Dethroning the Mao-era Elite, Clearing the Way for Reform

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Abstract

The reform era began with the removal of Mao-era elites from leadership positions on a scale theretofore unseen in the People's Republic of China. Rather than depending on incentives to mobilize Mao-era cadres to support Reform and Opening, the new reform leadership brought in younger, better educated pro-reform elites. This article thus proposes a Personnel Model, in which the Communist Party brings in sympathetic cadres to implement major shifts in the Party line. Furthermore, personnel changes were first imposed on the military, then on the civilian apparatus. We show the large scale and rapid implementation of these reforms in 1982–1984 using an original database of over 60,000 cadres drawn from *Organizational Histories*.

摘要

改革开放始于对毛时代领导干部的大幅更迭，其规模在共和国历史上是空前的。本文提出了一个全新的 "人事模型" 来理解改革开放。我们发现，新的政治路线的确立带来了组织路线的全面变更。相比给予毛时代领导干部不同的激励机制来推动改革，改革派领导人更依赖于启用新人。新干部更年轻，受过更好的教育，且被认为更拥护改革。另外，我们发现这种大规模的人事变动始于军队，然后扩展到政府机构。实证上，本文依据《中国共产党组织史资料》，构建了一个从中央到地方、自国家级至乡镇级，超过 60,000 名领导干部的数据库，展示了1982–1984 年间的组织路线变革。

Keywords: elite politics; elite transformation; reform and opening; cadre reform; organizational history
关键词: 精英政治; 精英转型; 改革开放; 干部改革; 组织史

> The political line having been set, there must be people to implement it. Who should implement it? The results will differ depending on whether it is implemented by the supporters of the Party's political line, its opponents, or those in the middle. Hence, the question of succession.
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> 政治路线确立了，要有人来具体地贯彻执行。由什么样的人来执行，是由赞成党的政治路线的人，还是由不赞成的人，或者是由持中间态度的人来执行，结果不一样。
> 这就提出了一个要什么人来接班的问题。
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> – Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, 29 July 1979[1]

China's reform era began with the permanent removal of more leading cadres up and down the hierarchy than had ever been accomplished under Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 leadership. The new

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1 Deng 2004a, 157.

reform leadership in Beijing saw the wholesale removal of Mao-era elites and their replacement by younger, better educated cadres as prerequisite to the nationwide implementation of Reform and Opening.

Scholarship on the Reform and Opening has focused on the use of incentive systems that guided local officials to implement economic reforms, yielding an explanation for the implementation of reforms that we label the Incentives Model.[2] Indeed, some have argued that economic reforms were implemented by the very same officials who had led localities during the Mao era.[3] An alternative literature – one that has received less attention in recent years – argues that national reform elites ushered younger reformist technocrats into office at the beginning of the reform era[4] but still largely suggests that Mao-era elites left the scene only gradually.[5] Drawing on a newly digitized data set of officials from the national level to the township level, we provide evidence that Mao-era elites were abruptly cleared out of leadership roles at the beginning of the reform era. These Mao-era elites were replaced by younger, better educated cadres, whom the reform leadership believed were better suited to implement Reform and Opening.

While the evidence remains strong that economic incentives shaped cadre behaviour, they shaped the behaviour of cadres chosen for their reform credentials by the reform regime. We thus introduce a Personnel Model. Although not mutually exclusive with the prevailing Incentives Model, the Personnel Model yields a decidedly different set of hypotheses about Chinese politics. In the Incentives Model, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) steers the bureaucracy by changing incentives without changing personnel. In the Personnel Model, the Communist Party does not reverse course using incentives alone; instead, it seeks out cadres favourably disposed to its goals and competent to aid in their achievement, even if it does also offer incentives to these hand-selected personnel. We demonstrate that implementation of Reform and Opening followed the Personnel Model.

In selecting pro-reform personnel and using the Party bureaucracy to do so, the new reform leadership in Beijing successfully accomplished an elite transformation from the centre down to the townships that was unprecedented in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Although the power seizures of the early Cultural Revolution led to a dramatic elite transformation in the 1960s, they proved abortive: most of those purged were able to return during the 1970s. The elite transformation of 1982–1984, however, *permanently* removed many of the Mao-era elites, replacing them with younger cadres selected by the reform leadership through the Party's organizational apparatus. The 1982–1984 elite transformation permanently removed a large share – 25 to 50 per cent – of leading cadres at each level of the Chinese bureaucracy (see Figure 1), meaning that these cadres left their leadership posts and *never* took another leadership post. At all levels of the hierarchy, elderly cadres were retired, the few remaining young Cultural Revolution recruits were shunted aside and a loyal "third echelon" (*disan tidui* 第三梯队) of youthful national leaders was pulled up through the ranks.

This elite transformation was significantly more abrupt and earlier than the existing literature recognizes. Careful work by Ch'i and Lee has underlined the systematic efforts of national leaders to organize authoritarian succession and transform the cadre body.[6] These broad analyses of cadre policy in the 1980s have tended to emphasize the new recruits brought in by the elite transformation and have recognized their arrival early in the 1980s. Another literature has focused on the plight of Mao-era elites, most notably Manion's work on retirement and several contemporary pieces on Party rectification, all suggesting that Mao-era elites exited senior positions only slowly.[7]

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2 Whiting 2001; Oi 1999; Landry 2008; Ang 2016; Lin and Liu 2000.
3 Oi 1999, 4–5.
4 Ch'i 1991; Lee 1991.
5 See also Manion 1993.
6 Ch'i 1991; Lee 1991.
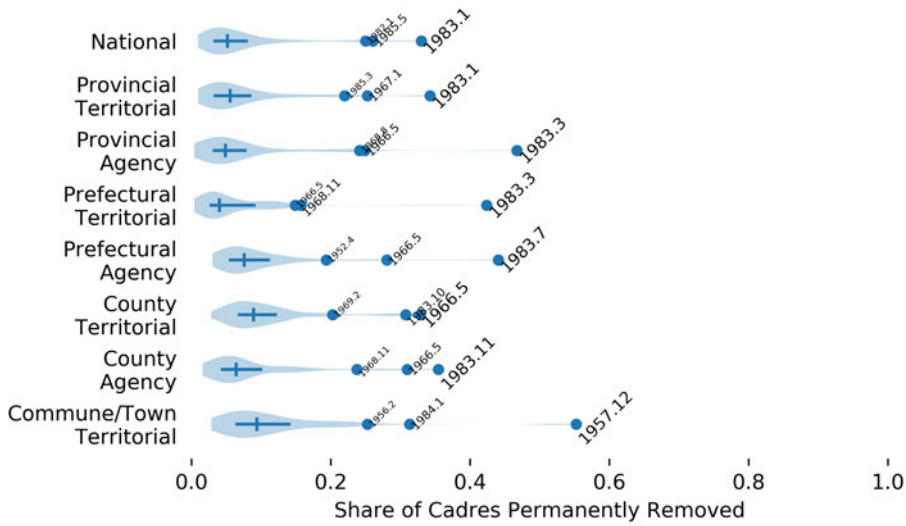7 Manion 1993; Johnston 1987; Dittmer 1991; Forster 1986.

Figure 1. Final Cadre Exits from Leadership

Notes: Cadres make a final exit from leadership when they do not ever again return. For example, if a cadre was removed in the power seizures of January 1967 but returned to office in 1976, only to be retired from leadership in June 1982, then the cadre's "final exit" will be in June 1982.

The horizontal line in each violin plot represents the interquartile range for permanent cadre exits from our data set for 12-month periods from the founding of the PRC to 1987. The vertical line represents the median. For each level of the hierarchy, the three outliers with the highest share of cadres permanently removed are plotted. For example, if the furthest outlier is 1982.2, it means that the 12-month period in which the highest percentage of cadres at that rank left office never to return was from February 1982 to January 1983.

We show that the elite transformation was in fact not gradual. Mao-era elites exited leadership, and reform-era elites entered, during the Party-organized, top-down administrative reform (*jigou gaige* 机构改革) of 1982–1984. While the process of formal retirement or rectification may have dragged on into the late 1980s, elderly cadres and those suspected of Cultural Revolution crimes were removed from leadership positions during the administrative reform: they were no longer leaders, merely cadres. The removal of Mao-era elites, as well as the appointment of new reform elites, thus occurred at the very beginning of reforms, concurrent with and often before the development of many of the incentive systems for policy implementation widely cited in the literature.

In a significant departure from the existing literature, we show that this elite transformation began in the military. Indeed, while military personnel changes followed the same patterns as civilian personnel changes, changes in the military were always more pronounced and generally occurred before changes in the civilian apparatus. This pattern pervades the personnel politics of the early post-Mao years, beginning with the removal of Cultural Revolutionary elites immediately after Mao's death and continuing through the elite transformation of the early 1980s. The military played a significant – and heretofore understudied – role in the personnel changes that marked the beginning of the reform era.

To show this rapid, wholesale exit of Mao-era elites from leadership roles, we exploit an underutilized data source to compile a comprehensive data set of cadres in leadership positions at the national level, as well as in Shanxi province. Drawing from *Organizational Histories* (*zuzhi shi* 组织史), our organizational data set includes career information on over 60,000 officials across a wide spectrum of party-state work units at the national level and, in Shanxi province, from the provincial level to the township level. The broad hierarchical span of our data enables us to examine personnel changes across different bureaucratic levels; its long duration makes it possible to compare the personnel effects of the many and varied campaigns the CCP has undertaken over the years.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. Because we are publishing our full data set, we begin by discussing at some length how the relatively underutilized *Organizational Histories* can improve our knowledge of elite politics. Next, in the second section, we outline the prelude to elite transformation: the post-Mao leadership rebalanced the leading cadres it inherited upon Mao's death, rehabilitating pre-Cultural Revolution leaders and purging Cultural Revolutionaries. Beginning in the third section, we turn our focus to the elite transformation, in which Mao-era elites were replaced with reform-era elites. We show how the new reform leadership, concerned about implementing its reform agenda, problematized the Mao-era elite, developing a programme of elite transformation in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The fourth section uses our data to show how this programme was implemented, first in the military and then, as part of the 1982–1984 administrative reforms, in the civilian apparatus. The fifth section relates our findings to the existing literature on elite transformation in the 1980s, highlighting that the reform leadership replaced Mao-era elites much more aggressively than the existing literature suggests. We conclude by discussing the implications for our understanding of how the Communist Party changes its political direction.

Data and the Study of Chinese Elite Politics

In this paper, we study the longitudinal composition of the Chinese bureaucracy, from the grassroots officials leading townships to the pinnacle of the regime in Beijing and from the founding of the PRC into the reform era. To do so, we depart from the popular practice of compiling biographical data sets of *the jobs certain elites have held and their personal characteristics*, a costly approach necessary for the longitudinal study of individual careers. Instead, we introduce an organizational data set of *the elites who have held certain jobs* in the Chinese bureaucracy, suitable for the longitudinal study of bureaucratic composition and – importantly – feasible to collect for lower-ranking officials who served in earlier years.

A major contribution of this project is the introduction of a data set that uses a single standard for collecting data across the hierarchy (from the national to the township level) and across time (from the founding of the CCP to the present).[8] To do so, we draw on the detailed lists of leading cadres assembled by Party organization departments at all levels from the centre to the counties in their nationwide effort to publish *Organizational Histories*.[9] These include information not only on leaders of geographic units but also on the leaders of various party and government departments, bureaus, agencies and offices. Each book lists leaders at two full (four half) levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy: that is, a county-level *Organizational History* will list the county's leaders and deputy leaders; the leaders and deputy leaders of the county's various bureaus, commissions and offices; and the leaders and deputy leaders of each commune, dispatched district or town(ship) under the

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8   While biographical data on Central Committee elites and local leaders have provided insights into elite recruitment, comparisons across the political hierarchy have been undermined by the very different ways in which scholars of central and local elite politics have defined their subjects. At the central level, elites have been conceived of quite broadly, incorporating the several hundred members of the Central Committee and studying their composition back to the founding of the Party. At the local level, the vast majority of studies have considered only party secretaries and government chief executives (that is, two officials per locale), with more ambitious researchers looking as far as provincial party standing committees (see Shih and Lee 2020 for a data set that spans 1993–2015 and Bulman and Jaros 2020 for one that covers 1996–2013) or municipal and county bureau chiefs (Zhou Xueguang and colleagues have collected data on the county and prefectural bureaucracies, but only after 1990; see Zhou et al. 2018).

9   The compilation of these *Organizational Histories* was a sprawling project initiated by the Central Organization Department in December 1984. The project took from 1984 to 1999 to produce 3,076 volumes (see Li 2016a, 476). The project involved a huge amount of work: the editors estimated that they consulted 7,360,000 volumes of archives, conducted 1.7 million interviews and held over 40,000 meetings (see Zhongyang zuzhibu 2000, 4). *Organizational History* books were published by locales across China beginning in the early 1990s, listing all leading cadres in the locale and its immediately subordinate geographic and functional units from the founding of the Communist Party in 1921 through 1987. Second editions were published including data through 1997.

county's jurisdiction. This ensures that transfers between agencies or leadership roles within a single jurisdiction are fully included in our data, but it does mean that cadres transferred to leadership roles in state-owned enterprises are excluded from the data. For a sample page, see Figure A1.

The sheer scale of data made available through these analogue records is alluring, but a comprehensive digitization project is beyond our means. We therefore collected personnel records from the national and select local *Organizational History* for the years up to 1987.[10] The national *Organizational Histories* include senior provincial leaders, national ministerial leaders and a large contingent of military leaders. Because administrative boundaries have varied dramatically over time and because leading local officials are sometimes transferred between organizationally proximate jurisdictions of equal rank, we opted for a nested sampling strategy of local *Organizational Histories* rather than a random sampling strategy.[11] We chose to focus on Shanxi province because Cultural Revolution deaths in Shanxi varied greatly across prefectures[12] and because we were able to collect a full nested sample of *Organizational Histories* from the province. For Shanxi province, we collected personnel records for all prefectures, as well as all counties within a single prefecture (Yuncheng 运城) from the beginning of published data on local Party cells up to 1987. Combined, this allows us to construct a bare-bones résumé for each of 68,501 cadres, listing all the leadership positions they have held in the Party, the government, the military and social organizations and the years in which they held these positions. We are publishing this dataset concurrently with this paper.[13]

To emphasize the diverse patterns of cadre management evident at different levels of the hierarchy, we sometimes divide results between the provincial, prefectural, county and commune/township levels; within each geographic unit, we further divide cadres between "territorial leaders" – party committee members, government chief executives and top military brass, as well as their immediate deputies – and "agency leaders" – agency directors and deputy directors in the party, government, military and social organization systems.

Prelude to Elite Transformation: Rebalancing the Mao-Era Elite

Immediately after Mao's death, his successors began to adjust personnel policy. These early adjustments, carried out under Hua Guofeng's 华国锋 leadership, sought to readjust the balance of power among various components of the Mao-era elite. By rehabilitating pre-Cultural Revolution cadres and removing Cultural Revolutionaries from leadership posts, these personnel shifts empowered what would soon become the reform leadership. But these personnel changes only adjusted *which* Mao-era elites were in power, keeping power firmly in the hands of cadres who had entered leadership under Mao's rule.

Rehabilitation

The rehabilitation of cadres began in earnest after the Lin Biao 林彪 incident and was already quite far along by the time of Mao's death in 1976. Indeed, much of the national reform leadership itself had been purged during the Cultural Revolution and rehabilitated even before Mao's death; the

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10 At the national level, we include data from 1945 to 1987, except for the military, where our data is limited to 1949–1987. At the local levels, our data begins at the founding of local party branches in 1920s. Because we write about leading cadres, we exclude members of deliberative bodies such as the National People's Congress who are not listed as holding leadership positions.

11 The nested sampling strategy further allows us to check the frequency of demotions. Because demotions in our data are empirically extremely rare, it is extremely unlikely that, for instance, provincial officials included in our data set are being demoted to prefectural leadership roles excluded from our data set.

12 Walder, "China Political Events Dataset, 1966–1971."
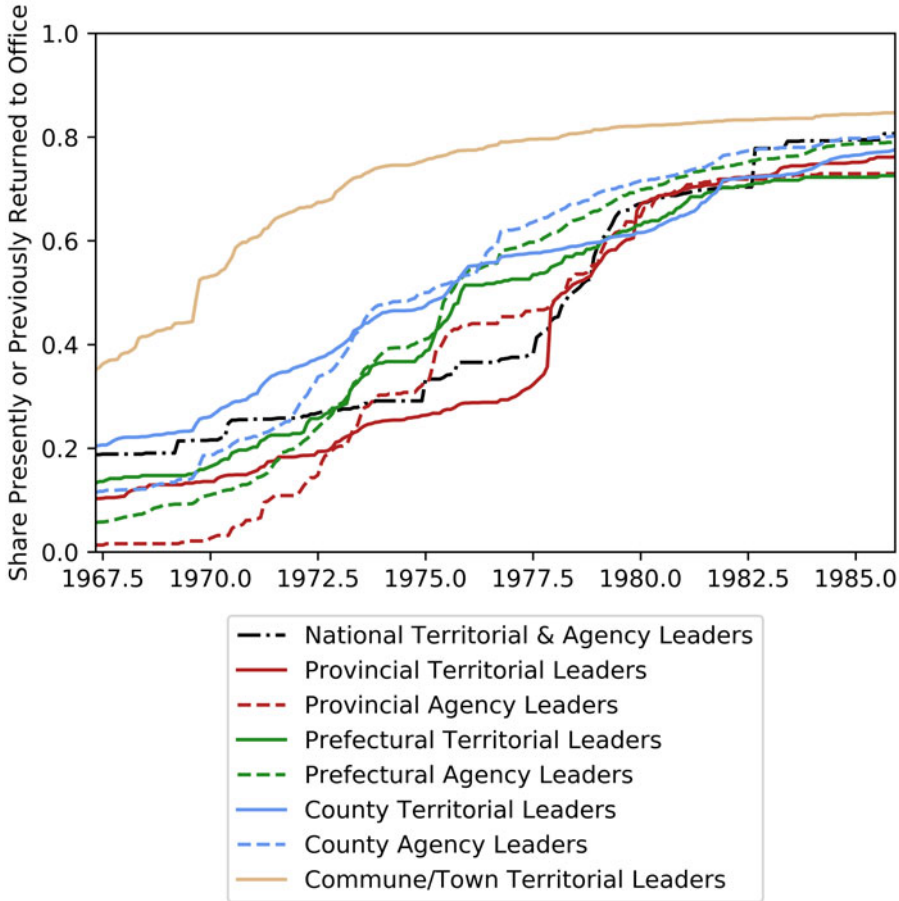
13 Chen, Wilson, Xu, Cheng and Wang 2023.

Figure 2. Rehabilitation of Pre-Cultural Revolution Civilian Cadres
Notes: This figure shows the share of cadres in office in December 1966 who again served in office in any month after April 1967. Note that once a cadre has returned, they are counted as rehabilitated in all succeeding years even if they leave office again in a subsequent year. All cadres are included, except those listed solely in military positions.

same pattern had been even more pronounced at lower levels of the hierarchy, with rehabilitations beginning at the bottom of the hierarchy and working their way up to the centre.

At the local level, rehabilitation of pre-Cultural Revolution cadres began early in the Cultural Revolution (see Figure 2). Commune leaders were being rehabilitated before the Lin Biao incident, and rehabilitation of county and prefectural leaders quickly followed after the Lin Biao incident. By the time of Mao's death in 1976, a majority of pre-Cultural Revolution officials in office in December 1966 at the commune, county and prefectural levels in Shanxi had returned to office at least once since the power seizures of 1967.

Provincial and national officials were rehabilitated more slowly. Although fewer than half of pre-Cultural Revolution cadres at the centre had been rehabilitated at the time of Mao's death, those already rehabilitated proved able to declare an end to the Cultural Revolution, rehabilitate their colleagues and purge remaining Cultural Revolutionaries. Indeed, rehabilitations at the national and provincial levels accelerated in late 1977 and were largely wrapped up by 1980. By 1980, well over 60 per cent of pre-Cultural Revolution cadres at each level of the hierarchy had returned to office for at least some period of time after the power seizures of 1967.
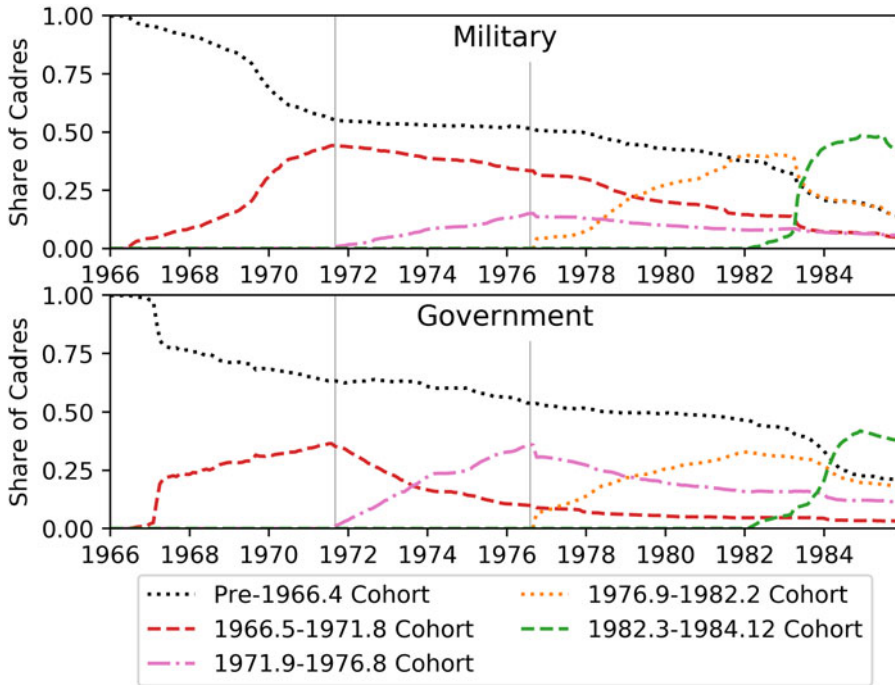
Figure 3. Share of Military and Government Leaders by Cohort (1967–1986)
Notes: The first vertical grey line marks the Lin Biao Incident (September 1971). The second vertical grey line marks the death of Mao Zedong (September 1976).

The Cultural Revolution's violent overthrow of these elderly cadres had, in the long run, failed to dislodge them. When the reform leadership took power in the years after Mao's death, a large share of pre-Cultural Revolutionary cadres had already been rehabilitated. The reform leadership, in turn, continued to rehabilitate cadres until the end of the 1970s, accentuating the dual problems of ageing and oversized leadership teams at all ranks.

Cultural Revolutionaries

Although the rehabilitation of pre-Cultural Revolution cadres meant that Cultural Revolutionaries were outnumbered in most civilian leadership teams, the post-Mao leadership was deeply concerned about the prospect that Cultural Revolutionaries might once again seize power. To minimize that risk, the post-Mao leadership acted to remove Cultural Revolutionaries from leadership positions immediately after Mao's death, starting with the arrest of the Gang of Four (*sirenbang* 四人帮) in October 1976. Because Cultural Revolutionaries in the civilian apparatus were few in number and only a small share of leading cadres, the post-Mao leadership quickly removed almost all of them. Cultural Revolutionaries, however, constituted a large share of military leaders; their removal from the military was more gradual and occurred through a less overtly political process.

Cadres who had first entered leadership positions between the early Cultural Revolution and the 1971 Lin Biao Incident amounted to only a trifling percentage of civilian cadres in office at the end of the Cultural Revolution (see Figure 3). At almost all levels of the hierarchy, such cadres amounted to fewer than 15 per cent of those holding leadership positions. The sole exception was among senior provincial leaders, of whom over 35 per cent had first entered leadership positions during

the Cultural Revolution.[14] Immediately after the Gang of Four was arrested on 6 October 1976, Marshal Ye Jianying 叶剑英 called for a nationwide campaign to "clean out" major followers of the Gang of Four.[15] Hua Guofeng described the struggle against the Gang of Four as "a serious life-or-death class struggle, yet another important line struggle in our Party's history."[16] A nationwide campaign to "expose, criticize and investigate" (*jiepicha* 揭批查) was carried out from 1976 until Deng Xiaoping brought it to an end at the Third Plenum in 1978. The campaign naturally focused on the provincial level, where Cultural Revolutionaries were most numerous; nearly 30 per cent of the first provincial party secretaries were replaced, a significant uptick in turnover from previous years.[17] By 1978, the share of Cultural Revolutionaries on provincial leadership teams had been brought in line with the norms at other levels of the hierarchy. Below the provincial level – and even at the centre – the few Cultural Revolution cadres who made it to 1976 survived onward to 1980.[18]

While the Cultural Revolution may have been a failed elite transformation in the civilian apparatus, it was quite successful at transforming the military elite. Indeed, the reform leadership inherited a military elite that had largely taken shape under Lin Biao's leadership (see Figure 3).[19] While a significant share of pre-Cultural Revolution military leaders at the centre and in the military regions were replaced during Lin Biao's ascendancy, this shift was even more pronounced at lower levels of the military hierarchy: this new cohort of Cultural Revolutionary military officers came to dominate the local military leadership at the prefectural level and below (see Figure A3).[20] Hence, the reformers faced a military leadership with substantially different characteristics than the civilian leadership. Whereas pre-Cultural Revolution cadres dominated the civilian leadership from the centre down to the counties, the military leadership at every level contained a significant number of leading cadres who had attained leadership posts *during* the Cultural Revolution. At every level of the hierarchy, cadres who had taken office during the early Cultural Revolution, before Lin Biao's death, constituted a higher proportion of military leaders than of civilian leaders.

Whereas the post-Mao leadership had almost immediately purged the few remaining *civilian* leaders who had taken office during the early Cultural Revolution, they did not do the same in the military. The wholesale removal of early Cultural Revolution leaders from the military would have gutted the ranks of leadership. Instead of directly gutting the military leadership in the name of a political campaign, Deng labelled the military "bloated."[21] Using this more politically neutral label as justification, Deng proceeded to gut the military leadership at precisely those levels of the hierarchy where early Cultural Revolutionary leaders remained most numerous. Indeed, the number of local military leaders at the provincial, prefectural and county levels – where early Cultural Revolutionary cadres dominated – all declined precipitously in 1978 (falling by almost 30 per cent in 1978 alone). Although he had labelled the military as "bloated," Deng actually *expanded* the national military leadership by over 15 per cent from 1977 to 1978. This influx of national leaders did not bring in a younger generation: experienced leaders from lower ranks,

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14 See Figure A4.

15 Yang, Jisheng 2016, 1018.

16 Hua 1977.

17 Bo, Zhiyue 2002. See also Figure A3.

18 See Figure A5.

19 A small share of these cadres entered military leadership roles just after the Cultural Revolution was announced, but the bulk entered office from 1969 to 1970 as Lin Biao prepared to succeed Mao and Mao counter-manoeuvred. For Mao's counter-manoeuvres, see Shih 2022, 55–80.

20 Moreover, at these lower levels, military officers were increasingly involved in civilian affairs: almost one-third of military leaders at the provincial level and below in Shanxi were concurrently holding government posts in the month before Lin Biao's death in September 1971. As Figure A2 shows, they were quickly pushed back into the barracks after the Lin Biao Incident, but these same military officers remained predominant in the local military leadership until well after the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress in December 1978.

21 Deng 2004a, 6–8, 169, 208, 215.

especially the military regions, were promoted into the national leadership. As a result, the number of Cultural Revolutionaries fell at lower levels of the hierarchy, even if their share among leadership cadres did not. At the centre, the already smaller share of Cultural Revolutionaries fell, as additional pre-Cultural Revolution leaders were promoted to national positions, diluting the share of Cultural Revolutionaries.

The motivations for these military personnel manoeuvres are opaque. Deng almost always framed them in terms of his long-term goal, first enunciated in 1975, of shrinking the military to make it a more agile fighting force. But Deng also clearly saw the military in a political light, making use of military publications to promote his slogan of "practice as the sole criterion for judging truth" and seeking to make personnel changes in Hua Guofeng's absence.[22] While Deng occasionally voiced concerns about military loyalty to the Party line – and indeed the epigraph at the start of this paper comes from one of his speeches to the Navy leadership – Deng repeatedly emphasized how a "bloated" military was unsuited to fight and was a financial drag on economic reform. Using this more politically neutral framing, Deng reduced the number of Cultural Revolutionaries in the military.

Immediately after Mao's death, personnel politics was a central issue for his successors. Their initial decisions continued the rehabilitation of elderly pre-Cultural Revolution cadres and prioritized the removal of younger Cultural Revolutionaries from leadership positions. On the one hand, this approach pushed aside potential political opposition from Cultural Revolutionaries; on the other hand, it continued to bring ageing pre-Cultural Revolutionaries back into power. This rebalancing of the Mao-era elite was a prelude to the elite transformation of the early 1980s, in which the Mao-era elite was finally removed from office.

Thinking about Reform, Problematizing the Mao-Era Elite

The Third Plenum in December 1978 started a new era in China, shifting the focus from class struggle to economic development. This major shift of focus was accomplished through sweeping personnel changes, in accordance with the Personnel Model.

Starting as early as the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun 陈云 cooperated to overhaul the Party's entire team of cadres. For Deng Xiaoping, these personnel changes were to be in the service of the new political line of Reform and Opening adopted at the Third Plenum. Chen Yun's focus was more on formulating a succession policy that would exclude Cultural Revolutionaries. Both agreed that the ageing incumbents would need to be replaced by a whole new generation of young and professional leaders loyal to the reform leadership.

To achieve these goals, Deng and Chen used the Party organization apparatus to transform leadership teams at every level of the hierarchy during a decisive period from 1982 to 1984. This package of campaigns and reforms entailed the abrupt removal and replacement of Mao-era elites from leadership positions through the 1982–1984 administrative reform, followed by their gradual removal from the cadre body later in the decade through retirement reform and a Party rectification campaign.

We begin by outlining the approach to cadre management that Deng and Chen crystallized into policy between the Third Plenum and the administrative reforms of 1982–1984, before analysing the implementation of those reforms.

Focusing on personnel to implement reform

Reformists faced a key issue after the Third Plenum: who was capable and trustworthy to carry out the reform program? The reform leadership recognized that the incumbent revolutionaries they had

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22 Torigian 2022, 163–64.

just rehabilitated were too old to remain in office for long and doubted their competence and sometimes even their devotion to the reform program. Adamant that the remaining Cultural Revolutionaries be kept as far as possible from power, Deng and Chen set out to create a new corps of leading cadres.

By the time of the Third Plenum, and certainly by the early 1980s, the incumbent revolutionary veterans seemed poorly suited for the task of leading China towards Reform and Opening: they were ageing, skilled in Mao-era governance and not particularly adept at handling markets or technical matters. As early as summer 1979, Deng went on a month-long tour of eastern China during which he repeatedly highlighted the importance of selecting a new generation of cadres to ensure the implementation of Reform and Opening.[23] Returning to Beijing, Deng gathered all provincial leaders for an economic work conference. Deng told the gathered leading cadres that "At present, […] economic work is the most important of all political issues. […] We need some experts, [those who] understand their professions. Right now, we have too many people who do not understand their professions; we have too many jacks of all trades who are masters of none. […] The current composition of cadres is unreasonable and is not suited [to our goals]."[24] Later in 1979, Deng continued his campaign: "Our nation is now facing a serious problem, which is not the right or wrong of the 'Four Modernizations' […], but rather the absence of talented people to realize [the Four Modernizations]."[25]

Top officials were, moreover, sometimes doubtful that incumbent revolutionaries were fully devoted to the cause of reform.[26] Emphasizing the need for the expeditious implementation of local administrative reforms in early 1983, General Secretary Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 complained that "the resistance facing our reforms is still not small. The resistance to reform does not come from grassroots cadres, but rather from some leadership cadres, from stubborn conservative forces."[27]

Just as importantly, Deng and Chen were acutely aware of the limitations imposed by old age. Using himself as an example, Deng told his fellow elites that "there would be no hope […] relying on old cadres sitting in offices," because "the real work is carried out by the youth. This being the case, why can't we promote them to leadership positions?"[28] Chen Yun was even more vocal that revolutionary veterans were simply too old and urgently needed to be replaced before they died. On several occasions in 1980 and 1981, Chen told the Politburo and the Central Committee that "there are reports of veteran cadres dying almost every day."[29] Chen called for the Party to "proactively select talent while we have the time; if we keep waiting, we will run out of time."[30]

Ruling out political enemies

Though the two top leaders supported each other on the issue of succession, the selection of new leading cadres was challenging. Both had ruled out ageing elites from the early Mao-era. But they also sought to avoid young and highly educated Cultural Revolutionaries, further narrowing the pool from which they could draw.

While few in number and a vanishingly small share of total cadres at any rank, the civilian Cultural Revolutionaries who had seized power in 1967 or entered office in the early years of the Cultural Revolution had proven remarkably adept at surviving; meanwhile, in the military, their numbers were far larger. Despite the efforts to remove them in the early years after Mao's death,

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23 Deng 2004b, 537–541.
24 Deng 1994, 194–96.
25 Deng 2004b, 220–21.
26 See also Fewsmith 2021, 27.
27 Hu, Yaobang 1983, 13–14.
28 Deng 2004b, 220–26.
29 Chen 1995, 258, 265.
30 Chen 2015, 1713.

most of those at the prefectural, county and commune level who had been in office at the time of Mao's death remained so in 1980. Even at the national level, almost half of the civilian Cultural Revolutionaries in office at Mao's death remained so in 1980.[31] These small numbers were clearly far more than either Deng or Chen were willing to tolerate. As early as 1980, Deng had described these cadres as a "time bomb" for the Party – the "most dangerous" people who were waiting for the right opportunity to come back to power.[32]

To ensure that surviving Cultural Revolutionaries were kept out of leadership positions, the Party developed a new category: the "Three Types of People" (*sanzhongren* 三种人), namely rebels who seized power and committed "evil" acts, those with seriously factional mindsets and those who had participated in Cultural Revolution violence and property damage.[33] In 1981, Chen Yun underscored that the Three Types of People must absolutely not be elevated to leadership positions – "not a single one."[34] During the State Council's administrative reforms in 1982, Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳 hammered home the point: "the Three Types of People must absolutely not be promoted, not a single one. Those already in leadership positions must be resolutely removed."[35] Indeed, the Cultural Revolution remnants were perceived by the reformists as the biggest potential threat to their political legacy. Deng, in particular, was haunted by Wang Hongwen's 王洪文 1975 reminder to "wait for ten years and see."[36]

By the end of 1982, the Party issued a detailed announcement about "cleaning out the Three Types" from leadership positions.[37] To make sure they could clean out the Three Types, Chen Yun ordered the promotion of tens of thousands of cadres who were "around and under [their] forties. [… O]nly people under the age of forty know the behaviour of young people in the early days of the Cultural Revolution."[38] Chen remarked that, despite his own extensive experience managing cadres, he only knew a few key leaders of the Three Types, but did not know the many lower-ranking cadres who also belonged to the Three Types. By promoting people of the Cultural Revolutionaries' own age, Chen hoped to ensure that the successor generation was sufficiently well informed about Cultural Revolutionary crimes to keep out any of the Three Types overlooked by such elders as Chen himself.[39]

In addition to the elderly incumbent Mao-era elites and the politically unacceptable Cultural Revolutionaries, the reform leadership explicitly ruled out those who did not support the Third Plenum. As early as 1979, Deng had insisted that "the results will differ depending on whether [the political line of the Third Plenum] is implemented by [its] supporters, its opponents, or those in the middle."[40] Hence, in the fall of 1982, Chen Yun added another "two types" to the well-established Three Types, ruling out of leadership positions cadres who were "against the line of the Third Plenum."[41] Indeed, when implementing the administrative reform in 1983, Shanxi governor Wang Senhao 王森浩 clearly stated that Shanxi's personnel changes must "absolutely prevent […] those against the Third Plenum's line entering into leadership."[42]

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31 See Figure A5. This is possible because the party-state apparatus was simplified dramatically after the 1967 power seizures, with the normally endless list of government agencies reduced to a mere handful; as a result, there were simply fewer mid-to-high-ranking leaders during the early Cultural Revolution.
32 Deng 1993, 37.
33 The Three Types of People evolved from the Four Types of People current in the late 1970s, which listed altogether different categories (Leese 2020, 452).
34 Chen 1986, 301–302.
35 Zhao 1982.
36 Chen 1995, 269.
37 Zhonggong zhongyang 1982.
38 Ibid.
39 Chen 1995, 267.
40 Deng 2004a, 157.
41 Chen 1995, 277.
42 Wang 1983.

Criteria for successors

Having ruled out the elderly, Cultural Revolutionaries and anyone opposing the Third Plenum, the reform leadership sought out young successors. Deng initially characterized "qualified cadres" as the "young, educated and professionalized" (*nianqing hua, zhishi hua, zhuanye hua* 年轻化、知识化、专业化) in an expansive speech on political reform delivered at the August 1980 Politburo meeting. This speech drew strong resistance from conservative elements in the Party.[43] By December 1980, Deng had adjusted, adding "revolutionary" (*geming hua* 革命化) as a fourth criterion.[44] These criteria were to be implemented on an enormous scale: Chen advocated the promotion of tens of thousands of technocrats into leadership positions in order to "build a modernized China."[45] In May 1983, Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang vividly described the project as one of constructing a third echelon: the senior-most leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun were the first echelon; while those working on the front line such as Hu Yaobang and Premier Zhao Ziyang belonged to the second echelon; the third echelon referred to a much larger group of qualified young cadres who would take charge of all subordinate posts.

The reform leadership sought to implement this strategy by using the Party's organizational apparatus to replace leading cadres at every level of the hierarchy in what was labelled "administrative reform" (*jigou gaige* 机构改革). New leadership teams were organized under guidelines that set upper age limits. These often alluded to flexibility in exceptional circumstances but not always: instructions for the prefectural administrative reform in February 1983 declared that "cadres over the age limit should be retired according to the regulations."[46] While the organizational apparatus could simply apply age limits and age quotas to push out ageing Mao-era elites, the extensive records and bureaucratic reach of the organizational apparatus were useful for keeping Cultural Revolutionaries and opponents of the Third Plenum out of power. To select such a large cohort of new leaders, the Central Party Organization Department established a Young Cadres Bureau (*qinggan ju* 青干局), ranking at the deputy ministerial level. The Young Cadres Bureau ultimately groomed about a thousand young leaders based upon Deng's four criteria for cadres;[47] most of them – such as Jiang Zemin 江泽民, Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 and Xi Jinping 习近平 – rose to the pinnacle of power.[48] The same strategy of organizational reproduction was followed at lower ranks.

Despite its humble name, top leaders clearly saw the administrative reform as their main tool to achieve elite transformation. Right before the launch of the administrative reform, Deng bluntly told the January 1982 Politburo meeting that the "administrative reform" was a "revolution," even going so far as to link it with the survival of the Party. Without such a "revolution" of the personnel team, there would be "no hope for the Four Modernizations"; the failure to accomplish elite transformation might even "bring down the Party and the country."[49] Party leaders clearly saw themselves as using the Personnel Model to implement Reform and Opening.

Out with the Old Cadres

The removal of Mao-era elites, Cultural Revolutionaries and the politically disloyal was accomplished in the early 1980s. The process began in the military, then expanded to the civilian apparatus under the canopy of the 1982–1984 administrative reforms.[50] Implemented through the Party organizational

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43 Vogel 2013, 553–57.
44 Lee 1991, 232–33.
45 Chen 1995, 262.
46 Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guowuyuan 1983. See also Zhao 1982.
47 Yan 2017, 187.
48 Li 1982; Cui 2003, 11–12; Yang, Min 2014; Shih 2022, 159–175. According to Li Rui, Chen Yun preferred to select "princelings" for the third echelon. See Li 2016b.
49 Deng 1994, 396–97.
50 The 12th Central Committee in 1982 witnessed an influx of new members constituting 61% of its total. Notably, among these new members, 88% had not previously been alternative members. See Fewsmith 2021, 40–41.
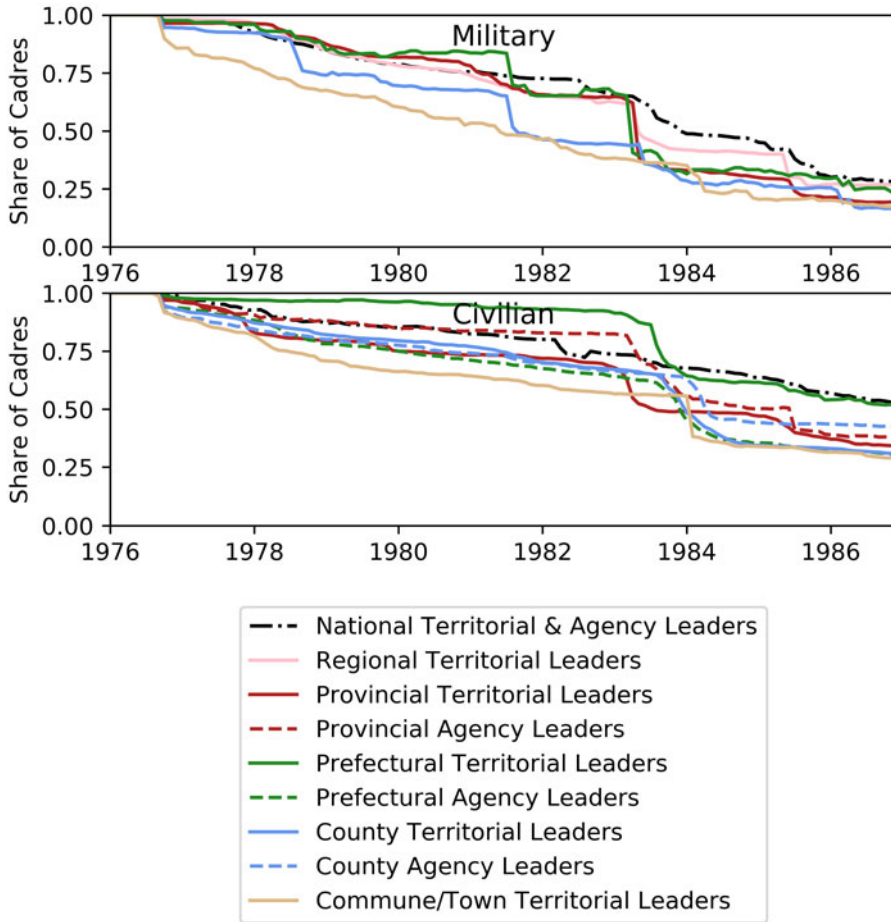
Figure 4. Share of Cadres with Leadership Experience during the Mao Era

apparatus, these reforms of the civilian bureaucracy restructured most leadership teams (*lingdao banzi* 领导班子), making them much younger, more educated and smaller. In the process, as shown in Figure 4, it removed a large share of Mao-era elites at each level of the hierarchy.

The removal of Mao-era elites began in the military. In the military, the removal of Mao-era elites started where Cultural Revolutionaries remained most numerous, proceeding from the bottom of the hierarchy upwards. Starting in 1981, Mao-era military leaders were removed from office first at the county and prefectural levels, bringing the share of Mao-era military leaders at the county level below 50 per cent. A second round of removals, at the prefectural, provincial and regional levels, occurred in early 1983, followed in late 1983 at the national level, leaving Mao-era military leaders in the minority at every level of the hierarchy. Cadres who had entered military leadership positions during Lin Biao's ascent during the early Cultural Revolution were removed particularly aggressively. Whether Deng was motivated by concerns about combat capability or political loyalties (or both), the sequencing of personnel changes ensured that Mao-era elites, especially cadres who had attained leadership roles during the early Cultural Revolution, were removed from the military *before* corresponding personnel changes were implemented in the civilian bureaucracy.

The civilian apparatus quickly followed suit. A large share of Mao-era elites were removed during the 1982–1984 administrative reforms. Unlike in the military, the civilian administrative reforms

worked from the top down, starting with the national government in 1982 and moving down to the provincial authorities (early 1983), the prefectural authorities (mid- to late 1983) and finally the counties and communes (late 1983 to early 1984). At every level of the hierarchy, Mao-era civilian leading cadres fell into the minority only after military leading cadres had already met the same fate.

The effect on leadership teams was abrupt and dramatic. For example, among Shanxi's 57 provincial departments and bureaus, the number of leaders decreased 41 per cent; the average age of the new leadership teams was ten years younger, and the percentage of leaders holding college degrees rose from 14 per cent to 46 per cent.[51] Similar things happened at the prefectural level. Among the 11 prefectures, the total number of prefectural leaders decreased from 196 to 91, while college-degree-leaders jumped from 4 per cent to 36 per cent.[52] Much the same happened across the country.[53] Smaller, younger leadership teams necessarily meant fewer elderly leaders.

Efforts to remove the elderly and the politically problematic from leadership positions resulted in a complicated pattern of personnel departures. An unusually high rate of departure is evident across all ranks and across all entry cohorts, but it is especially pronounced at higher levels in the administrative hierarchy. At the provincial and prefectural levels, pre-1949 revolutionary cadres had remained in office at relatively high rates before 1982; during the administrative reform they were removed from the provincial agencies and prefectural levels but largely allowed to remain at the centre and in top provincial positions. Mao-era cadres who had entered office after the founding of the PRC but before the Cultural Revolution were rapidly removed at the centre and in provincial and prefectural agencies but at lower rates among the top provincial, prefectural and county leaders. The remaining early Cultural Revolution cadres were aggressively removed from territorial leadership roles at all ranks above the commune, although some were allowed to remain in leadership positions in the communes (now townships) and at county agencies. Those who had initially taken leadership positions only in the late Cultural Revolution, however, fared relatively well; sometimes better, indeed, than those who had taken positions immediately afterwards.

The administrative reform, then, did not target the Mao-era elite alone. Almost across the board, it resulted in cadres leaving office earlier than had been the norm in preceding years. Cadres who had entered leadership roles during the Mao era, up until the early Cultural Revolution, left office significantly faster than we would expect for cadres of their seniority and survived at a rate much lower than post-Mao cadres. At the provincial and prefectural levels, as well as among top county leaders, this resulted in the very rapid removal of almost half the stock of Mao-era elites from office.

Reform leaders at the centre had tried to target particular types of cadres for removal, not only the elderly but also especially those associated with Cultural Revolution violence. The disproportionate removal of these categories – and indeed the almost total removal of the few remaining cadres who had so much as held office during the early Cultural Revolution – reflects the reformers' success in reshaping the bureaucracy during the 1982–1984 reforms.

Putting Retirement and Rectification in Context

Only after their removal from leadership were Mao-era elites gradually retired or purged from the Party. As this article quantifies, by the time the administrative reforms had trickled down to the county level in 1984, Cultural Revolutionaries and much of the rest of the Mao-era elite had been removed from leadership. However, the literature on the Party's efforts to deal with stubborn Cultural Revolutionaries and elderly cadres focuses on the mid-1980s, not the early 1980s. This literature misses the mark: by emphasizing the Party's efforts to, respectively, expel and formally retire

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51 Lu 2014, 303–304.
52 Ibid., 305–306.
53 Lee 1991, 255–56.

these cadres, it overlooks their removal from positions of power in the early 1980s. It is nonetheless worthwhile to briefly review the very different fates these two groups met.

In October 1983, the Party launched a rectification campaign to "purify the organization." The campaign was scheduled for implementation only after the completion of the administrative reform at each respective level of the hierarchy.[54] According to Bo Yibo 薄一波, leader of the Party rectification campaign, the key was to "clean out" the "Three Types of People."[55] The campaign culminated in the formal exclusion of a small handful of people from the Party in 1987.[56]

Researchers in the 1980s sought to understand why an initially energetic rectification campaign that at one point sought to totally "negate the Cultural Revolution" appears to have been set aside unfinished. Forster attributes the most vigorous peaks of the rectification campaign's attacks on the Cultural Revolution to the refusal of some cadres to accept that *all* Cultural Revolution factions, and not only rebel factions, were wrong.[57] Dittmer then argues that such attacks on factionalism proved too much of a Pandora's box, motivating the party leadership to set the issue aside altogether.[58] Looking at rectification in the military, Johnston suggests that the dearth of explicit party expulsions during the rectification campaign covers for the selective demobilization of units in which major problems were uncovered during rectification.[59]

Our data suggests that few cadres who had held leadership positions during the Cultural Revolution remained in any leadership capacity after the administrative reforms, which explicitly demanded the exclusion of Cultural Revolution troublemakers and anti-reformers from leadership positions. Indeed, personnel turnover in the military was especially early and thoroughgoing. From this perspective, the rectification campaign looks less like an abortive purge and more like the mopping-up operation of a victorious reform faction. Indeed, central leaders such as Chen Yun and Bo Yibo had repeatedly related the administrative reform to the cleaning out of the Three Types, an effort to ensure that the newly selected leaderships at all levels would not be infiltrated by any of the Three Types.[60] As Secretary of the Party Secretariat Hu Qili 胡启立 told the Guangdong Provincial Party Committee, "The 'Three Types of People' are very dangerous, but there won't be many of them. Especially after the administrative reform and the restructuring of the leadership teams, the provincial Party committee should be aware of how many of these types are at the provincial, municipal and prefectural committees and above."[61] The leaders clearly saw this round of Party rectification as a mopping-up campaign.

Research into the retirement reforms of the 1980s has focused on the role of social enforcement. Manion's work on cadre retirement wrestles most explicitly with policies to push out a broad cross-section of Mao-era cadres.[62] She contends that the Party centre constructed a norm of retirement by leaning progressively more heavily on elderly cadres to retire, turning to automatic (mandatory) retirement in 1988 only after compliance was already very high. While Manion's formulation of norm building is by no means voluntaristic, placing substantial emphasis on the role of social enforcement, it characterizes the Party as initially creating incentives for social enforcement rather than directly mandating retirement or enforcing it through its power to appoint officials. Our paper provides a context for understanding why the Party would rely on norms. We show that Mao-era cadres were replaced in leadership positions en masse, sometimes in the face of binding age

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54 Zhongguo Gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui 1983, section 4. In two exceptional counties in our data set (Ruicheng and Yongji), Party rectification occurred concurrently with the administrative reform on an experimental basis.
55 Bo, Yibo 1988, 6, 10–12.
56 Leese 2020, 458–470.
57 Forster 1986. See also Li Rui's speech at the departmental level cadre meeting in Hunan in May 1983 (Li 2009, 41–43).
58 Dittmer 1991, 35.
59 Johnston 1987.
60 Chen 1986, 323–25, 330–33; Bo, Yibo 1988, 10, 28–29, 40–42, 59–61, 68–71.
61 Hu, Qili 1984, 95.
62 Manion 1993.

restrictions on leadership positions. The retirement of Mao-era cadres from leadership positions, then, appears to have been accomplished by the handiwork of the Party organizational apparatus. This, in turn, led to many outright retirements: in the first five months of the provincial administrative reforms, the number of retirements were twice those *in the preceding five years*.[63] While others may have remained employed as cadres for several more years, the Party leadership generally declined to appoint them to leadership roles.

Conclusion

Although few early Cultural Revolutionaries were in leadership roles by the early 1980s, the overwhelming majority of local leaders and senior bureaucrats were Mao-era elites. The administrative reform of 1982–1984 changed this, removing Mao-era elites en masse from all levels of the Party, clearing the way for economic reforms that leaned heavily on the mobilization of local cadres. Indeed, Deng Xiaoping and other central leaders were explicit that personnel changes were necessary to facilitate economic reforms. Deng and his colleagues designed and implemented an approach to reform that focused as much on personnel changes as it did on incentives.

The reform leadership did not invent the Personnel Model. When he found that political incentives alone did not bring entrenched cadres into line with his Cultural Revolution, Mao had replaced those cadres wholesale. Although scholars have suggested that the market incentives offered by reform policies were able to turn Mao-era elites into ardent reformers, the reform leadership clearly was not prepared to make this wager. They replaced Mao-era elites with younger, better educated reform-era elites; market incentives were applied to this new cohort of cadres.

In more recent years, institutionalized retirement and personnel turnover – concentrated at five-yearly cyclical leadership transitions (*huanjie* 换届) since 1992 – have obscured major personnel changes. Nonetheless, central leaders who seek to fundamentally redirect the Party may still find personnel changes a prerequisite to the effective implementation of new incentive structures. Xi Jinping's decade-long effort to recruit cadres with ideological commitment – and the concurrent departure of some cadres who lacked such ideological commitment – suggests that we may be at just such a juncture today.

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63 Data for nine provincial-level units; see Zhongyang zuzhibu 1983. Manion attributes this uptick in retirements in 1983 to early retirements that were discouraged under the retirement policy (Manion 1993, 81–83).

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Appendix

一、中共绛县核心小组——中共绛县
革命委员会核心小组领导人名录
(1967.5～1971.1)

组 长	徐丛林	(1967.5～1969.8)
	李廷芳	(1969.8～1970.4)
	董益锡	(1970.4～1970.6)
	李廷芳	(1970.6～1971.1)
副 组 长	李海友	(1967.5～1970.6)
	傅 义	(1967.5～1970.6)
	周明山	(1970.2～1971.1)
成 员	梁玉明	(1967.5～1969.7)
	段宪章	(1968.2～1971.1)
	王 源	(1967.5～1968.2)
	续延亭	(1967.5～1969.7)
	马寓宸	(1967.5～1969.8)

Figure A1. Sample Selection from *Organizational History* Book
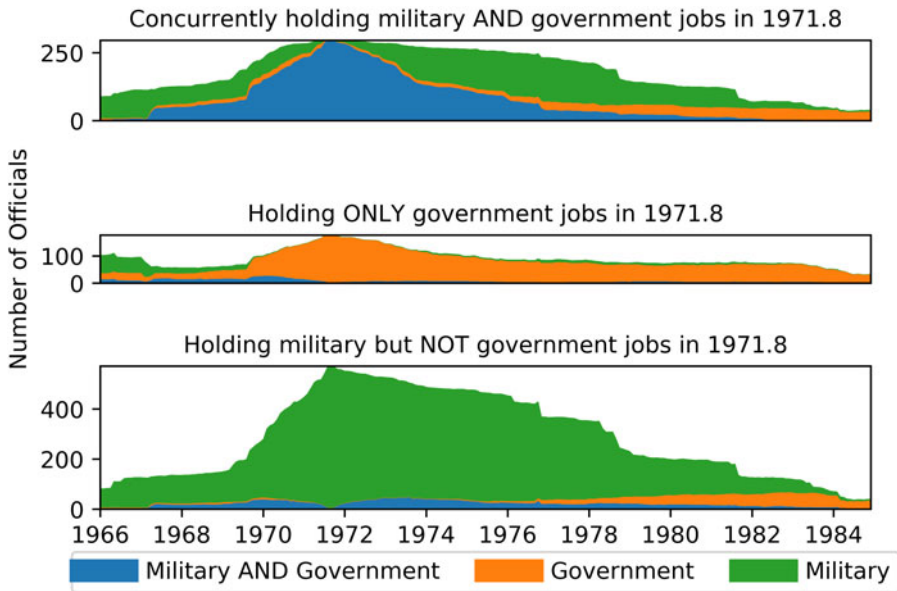
Figure A2. Military–Government Overlap in Shanxi and the September 1971 Lin Biao Incident
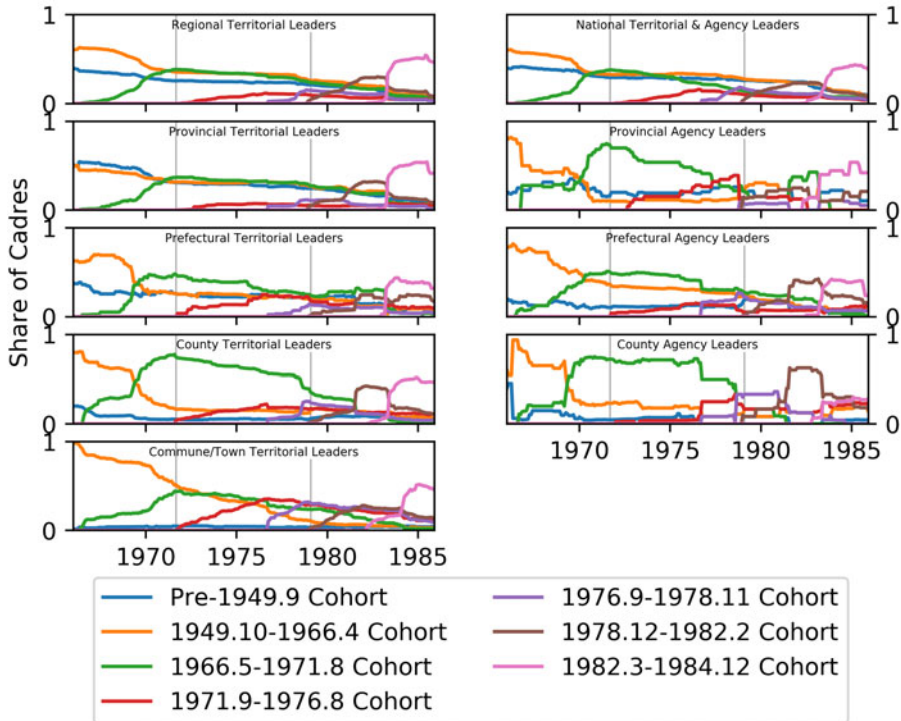

Figure A3. Share of Military Leaders by Cohort (1967–1986)
Notes: The first grey line marks the Lin Biao Incident (September 1971). The second grey line marks the Sino-Vietnamese War (February 1979).
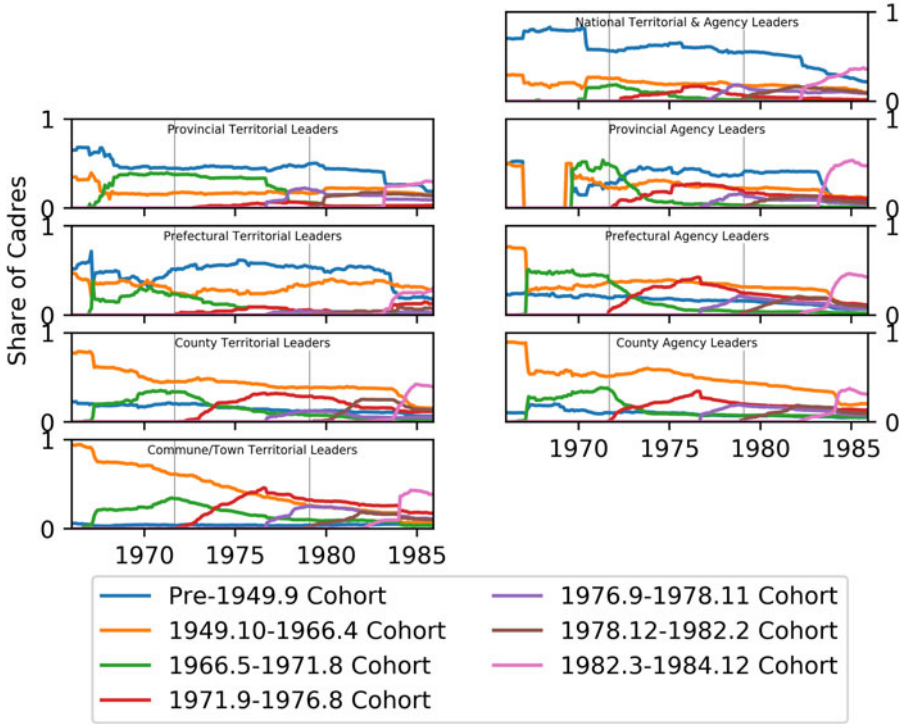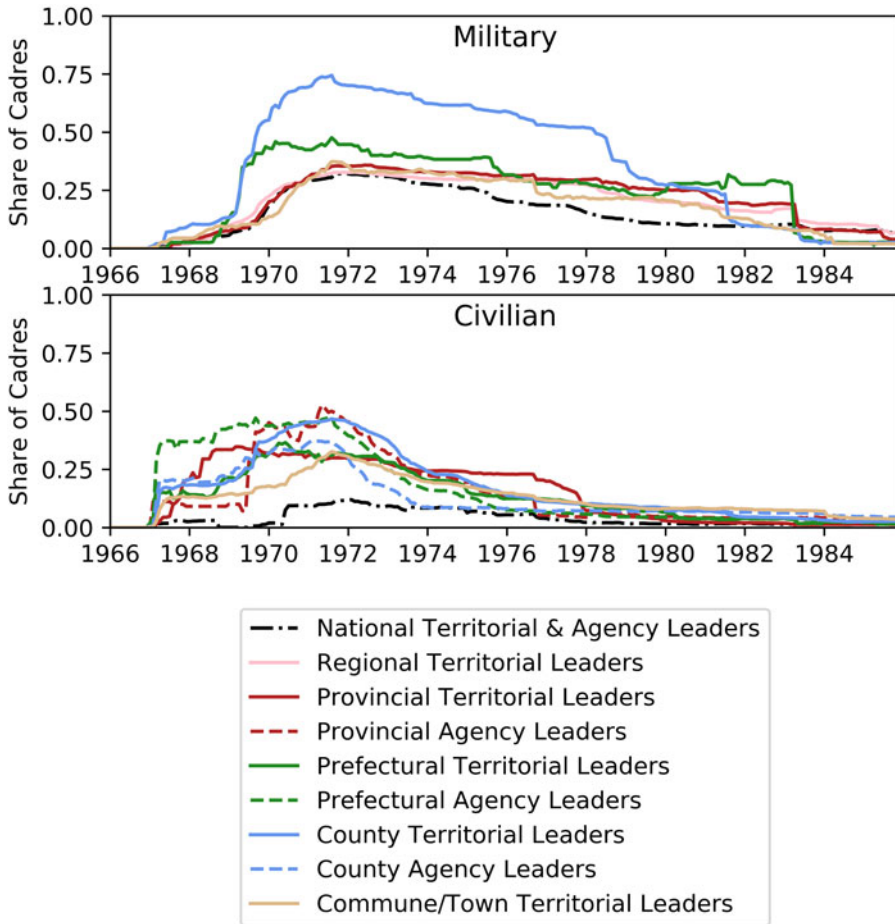
Figure A4. Share of Government Leaders by Cohort (1967–1986)
Notes: The first grey line marks the Lin Biao Incident (September 1971). The second grey line marks the Sino-Vietnamese War (February 1979).

Figure A5. Share of Early Cultural Revolution (1967.1–1971.7) Cadres Remaining in Leadership

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