the *gongwuyuan* status that he desired. In 2013, he was passed over for a less decorated colleague who was said to have a stronger 'backstage presence' (*hou tai*) in the county Party committee.²⁸ Nor was he interested in participating in the sort of activities that might cultivate the *renqing*²⁹ (human feelings, relationships and favor) of the county political elite, by undertaking the rounds of banqueting, karaoke, sauna visits and disguised cash payments that were still fashionable in Benghai. He preferred table tennis. Such cadres who failed to 'do bad things' (*gan huai shi*) were often derided as being 'timid' (*danzi xiao*), but this cadre was content to live a

26. Smith, 'The hollow state', p. 610. See also Mingxing Liu, Juan Wang, Ran Tao and Rachel Murphy, 'The political economy of earmarked transfers in a state-designated poor county in western China: central policies and local responses', *China Quarterly* 200, (2009), p. 992.

27. Author's interview, Benghai County, January 2006.

28. Author's interviews, April 2011 and May 2013.

29. There is a vast literature on the subject of *renqing*. For a discussion of how it is used by business elites, see Osburg, *Anxious Wealth*, especially pp. 23–26 and pp. 77–82.

‘relatively healthy’ (*bijiao jiankang*) life, at least until his daughter found work and a husband, not necessarily in that order. After that, he planned to try his hand at business, possibly running his own large-scale agricultural development park.

Among local officials at the county and township level, several groups with quite distinct attitudes towards *gongwuyuan* status and strategies for ‘getting ahead’ can be discerned:

- those who currently enjoy *gongwuyuan* status, and owe full loyalty to their patron/faction due to enjoyment of status and the prospect of further advancement;
- those officials who currently enjoy *gongwuyuan* status, but see no further prospect of advancement, and thus may have divided loyalties towards their patron/faction. Deputy township leaders over 40 are a typical example of this category. Although lambasted as ‘too old for promotion, too young to stop working, but just right for mahjong and drinking’,³⁰ this group of officials is paradoxically often the most likely to act in the public interest;
- officials who aspire to *gongwuyuan* status, and are willing to demonstrate their loyalty to their patron and/or faction, and to make formal (education, training) and informal (wining, dining and ‘showing their appreciation’ to their superiors) investments to obtain *gongwuyuan* status;
- officials who previously aspired to *gongwuyuan* status, but have abandoned hope of promotion, or taken up other opportunities in the business sector; and
- officials with no desire or ability to attain *gongwuyuan* status, due to lack of ambition, ability, funds or social capital, satisfaction with their current status, existing involvement in sideline business activities, or an aversion to the nature of administrative work.

Enterprise cadres

A second important group of ‘ordinary cadres’ are enterprise cadres (*qiye ganbu*) who belong to state-owned enterprises that are expected to generate profits. Generally they have slightly worse working conditions than service cadres, although this depends on the economic health of the enterprise.³¹ Many enterprises, notably a light bulb factory that had once been the foundation of the elite status of one township,³² were struggling with increased competition from new entrants in their market sector. The light bulb factory had once enjoyed such appeal that at the time of my first round of fieldwork in 2004, workers would routinely pay bonds in excess of 20,000 *yuan* to secure employment at the factory. With the price of energy-efficient light bulbs relentlessly dropping, the once envied enterprise cadres of this firm were gently, then firmly, encouraged to find work outside the county. One organization that has run counter to the trend is Benghai’s local liquor factory, where employment as a *qiye*

30. Zhao Shukai, ‘Rural governance in the midst of underfunding, deception and mistrust’, in Andrew Kipnis and Graeme Smith, eds, *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 39(2), (2007), p. 71.

31. For an excellent account of changes in the status of this class of cadre see You Ji, *China’s Enterprise Reform: Changing State/Society Relations after Mao* (London: Routledge, 1998).

32. This township (later upgraded to town status) resisted efforts to merge it with neighboring townships, even though it was the smallest in the county and the number of townships was reduced by 36%.

ganbu is highly sought after, not just for the obvious fringe benefits. Until the crackdown on extravagant consumption of alcohol (which began before President Xi Jinping came to power), this factory provided half of Benghai County's revenues, and has been the largest taxpayer in the prefecture for more than a decade. The company employs over 11,000 people, making it the largest employer in the county.

In local news bulletins, the head of the company is treated as an equal to the county party secretary. The first flight to take off from the short-lived Benghai County Airport carried both men (in popular folklore, both were terrified by the experience). As he has run the factory for more than two decades, the company head arguably wields considerably more influence than the party secretary, which is underscored by the political posts he holds at the national and provincial levels. The factory boasts its own five-star hotel, and has a theater and a range of educational and health facilities for its employees. Much like the factory described by Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger, the factory has settled on an organization-oriented model, with an emphasis on staff welfare that is a curious blend of Japanese and Maoist management systems.³³ However, securing a mid-ranking management position is less desirable than a mid-level post in the county government because shirking is not an option, and the *renqing* that might exist among the political and business elites of Benghai is not apparent in management's treatment of staff. As one *gongwuyuan* cadre noted of his brother, who had been with the company for over ten years, 'It's exhausting work. He spends half the year outside county trying to drum up sales. They really have to work'.³⁴ His tone suggested more pity than admiration.

In contrast to the enterprise described by Chan and Unger, the factory boss is known for his extravagance, notably paying extraordinary sums for number plates that conveyed his self-image as an 'awesome' (*niu*) gentleman, as well as his love of alcohol and getting rich. In preparation for the company's listing on the stock exchange, it also emerged that the company (like many in the industry) was adulterating (*goudui*)³⁵ its brew with industrial ethanol and water. More seriously, it emerged that its main reason for listing was to be a 'good kid' (*hao haizi*) so as to raise funds to pay the back taxes that it owed to the county.

In response to these revelations, and a nationwide crackdown on carousing, the company opened a liquor museum, which provides a neat insight into the way historical and cultural memes can be deployed to justify the wealth of business and political elites. By the end of a tour, which features still-life re-enactments and stelae, a visitor may be convinced that without Benghai's historic brew, China would possess no art, literature or music worthy of the name. There follow a series of images, featuring the factory owner with national figures such as Wu Bangguo, Li Keqiang and Wang Yang. The leaders link the past to a high-tech future, which

33. Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger, 'A Chinese state enterprise under capitalism: what model of capitalism?', *The China Journal* 62, (2009), pp. 1–26.

34. Author's interview, Benghai County, May 2013.

35. Ironically, *goudui* is also a word used in SW China to refer to businessmen seducing government officials through the provision of gifts, banqueting and sexual services. I never came across the term in Anhui or in Fujian. See Everett Zhang, 'Goudui and the state: constructing entrepreneurial masculinity in two cosmopolitan areas of post-socialist China', in Dorothy Hodgson, ed., *Gendered Modernities: Ethnographic Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 235–265; and Osburg, *Anxious Wealth*, pp. 51–59.

dominates the rest of the exhibits. The culmination of the visit is a brightly lit circular chamber, with the company's finest products recessed into the walls, all facing a central computer screen mounted on a wood, marble and glass dais. The effect is diminished by the company's unimaginative website and an award from a Shanghai liquor fair, popped in a cheap photo frame and perched unsteadily atop the computer.

While such attempts to cultivate legitimacy on the part of Benghai's political and business elite are slightly comical, my research elsewhere in China, particularly in Fujian and Yunnan, indicates that business and political elites are more effective at using culture (particularly in ethnic minority areas) and religion (especially where the beliefs are widely and deeply held, as is the case for Christianity in parts of Fujian) to enhance their legitimacy. Many of their elites were involved in questionable, even criminal activities, but they were *their* elites. By maintaining a separate culture, religion and language from the dominant Han party-state (even as they profited from it), a degree of legitimacy was conferred.³⁶ Even in Benghai, mockery of the factory chief's 'unsophisticated' (*tu*) ways was invariably followed by the disclaimer that at least he was 'one of us' (*tu sheng tu zhang*). While non-native leading cadres yearned for acceptance as Benghai locals (at least for the duration of their tenure), the factory chief had earned the loyalty of his cadres, who in turn were among the hardest working in the county.

Political elites and ordinary cadres

During my initial fieldwork in Benghai County from 2004 to 2006, the unequal status of different cadres was a frequent topic of conversation, but in the case of most of my colleagues in the county and township governments, it was not a source of great dissatisfaction. Upon return trips in 2008, 2009, 2011 and 2013, it became clear that many of those who had not secured *gongwuyuan* status were now openly expressing resentment and envy towards those who had. Partly, this was due to an increase in the benefits available to *gongwuyuan*, but largely it derived from a consensus that those who achieved *gongwuyuan* status attained their positions not through merit (as media coverage of competitive examinations for government posts would suggest), but through a combination of bribery and networking. Listening to their accounts, it was striking that even those who were materially better off than they were when we first worked together in 2004—which was the case for nearly all interviewees, as Benghai, in contrast to many neighboring counties, had benefited from economic reform—still identified themselves as missing out because of the undeserved success of a handful of their peers.

Beyond Benghai, 'resentment literature' detailing the unfairness of privileges enjoyed by *gongwuyuan* cadres has grown, and it would require a further article just to outline the main themes. Common topics include:

36. Authors interviews in Fuqing City, Fujian (July 2010 and April 2011) and Mangshi City, Yunnan (September 2013).

- the persistence of nepotistic recruitment practices, such as a city in Inner Mongolia which gave an extra ten points on the public service exam to the children of *gongwuyuan* cadres;³⁷
- the re-emergence of housing benefits to *gongwuyuan* cadres in various forms, despite these subsidies having been made illegal in 1998, and again in 2006;³⁸
- the level of remuneration enjoyed by *gongwuyuan* cadres, and the variety of subsidies available to them, estimated by Sun Lin from Fudan University to be in excess of 300 different types;³⁹ and
- the numbers of university graduates sitting the civil service examination, up from 125,000 in 2004 to 1.4 million in 2011, which is seen as a waste of talent (Western countries are often held up as a positive example, where ‘only third rate and below graduates want to work for the government’).⁴⁰

Several interviewees in Benghai County expressed contempt for *gongwuyuan* cadres. They saw such cadres as less qualified than service staff. Many interviewees noted that older cadres often had only completed junior high school, and that most *gongwuyuan* cadres did not possess a genuine college or university degree. Many senior *gongwuyuan* cadres had upgraded their qualifications to the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree, but these were universally viewed as ‘trumped-up qualifications’. These were usually not simply bought (although that was possible), but it was common that the work for such degrees would be farmed out to junior staff members, current students or recent university graduates. Such degrees were referred to as ‘real fake degrees’ (*zhende jiade wenping*). While most township service staff had to sit exams to retain their jobs, *gongwuyuan* cadres were protected from township streamlining reforms. This meant that an increasing proportion of township staff were involved in ‘management’, but in the opinion of many ordinary government staff, the *gongwuyuan* cadres were incapable of managing staff and were mainly concerned with playing politics. As one township agricultural extension station head explained, ‘I’d never become a *gongwuyuan* cadre. If you join their ranks, you have to learn how to flatter and fawn [your superiors]. I’ll stick with agricultural extension. Farmers are easier to please’.⁴¹

Such sentiments could easily be discounted as arising from resentment at failing to join the ranks of the political elite, or failing to realize the opportunity early enough in one’s career. Yet many service staff who had the opportunity to change their status declined offers to study at the Party School and remained in less secure posts because

37. Tao Yang, ‘Gongwuyuan zinu jiafen tuxian “quanli jicheng” chiluhua’ [‘Adding points for the children of *gongwuyuan* cadres highlights the naked succession of power’], *China Elections*, (2010), available at: <http://www.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=183613>.

38. Tao Zhu, ‘Jin’er bu zhi de gongwuyuan “fuli fang”’ [‘Banned but thriving: “welfare housing” for *gongwuyuan* cadres’], *Caijing*, (2010), available at: <http://magazine.caijing.com.cn/2010-04-25/110424160.html>; ‘Gongwuyuan heyi taobi “chengdan fangjia zhi zhong?”’ [‘Why do *gongwuyuan* cadres evade the burden of housing prices?’], *Xinhua*, (2006), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/house/2006-09/08/content_5065928.htm.

39. Shusi Shi, ‘Zhongguo gongwuyuan jiujiing zheng duoshao qian?’ [‘How much money do *gongwuyuan* cadres really earn?’], *China News*, (29 March 2011), available at: <http://bbs.chinanews.com/blog110329-12292.shtml>.

40. Kefeng Wu, ‘Shenme rencai qu zuo gongwuyuan?’ [‘What sort of people are becoming *gongwuyuan* cadres?’], *China Elections*, (2009), available at: <http://www.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=162406>.

41. Author’s interview, Benghai, May 2006.

of the opportunity to continue meaningful work without having to answer directly to leading cadres. As a county Forestry Department worker explained,

I'm already at section chief rank (*zheng keji*), and could enter into the ranks of *gongwuyuan*, but I was never interested. If you do that sort of work, there's no guarantee that you'll use your technical skills. I love doing technical work ... Yes, your status changes. But then [you're in a situation where] your ass directs your brain (*pigu zhihui naodai*).⁴²

From the perspectives of neutrals that are uninterested in joining the *gongwuyuan* ranks, an attitude of cynical disinterest was common, which undermined the morale of local government, and reduced the potential for 'local enthusiasm' to arise to complement 'central enthusiasm'.⁴³ The reintroduction of the public service examination has been welcomed for its potential to reduce corruption and favoritism within government,⁴⁴ but whenever I put forward the proposition that the introduction of a merit-based examination system to obtain advertised *gongwuyuan* positions was making the system more reasonable, I was met with derision. As one county official explained,

The exam is just one aspect. It's a problem of how many marks you get. Everyone is the same. Part two: you must apply for the position and there's checking. Part three: there's an interview (*mianshi*) or an assessment (*kaohe*). So the exam is a matter of marks, but the interview, it's a matter of how you represent (*biaoxian*) yourself. The crucial problem is the interview. If I don't want you, I can say, 'Your health is poor, you've got an illness', perhaps I can say you have Hepatitis B and use that as a reason to not admit you, or come up with any other medical reason to discriminate against you. Or they can just say, your interview wasn't good enough, you weren't eloquent enough, you aren't a fluent orator. Or if the panel has three members, and there are two who don't agree, you'll be passed over. But even if the three panelists find no fault, you can still be passed over. Who sees that you are passed over? People behind the panel. If you are admitted, the logic is the same. The exam is just a cover (*huangzi*).⁴⁵

The gap between the political elite and ordinary cadres can be a fault line, a source of cynicism and indifference, but it is equally the glue that motivates cadres to serve the political elite. The motivation of attaining *gongwuyuan* status can provide an incentive to undertake long hours of work on behalf of a patron who promises to deliver such status sometime in the future. The prospect of status change goes a long way to explaining how county and township governments continue to function, given the compressed nature of pay grades within both the *gongwuyuan* system and the public service units⁴⁶ and the failure of the evaluation system to function

42. Author's interview, Benghai, April 2011.

43. Linda Chelan Li, 'Central-local relations in the People's Republic of China: trends, processes and impacts for policy implementation', *Public Administration and Development* 30, (2010), pp. 184–185.

44. Kikon Ko and Cuifen Weng, 'Structural changes in Chinese corruption', *China Quarterly* 211, (2012), p. 7. For an excellent analysis of the practice of corruption, see Ling Li, 'Performing bribery in China: *guanxi*-practice, corruption with a human face', *Journal of Contemporary China* 20(68), (2011), pp. 1–20.

45. Author's interview, Benghai, April 2011.

46. John P. Burns and Xiaoqi Wang, 'Civil service reform in China: impacts on civil servants' behaviour', *China Quarterly* 201, (2010), pp. 70–74.

effectively.⁴⁷ These workers aspiring to a change in status do not shirk, though the question of to what degree they are serving the public, their family, their patron or their faction remains open. Aside from undertaking study at the Party School, sometimes at their own expense, workers in this position will often find themselves doing the dirty work of their patron, and depending on their disposition, offering up large amounts of flattery, while slighting factional rivals. For township government staff, a necessary step is often several years spent working as a sent-down village cadre, or being transferred to a township agency that is conducting ‘core tasks’ (*zhongxin gongzuo*) which leading cadres see as overriding other government tasks. In Benghai these are the Family Planning Office, the Investment Office or the Finance Office.⁴⁸

Several accounts focus on the bottleneck faced by leading cadres in obtaining promotion to county head or county party secretary before they reach a cut off age.⁴⁹ Mid-ranking cadres also face—and are motivated by—similar constraints on attaining promotion. Yet even if you are willing to do ‘whatever it takes’ for your patron and his faction, success is not guaranteed. One colleague, who had been promoted out of the ranks of ordinary township staff into a county bureau a decade ago, had long hoped to attain the rank of deputy bureau chief (*fu keji*). He upgraded his technical college credentials, acted as bagman for the Benghai ‘Maoist’ faction, in which his patron was a prominent figure. He did whatever was asked of him, however debasing it might be. Ultimately, his patron was unable, or unwilling, to secure his promotion; the rationale widely given was that he had been too willing to get his hands dirty. His own explanation was simple and consistent: ‘No one backstage’. The evaluation of many of his peers was less kind, and points to the way that ambitious cadres are abused by the political elite:

You look at all of the bad stuff he’s done, it’s just over the top, too much. The way he flatters his superiors, and criticises grassroots cadres whenever he ventures outside the county seat; officials like that are despised by ordinary folk. He’s got no real abilities, or technical skills. He’s lucky to have been plucked out of the township.⁵⁰

Beyond these judgments of his character (and there were certainly more odious individuals who had secured senior positions in the county and beyond), this cadre faced another, more objective barrier: funds. Coming from a poor, rural background, his family simply lacked the financial resources to move him further along in the game of county politics. He also, as the accounts above suggest, lacked the personal charisma to secure financial backers beyond his immediate family. This perhaps goes to the heart of why many ordinary cadres are disillusioned with the political culture in Benghai. While the professionalization of their ranks and the emphasis on the

47. Shukai Zhao, ‘Cong 10 sheng (qu) 20 ge xiangzhen de diaocha kan biduan yanzhong xiangzhen zhengfu wenze tixi’ [‘A survey of 20 townships in 10 provinces (districts): the severely defective evaluation systems of township governments’], *Kexue juece* [Scientific Policy] 3, (2005), pp. 46–49; Smith, ‘Political machinations in a rural county’, pp. 49–52; and Edin, ‘State capacity and local agent control in China’.

48. Smith, ‘The hollow state’. For a definition of ‘core tasks’ see Kenneth Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), p. 56.

49. Liu Bin, ‘Chengwei yi ge xianzhang you duo nan’ [‘It’s so difficult to become a County Head’], *Nanfang Zhoumo* [Southern Weekend], (16 May 2013), available at: <http://news.qq.com/a/20130516/020542.htm>

50. Author’s interview, Benghai County, May 2013.

examination system were welcomed, they also realized that ability and effort were not enough to get ahead in Benghai.

This is not to say that no service staff are promoted to *gongwuyuan* status on merit. Many ordinary service staff are enthused by the prospect of such status change, and readily internalize the CCP's ideals of modernity. One of my colleagues, possessed of a healthy degree of skepticism, was beside himself with pride when he was selected to study at the Party School in Shaoxing, proclaiming, 'The [Party] organization believes in me!' (*zuzhi xiangxin wo*), leading his wife (who ran a couple of small shops in the county seat) to declare that he had either developed a mental illness or had been brainwashed. After attending the Shaoxing Party School, he was filled with disdain for the prefectural Party School he had previously attended, asserting that it 'belonged to another world', even though it was of the same bureaucratic rank. Modernity was to be found elsewhere, not in one's poor, rural home county. As he explained,⁵¹

The differences are huge, their way of thinking is advanced and open, and classes are a lot livelier. From a technical perspective, it's easy enough to understand, they are richer. But the biggest difference is in perspective; they have a more accurate understanding of a market economy. Here, we're no good. We're more closed off, just not as clever. They know how to support enterprises, how to develop the economy. We're at least ten years behind in our outlook. We're still teaching what's in the books, there's no capacity to link theory to reality: after 20 minutes of class you're bored, you have to doze off. In Shaoxing, there's no need, the content is rich, really interesting: they go over time and you don't notice. Here, we're stuck with a crude form of economic development, just give it all you can (*shijin*) and pay no attention to popular sentiment, we're stuck where they were ten years ago, there's no such thing as harmonious development.

Although attending such Party Schools does not automatically lead to promotion—this cadre noted that he had 'little chance, I've got no one pulling the strings for me'—they do help to inculcate an aspirational ideal of modernity among those who attend, where 'openness' (*kaifang*) and the 'vanguard' (*qianwei*) are to be found elsewhere, far in time and place from rural Benghai. While the revival of Party School training embodies a desire on the part of the central state to inculcate a more cohesive ideology among *gongwuyuan* cadres,⁵² such exposure to more developed localities leads cadres from less-developed regions to feel keenly the economic, social and moral deficit of their rural constituencies, and to intensify feelings of separation from their 'lower quality' rural constituents.⁵³ While Benghai had benefited from rural industrialization, leaving it with healthy public finances compared with much of Anhui province, the political culture would never be as open as the Eastern seaboard. While business elites, such as the liquor factory owner, did have some sway, the tyranny of geography meant that Benghai would remain a place

51. Author's interview, Benghai, May 2011.

52. Frank N. Pieke, 'Marketization, centralization and globalization of cadre training in contemporary China', *China Quarterly* 200, (2009), pp. 953–971.

53. See Børge Bakken, *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 57–66; Andrew Kipnis, 'Suzhi: a keyword approach', *China Quarterly* 186, (2006), pp. 295–313; and Tamara Jacka, 'Cultivating citizens: *suzhi* (quality) discourse in the PRC', *Positions* 17(3), (2009), pp. 523–535.

where the local state was the main employer and the main investor. While its rural migrants might find work there, Benghai would never become Shaoxing.

Many cadres aspired to the world beyond Benghai, which Frank Pieke aptly described as embodying a ‘new, glossy socialism’.⁵⁴ During the course of my ten years of visiting Benghai, I was struck by the transformation in many officials, from straightforward government workers to devoted consumers of the signs and signals of this new brand of socialism.⁵⁵ In many ways, this was at the heart of ‘getting ahead’ and embodied their understanding of elite status. Their change in status transformed every aspect of their lives, and the lives of their families, from modes of speech, dress, housing, transport, leisure interests, the schools attended by their children, and often a younger, more modern, better-connected spouse. If one word could encapsulate the transformation to elite status, it would be ‘urban’. As Pieke has observed,⁵⁶ the ideology promoted is irrelevant—anything that promotes the imago⁵⁷ of the Party as embodying a strong, forward-looking, modern state serves to instill faith and provide legitimacy for its high priests, the *gongwuyuan* cadres.

Those seeking to join the ranks of *gongwuyuan* cadres look to mimic these signals of status, altering outward indications to emphasize their suitability to be admitted into *gongwuyuan* ranks, although these signals, be they sporting the latest mobile phone or sending one’s child to an elite school, are ‘promissory notes’ with no inherent credibility.⁵⁸ Fascinatingly, those on either side of the barrier are often avid consumers of the new wave of ‘corruption fiction’ that fill airport bookstores and glamorize the life of government officials, and whose moral messages—corruption is wrong and perpetrators will be caught—are increasingly secondary.⁵⁹ Ben Hillman notes a tendency among cadres in southwest China to use familial titles,⁶⁰ such a practice is also common in Benghai County. In Benghai, a common word for a bribe is the Confucian term for demonstrating filial respect, *xiaojing* (孝敬). To an extent, it can be said that the fictional practices are feeding back into the practices and

54. Pieke, ‘Marketization, centralization and globalization of cadre training in contemporary China’, p. 953.

55. For details on signaling theory, see Andrew Michael Spence, *Market Signaling: Informational Transfer in Hiring and Related Screening Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); and Diego Gambetta, *Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

56. Frank N. Pieke, *The Good Communist: Elite Training and State Building in Today’s China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 11.

57. I prefer imago, which suggests a culturally and psychically constructed image, rather than image, which suggests a direct mirror. In the case of the imago of the modernizing CCP in rural Benghai, it seems based on a future state of development that will never arrive. On imago, see George Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); on the displacement of revolutionary zeal see Jiwei Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

58. Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

59. An early example was Wang Xiaofang’s *Zhujing ban zhuren* [Beijing Representative Office Director], now on to its fourth installment, but practically every imaginable government and Party title has now been used as titles for similar (and increasingly salacious) works of fiction. See also Huang Xiaoyang, *Er Hao Shouzhang: Dang guan shi yi men jishu huo* [Second Chief: Being an Official Requires Technical Skills] (Chongqing chubanshe, 2012).

60. Hillman, ‘Factions and spoils’.

signaling of the political elite themselves, as Diego Gambetta has observed of criminals in his essay ‘Why (low) life imitates art’.⁶¹

Another motivation for seeking the ‘right’ government post is as part of a strategy of enrichment for one’s family, by allowing access to scarce resources and privileged information. Local officials and their agencies are the ‘quasi-owners’ of resources. They are not merely regulators or rent seekers, but market players, whose influence is defined by their influence and success in the market. While it is common for public service unit staff to be directly involved in the private sector, for leading cadres and *gongwuyuan* the more common approach is to engage indirectly with the shadow state through their spouse, a close relative or trusted friend, such as a former schoolmate, or (in the case of demobilized soldiers) a fellow veteran.⁶²

The fortunes of the shadow state shift over time in response to changes in the leading cadres and the regulations that apply to different sectors of the economy.⁶³ For business elites, in the closed shop of Benghai County, it is impossible to ignore the needs of the political elites. For example, until recently, developers from outside the province, particularly Zhejiang, dominated the real estate sector in Benghai. While this gave the leading cadres entrée into a more developed part of China, the poor quality of construction by the outsiders, and their failure to keep quiet during a corruption scandal, led to a local developer being preferred for Benghai’s most prestigious real estate development, by the shores of the county’s new man-made lake, built for *fengshui* purposes.⁶⁴ The local developer had quietly made his fortune in the construction sector, winning the bulk of county government road projects, but he lacked the deep pockets of developers from Zhejiang. What swayed the political elite was his ability to keep quiet. As one of his interrogators recalled, ‘That guy was never going to talk. He has to do business here [in Benghai]’.⁶⁵

Concluding thoughts

To borrow from Mao Zedong, the crucial question to ask in the formation of political structures is still, ‘Who is our friend, and who is our enemy?’. The prospect of promotion, or more accurately a change of status, is vital to the political elite retaining some control over middle-ranking and junior staff. While the buying and selling of positions is understood in terms of cadres making an investment in posts that entail ‘wet’ functions,⁶⁶ the change in status from service or enterprise official to *gongwuyuan* cadre is often the baseline investment made when purchasing a position.

61. Gambetta, *Codes of the Underworld*, pp. 251–274.

62. Veterans of China’s conflict with Vietnam are particularly close, and influential in Benghai’s business community. For more examples of how such relationships are activated, see Chunyu Wang, Jingzhong Ye and Jennifer Franco, ‘Local state corporatism of neo-guanxilism? Observations from the county level of government in China’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(87), (2014), pp. 498–515.

63. Barbara Krug and Hans Hendrischke, eds, *The Chinese Economy in the 21st Century: Enterprise and Business Behaviour* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2007), pp. 91–93; Björn Alpermann, *China’s Cotton Industry: Economic Transformation and State Capacity* (London: Routledge, 2010); and Graeme Smith, ‘Franchising the state: farmers, agricultural technicians, and the marketization of agricultural services’, in Björn Alpermann, ed., *Politics and Markets in Rural China* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 69–86.

64. Smith, ‘Political machinations in a rural county’, p. 32.

65. Author’s interview, Benghai, November 2008.

66. Burns and Wang, ‘Civil service reform in China’, pp. 69–70.

Ambitious cadres can also anticipate an opportunity to share in these payments, rather than simply handing them over.

In terms of its capacity to benefit a limited segment of rural society, local government works somewhat like a pyramid scheme. The sooner one enters the elite ranks, the greater the earnings of one's family over the course of a career, the greater one's prospects for further promotion, and the greater the opportunity to bring in other family members and friends. But those lacking the funds and connections to join the scheme faced a career laced with disenchantment and cynicism, should they choose to remain in government service. The push to remove the perks available to local political elites by the Xi Jinping administration has the potential to undermine their morale, which would at best be only partially offset by increases to *gongwuyuan* salaries that are mooted for 2015. As one mid-ranking county cadre asked, 'being an official here couldn't be considered fun. If they take that [gray income] away, who will they find to do it?'.⁶⁷

The words used to describe official state ideology—harmonious society, scientific development, the Three Represents, the China Dream—are mocked as meaningless, plastic terms, but the words do not matter. Although they are appointed through a highly opaque, almost feudal system of patronage, through the way they live their lives the political elite see themselves as embodying (or at least potentially embodying) a modern Chinese state, albeit one that will never be realized in rural Benghai. While the shortcomings of Benghai are evident to them, and attempts by business and political leaders to rally them with calls to culture and religion are met with derision, the political elite (aside from the handful of outsiders who are desperate to prove their loyalty to Benghai) are bound by a strong sense of loyalty to their home county, especially in contrast to their immediate county neighbors with their larger populations and (it was widely claimed) better political connections to Hefei and Beijing.

The prospect of status change, of getting ahead, provides the glue that binds leading cadres, *gongwuyuan* cadres and ambitious ordinary cadres to work together in the local state. Through the everyday frustrations of government work a shared status identity is cultivated, binding them in a common dissatisfaction with the level of development attained by their rural county relative to the modern, cosmopolitan, urban China that dominates official popular culture and is glimpsed through study in Party Schools beyond the provincial boundaries. While they may not always enjoy their work, the regime has succeeded in persuading nearly all of the local political elite and many ordinary cadres to identify with and internalize these ideals. The blame for the *lack* of a modern, urban Benghai is placed not on the system itself—although cadres of every stripe complain at length about the 'system' (*tizhi*)—but on the intellectual and moral failings of ordinary government workers and the wider rural populace. This failure of government work to provide them with a satisfying career provides them with an additional incentive to participate in business, directly or indirectly, through the shadow state.

For those who lack the financial and social capital to enter the ranks of the political elite, widespread acceptance of market logic leads to an acknowledgement that while

67. Author's interview, May 2013.

the local state is not a meritocracy, it has a predictable set of market-based and kinship-based rules that establish its hierarchies, and these rules are known to everyone that chooses to join the game of local politics. Cynicism or indifference among ordinary cadres are not ideal for a bureaucracy, but these attitudes are not a threat to the regime, nor are they universally held. While it may not be loved, or even respected, in the eyes of ordinary cadres the local state has legitimacy and thus, resilience.