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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## **CHINA'S "YUPPIE CORPS"**

### **Part II**

#### **College Networks of the "Best and the Brightest"**

Beijing, China  
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Dear Peter,

A hundred China experts have said it before and a hundred will say it again, but it is no less true that a key to understanding Chinese politics, or to doing business in China, is to have a profound grasp of the Chinese term "*guanxi*."

*Guanxi* (pronounced *guan-shee*) means connection or network. If a politician wants to advance his career, he should have *guanxi* in high places; if an entrepreneur wishes to make a fortune, he needs to have *guanxi*, not only in business circles, but in political power as well. Intelligence and diligence help in life, but connections, or *guanxi*, are what really count. As the popular saying goes, "it's not what you know, it's who you know."

Effective networks in China are formed in various ways, for example, through shared experiences, through common beliefs and ideas, from the same birth place, or as an extended family. While all these forms of networks still exist, a particular kind of network – college ties – has become increasingly important in post-Mao China. As Andrew Nathan, a distinguished China expert at Columbia University, recently observed, the Chinese political elite is no longer an ideologically disciplined cadre, but it is composed of a group of technocrats – a network of the "best and the brightest" (*Journal of Democracy*, April 1993, p. 38).

The crucial role of college networks in elite recruitment is of course not uniquely Chinese, but has been widely recognized in many countries. For example, Eton

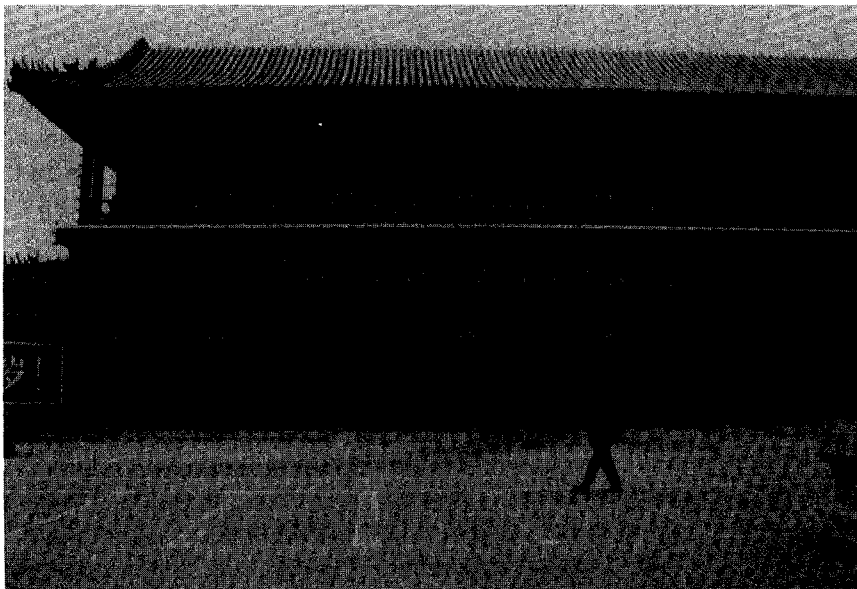
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College in Great Britain, the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA) in France, the Law School of Tokyo University (Todai) in Japan, the Doon School in India, the Universidad Catolica of Santiago in Chile (graduates in this school later became the well-known "Chicago Boys") have all been famous for engendering political networks. Likewise, China now has one educational establishment that surpasses the rest: Qinghua University. Indeed, there is no more telling example of the role of a college network in the rise of technocratic elites in post-Mao China than this institution.

Qinghua University (also spelled and pronounced "Tsinghua"), located in Beijing, is one of the most prestigious universities of science and engineering in the nation and is often recognized as "China's MIT." Qinghua has also become the most important cradle for technocrats in post-Mao China.

At the recent Party congress, twenty-nine Qinghua graduates and faculty members were selected for the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has a total of 319 members. More importantly, of the 22 Politburo seats, Qinghua graduates occupied four – including Zhu Rongji and Hu Jintao (two of the seven Standing Committee members). Qinghua's president, Zhang Xiaowen, is a member of the 14th Central Committee.



*Xinhuamen, Beijing – the headquarters of the Chinese government.  
People who work there are no longer revolutionary veterans, or ideologically disciplined cadres, but mainly a group of technocrats.*



*Qinghua University – the “cradle of Chinese technocrats.”*

*Qinghua was founded in 1911 by Americans with funds from the Boxer Indemnity. In its early days, it was called the Qinghua School, a preparatory institution for sending students to further study in the US. In 1928 Qinghua School was reorganized into National Qinghua University consisting of the colleges of arts, sciences, and law.*

*Soon after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, most of Qinghua's colleges for arts, law, and sciences were compressed and merged into Beijing University and other institutions. Qinghua absorbed all of the engineering departments of Beijing University and Yanjing (Yenching) University and became a multi-disciplinary university of engineering.*

*Qinghua has played a pivotal role in Chinese politics, repeatedly serving as a major battleground of conflicting viewpoints and rival political forces. Qinghua has experienced several “firsts” in major national political events during the past several decades:*

- The dichotomy of “red” and “expert” was first used in the context of Qinghua in the 1950s, with the anti-Rightist campaign there, making this dichotomy a central ideological issue in the country.*

- Qinghua was a breeding ground for the Cultural Revolution in 1966, when the Red Guards were first formed by students in the secondary school attached to Qinghua University.*

- Qinghua was the first institution entered by a Worker-Soldier Mao Tse-tung Thought Propaganda Team to inaugurate “proletarian leadership in the realm of superstructure.”*

- Qinghua was also hailed as a typical case in the educational revolution personally nurtured by Mao. The university was a pacesetter for the rest of the country when it admitted the first class of worker-peasant-soldier students in September 1970.*

- The power struggle between Deng and the “Gang of Four” in China's top leadership in the mid-1970s became evident when it was first exposed by the conflict among Qinghua officials.*

*To some extent, Qinghua is a microcosm of Chinese politics.*

In the 46-member cabinet approved by the most recent People's Congress, Qinghua graduates hold eight seats (17%). Among the country's 29 provincial governors in 1993, seven (24%) were Qinghua graduates. No other university in China, technical or otherwise, can match or even come close to Qinghua in the number of graduates with high political positions.

Why are Qinghua graduates able to dominate the current Chinese leadership? Are Qinghua graduates in government, as they often claim themselves, selected because of their technical expertise? Is the recruitment of technocrats determined primarily by impersonal and achievement-oriented standards?

In a nation in which only 0.8% of the labor force has a college education, graduates from elite universities such as Qinghua may reasonably claim to be "the best and the brightest." Almost all Qinghua graduates in leadership majored in engineering and natural sciences. There can be little doubt that the technical skills and administrative knowledge of technocrats help them consolidate their governing power.

Yet a careful analysis of the backgrounds of Qinghua technocrats shows that their political networks at Qinghua are more important than technical expertise in explaining their success in acquiring leadership posts. Several Qinghua professors whom I interviewed told me that very few top-notch graduates of Qinghua later became political leaders.

"I don't think these technocrats are really the 'best and the brightest' of the nation," a professor in the department of civil engineering at Qinghua said to me. "Those graduates who later came to power were usually academically average or mediocre while they were students at Qinghua."

"A Qinghua degree may not be as important as belonging to the Qinghua network," another Qinghua professor explained to me, "Belonging to an elite college network is far more essential for politicians than having an elite college degree."

"It is shameful for these technocrats to claim that they are 'the best and the brightest' of the nation," a distant relative of mine who lived in Hong Kong said to me when she heard that I was writing a report on college networks in China. She graduated from an engineering college in Shanghai in the late 1950s and later emigrated to Hong Kong. A winner of both college-level English and mathematics competitions in Shanghai, she organized a study group with several other students on campus. Party officials at the college did not like the study group, because the students in the group only concentrated on academic studies, and did not participate in political activities.

"The Party officials not only launched a political attack against us, but also ordered professors to give us poor grades in academic courses," she explained. "I, and other two students in the group, all received 59 points in the main courses we took in a semester [a passing grade was 60]."

"Really?" I could not believe what I heard, "all three of you received 59 points in your main courses?"

"Exactly!" she answered, "the Party officials wanted to demean us, not only politically, but academically as well. A friend of mine refused to take a make-up examination."

"What happened to that student?" I asked.

"She was expelled from the college."

"But the student political activists, despite being mediocre academically, usually received good grades," she continued. "They were assigned good jobs after graduation. Some of them are now technocrats in government."

My relative's experience was not really unique. Since the late 1950s, training students to be both "red and expert" became a guiding principle of all institutions for higher education in China. The emphasis, however, was on the "red" – politically obedient. The dichotomy of "red" and "expert" was first used in the context of Qinghua University in the 1950s, with the anti-Rightist campaign there making this dichotomy a central ideological issue in the country. From the 1950s to the 1970s, thousands of college students and instructors in the country were expelled from colleges because they were not "red."

I had a roommate from Qinghua when I was a graduate student at Princeton. He was born and grew up on the Qinghua campus, because his father, a Ph.D. from Harvard, was a Qinghua professor for over twenty years. My roommate himself also went to Qinghua after the Cultural Revolution, first as an undergraduate, then as an M.A. degree candidate.

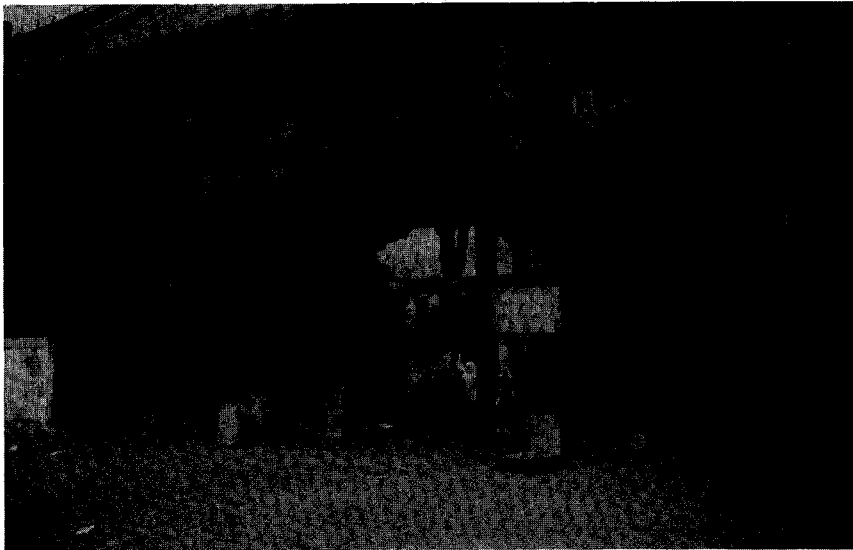
"If you want to know why there are so many Qinghua graduates in the Chinese leadership," he told me, "you have to study the Qinghua network; if you want to understand the Qinghua network, you have to scrutinize one particular figure."

That particular figure was Jiang Nanxiang, who headed the university from 1952 to 1966. The Qinghua network was initially fostered by him. During his fourteen-year presidency, Jiang led a wholehearted effort to make Qinghua "the cradle of red engineers" – a key source of both political and technical power for the nation. To reach this objective, Jiang created a "system of political counsellors" (*zhengzhi fudao yuan zhidu*) which was later adopted in all the tertiary institutions of China. The selection of political counsellors reflected Jiang's intention to build a power network, based on patron-client relationships.

Jiang had his own explanation of "red and expert." In his view, in a country where only a minute percentage of the population could receive education above the middle-school level, students at Qinghua were destined to become "experts" – and it was therefore essential that they become "red" as well, in their support for the leadership of the Party and adherence to the Party's politics.

In 1953, the Bureau of Political Counsellors (SPC) was set up at Qinghua to select junior and senior students who "excelled both politically and academically." Their schooling was extended for one more year so they could develop their skills as

political counsellors. The main function of the SPC, as Jiang explained, was to strengthen political and ideological education among college students and others affiliated with the school. Jiang used this system to control the distribution of career chances and to award the best opportunities to those who were associated with his political network. For a Qinghua student, to remain in the university as a teacher (*zhujiao*) after graduation had always been a mark of tremendous prestige. Jiang also sent some political counsellors abroad to study in new branches of learning such as aerospace engineering.



*Beijing University, one of the top universities in China – Despite its academic strength, international prestige and multi-disciplinary program, very few graduates from this university rise to the power circle. In contrast to Qinghua University, which is famous for producing technocrats, Beijing University has fostered many dissident s and leaders of student movements during the recent decade.*

The System of Political Counsellors downplayed academic credentials, and encouraged academically mediocre students to seek political means through which they could "surpass" their fellow students. Although a few political counsellors

distinguished themselves in both curricular studies and political activities, many of them, as some Qinghua officials admitted, were academically below average (Jiang Nanxiang jinian wenji, p. 150).

Since the mid-1950s, all Qinghua officials have been familiar with a motto which reflected Jiang's expectations of his subordinates. The motto "*tinghua chuhuo*" (be obedient and productive) originated at Qinghua and was used only among Qinghua members and alumni. It was not clear what "*chuhuo*" meant. This could refer to academic or political work, but no one at Qinghua would fail to understand what "*tinghua*" implied. Because "obedience" was generally subjective, people were inclined to flatter officials and form patron-client relationships.

"How could it be possible that such an anti-intellectual motto has been accepted among well-educated people at Qinghua?" I once asked a professor at the Institute of Educational Research of Qinghua University.

"Who dared to express dissent or to argue with Jiang Nanxiang?" he answered. "Jiang was *tianshanguang* (the King) at Qinghua."

The professor continued, "Those who had dared to challenge Jiang were later either kicked out of the university or labelled "rightists" – people were persecuted for their views. People at Qinghua had to choose between being obedient or being subjected to persecution. Understandably most people chose the former."

A good example was Liang Sicheng, son of the famous scholar-politician Liang Qichao. Liang Sicheng studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard in the 1920s and was a leading architect in Beijing after the 1949 revolution. He served as chair of the department of architecture at Qinghua in the 1950s. Before the anti-rightist campaign, he had opposed the Party's plan to redesign Beijing on the grounds that it would mar the original atmosphere of the city, and criticized Party officials for brutally intruding into scientific matters.

But he was warned by Jiang himself that Jiang's associates were preparing a 100-page document criticizing him. Under such pressure, Liang wrote an article, praising the excellent leadership of Jiang and the Party. As a Hong Kong journalist observed, this article was full of bare-faced lies which gave the reader the impression that Liang and the other leading Chinese architects were unable to construct a simple three-story building without the guidance of the Party officials and the help of Soviet advisors.

Through both favoritism and political intimidation, Jiang turned Qinghua into his own "kingdom." Jiang's network had been under attack by Maoists during the Cultural Revolution, but it revived soon after Deng came to power in 1978. For Jiang Nanxiang, the 1980s was a decade of harvest: his political counsellors not only occupied virtually all top leadership posts at Qinghua, but also became a major source of technocratic elites throughout the country. From a total of 682 political counsellors on campus from 1953 to 1966, two-thirds were later transferred out of Qinghua and rose to be governors, ministers, managers of large industrial enterprises, and presidents of other universities. At least nine members of the Central Committee of the Party had experience as political counsellors at Qinghua.

Among the top ten posts in the two most important departments of the Central Committee of the CCP, the organization and propaganda departments, Qinghua graduates occupied five of the top ten posts in the late 1980s. In Shanghai, all four top positions in the Party and municipal government by 1990 were occupied by Qinghua graduates.



*Wu Bangguo (in the middle), a Qinghua graduate and the party boss of Shanghai, is inspecting the public transportation and traffic problems in the city.*

*In 1990, four top positions in the Party and municipal government of Shanghai were all occupied by Qinghua graduates. When Zhu Rongji was promoted to vice premier in May 1991, two fellow Qinghua graduates, Wu Bangguo and Huang Ju, succeeded to the posts of Party Secretary and Mayor respectively.*

*"Every new boss in Shanghai always claimed that he would improve the traffic conditions in the city when he arrived here. But the traffic situation usually became far worse when the boss left the city to get a higher post in Beijing," a passenger who had just shook the hand of Wu Baoguo told me.*

Since the early 1980s, Qinghua resumed its tradition of having a graduate reunion every April. Qinghua graduates among China's top leadership such as Yao Yilin, Song Ping, Li Ximing, Kang Shi'en, and Hu Qiaomu often attended the reunions. In almost all large or medium-sized cities of the country, there is a branch of the



Qinghua Alumni Association. In Shanghai and Guangzhou, where Qinghua graduates occupy many top leadership posts, the members of the alumni association exceed 2,000 and 1,000 respectively.

Although not all Qinghua graduates are associated with the network that Jiang established, the Qinghua connection helps to explain some rapid career advances. We may take the two Qinghua graduates in today's Politburo Standing Committee as examples. Zhu Rongji was Chairman of the Student Union at Qinghua in the early 1950s. After graduation, he worked as a deputy bureau head in the Central Planning Commission, but he was removed from this position after being labeled a rightist. When he was rehabilitated in 1979, Zhu was appointed Deputy Bureau Chief in the Ministry of Petroleum Industry by Minister Kang Shi'en, himself a Qinghua graduate. A few years later, Zhu was promoted to the position of vice-chairman of the Central Economic Commission, which Kang at that time chaired.

Both Kang and Zhu maintain close contacts with Qinghua, and Zhu still serves as Dean of the School of Economic Management, even though he is busy as one of China's highest politicians. In late March this year, Dean Zhu delivered a two-hour speech at the School of Economic Management of Qinghua. He was particularly proud of the school for producing vice ministers, vice governors and many other administrators in large enterprises all over the country (Baokan wenzhai, May 9, 1994, p. 2).

The role of college ties in the career of Hu Jintao is even more revealing. Like Zhu, Hu was a student leader, as Secretary of the Qinghua Communist Youth League. After graduation in 1965, Hu went to Gansu and worked in the provincial Construction Commission under Song Ping, a Qinghua graduate who was Party Secretary of the province. Song soon appointed Hu as secretary of the province's Youth League. In 1981, Song returned to Beijing, and he recommended his protégé to Hu Yaobang, who later appointed Hu Jintao secretary of the national Communist Youth League. Hu Jintao then worked in Guizhou and Tibet as provincial Party Secretary. In 1992, Song recalled Hu to be in charge of the CCP's organizational affairs and to be President of the Central Party School, two positions that the former once held.

These examples show the crucial role that institutional networks, particularly college ties, have played in the emergence of technocrats. College ties seem to carry more weight in the elite selection process today than other kinds of networks formerly considered crucial, e.g. those based on shared revolutionary experiences or field army affiliation.

A recent study of China's high-ranking military elites shows that school ties are also crucially important among China's military elites. Academy bonds have increasingly become the primary source of political networks in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), replacing field army associations among soldiers (Asian Survey, August 1993, pp. 757-786).

"This change has historical significance," a scholar in the study of Chinese

political elites at Beijing University told me. "The increasing importance of academy bonds is actually bringing to an end the field army system network."

For more than four decades the field army identity of Chinese leaders often provided a focus for personal and group loyalties, not only in the PLA but also in the government and the Party. The five groups of officers rose through the field army system beginning in the late 1920s and governed (by the early 1950s) five large groups of provinces which they had won for the People's Republic of China. The promotion of elites to leadership posts reflected a clear recognition within the field army elite factionalism, based on prevailing inter-personal bonds of confidence which was originated during the Communist revolution.

Field army factionalism has long been a serious problem in Chinese politics. It is reported that Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping had a meeting in 1973, when Deng was rehabilitated for the first time. Mao was troubled by the increasing power of local military elites and the potential conflicts between China's vast regions. Deng told Mao that he could solve the problem quickly by transferring all the top officers of military regions simultaneously.

Deng's tactics seemed to work very well. During the past two decades, no regional military upheaval ever occurred, even though the country went through some turbulent periods, e.g. the death of Mao in 1976 and the Tiananmen incident in 1989. But paradoxically, Deng achieved this only through constant large-scale reshuffles of top military elites over the years.

As a new generation of well-educated military elites comes to center stage, school ties become more important. It is not surprising that Zhang Zhen, President of the PLA National Defense University (NDU) in Beijing from 1985 to 1992, has now become a central figure in China's military. Some China experts believe that Zhang's tenure as commandant of the PLA's premier military academy allowed him to cultivate ties with many middle-ranking officers, who were selected to pursue advanced studies at NDU, and then appointed to top military posts.

Like the civilian leadership in post-Mao China, the PLA leadership is now dominated by military technocrats. The high-ranking soldiers who have received tertiary education, either from military academies or other colleges, number 58 per cent of all high officers at the military district level or above. As recently as 1982, the number was just four per cent.

About 65 per cent of all high-ranking officers above the group army level (*junji*) in the PLA today, according to one source, are graduates of the National Defense University. A military officer whom I met on a train told me that the National Defense University is seen as China's "Huangpu Academy of the 90s." The Huangpu Academy, which was located in Guangzhou, prepared both Nationalist and Communist soldiers for the Northern Expedition in the 1920s; it was a training ground for many of China's most salient 20th century leaders.

The National Defense University did not exist until the early 1980s, when three elite PLA colleges – the Academies of Military Command, of Logistics, and of

Political Education – merged to form this university. The president from 1985 to 1992, Zhang Zhen, unambiguously claimed that the NDU should become the cradle of China's generals in the 1990s and the next century. To accelerate this process, Zhang established a department of defense research in 1988. The students in this special department have to be major generals or bureau-level civilian cadres. After a one-year intensive program, the graduates are promoted to higher military posts or civilian leadership positions in military industries.

The first four classes of graduates largely became commanders of group armies or military region headquarters. These graduates, in turn, have sent more junior military officers from their military units to the National Defense University, which has already become the center of a formidable, informal political network.

Zhang Zhen has long promoted many of his protégés to top military posts. Two current members of the Central Committee of the Party, Zhou Yushu and Zhang Meiyuan, for example, worked at different times as commanders of the No. 24 Group Army, in which Zhang once served as a commander himself. In the past very few commanders of group armies were elected to the Central Committee, but the association of these two young officers with Zhang explains their rapid promotions.

The promotion of these military elites to the core of the Party leadership reflects the army's growing influence in political affairs. Some analysts expect that the military will likely be the "kingmaker," serving as the primary institution in determining China's future when Deng finally makes his big decision to see Marx.

In the on-going political succession, graduates from China's premier engineering school Qinghua and graduates from the National Defense University have emerged as distinctive elite groups in civilian or military leadership. Their group identity may politicize the decision-making process in the new political spectrum and indicate future sources of elite conflict in Chinese politics.

As the Chinese economy grows rapidly, China is entering a new era in its century-long modernization process. Meanwhile, a new generation of leadership, a technocratic elite, is moving towards the center stage of Chinese politics. Technocrats usually like to portray themselves as people who are selected, not because of their political associations, but because of their technical expertise. The technical skills of Chinese technocrats surely help them claim and consolidate their governing power. One important question, however, has rarely been asked in the study of China's technocrats: do technical knowledge and skills account for success, or are these ancillary to other aspects of their experience?

An analysis of the career experiences of technocrats from universities such as Qinghua and the NDU shows that their selection is not based on criteria which are universal, technical, or impersonal, but is based on the political and institutional network through which they have been promoted.

The ties that bind graduates from Qinghua and the NDU, however, are only partly new. They are much like the ties that bind groups based on other loyalties: to

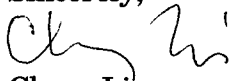
field armies, revolutionary experience, geographic places, class origins, or particular patrons. Like their predecessors, technocratic elites form their own networks – "groups of people who help each other along in life, in ways that mystify and infuriate those excluded," as a British reporter recently pointed out in The Economist. (December 26, 1992, p. 20).

"My life experience tells me that one should be suspicious of any kind of politicians in non-democratic countries," an 88 year-old man with whom I chatted in a park of Shanghai said to me. "I have lived through the rules of Reformists, Nationalists, Communists, and Maoists. All of these elite groups claimed that they were 'chosen for governance.' Each of these groups first aroused great hope, and then caused immense despair among millions of Chinese people. I don't think that the technocrats' rule will be any different."

I found the old man's remarks insightful. Indeed, technocratic governance will not change elite-mass relations in a society which for twenty-five centuries has believed in the inequality of people. Probably only the elites' justification for governing the masses has changed.

No matter whether one is suspicious of, or enthusiastic about, the governance of technocrats, technocratic identity, tied to group loyalty fostered at universities, has now become a generalized basis for claims to legitimately rule China. Without measures to constrain favoritism in elite recruitment, without social awareness of the problems of technocratic ideas, civilian technocrats from Qinghua and military technocrats from the National Defense University can be expected to further increase their power and influence in the years to come.

Sincerely,



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Note:

For an academic discussion of school networks in Chinese military leadership, see Cheng Li and Lynn White, "The Army in the Succession to Deng Xiaoping: Familiar Fealties and Technocratic Trends" Asian Survey, Vol. 33, No. 8, August 1993, pp. 757-786.

For a case study of networks of Chinese civilian leadership, see Cheng Li, "College Networks and the Rise of Qinghua Graduates in Chinese Leadership," The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs, (forthcoming).