

The strength of a weak organization

The Communist Youth League as a path to power in post-Mao China

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Key words

Chinese Communist Party ; elite renewal ; Communist Youth League ; political mobility ; factions

Abstract

How can a weak organization be a path to power? The Chinese Communist Youth League (CYL) lacks autonomy and coherence, yet it is seen as the cradle of one of the main factions within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). To understand this tension, I provide a novel account of the role played by the CYL in cadres' recruitment since the 1980s. Against explanations based on factional struggle, I argue that the rise of CYL affiliates is the by-product of the organization's weakness. As the Party appoints CYL heads, CCP leaders, at various levels and at different points in time, use the League to accelerate the promotion of their protégés. For years, this configuration has given Party bosses little incentive to dismantle this promotion path. However, as he concentrates power, Xi Jinping weakens this channel which could be used by potential competitors.

Introduction

Why is the Chinese Communist Youth League (*Zhongguo gongchan zhuyi qingnian tuan*, 中国共产主义青年团, hereafter CYL), an organization portrayed as weak, also presented as the cradle of one of the main factions within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)? The CYL is the Party's "assistant" (*zhushou*, 助手) in managing youth affairs.² It is similar in size to the

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² Congress of the Communist Youth League 2013.

CCP,³ with 87.5 million members by the end of 2015.⁴ There are CYL committees at every level of the Party-State hierarchy as well as in units with numerous young people, such as schools and universities.

Despite its size, the CYL is an organization “without power and funds” (*wuquan wuqian*, 无权无钱).⁵ The Party controls the recruitment of its leaders: Although the League's Central Committee formally elects the central-level CYL secretaries, it is the CCP Politburo Standing Committee that actually selects them. This is reproduced at lower levels.⁶ Beyond lacking autonomy, the CYL lacks funding. As a matter of comparison, the 2015 budget of the central CYL (583,8 million RMB) stands for only 26 per cent of the 2015 budget of another mass organization of the CCP, the All-China Federation of Trade-Unions (2 billion RMB).⁷ In addition to its organizational weakness, studies have stressed the League's limited appeal among young people, and the decline of its political indoctrination role since the 1980s.⁸

The CYL plays, however, an essential role in political recruitment. As the Party's “reserve force” (*houbeijun*, 后备军) it has a dual function regarding the recruitment and training of Chinese Communist Party members and officials. First, it recruits League members, young people of 14 to 28 years old. After being screened and trained, some of its members eventually become CCP members. Yet, CYL membership covers around 25% of its age-group and is hence too broad to provide any clear advantage for a political career.⁹ Second, the CYL recruits young cadres who lead the organization. They are managed like civil servants and are generally both CYL and CCP members. Many of them later pursue their careers in the Party-State. Between 1922 and 2012, 34.59 per cent of CCP Central Committee members had previous working experience as CYL officials.¹⁰

The League's role as a promotion channel for officials has grown over time. CYL officials have been portrayed as winners of the cadre system reforms the Party-State initiated in the 1980s.¹¹ However, no study analyzes systematically this evolution and the mechanisms driving it. Contrary to scholars who see in this phenomenon the rise of a cohesive “Youth League Faction,” or *tuanpai* (团派),¹² I argue that the promotion of numerous CYL affiliates to Party-

³ The CCP had close to 88.75 million members by the end of 2015 (Financial Times 2016).

⁴ Xinhua 2016.

⁵ Interviews with CYL officials, Nanjing, Guiyang, Beijing, 2014-2015.

⁶ Kou 2007.

⁷ Central Communist Youth League 2015; All-China Federation of Trade-Unions 2015.

⁸ Rosen 1985, Tsimonis 2018.

⁹ Zhang 2013.

¹⁰ Chen 2016, 4.

¹¹ Li 2001.

¹² Li 2016.

State leadership positions is the by-product of the CYL's organizational weakness in the context of the CCP's rejuvenation policy.

CYL leaders are both highly ranked, as the heads of a primary mass organization, and quite young, as they are in charge of youth issues. In the age-based promotion system that emerged in the 1980s, this unique situation has a significant resonance on their future careers. Besides, CCP leaders control this promotion channel and use it as a springboard to accelerate the promotion of their protégés. By contrast to the stronghold of a specific faction, Party-State leaders at different times and in different localities can use this promotion channel to their advantage. As a result, the CYL is for the Party-State a stable promotion channel allowing to recruit and screen young talents.

The CYL's lack of autonomy from the Party makes it however very sensitive to policy changes. The configuration which allows this weak organization to play key political functions remains fragile. To limit competition, Xi Jinping (习近平) has been in fact weakening this promotion channel that can be used by potential rivals.

I provide a unique account of the role played by the CYL as a promotion channel from the 1980s. My analysis is based on fourteen months of field-research conducted in Beijing, Nanjing and, Guiyang, between 2011 and 2015. Following a snowball sampling method, I conducted 121 interviews with actors affiliated to the Communist Youth League at different levels of the polity. Relying on these interviews and biographical data, I reconstructed the trajectories of CYL cadres and their working environment.

I first highlight the CYL's lack of autonomy and why it is not a separate nexus of power within the Chinese Party-State. I then document the rise of the CYL as a key promotion channel in post-Mao China and demonstrate that its resilience results from its organizational weakness and dependence on the CCP. Finally, I describe the changes happening under Xi Jinping and how they might challenge the role played by the CYL as a “reserve force.”

The Youth League has “no power and no funds.”

The Chinese Communist Youth League organized its first National Congress in 1922.¹³ That same year, the Party issued a “Resolution on the question of the youth movement” to limit the League's political autonomy.¹⁴ The League's fate has since been firmly linked to the CCP.

¹³ It was then named the Socialist Youth League. In practice, its first cell was created in 1920 (Graziani 2014).

¹⁴ Graziani 2014, 136.

It was first a vital tool in the CCP's struggle for power. After 1949, it was transformed into a governing instrument to manage young people's activities. Its relationship with the Party became problematic during the Cultural Revolution as the CYL was accused of bourgeois revisionism.¹⁵ The CYL was guilty "by association:"¹⁶ as the Party was by-passed by rebel organizations, the CYL was replaced by the Red Guards. It stopped its activities in 1966. The provincial CYL committees were reestablished in 1973, followed by the national organization in 1978.¹⁷

In the 1980s, Party-State reformers thought that loosening Party control was essential for the CYL to remain relevant to young people.¹⁸ They argued that the decreasing ideological hegemony of the CCP, and the emergence of new channels of social mobility in the 1980s, had led the CYL to lose its appeal among Chinese youth.¹⁹ A reform project was put forward in 1988 to make the CYL more autonomous.²⁰ But a year later, the Tiananmen movement embodied the CYL's failure to control young people. The League was criticized as too indulgent towards the students and too loosely organized in the 1980s.²¹ In 1980, the League already admitted that 30 per cent of its 2.2 million local units countrywide were poorly organized or even paralyzed.²² Moreover, studies showed how CYL cells on campus facilitated the student mobilizations.²³ The Tiananmen movement led the CCP to set aside the reform of the CYL.²⁴

Ever since 1989, officials have been regularly calling for the strengthening of the CCP's supervision over the CYL.²⁵ Along these lines, the CYL First Secretary He Junke (贺军科) declared at the 2018 National Congress of the CYL: "CYL work often does not live up to the standards of the new era (...). The CYL still has weak foundations at the grassroots."²⁶ His speech was in line with recent criticisms of the League. In 2015, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection accused the CYL of being increasingly "bureaucratic, administrative, aristocratic and entertainment-oriented."²⁷ In a recent book compiling his comments on youth

¹⁵ Ibid.; Healy 1982.

¹⁶ Funnell 1970, 126.

¹⁷ Healy 1982.

¹⁸ Rosen 1985.

¹⁹ Ibid.; Gold 1991.

²⁰ Goldman 1994.

²¹ Li D. 2007.

²² Rosen 1985.

²³ Ding 1994, 99.

²⁴ Goldman 1994.

²⁵ Gold 1991.

²⁶ He 2018.

²⁷ Central Commission for Discipline Inspection 2016.

issues, Xi Jinping warned the CYL against “empty slogans” (*konghan kouhao*, 空喊口号) and the risk of becoming an “empty shell” (*kongke*, 空壳). He also argues for more Party control.²⁸

Xi’s proposition amounts to a deepening of the status quo. CCP committees already manage CYL committees at every level of the polity. From the local to the central level, the CCP is in charge of appointing CYL leaders. In the “one-level downward” cadre management system,²⁹ and similarly to the way it treats its own departments, the CCP committee at the corresponding level oversees the selection of local CYL leaders, who are one full rank below the Party committee leaders.³⁰ The CCP also has power over the League’s budget.³¹

The CYL is at every level dependent on the Party, and the upper-level CYL unit only has a supervision function, with very little power. The main channel through which the upper-level CYL committee can influence the units below is by transmitting to the relevant CCP committee a negative evaluation of CYL cadres.³² As explained by a Central CYL School staff member:

*A significant problem for the CYL is that it cannot have an integrated work plan. The central CYL policies are only partially implemented at the local levels as the upper echelons have no power over officials' promotions (...). If a local CYL committee must choose between conflicting orders given by the upper-level CYL committee and by the local CCP committee, it will follow the Party.*³³

Chinese specialists of the CYL widely share this diagnosis. Zheng Changzhong, a former CYL official now based at Fudan University, warns that the CYL is “marginalized” (*bianyuanhua*, 边缘化) at the local level as it lacks resources and because its officials do not adequately follow central CYL instructions.³⁴

Overall, the CYL is in a situation of organizational “juniority”.³⁵ It is unfavorably embedded in Party-State hierarchies, which leads to subordination and disempowerment. It lacks autonomy as well as coherence, two critical features of an institution.³⁶ How can it then be the Party’s “reserve force?”

²⁸ Xi 2017.

²⁹ Zeng, 2015

³⁰ Congress of the Communist Youth League 2013.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Interviews with CYL officials, Nanjing, Guiyang, Beijing, 2014-2015.

³³ Interview with Central CYL School staff, Beijing, June 2013.

³⁴ Zheng 2008.

³⁵ Tsimonis 2018.

³⁶ Huntington 1968.

The League is not a separate nexus of power

Despite the League's organizational weakness, a branch of literature highlights how many former CYL officials have been promoted to top positions in the Party. These authors explain this phenomenon by the development of a Youth League Faction (*tuanpai*), first under Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) in the 1980s and then under Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) in the 2000s.³⁷

The *tuanpai* literature implicitly develops a cyclical narrative of CYL affiliates' rise to CCP leadership during the post-Mao era. During a first phase, many CYL affiliates were promoted within the Party thanks to the support of Hu Yaobang, former central CYL secretary (1952-1966) and General Secretary of the CCP between 1980 and 1987. He used the CYL to promote officials he could trust, as part of the rehabilitation process and the rejuvenation policy. This phase ended with Hu Yaobang's demise. The fall of Hu Yaobang harmed the careers of several officials he promoted from the CYL.³⁸ Two years later, his death triggered the Tiananmen movement. The CYL leadership appeared too favorable towards the student movement and was criticized for it.³⁹ By the late 1980s, the promotion of CYL officials to top Party positions thus seemed to have lost its political momentum. A second phase of the *tuanpai*'s rise took place when Hu Jintao, also former central CYL secretary (1982-85), became the CCP General Secretary in 2002. According to Cheng Li, the *tuanpai* became a cohesive group formed around Hu Jintao and constituted of former CYL leaders.⁴⁰

The emergence of the Youth League as a promotion channel to leadership positions in the post-Mao era is evident when looking at the evolution of the CCP Central Committee and Politburo members' background. Figure 1 illustrates this trend by displaying the percentage of former central CYL officials in the CCP Central Committee and Politburo from the 8th CCP Congress of 1956 until the 19th Congress of 2017.⁴¹ These bodies, which include respectively around 300 and 20 members, represent the Party elite.

³⁷ Li 2016; Payette 2016; Bo 2007.

³⁸ Ai and Chen 2009.

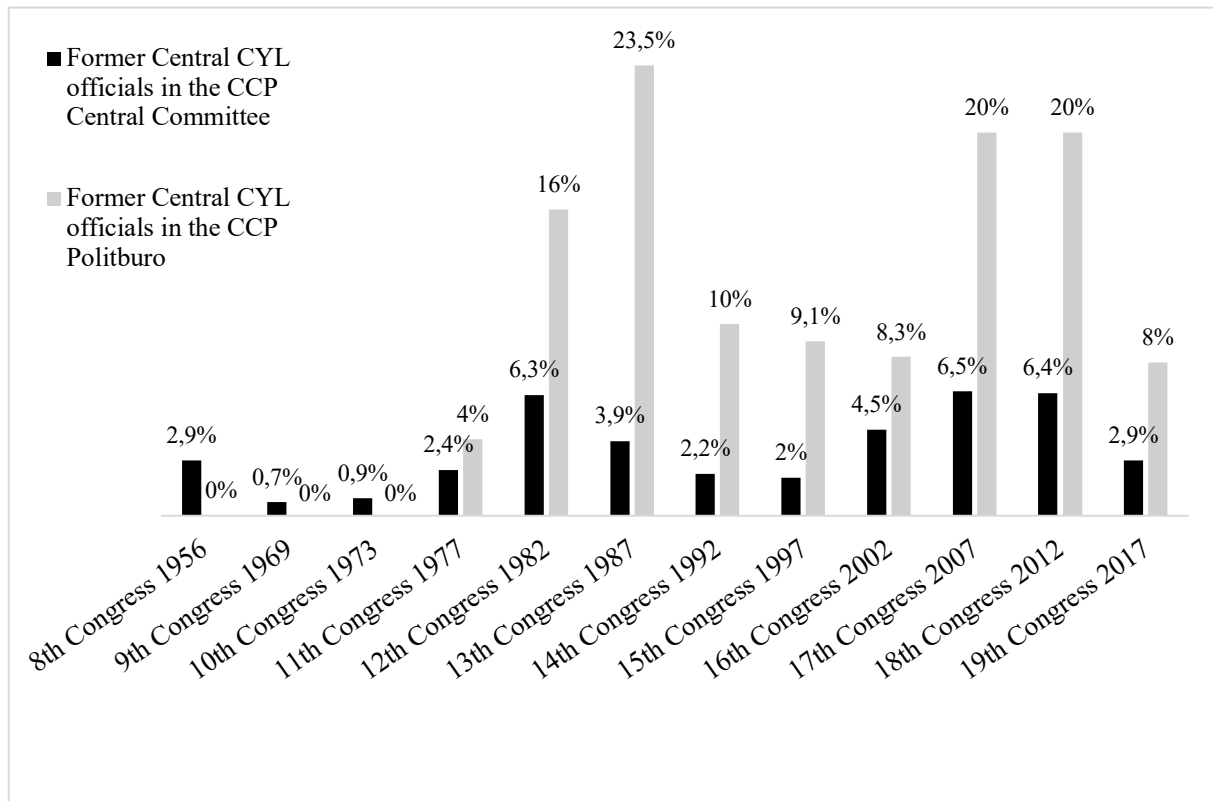
³⁹ Li 2007.

⁴⁰ Li 2016.

⁴¹ I chose to focus on officials with experience in the central administration of the CYL because, by contrast to local CYL leaders who are managed by local CCP committees, the promotion of central CYL leading cadres is decided by central CCP leaders.

Figure 1

Former central-level CYL cadres in the CCP Central Committee and Politburo



Sources: Database compiled by Victor Shih and Jonghyuk Lee (<http://www.jonghyuklee.com/database>, consulted on 7 May 2018) and the website *Chinavita*.com.

Looking at Figure 1, the percentage of former central-level CYL officials who made it later to the CCP Central Committee and Politburo skyrocketed in the 1980s. However, the data does not support a purely factional explanation for this increase. First, when looking at the number of CYL affiliates who made it to the CCP Central Committee, the primary difference is between the Mao and post-Mao eras, 1976 onwards. By contrast, the variations that factional struggles supposedly explain within the post-Mao era are secondary. This is even clearer when looking at the percentage of former central-level CYL officials who joined the Politburo: While there was none during the Mao era, such appointments became common afterward. Second, the main upsurge of former CYL officials in the 1980s took place at the 13th Congress of 1987, ten months after Hu Yaobang's demise. Third, although former CYL officials have been less represented in the Central Committee and Politburo after the 13th Congress, this did not fundamentally change with the 16th Congress of 2002 and the nomination of Hu Jintao as Party leader. Fourth, the ratio of former CYL cadres was unusually high under Hu Jintao at the 17th Congress, but almost as many were also appointed at the 18th Congress of 2012, even though

Hu Jintao was not in power anymore. The ratio of CYL affiliates who made it to the CCP leadership however drops at the 19th Party Congress. As I show in the last part of the article, Xi Jinping has been weakening the role played by the CYL as a promotion channel.

Beyond its cyclical narrative, the factional narrative is based on an alleged opposition between two coalitions within the Party. Cheng Li describes the *tuanpai* as a group of like-minded officials, interested in social policies. He presents this faction as competing with the “elitist” princelings, the offspring of Party and military leaders from the Mao era.⁴² This dichotomy is far from obvious. Some princelings may have been competing with CYL affiliates for positions. Yet, the idea that these groups are fundamentally different does not resist to empirical examination. Several key members of the supposed *tuanpai* faction also have a princeling background. This was true of Chen Haosu (陈昊苏) as well as He Guangwei (何光伟) in the 1980s, and later of Liu Yandong (刘延东).⁴³ Although a statistical account of the CYL officials’ family background is missing, several of the cadres I interviewed noted that, since the 2000s, an increasing number of high ranked officials’ children started to work for the CYL, especially at the central level.⁴⁴ Taking these overlaps into account, as well as the difficulty to distinguish these groups’ competing political agendas, we should question the dichotomy between a “populist” *tuanpai* and a group of “elitist” children of officials.⁴⁵

Factional features are important to explain the rise of some CYL affiliates, but they cannot explain the phenomenon as a whole. The assumption that all CYL leaders since the 1980s constitute an overall faction with a shared foe remains unproven. With these limitations in mind, Kou Chien-wen has argued that both factional and organizational effects are at play in the rise of CYL affiliates. For Kou, the CYL produces a pool of talents from which the *tuanpai* can recruit followers.⁴⁶ Kou's argument is an application to the CYL of Andrew Nathan's point about factions developing on organizations like on "trellises." For Nathan, external factional networks, based on clientelist ties, can attach themselves to, or emerge from, organizations. This facilitates the development of the faction, as it can use the organization's communication flows and can recruit among its members.⁴⁷ The way Chiang Ching-kuo used the Kuomintang's

⁴² Li 2016.

⁴³ Bo 2007, 195.

⁴⁴ Interview with former central-level CYL official, Central CYL School, Beijing, March 2015; Interview with district-level CYL official, Beijing, June 2012.

⁴⁵ Li 2016.

⁴⁶ Kou 2007.

⁴⁷ Nathan 1973.

various youth organizations, which he headed in the mainland in the 1930s and Taiwan in the 1950s-1960s, to develop his personal network illustrates this phenomenon.⁴⁸

The trellis configuration requires the organization to have some autonomy from other political structures. Yet, CYL leaders are selected by the Party leadership and not the League itself. They often come from outside the League, generally from a local CCP leadership position, and get transferred to another Party-State unit after a few years in their position. This was the case for the last three central CYL First Secretaries: Hu Chunhua (胡春华) appointed in 2006, Lu Hao appointed in 2008, and Qin Yizhi (秦宜智) appointed in 2013. As a result, the CYL is not an autonomous promotion channel and cannot fit the trellis configuration. By contrast to Chiang Ching-kuo's personal faction, which survived the organizations, the CYL as a promotion channel survived Hu Yaobang's or Hu Jintao's political side-lining, and it has continuously brought new blood to the CCP. Factional networks cannot explain the resilience of the promotion channel. The CYL's lack of autonomy and coherence prevent it from becoming a separate nexus of power.

The Youth League as a path to power

Rather than a factional stronghold, I argue that the League has become a regularized path to leadership positions in the post-Mao era and has been used across the board. The CYL became increasingly important as a promotion channel in the context of the CCP's rejuvenation policy. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) called for the promotion of "revolutionary, younger, more educated, and more technically specialized" officials. The Party-State implemented new promotion rules. Contrary to the Mao era, class origin was no longer emphasized and education became vital.⁴⁹ New entry and exit mechanisms were developed to accelerate cadres' turnover and rejuvenate the Party. The establishment of a retirement system⁵⁰ was followed by the development of new rules concerning the age of leading cadres,⁵¹ which are still in place today. As highlighted by Kou and Tsai, age limits became a unique and complicated system affecting

⁴⁸ Liu 2010.

⁴⁹ Ch'i 1991.

⁵⁰ Manion 1993.

⁵¹ Leading cadres are the highest ranked Party-State figures at every level of the polity. The distinction between leading and non-leading cadre takes form within a structured ranking system. Leading cadre position can start at the section leadership level (*keji*, 科级), the equivalent of a township leader, and go all the way to the State leadership level (*guoji*, 国级). There are currently around 2 million leading cadres in the Chinese Party-State (Edin 2003; Chan and Gao 2018).

promotions at all levels of the polity.⁵² The implementation of these age-related rules went together with the development of regulated cadre tenures: officials must serve a minimum set of years in every position to prevent accelerated promotions based on favoritism. Also, cadres cannot skip ranks and must be promoted from one level up to the next. These regulations are not always fully implemented, but they overall rule the cadre system.⁵³

With the CCP's rejuvenation policy, the CYL's role as the Party's "reserve force" was brought back in. This official function of the organization had been removed from the CYL charter in 1957,⁵⁴ and included again in 1982.⁵⁵ More significantly, the CYL mirrored the Party and established in 1982 age limits for its leading cadres.⁵⁶ The official reason was that CYL leaders could not be much older than League members, but it had a significant impact on their trajectories. As the leaders of a key mass organization, CYL leaders are highly ranked and they find themselves with an age advantage when transferring to Party-State positions. For instance, when the CYL Central Committee First Secretary, who cannot be older than 45 when appointed, is transferred to a similarly ranked position within the Party-State, he or she generally becomes a provincial leader, at a much younger age than other officials. Under a system with strict age restrictions, this advantage is precious for CYL officials' careers.⁵⁷

These changes have led to the continuous promotion of CYL leaders to Party-State leadership positions in the post-Mao era. This is transparent when following the careers of former central CYL secretaries. A new secretariat of around ten members is selected at the CYL national congress every five years. Although the First Secretary is generally an alternate member of the CCP's Central Committee, most secretaries are too junior and will not even be considered to join for another 15 years or so as Party-State officials. Still, as shown in Figure 2, it is striking that the vast majority of them eventually become CCP Central Committee members.

⁵² Kou and Tsai 2014, 157.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Liu Shaoqi, then deputy chairman of the CCP, explained this removal in 1957 by the fact that the term "reserve force" might let young people think that any CYL member would eventually become a CCP member. He wanted to further emphasize the "advanced" nature of CCP and its superiority over the CYL (Zhang 2013, 17–23).

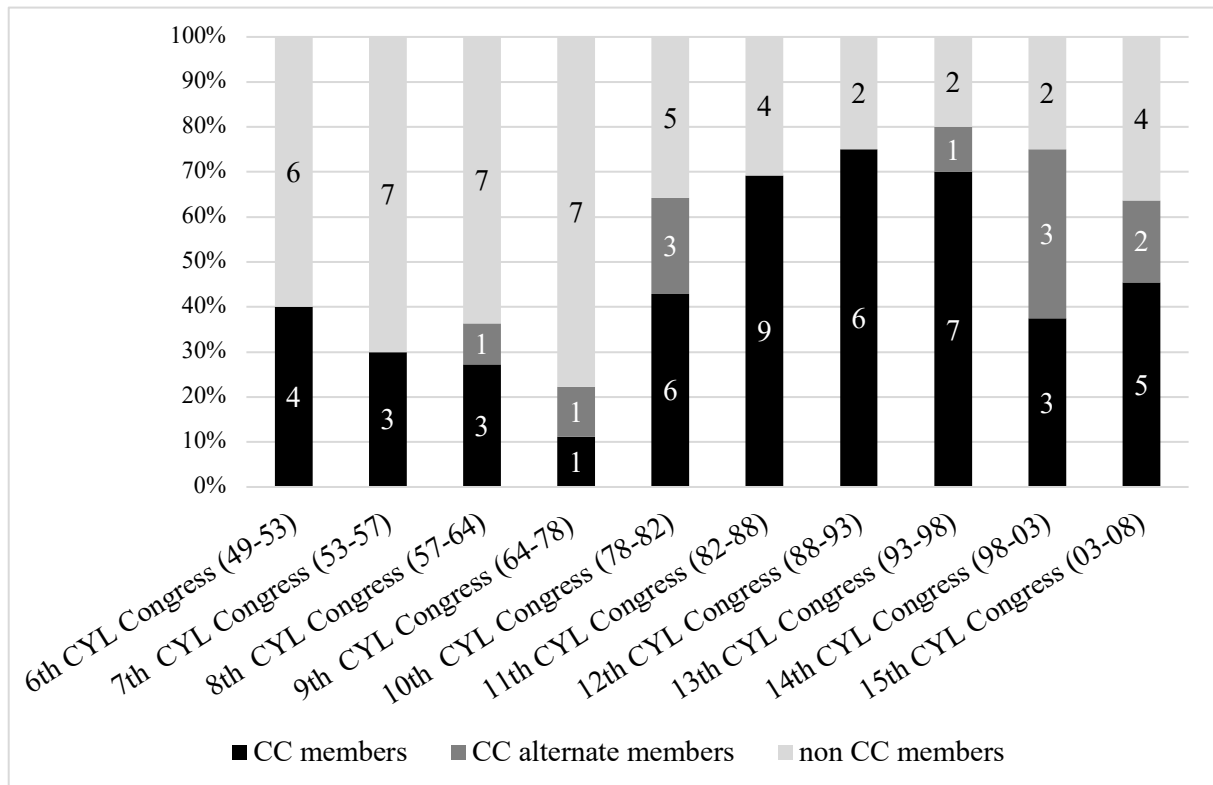
⁵⁵ Congress of the Communist Youth League 1982.

⁵⁶ Chinese Communist Party Organization Department 1982.

⁵⁷ Payette, 2016; Kou and Tsai 2014

Figure 2

Former central-level CYL secretaries who joined the CCP Central Committee



Source: name list of central CYL secretaries (Central Government website 2016), and their career data which I found in their official resumes, available on Xinhuanet.com, or in the ones compiled by Baidu.baiké (at the condition that the data was sourced from media reports or official websites).

From 1949 to 1978, only a few former CYL leaders made it to the Central Committee at all. Starting with the 10th Congress of the CYL (1978), and especially after the 11th (1982), the majority of central CYL secretaries made it later in their careers to the Party Central Committee. Of the eight CYL secretaries nominated at the 11th Congress of the CYL, only two did not make it. Among them, Feng Jun died too young to have reached the Central Committee. The same pattern holds for the following congresses. Regarding the 14th and 15th CYL Congresses, one should keep in mind that the concerned officials are still relatively young and might make it to the Central Committee in the future. I did not include the 16th (2008) and 17th CYL Congress (2013) in the current analysis as most of the subsequent CYL leaders are too junior to be appointed to the CCP Central Committee.

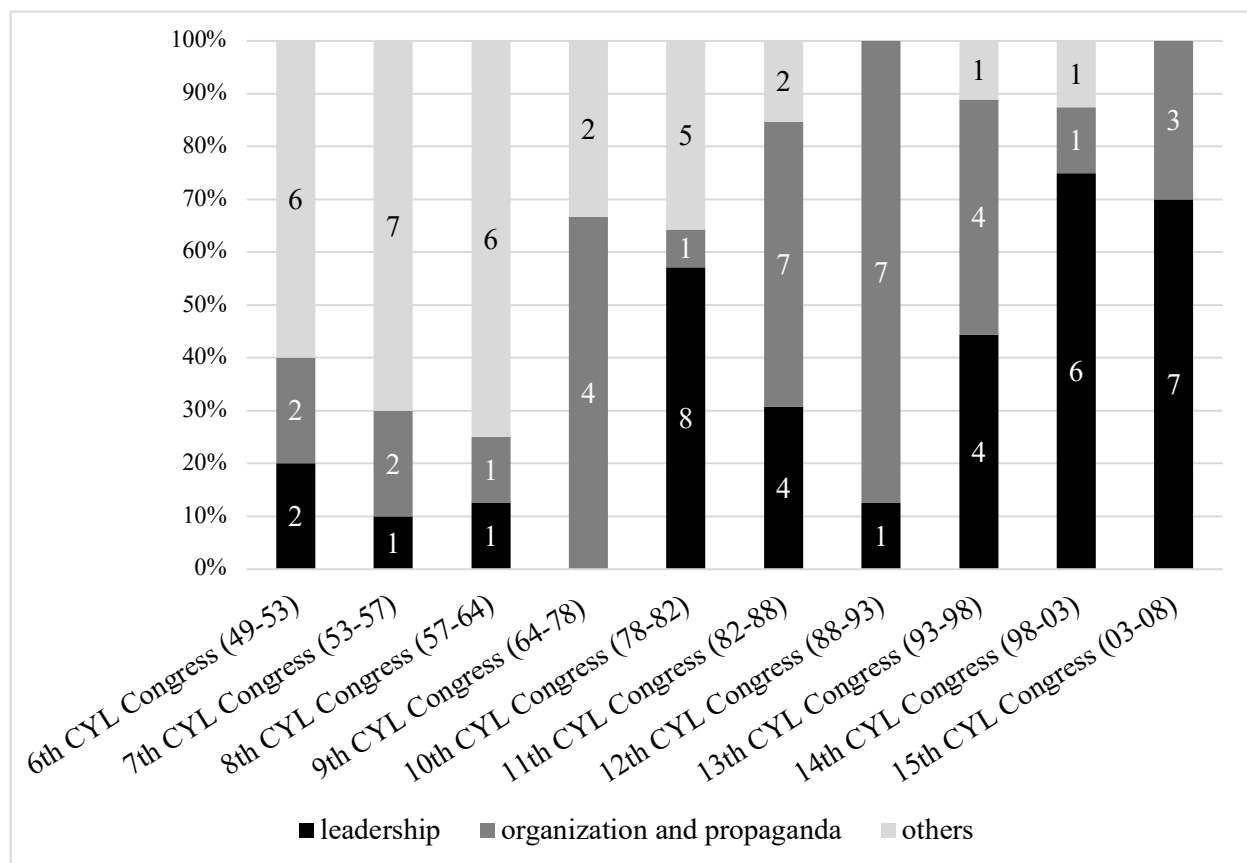
The League's situation is very different from other mass organizations. Looking at the careers of former All-China Federation of Trade-Unions leaders, chairmen and vice-chairmen from 1978 to 2013, only 24.7 per cent of them eventually made it to the CCP Central

Committee.⁵⁸ CYL leaders have a brighter future despite being lesser ranked than Trade-Union Leaders. The CYL Central Committee First Secretary is a ministerial-level official with only an alternate membership in the CCP Central Committee, whereas the Trade-Union Chairman is generally a Politburo member with a rank of Deputy State Leader.

Furthermore, former CYL officials have increasingly been promoted directly towards leadership positions in the Party-State. Figure 3 illustrates this trend. During the Mao era, transfer options for central CYL leaders were diverse, including propaganda, technical, or military positions. Only a few secured leadership positions, generally as local CCP secretaries. After 1978, the ratio of former CYL leaders transferred to such positions increased considerably. Some of them continue to be appointed to the Propaganda or Organization Departments, but most of them are promoted as local leaders. They generally join provincial leadership teams.

Figure 3

Types of positions former central-level CYL secretaries obtained immediately after leaving the CYL

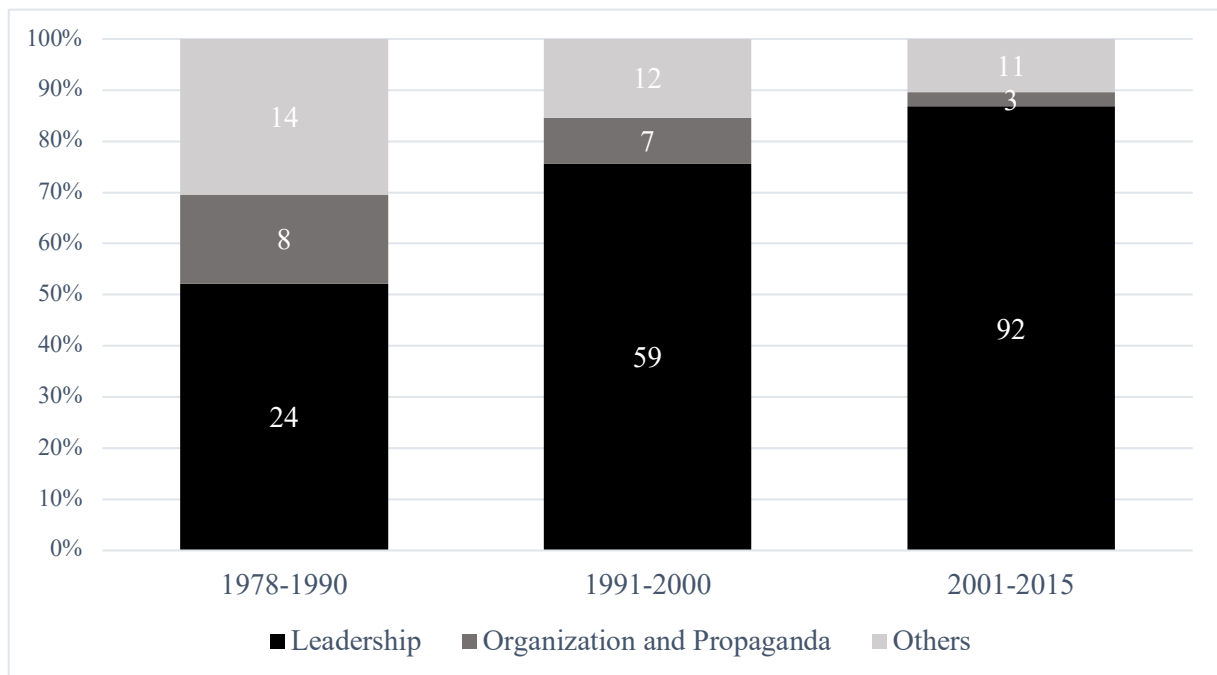


Source: see Figure 2

⁵⁸ Source: Several name-lists for former All-China Federation of Trade-Unions leaders are online (for example: All-China Federation of Trade-Unions 2017). I cross-examined the lists and based the analysis on their career data, following the procedure explained in Figure 2.

At the local level, CYL affiliates are also increasingly promoted to leadership positions. Figure 4 shows that in the 1980s, provincial-level CYL leaders (secretaries and deputy secretaries of CYL committees in provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities) were transferred to various positions, ranging from agriculture to culture. It changed in the 1990s: Almost 80 per cent of the provincial CYL leaders appointed between 1991 and 2000 directly became local Party-State leaders. This trend accentuated in the 2000s. Provincial CYL secretaries are indeed in a perfect position to become a future local leader: They already ranked as bureau director and are generally below 40 years old.⁵⁹ Most of them become city-level CCP deputy secretaries.⁶⁰ On the long run, many former CYL cadres joined local leadership structures. Looking at the provincial Party secretaries and governors in charge by March 2015, 45 per cent of them had work experience as CYL officials.⁶¹

Figure 4
Types of positions former provincial-level CYL leaders have obtained immediately after leaving the CYL



Source: Name lists of former provincial CYL secretaries, which are available online (see for example: <https://freewechat.com/a/MzIxNzU3MjM2NA==/2247488044/1>. Accessed on 29 July 2019). I cross-examined them and checked them with local CYL officials. I analyzed their career data using the same sources as Figure 2

⁵⁹ The median age for CYL provincial leaders was 38 years old between 2003 and 2013 (Pan 2013).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Source: The official CVs of the cadres found on *Xinhuanet.com* and *Chinavita.com*.

CYL positions remain only one step in officials' careers and obviously cannot explain their whole trajectories. Still, these results confirm that, starting from the 1980s, the CYL became a regularized promotion channel to top Party-State positions. This phenomenon is however tied to a specific and fragile configuration founded on age-based rules, which raises the question of its resilience over time.

All leaders have their own *tuanpai*

I argue that the unique promotion opportunities provided to League officials are a by-product of the CYL's weakness. The CYL's organizational dependence on the Party leads to close relationships between CYL leaders and CCP leaders at the same echelon. CYL leaders can join CCP standing committee meetings as observers,⁶² and they report to the Party leadership regularly. A local CYL cadre I interviewed summarized this relationship:

*As a CYL secretary, you can meet local CCP leaders daily. You can talk to the CCP secretary, regularly exchange with him. He therefore knows you well, your skills and qualities. This is the most unique feature of being a CYL leader.*⁶³

The relationship with CCP leaders is particularly important, as they appoint CYL leaders, evaluate their work, and eventually promote them to Party-State positions within their jurisdiction.⁶⁴ For example, a provincial-level Party secretary can decide to appoint the CYL secretary of the province as deputy mayor of a middle-sized city within the province.

This is not true for all League officials. By contrast to leading officials who are managed by the CCP at the same level, lower ranked CYL officials are administered by the League. They cannot rely on the CCP leadership to promote them. Most of their promotion options are within the CYL itself, and when they reach the age limits for CYL positions, they need to transfer to another organization. The League rarely has the means to help them search for another post, thus they must rely on themselves. The CYL fast-track therefore only functions for leading cadres. This dual-track within the CYL echoes the elite dualism literature which describes how only some Party-State officials are "pulled" to the top.⁶⁵

⁶² Congress of the Communist Youth League 2013.

⁶³ Interview with city-level CYL official, Nanjing, February 2015.

⁶⁴ Committees are set up for appointments and promotions, but the local Party Secretary has the last word (Zeng 2015).

⁶⁵ Payette 2016; Zang 2004.

For the chosen few, the relationship with the CCP officials is all the more critical as evaluations of CYL officials are highly subjective. As put by one of my interviewees:

*CYL leaders have objectives and they submit annual reports to CCP leaders on how they attained them. However, the Party leaders barely read them. The evaluation is very subjective; what is essential is to know how to manage the boss and his feelings towards you. You have to make yourself useful to him.*⁶⁶

Since the 1980s, the Party-State cadre management system has progressively been systematized to integrate precise methods and criteria for the evaluation of officials' work.⁶⁷ Yet, this evolution did not really apply to CYL officials. The CCP leadership evaluates the CYL secretary and deputy secretaries at the corresponding level, but beyond organizing the activities themselves, there is no clear standard on the impact these activities should have. The evaluations are not based on any quantifiable target. Moreover, as mentioned above, the policies and projects initiated by the central CYL do not always have to be implemented by local CYL committees. Due to the CYL's lack of coherence, they follow instead the priorities set by local CCP committees.

In the absence of clear performance targets, CYL officials have to please their superiors. My interviewees stressed the subjective nature of evaluation and the importance to efficiently showcase one's own work. They put forward the importance of rhetorical and writing skills, as well as "charisma" (*meili*, 魅力).⁶⁸ As one official put it: "the most important is to speak and write well, to learn to defend your work. When you have no power and no fund you have to be a sweet talker."⁶⁹ CYL officials like to stress their abilities to organize numerous activities with little means in order to assert their legitimacy and compensate for their lack of specific expertise.⁷⁰

CYL officials must be noticed by their superiors to be promoted. They organize massive events to catch their eyes. The "Youth Volunteers Operation" (*qingnian zhiyuanzhe xingdong*, 青年志愿者行动), launched in 1993 and still running, exemplifies this phenomenon. This project was put forward by Li Keqiang (李克强), then First Secretary of the CYL and now PRC's Premier. With this project, the CYL recruits young volunteers and channels them toward various educational, social or environmental projects. In addition to day-to-day activities, it also

⁶⁶ Interview with provincial-level CYL official, Guiyang, April 2015.

⁶⁷ Edin 2003.

⁶⁸ Interviews with CYL officials, Nanjing, Guiyang, Beijing, 2014-2015.

⁶⁹ Interview with city-level CYL official, Nanjing, February 2015.

⁷⁰ Interviews with CYL officials, Nanjing, Guiyang, Beijing, 2014-2015.

recruits volunteers for major events: 1.7 million volunteers took part in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. All in all, from 2001 to 2013 the CYL recruited 40 million volunteers at different levels.⁷¹ CYL officials present this operation as one of Li Keqiang's key successes.⁷²

Projects can lead to competition. During my fieldwork, the Nanjing CYL took an active part in the organization of the Nanjing 2015 Youth Olympic Games. The CYL recruited and managed around 20,000 volunteers for the event.⁷³ To demonstrate commitment, the Nanjing CYL committee set up a special office employing around 400 temporary staff members. However, the Jiangsu CYL Committee tried to win control of the event to share the spotlight.⁷⁴

To catch their superiors' eyes, local CYL leaders widely advertise their work. Here is how a CYL official replied when I asked him why he published so many articles in local media and internal Party publications:

*Rather than content, the most important is to show that you are active, as you have to put yourself forward to be promoted. You have to use the media, or any channel through which the local and central leaders, can hear about you. It also gives you things to say to your boss in meetings, and you can show that you understand correctly the directives coming from the top.*⁷⁵

By contrast to the literature highlighting the meritocratic features of the Chinese Party-State,⁷⁶ studies have stressed the importance of pleasing one's superior to get promoted.⁷⁷ For CYL officials, the lack of clear evaluation criteria further strengthens their dependence on their superiors' subjectivity.

As a result of the close connection between CYL and CCP leaders, CCP secretaries at all levels use the CYL to promote their affiliates. They may appoint as CYL leader someone with whom they already have a personal tie, to further cultivate this tie, or someone with whom they want to build a relationship. These strong ties contrast with the weak ones among the different levels of the League itself.⁷⁸ When CCP heads appoint cadres as CYL leaders, they grant them a career advantage over their colleagues. They also develop their network within the Party-State as these protégés might rise to high positions in the future. All Party leaders can

⁷¹ China Youth Daily 2013.

⁷² Interview with former central-level CYL official, Central CYL School, Beijing, March 2015; Interview with district-level CYL official, Beijing, June 2012.

⁷³ China Youth Daily 2016.

⁷⁴ Interview with city-level CYL official, Nanjing, February 2015; Interview with provincial-level CYL official, Nanjing, February 2015.

⁷⁵ Interview with provincial-level CYL official, Guiyang, April 2015.

⁷⁶ Bell 2018.

⁷⁷ Li and Gore 2018.

⁷⁸ Granovetter 1973.

then build their own “Youth League faction.” Contrary to the *tuanpai* literature which emphasizes the ties created within the League, I argue that the strong ties created between CCP and CYL officials allow this weak organization to be a powerful path to power.

The League’s lack of autonomy also facilitates its resilience as a promotion channel. Since they can all use it as a fast-track to promote young officials they trust, Party leaders have little reason to question the specific status the CYL enjoys within the Chinese political system. They can purge the organization when they come to power to side-line their predecessor’s affiliates and to, once again, use the organization to promote their followers. After Hu Yaobang’s fall, several of his affiliates were indeed purged from the League.⁷⁹ A central leader concentrating power in his hands might however want to weaken this promotion channel which can also be used by potential competitors at the local level.

Young officials do not fare well under Xi Jinping

The CYL being dependent on the Party leadership, its status as a path to power is fragile. In past years, Xi Jinping has taken several steps towards limiting the role played by the League. In August 2016, the CCP Politburo Standing Committee put forward a restructuring of the League. The “Proposal on the Reform of the Central Youth League” underscores the Party’s control over the League and reforms its leadership organs.⁸⁰ The main features of the reform are summarized in this expression: “shrinkage at the top and replenishment below” (*jianshang buxia*, 减上补下). It implies a drastic decrease in CYL full-time personnel at the central and provincial levels, partially replaced by part-time and temporary transferred cadres, and a parallel increase in personnel at the county level. This reform limits the CYL’s resources and strengthens the CCP’s control over it.

The 2016 restructuring is a response to the criticisms of the CYL expressed by Xi Jinping, as mentioned in the first section.⁸¹ It goes with a further weakening of the organization. First, the central CYL’s budget was cut in almost half between 2015 and 2016. The central CYL lost control over some of its main volunteering activities, and the associated funding.⁸² Second, the central CYL is losing control over several of its associated structures: it has lost its shares in the companies China Travel Group and Cachet Pharmaceutical;⁸³ and the core of the China

⁷⁹ Li 2007.

⁸⁰ Central Communist Youth League 2016a.

⁸¹ Xi Jinping 2017

⁸² Central Communist Youth League 2016b.

⁸³ Yicai 2018.

Youth University of Political Studies, co-managed by the CYL and the Ministry of Education, has been absorbed into the newly founded University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.⁸⁴

These changes will probably limit the CYL's role as a promotion channel on the long run, especially at the central and provincial levels. The recent appointment of former CYL First Secretary Qin Yizhi as Deputy Director of the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine, symbolizes this change. This position is of lesser importance than the provincial Party-State leadership positions to which CYL heads are usually transferred.⁸⁵

We must understand this evolution within the context of Xi Jinping's attempt to reform the Party-State's elite renewal system. The age-based rules explained above are progressively being relaxed. They are less and less implemented at the local level.⁸⁶ A document issued 2014 on the promotion of leading cadres endorsed this change: It noted that age limits should not be used too strictly for personnel transfers.⁸⁷

Xi Jinping is also blocking various avenues facilitating the rapid promotion of young officials. In addition to the CYL, the "open selection" (*gongtui gongxuan*, 公推公选) mechanism, which allowed the rapid promotion of young officials, is impeded. This recruitment mechanism requires the recruiting unit to make a public announcement for vacant positions, open a procedure for all candidates who fulfill the conditions to submit job applications, and select them through written exams and interviews.⁸⁸ It was introduced in the 2000s to make the recruitment process more transparent as well as to bring new blood to leadership positions. In fact, "open selection" made it easier for young officials not to follow tenure regulations, and it became a well-known fast-track for young officials to get ahead in the Party.⁸⁹ The scope for "open selection" has been restricted from 2014 with the publication of a revised version of the "Work Regulation for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres." According to this document, it can only be used when the local unit cannot find suitable candidates internally. It is also no longer possible to transfer candidates across provinces for positions at the division director level (*chuji*, 处级) and below, which includes

⁸⁴ Xinhua 2017.

⁸⁵ South China Morning Post 2017a.

⁸⁶ Interviews with CYL officials, Nanjing, Guiyang, Beijing, 2014.

⁸⁷ Central Office of the Chinese Communist Party, 2014.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Kou and Tsai 2014.

most leading officials below 40 years old.⁹⁰ The 2019 revised version of that same document goes one step further and states that this mechanism should be used for appointments to deputy positions rather than full-ranked leading officials.

Officially, these changes aim at limiting the rapid promotion of inexperienced and unfit cadres who rely on personal ties to accelerate their careers. In practice they make the promotion process extremely difficult and “strict” (*yan*, 严), to paraphrase the *China Youth Daily*.⁹¹ As one of my interviewees mentioned:

*It is now very difficult to be promoted as a young official. Many people think about transferring to the private sector. Even I: I have been a CCP member since high school and a loyal CYL official, and I am now leaving.*⁹²

As he concentrates power,⁹³ Xi Jinping is weakening the promotion channels which could be used by other officials to develop their networks. He constrains the promotion of young officials and limits potential competition. Yet, by decreasing the importance of age-based rules and the level of cadre turnover, Xi Jinping risks accelerating the aging of the Party-State elite. This is not to say that young officials are not promoted to high-level positions anymore, but the absence of formalized promotion channel could make it rarer and increasingly based on patronage.⁹⁴ Illustrating this change, the Central Committee selected at the 19th Party Congress is the oldest in decades with an average age of 57, compared to 56.1 in 2012 and 53.5 in 2007.⁹⁵

The Party-State’s rejuvenation policy of the 1980s led to the development of a cadre management system largely based on age. In this context, CYL officials, and especially CYL leaders, find themselves in a favorable position as they are both young and highly ranked. CYL officials have a structural career advantage compared to other cadres, which facilitates their promotion to high-level positions.

The CYL’s role as a promotion channel has been widely accepted and maintained over time, not because the League emerged as a unified faction but as a result of its lack of autonomy

⁹⁰ Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, 2014.

⁹¹ China Youth Daily 2014.

⁹² Interview with district-level CYL official, Beijing, 2017.

⁹³ Shirk 2018.

⁹⁴ Doyon Forthcoming.

⁹⁵ South China Morning Post 2017b.

from the Party. At different points in their careers, young officials can use the CYL as a springboard to advance in the Party-State hierarchy. Meanwhile, Party leaders control the appointment and evaluation of CYL leaders and can promote their affiliates. Both recruits and recruiters can therefore use the CYL strategically and have little incentive to weaken this promotion channel.

This fast-track is essential to attract talented young people in a context where the Party-state does not have the monopoly of social mobility anymore, and other career choices are available. This echoes Svolik's work on the way authoritarian political parties manage to secure their members' loyalty by forcing them to invest in the organization for long periods before they can reap the benefits tied to leadership positions.⁹⁶

All in all, this unique configuration allows a weak CYL to play essential functions. It also makes it vulnerable. As Xi Jinping concentrates more power than his predecessors, he puts forward several reforms which constrain the CYL's role as a promotion channel. By doing so, he marginalizes a political springboard which could be used by potential rivals, and therefore limits both competition and elite renewal.

⁹⁶ Svolik 2012.

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Abstract:

中共；共青团；派系；政治精英；干部选拔

一个薄弱的政治机构怎样成为主要的选拔途径？尽管中国共产主义青年团缺乏自治权与一致性，它还是被视为中国共产党内部主要派系之一。为了解释这个矛盾现象，我对共青团自 1980 年代开始在干部选拔中的角色提供了一个

新的见解。与派系斗争解释不同，我认为共青团干部势力上升是共青团本身组织薄弱造成的。在指派共青团领导时，各地的共产党领导人以此为契机提挈自己的人马。正因为这样的安排，以往的共产党领导人没什么激励使这一上升通道解体。但是，考虑到这一通道会被潜在竞争者利用，习近平掌权后削弱了这一通道。