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Political meritocracy in Chinese cadre personnel management

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Abstract

This chapter illuminates how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) implements the idea of political meritocracy in its cadre personnel management. First, the chapter introduces the notion of political meritocracy and provides an overview of extant literature. Second, based on empirical evidence, it illustrates how the CCP puts political meritocracy in practice by examining three important aspects of Chinese cadre personnel management. Third, it analyses the rationale and functions underscoring political meritocracy in a highly integrative state such as China. Finally, it concludes by examining the challenges and prospects in implementing political meritocracy including in the Xi Jinping era. This chapter shows that political meritocracy is not just an abstract concept. Instead, it is a real policy tool in Chinese cadre personnel management. For countries like China with no divide between politics and administration, political

1 This study was funded by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (Grant Number 20YJC81002) and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (Grant number: NRF-2017S1A3A2067636). The authors thank the editors, reviewers and participants of the 10th Greater China Australia Dialogue on Public Administration for their valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this chapter.

meritocracy provides a means of achieving administrative rationality while maintaining adherence to political values of fundamental importance for regime resilience.

Keywords: political meritocracy; Chinese cadre personnel management; Chinese Communist Party; Chinese Civil service.

Introduction

Meritocracy has been embraced as a principle in modern bureaucracy. As a management principle, meritocracy encourages specialisation, division of responsibility, span of control and efficiency, and provides protection against a culture of favouritism, nepotism and inherited privilege. Following Northcote and Trevelyan (1854), both Woodrow Wilson (1887) and Max Weber (1946) subscribed to the notion of administrative efficiency, proposed to separate politics and administration, and strived to insulate bureaucracy from inappropriate political influence: the democratic process would ensure government reflected the will of the people, but administration would be conducted efficiently and impartially.

Given that liberal democracy is only one of the many forms of government, the question is how a politically integrative country such as China could raise administrative efficiency in the absence of a clear separation of politics and administration. This chapter examines how Chinese political officials utilised political meritocracy as a measure in personnel management to strike a balance between administrative rationality and political prerogatives. Chinese experiences show that China's officials have developed 'home-grown' solutions to deal with 'home-grown' problems—that remain pervasive in and particular to its political system.

Political meritocracy: Theory and reality

Meritocracy and political meritocracy

Alan Fox, an industrial sociologist, was the first scholar to use the word 'meritocracy'. To Fox, rather than something desirable, meritocracy is a social order which divides people into those who get the best and most of everything and those who get the poorest and the least (Fox 1956). Later, the British sociologist Michael Young described meritocracy, in his novel titled

The Rise of the Meritocracy (1958), as intelligence plus effort and used the word meritocracy to mock a society in which wealth and positions are determined by achievement on standardised intelligence tests (Young 1958). Today, the term ‘meritocracy’ has more positive connotations. In modern society, meritocracy is now generally to be understood as promoting the idea of a fair social system in which people can work hard, make best use of their talents and thus achieve social success (Littler 2018). In an ideal meritocracy, people continue to move up and down according to their level of performance and achievement.

Daniel Bell and Chengyang Li’s book, *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy* (2013), discussed the theories, history and practices of the idea of political meritocracy and examined arguments for building political regimes as meritocracies. Later, in 2015, Bell published *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* to further develop their ideas. In this book, political meritocracy is defined as a political system (or a regime type) in which political power is distributed in accordance with ones’ ability and virtue (Bell 2015:6). To Bell, political meritocracy is a good alternative to liberal democracy, which can also be used as a yardstick for evaluating China’s pertinent political system (Bell 2016).

In examining Bell’s ideas, political theorists began by making the connection between traditional Confucianism and political meritocracy as well as the relationship between political meritocracy (also known as Confucian meritocracy) and democracy. Focusing on the cultural origin or the nature of political meritocracy, these studies are largely thematic, academic or philosophical (Kim 2020).

Subscribers of political meritocracy, also referred here to as ‘Confucian meritocrats’, argued that political meritocracy is based on, or inspired by, Confucianism or Confucian values. Further, they believed that political meritocracy can be combined with and, indeed, complementary to democracy in some ways (Bai 2013; Chan 2013, 2014; Bell 2015). Gaining confidence in the desirability and feasibility of Confucian political meritocracy, they defended and argued for the superiority of political meritocracy over liberal democracy. However, these arguments met with strong criticisms. For instance, He and Warren (2020) contended that Confucian meritocrats did not offer a viable alternative to liberal democracy. In an ‘authoritarian meritocracy’ such as China, the authoritarian features of the political system invariably undermined merit and would finally lead to regime instability. Because of a lack of commitment to democracy, an

authoritarian regime like China has a strong tendency to use politically oppressive measures to suppress Chinese citizens. Political meritocracy in China ultimately may betray its original ideal (Mang 2020).

Inspired by Confucian meritocrats' proposition on political meritocracy, Chinese mainland scholars also joined the debate. Tang and Zhao (2016a, 2016b), for example, proposed 'neo-political meritocracy' to describe the modern transition of China's political system. To them, political meritocracy has inherited the Confucian tradition of meritocracy, and can aptly adhere to the basic rules and procedures of modern democracy, that is, responding to the wishes of the public while managing government efficiently. Some Chinese scholars did not support this notion of political meritocracy. Critics pointed out that political meritocracy is neither desirable—as it easily gives rise to the dominance of a particular group or person—nor feasible—as it fails to get rid of problems such as patronage and corruption (Liu 2015; Zhang 2017). Furthermore, with an undue emphasis on the importance of elite selection, political meritocratic theorists might overlook the role of society in state governance (Gao 2018).

Meritocratic ideas and practices in China

China has a long tradition of meritocracy with its root in Confucianism. Confucian thinkers thought highly of a 'holy man' (*shengren*) or a person of virtue (*xianren*). They asserted that everyone could acquire the nature and propriety of a 'holy man'. They attached greater importance to the virtue of 'elevating the worthy' (*shangxian*), reflecting the propensity towards evaluating talents and selecting the right leaders. As a way of empowering the holy man to practice the 'virtue of benevolence' (*renzheng*), they believed in their political ideal of 'ruling by virtue'. With such cultural heritage of political meritocracy, governors in ancient China initiated some meritocratic practices, such as 'abdication from the crown' (*shanrang*) (i.e. to transfer power based on merit rather than inheritance) in archaic times (around 2241 BCE–2074 BCE), an investigation and recommendation system (*chajuzhi*) created in the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE) and an imperial examination system (*keju zhidu*) established during the Tang dynasty (618–907). In particular, the imperial examination system played an important role in creating opportunities for talents and increasing social mobility in imperial China (subject, of course, to the emperor's rule). These meritocratic ideas and practices had a profound effect on today's Chinese cadre personnel management.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the CCP has continuously sought to develop its own cadre personnel management system with 'Chinese characteristics'. In doing so, the CCP has managed to insert meritocratic principles into the criteria and methods of cadre selection. In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping organised a symposium to promote the criteria for evaluating cadres who are both red (i.e. politically loyal) and expert (i.e. administratively competent) (*you hong you zhuan*). Subsequently, Deng later supplemented these criteria by adding the 'four standards' of cadre corps (*ganbu duiwu sihua fangzhen*), namely, being 'more revolutionized, better educated, professionally more competent and younger in age', to give substance to the stance of being politically loyal and being administratively competent. All these triggered a series of measures to reform the cadre and personnel system, including abolition of the life tenure system and establishment of a reserve party cadre system (*houbei ganbu zhidu*). In the 1990s, the CCP strived to reform the centralised and unified cadre management system by building a relatively independent state civil service, alongside the idea of separating the party from the government. In the 1990s, the party spearheaded open selection (*gongkai xuanba*) and internal competition for posting (*jingzheng shanggang*) to improve the method of cadre selection. The Party Central and the State Council officially established the principle of requiring all new recruits to pass the civil service examination (*fan jin bi kao*) in 2003 and reinstated these in the 2005 Civil Service Law (CSL) (State Council 2005). At the 2008 National Conference on Organizational Work, Hu Jintao stated that the cadre selection criteria are comprised of both virtue and ability, with virtue given a priority (*de cai jian bei, yi de wei xian*). In 2013, Xi Jinping further proposed that good cadres needed to have five standards: possessing firm belief (in the party's ideals), a desire to serve the people, diligence and pragmatism, bravery in relation to taking responsibility, and the ability to remain clean and uncorrupted.

Political meritocracy in today's Chinese cadre personnel management

Assessment, selection and appointment, and disciplinary inspection are three key components to enable us to assess how political meritocracy has fared in the Chinese cadre personnel management. This part of the chapter is going to investigate how the CCP has implemented political meritocracy across three aspects of cadre personnel management: cadre evaluation, cadre

selection and appointment, and cadre discipline and inspection. It shows how the CCP has applied political meritocracy to improve bureaucratic efficiency, given the presence of the centrality of the party.

Cadre evaluation

Evaluation is used by the party to manage cadres' behaviour and direct local cadres to accomplish the priorities set by the central government. The party highlights five dimensions in evaluating party and government-leading cadres: virtue (*de*), ability (*neng*), diligence (*qin*), achievement (*ji*) and integrity (*lian*). We use Article 8 of the *Regulations on the Assessment of Party and Government Leading Cadres* issued in April 2019 to examine specific indicators of the five dimensions and sort out both political and meritocratic ones (see Table 13.1) (Central Organization Department 2019a).

Table 13.1: Political and meritocratic indicators in the evaluation of party and government leading cadres.

Dimension of evaluation	Political indicators	Meritocratic indicators
Virtue	Firm political ideals and convictions, and loyalty to the party; compliance with the Party Constitution, political discipline and political rules (<i>zhengzhi guiju</i>); ideological and political allegiance	Null
Ability	Political ability to deal with emergencies and mass disturbances	Professional qualities and organisational and leadership skills to deal with emergencies and mass disturbances
Diligence	Promoting the spirit of revolution and struggle, adhering to 'Three Strictnesses, Three Honests' (<i>san yan san shi</i>); daring to assume responsibility; showing willingness to dedicate	Working hard and perseveringly
Achievement	Adhering to the correct view of political achievement; emphasising the effectiveness of party building in the evaluation of actual performance	Performing their duties; undertaking urgent and dangerous tasks; handling complex issues and coping with major challenges
Integrity	Assuming the political responsibility of 'one position, two responsibilities' (<i>yi gang shuang ze</i>); ² taking the initiative to both adhere to the spirit of and implement the 'Eight Point Code' and its detailed rules and regulations	Null

Notes:

1. 'Three strictnesses, three honests' was proposed by Xi on 9 March 2014. 'Three strictnesses' refers to 'being strict in morals, being strict in power, and being strict in disciplining oneself'. 'Three honests' refers to 'being honest in decisions, being honest in business, and being honest in behaviour'.
2. 'One position, two responsibilities' means that a leading cadre should undertake both their assigned job responsibility and the political responsibility of constructing party style and clean government (*dangfeng lianzheng jianshe*).

Source: Compiled by authors.

These indicators emphasise political standards in cadre evaluation. Table 13.1 shows that all indicators promoting the virtue and integrity are politically oriented. The party has also inserted political factors into all the other indicators. Under 'achievement', for example, the effectiveness of party building (*dangjian*) is set as a key indicator when assessing the actual performance of leading cadres (see also Article 8). In converting political requirements into performance indicators, the party can use the evaluation system as a baton to manage cadres' political performance (*zhengzhi biaoqian*).

Inserting political and ideological standards aside, the indicator system also aims to promote job-based performance (Gore 2016). As shown in Table 13.1, professional qualities, organisational and leadership skills, professional dedication, and job performance are the main meritocratic indicators in the evaluation of party and government-leading cadres. Furthermore, local party committees have developed more detailed performance indicators in connection with local conditions. In measuring a lower-level government's performance, the CCP has always converted governance goals into cadre evaluation indexes. In the early years of the PRC, the CCP used seniority in terms of revolutionary war experience as the main selection criterion. Consequently, political loyalty, usually measured by revolutionary seniority, was the main indicator to evaluate cadres at that time. After the opening-up of China, especially when Deng proposed that 'development is the only way out' (*fazhan cai shi ying daoli*) in the early 1990s, the capacity to promote economic development, mainly measured by GDP, has become a core indicator to assess cadres across the country. In the decades since opening-up, economic performance has become an important source of regime legitimacy (Zhao 2009). Since the beginning of the new century, China's leaders started to pay increasing attention to social development and stability as well as economic growth. Correspondingly, indicators such as social harmony and environmental protection have been inserted into the index system of cadre evaluation. In line with this

development, major performance tasks have become an important part of the performance contract signed between a local government and higher-up authorities. These performance goals are handed down level by level to lower governments (Edin 1998). In this way, the party can manage cadres' individual job performance on the one hand, and on the other also ensure that local leaders deliver what has been decided by those further up the hierarchy.

Cadre selection and appointment

Chinese cadre personnel management uses a rank-in-person system (also known as the rank classification system) in which every cadre is first assigned a rank (instead of a particular job) and attached to a pertinent party committee. In a nutshell, this type of system seeks chiefly to manage people but not to manage a job. Given this feature, cadre selection and appointment has always been central to the party's cadre work.

Since the 1950s, the CCP has adopted the principle of 'party controlling cadres', with the jurisdictional authority (*guanli quanxian*) of cadre personnel management as the primary mode of government control and oversight. In the early 1950s, the CCP established a nomenklatura system (generally refers to the lists of positions controlled by the respective party committees) to regulate authority over party-state 'principal leading cadres' and other relevant important personnel (Manion 1985; Burns 1994; Brødsgaard 2002; Chan 2004). Through the nomenklatura system, the party manages and controls the appointment, promotion, transfer and removal of practically all but the lowest-ranking officials. This system continues to operate and plays a significant role in maintaining the party's authority over cadres across all sectors and localities. At the same time, while holding a tight control over principal officials and key positions, the party has also opened the channel for 'talents' to enter the bureaucracy, strengthening expertise (Chen et al. 2015).

Upon issuing the *Provisional Regulations on State Civil Servants* in 1993, the State Council (1993) established the civil service examination system. The examinations, including written examinations and face-to-face interviews, help to assess candidates' level of knowledge, professional qualities and ability to express and communicate. Through this system, the party is also able to examine and investigate applicants' political records and family background, by conducting a qualification (*zige shencha*) and investigation

(*kaocha*) review. The civil service examination is only applicable, however, to non-leading positions at the lower level (i.e. mainly entry-level positions: see Article 21 of the 2005 CSL).

In addition, ‘open selection’, and ‘internal competition for posting’ have become important methods of cadre selection and appointment. Open selection is used to select leading cadres from the public, and internal competition for posting is an internal mechanism for selecting leading cadres within a department or system (*xitong*). Both measures adopt competition as a way of promoting meritocracy in cadre selection below a certain level. However, the scope of application of the two measures has been adjusted and confined more recently. Article 49 of the 2002 *Regulations on the Selection and Appointment of Party and Government Leading Cadres* shows that the two methods are used to select leading members or candidates of the party committees and government departments at the local level or in the internal departments of party and state organs (Central Organization Department 2002). In the revised regulations promulgated in 2014, however, the scope is applicable only to leading cadres below the county/divisional level (see Article 50) (Central Organization Department 2014). In the revised 2019 regulations, the scope of application of the two methods was further confined to deputy leading positions (see Article 15) (Central Organization Department 2019b). Article 15 of the regulations indeed resonates with Article 47 of the 2018 CSL to downplay the role of competitive hiring in cadre selection—promoting political cohesion is more important than developing an administratively competent bureaucracy. Though the change may signal a reversal or a fall back, competitive hiring has not been entirely abandoned.

Discipline inspection

Discipline inspection is another key measure to supervise and monitor cadres. Discipline inspection refers to the work in supervising party members and cadres, monitoring the implementation of party lines, principles, and policies, and promoting the construction of party style (*dangfeng jianshe*) (e.g. the establishment of an honest and clean government). In 2012, Xi Jinping gave an instruction of ‘exercising full and strict governance over the Party’ (*quanmian cong yan zhi dang*), and later in 2013, Xi Jinping gave further instruction to having the party strictly manage cadres (*cong yan zhi li*). All of these require party committees to strengthen discipline inspection work across the nation, localities and sectors.

Political requirements, including political ideology and political loyalty, are the primary components in the party's discipline inspection work, as stipulated in Article 17 of the 2016 *Regulations on Intraparty Supervision* (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party 2016). Likewise, Article 2 of the 2018 *Disciplinary Regulations* and Article 7 of the 2019 *Accountability Working Regulations* also make the inspection of political performance the most important task of disciplinary sanction and accountability (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party 2018, 2019).

To strengthen supervision over its cadres, the party has converted governance goals into intraparty rules (*dangnei fagui*). For example, Article 7 of the 2019 *Accountability Working Regulations*, party and state leading cadres should be held accountable if they perform poorly in management and supervision duties or issues involving the people's livelihood, poverty alleviation or environment protection. The party has further rolled out a list of 'work disciplines' (*gongzuo jilu*) to manage job performance (see Article 121 and 122 of the 2018 *Disciplinary Regulations*). In this case, the party organisations and leading cadres in charge will be disciplined for their failure to assume job responsibilities or accomplish the party's policy goals. Article 7 of the 2019 *Accountability Regulations* has incorporated requirements on political construction, political ideology and party building into the job responsibility system. Article 16 of the same regulations also establishes a 'lifelong accountability' to hold top and responsible officials accountable for failing to take proactive measures to enhance the party or address major issues (such as corruption) or for dereliction or negligence in matters with serious consequences, even if they have since exited the service in the normal course of events.

In cadre discipline inspection work, the party has now focused its attention on the 'key minorities' (*guanjian shaoshu*)—that is, all leading cadres at each level who hold key (i.e. top and responsible) positions at their respective level in the bureaucracy. The instruction is clearly stipulated in Article 17 of the 2016 *Regulations on Intraparty*. Article 5 of the 2019 *Accountability Working Regulations* makes the same provision. The idea is that holding the 'key minorities' or top group at each level would help better control the entire cadre workforce. The party has attempted to portray these 'key minorities' as role models for accomplishing the goals of both political construction and job performance.

Conclusion and discussion

Meritocracy is essential to modern bureaucracy. For a highly integrative state with no divide between politics and administration like China, the difficulty is how to carry out successfully meritocratic measures in a highly politicised bureaucracy. To what extent can administrative or meritocratic rationality be compatible with political prerogatives (Chan 2010)? Political meritocracy, as a policy tool to balance administrative rationality and political prerogatives, might provide some clues.

The CCP has applied the idea of political meritocracy to various aspects of the Chinese cadre personnel management. First, political standards are the primary set of components, and have been built into every important aspect of cadre personnel management. Second, albeit with limited scope of application, meritocratic rationality is essential to the operation of political meritocracy. While maintaining a degree of political control, the CCP has sought to use meritocratic measures in various aspects of its cadre personnel management. To push cadres to implement its policies, the party has converted political construction tasks into measurable performance indicators. The CCP has also written governance goals into intraparty regulations and used political discipline as the main tool to monitor cadres' job performance. Third, the 'key minorities' are always the focus of the party's cadre personnel management. Fourth, putting the idea of political meritocracy into operation is a dynamic and complicated process. The CCP has tried to institutionalise political meritocracy in various forms, including statutory laws and intraparty rules and regulations. To ensure that Chinese officials can faithfully respond to political lines and directives, the CCP has continuously adjusted the specific goals, indicators or methods with a view to embrace the stance of political meritocracy in cadre personnel management.

As an endeavour to balance administrative, meritocratic rationality and political prerogatives, political meritocracy helps to maintain a high degree of political cohesion. By stressing political standards in various aspects of cadre personnel management and highlighting the role of the 'key minorities', the CCP can make sure that those selected adhere to and carry out party lines and directives. In addition, in the process of applying the idea of political meritocracy, the CCP has strived to improve the quality and professional level of the cadre workforce. More and better-educated 'talents' with expertise and professional skills have been encouraged to join

the civil service. In a way, political meritocracy has been used by the party to enhance the quality of governance. Cadres at various levels are very concerned about and sensitive to the established targets because the CCP has connected evaluation results to their career prospects. Making the top-down evaluation a baton to manage administrative performance, the CCP uses political meritocracy to play an important part in enhancing the party-state's capacity for governing socio-economic affairs and meeting citizens' needs. Moreover, political meritocracy is also a pattern of internal accountability that requires cadres to be responsible. Cadres are responsible for both politics-based and job-based indicators. By means of full and strict supervision over cadres at various levels, the party can make sure that cadres are held responsible for the accomplishment of both established political tasks and performance goals. In this case, political meritocracy can be seen to be helpful both in improving bureaucratic responsibility and in ensuring regime legitimacy.

Contrary to previous studies on political meritocracy, this chapter shows that political meritocracy is a policy tool in active operation in China. Chinese experience shows that political integrity and administrative rationality can be achieved, though unevenly and with some tensions, by the same management design. Although some incompatibilities are apparent, their extent can be managed to a degree that the underlying values of political meritocracy can be accomplished, without some succeeding at the cost of others.

Without any electoral competition in place, Chinese bureaucracy is party-dominated and highly integrative. As a result, the party-state bureaucracy has encountered problems including lacking responsiveness and accountability to the public and constraining more open debate about policies and ideas. Moreover, because of the centrality of politics in China's political system, administrative rationality can easily be undermined by political patronage.

It is important to state that the combination (and tensions) of the different values incorporated into China's management design are a 'home-grown' problem. This problem is pervasive to and particular to China's highly integrated political system both across government and across society. The practical way to look for a solution must also be a home-grown one. The theory is that when a country makes a transformation, its reform goalposts and roadmaps are characteristically self-referential; that is, reflecting distinctly the national situation. Political meritocracy reflects an orientation in management design, suitable to China's party-state system and its history.

The theory provides an alternative way to understand how China has reconfigured the relationship between politics and administration to address its personnel management problems. China has a highly politicised bureaucracy in which politicians are simultaneously bureaucrats (Vogel 1970; Gore 2019). With a fusion of political and career appointees, Chinese cadre personnel system is seemingly a two-layer unified framework in which there now exist two distinct career paths—the political realm for political appointees, and an administrative realm for career appointees (Chan and Li 2007). In the political realm, the CCP has emphasised control over and through the ‘key minorities’. The CCP has issued many intraparty rules and regulations to ensure that the key minorities have earnestly adhered to the political lines and directives handed down by the CCP. All these represent an endeavour to manage party members. Although not all civil servants are party members, it is likely all principal and high-level civil servants are. As such, the CCP can exercise nomenklatura authority over all principal and high-level civil servants as a matter of exercising internal party power and authority. In the administrative realm, the CCP relies on the use of the statutory law (such as the CSL) to introduce more meritocratic measures to enhance administrative rationality. Meritocratic measures are mostly confined to the administrative realm and add predictability to management and enhance administrative capacities.

Chinese reform trajectories also illuminate that political meritocracy is quite different from Bell’s proposition of ‘China model’—democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle and political meritocracy at the top (Bell 2015:178). Since the CCP has exercised more merit-based management among the administrative realm (i.e. civil servants serving at the lower levels), Bell’s propositions do not reflect China’s reality. Bell does not mention the incompatibility issues and overlooks the efforts made by the CCP to address them through personnel management by both statutory law and internal rules and regulations.

A caveat must be made here. Since political meritocracy still operates in the presence of a strong party, some endogenous problems still emerge. A high concentration of power and authority in the party gives rise to the problem of political patronage, bureaucratism and abuse of power. There is a conventional understanding among Chinese scholars that Chinese cadre personnel management always focuses its attention and centres its efforts on recruiting and selecting personnel rather than managing a job. One interpretation is that the endeavour of political meritocracy approach can

certainly promote the meritocratic aspect in recruitment and selection of personnel, but it might not help in other aspects, for example in regard to cadre dismissal and career mobility.

The CCP has faced challenges in the development of political meritocracy. There are always trade-offs in management design. Placing too much emphasis on political requirements is likely to distort the career incentive of cadres and might fail to achieve a commensurate increase in effective management. Given the emphasis of heightened political control of the entire cadre workforce, taking place after the Eighteenth National Congress of the CCP under Xi Jinping, the party will need to remain vigilant against failing to balance administrative rationality and political prerogatives. Chinese reform cycles reveal swings in the balance between political control and administrative rationalism: the current emphasis is on party control, but new circumstances and opportunities may later revive the importance of managerial capacity and bureaucratic rationalism.

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This text is taken from *Dilemmas in Public Management in Greater China and Australia: Rising Tensions but Common Challenges*, edited by Andrew Podger, Hon S. Chan, Tsai-tsu Su and John Wanna, published 2023 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/DPMGCA.2023.13