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Short Term Policy Brief 26

Cadre Training and the Party School System in Contemporary China

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Executive Summary

1. Training and educating administrative officials ("cadres") is a cornerstone of the socialist modernization of the Chinese party-state: China probably takes training of officials more serious than any country in the world.

2. Cadre training takes place either in dedicated institutions, such as party schools, that exist at all levels and major organizations of the administration, or through collaborations, exchanges and commercial contracts with a range of local, national, or international providers.

3. Cadre training serves two contradictory objectives: ideological conformity and professional competence. The time devoted to ideology and policy in training classes continues to decrease. However, many cadres continue to find policy and ideology still relevant to their jobs and chances of promotion.

4. Cadres in China are immeasurably better qualified and equipped for leadership than ever before. China is now a country ruled by professional experts rather than revolutionary ideologues.

5. The Central Party School in Beijing is a vital breeding ground of ideological renewal for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Party schools also conduct policy-oriented research. Party schools occupy an important space between more autonomous academic institutions and directly applied policy research taking place within administrative departments themselves.

6. Like the current CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao before him, Xi Jinping uses his appointment as head of the Central Party School in 2007 to spearhead ideological and policy innovation in preparation for his likely assumption of the party's top job in 2012.

Key recommendations

1. For foreign governments, organizations and individuals cadre training is one the easiest and most promising points of contact between European politicians, administrators and academics and the current and future leaders of Chinese People’s Republic (PRC). The EU should use the opportunities presented by cadre training for possible practical cooperation with Chinese authorities and for mutual learning and exchange on a diverse range of policy areas.

2. As a first step, preliminary research ought to be commissioned to establish the extent of existing collaboration in Europe and to formulate recommendations on the role that the European Commission and national and regional governments in the EU ought to play in coordinating and funding future expansion of collaboration with central and local cadre training institutions and programmes in China.
Introduction: Why party schools?

1. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) schools are anything but mouldy remnants of the Maoist past. The economic success of the reform policies since 1978 has made possible an ambitious programme of state building. The growth of a market economy has created a robust revenue base for the administration. Conversely, the transition away from comprehensive socialist economic planning has created a need for a state that regulates and enables orderly market competition and economic growth. Currently, the state arguably governs fewer things, but governs these things much better than in the past.

2. Training and educating administrative officials (“cadres”) is a cornerstone of the socialist modernization of the Chinese party-state: China probably takes training of officials more seriously than any country in the world. Cadre training takes place either in dedicated institutions, such as party schools, that exist at all levels and major organizations of the administration, or through collaborations, exchanges and commercial contracts with a range of local, national, or international providers.

3. Cadre training serves two (at least partially) contradictory objectives: ideological conformity and professional competence. The former is a direct continuation of pre-reform Maoist practice; the latter has become ever more prominent since the early phases of the reforms in the 1980s. The time devoted to ideology and policy in training classes continues to decrease. However, many cadres continue to find policy and to a lesser extent ideology still relevant. Their jobs and promotions continue to depend at least in part on their ability to suss out correct from incorrect ideas and approaches. Although formal qualifications, performance and competence are increasingly prominent, the Chinese bureaucracy continues to be politicized along ultimately Leninist principles of centralism, discipline and orthodoxy.

4. Professional competence, the other aim of cadre training, includes management and leadership skills, in addition to more general or vocational subjects, such as economics, international relations, military affairs, law, accounting, history, philosophy, world religions, or English. Increasing amounts of time in training courses are also devoted to the analysis and discussion of case studies, current events, assignments and research. Many classes spend considerable time on presenting and explaining the findings of research, and elaborating how this research is relevant to practical administration. Obviously, there is considerable self-censorship here and clear boundaries that cannot be crossed, but teachers, particularly the older and more respected ones, often do not shy away from pointing out some of the real problems caused by inadequate or non-existing policy identified by research.

5. Training at a party school is not only valuable because of the formal teaching provided. The opportunity to mix with a variety of other cadres is equally important. Trainees value formal and informal discussions with other students, and learning from each other is often more important than from teachers. Furthermore, the relationships formed during training are an important lubricant of the administrative system. Much time during training courses is spent establishing and reinforcing relationships that make the solution of some future problem perhaps only one mobile phone call away.

6. Much effort has been made in the last 20 years to strengthen the academic quality of teachers and researchers at party schools. Although party schools and other cadre training institutions are important sites of formal degree education specifically aimed at cadres, this role is gradually being taken over by regular institutions of higher education. Research, especially at higher level schools (in provinces or the centre), contributes to policy making and evaluation.
7. Especially the Central Party School in Beijing is a vital breeding ground of ideological renewal for the CCP. Researchers, graduate students and even high-level trainees at the school quite often experiment with ideological innovations and elaborations, often with the support of individuals or groups from the central CCP leadership. Conversely, central leaders frequently test new ideas or policies by presenting them to audiences at the school. Party schools thus occupy an important space between more autonomous academic institutions and directly applied policy research taking place within administrative departments themselves.

Organization of party schools and cadre training

8. Party schools exist at all levels of the Chinese bureaucratic hierarchy, from the centre down to provincial, prefectural, county and even township administrative levels. In addition, many larger state-owned enterprises, military organizations, and central government organizations often have one or more party school of their own. In total, there are well over 2,000 party schools in China. At each administrative area or institution the local party committee decides on annual cadre training plans that not only include courses taught at the local party school(s). Other specialized cadre training institutions include the schools of administration for “non-leading” high-ranking cadres who are not in charge of an organization or department and the academies of socialism for leading cadres who are not members of the CCP. Cadre training plans also include specialized training programmes at other institutions, both locally and elsewhere.

9. All Chinese cadres, even the highest leaders, are expected to undergo periodic training at an institution commensurate with their rank, place of service and position. The Central Party School trains cadres up to vice-minister rank; even higher ranked officials (including the members of the Politburo) receive their training through special meetings, briefing sessions and conferences. The organization department of the party committee selects from the cadres under its jurisdiction candidates for specific courses or programmes. Selection for training is usually a sign of success as it indicates that the organization department has a special interest in furthering the career of the individual concerned. Formally, cadres slated for promotion ought to undergo training first, but quite often training only happens after a promotion already has been made.

10. Cadre training, party schools, schools of administration and academies of socialism are organizationally fully integrated parts of their local administration. Normally, one of the local deputy-party secretaries is in charge of cadre training; quite often he or she also doubles up as pro-forma head of the party school. At the central level, cadre training is considered sufficiently important to put a member of the Politburo’s standing committee in charge of the Central Party School. When Hu Jintao’s became head of the Central Party School in 1993, this was one of the posts that groomed him ultimately to succeed Jiang Zemin in 2002. Xi Jinping’s appointment as head of the Central Party School in 2007 seems to have followed this precedent. Xi is currently very active in this post, using it to spearhead ideological and policy innovation in preparation for his likely assumption of the party’s top job in 2012.

11. Like most other parts of the Chinese administration, the hierarchy of party schools does not constitute a vertically integrated unitary organization, but is a much more loosely bound “system” without a direct chain of command that runs from top to bottom. Although lower-level party schools are coordinated and guided by higher levels, they are only directly answerable to the local party committee of their administrative area. Budgetary funding
also comes wholly from the local administration’s cadre training budget. In addition, party schools often have considerable self-raised income, for instance from courses and degrees programmes offered outside their obligations laid down in the local cadre training plan, but crucially are not funded by higher level administrations or party schools.

**Marketization and diversification of cadre training**

12. Since the mid-1990s, considerable proliferation of institutions and modalities of cadre training has been fostered. As a result, increased competition has given party committees much more choice in providers and types of training they can provide. Regular schools, universities and national or international exchanges offer courses that have taken over a considerable part of the market, largely at the expense of more traditional training at party schools. The curriculum of such courses is virtually devoid of political content and usually focuses on subjects such as management and leadership skills, economics, city planning, or law.

13. Even where ideological or policy-oriented training is concerned, the market share of particularly lower-level party schools has seriously been eroded. Increasingly, such schools become defunct and exist in name only. Special training courses aimed at key personnel, for instance, are increasingly entrusted to the Central Party School. Even more importantly, party committees at central and local levels have established new institutions (such as the four new central cadre academies in Shanghai, Jinggangshan, Yan’an and Dalian) in a deliberate attempt to increase competition even in this area, the very core of Leninist governance. Recently, an attempt has been made to revive some defunct party schools by making them branches of higher-level schools. It remains unclear whether this has had any perceptible effect.

14. Party schools are not passively watching as central initiatives and regular universities erode their traditional monopoly. Local schools in more remote and poorer parts of the country have indeed only limited options and indeed sometimes have become mere empty shells. However, schools in affluent and developed parts have entered the new market for commercial cadre training and other kinds of education, themselves becoming diversified providers of higher education and training. The Central Party School, for instance, has opened a commercial branch that offers training courses for cadres who otherwise would never have been able to gain acceptance on one of the school’s regular courses.

**Effect of training and challenges for the future**

15. Marketization and diversification have been encouraged in response to problems with conventional training in party schools. These include sub-standard teaching staff, an ossified curriculum insufficiently attuned to the challenges of China’s modern and open society and economy, lack of zeal and tokenism among trainees, and the perception that training is only a reward and entitlement. Among the central leadership there seems to be a consensus that conventional training has not delivered what it should: selecting promising candidates for promotion, monitoring and controlling the party-state’s own personnel, ensuring ideological discipline, combating corruption and sloth, teaching management skills and knowledge required of pro-active leaders of China’s complex and entrepreneurial administration.
16. The response has been investing more rather than less resources in training, making China’s administration arguably the most extensively and intensively trained one in the world. It is undeniable that cadres in China are immeasurably better qualified and equipped for leadership than ever before. China is now a country ruled by professional experts rather than revolutionary ideologues: contemporary China is Mao Zedong’s worst nightmare – communism deteriorating into a self-serving bureaucratic elite – come true.

17. However, problems with the CCP’s approach to cadre training persist. The reasons for this are both of a practical and a more fundamental nature. Practically speaking, there is surprisingly little information available on the efficacy and effect of the different forms and modalities of training. It might, for instance, be true that commercial courses at regular universities or abroad deliver the goods better than conventional courses at party schools, but there is hardly any evidence, just a consensus that this must be the case.

18. More fundamentally, too many expectations are heaped onto training. Certain types of training might be an excellent way to impart certain specific knowledge and skills or to identify and groom promising talent, but it is unrealistic to expect that training can tackle endemic and systemic problems of corruption, favouritism, wastefulness and laziness. Structural problems require structural solutions and pinning one’s hope on (ideological) training is more a “tried and failed” solution reminiscent of the Maoist era than a strategy for the future.

The EU and party schools

19. Cadre training and its many institutions are one the easiest and promising entry points into the Chinese administration at all levels and in almost all domains of Chinese society. Training exposes cadres to new ideas and the outside world, an exposure that is actively encouraged and organized. Organizations and administrations from across the country are sending delegations of their cadres for short-term visits or formal training classes abroad. They have money to spend on courses, international exchanges and foreign site visits that teach them about the latest trends in developed countries. Party schools and other cadre training institutions at all levels also actively seek collaborative arrangements to exchange teachers, speakers and possibly even students and researchers.

20. Cadre training can serve as a crucial point of contact between European politicians, administrators and academics and the current and future leaders of Chinese People’s Republic (PRC). Universities and business schools in Europe, North America and Japan already have availed themselves of some of the opportunities. There is, however, much potential here to coordinate, encourage and systematize collaboration between European governments, enterprises, NGOs and academic institutions and the world of Chinese administration. As a first step, the EC might consider negotiating an MOU with one or more central cadre training institutions (Central Party School, National School of Administration, the four cadre academies in Shanghai, Jinggangshan, Yan’an and Dalian). Furthermore, the EC could establish a point of contact in Brussels or Beijing that facilitates site visits, courses and briefings in Europe for visiting delegations of cadre-trainees and that in turn facilitates visits of European officials, teachers and researchers at cadre training institutes in China. The EC could also be instrumental in facilitating the flow of information within Europe, especially between academic and government institutions. Preliminary research ought to be commissioned to establish the extent of existing collaboration and the role that the European Commission and national and regional governments could play in coordinating and funding its future expansion.