

Introduction: Toward a Power Balancing Model on Elite Politics in China

The purpose of this study is twofold. It aims to provide a new theoretical framework for understanding Chinese elite politics and then to apply the theoretical framework to the analyses of elite politics in reality. A new theoretical framework in the subfield of Chinese elite politics, as late Tang Tsou observed, is long overdue.¹ Efforts have been made to understand the sinews of the Chinese political system,² but no systematic theories have been produced as a result. The most dominant model so far is that of “winner-takes-all” that postulates a recurrent pattern of elite power struggles in which the winner of all emerges at the expense of his/her political rivals.

This study attempts to introduce an alternative model — power balancing model. Based on a recognition that the existing studies of Chinese elite politics have not yet gone beyond unit-level analyses,³ this new model aims at looking at political actors and their interactions in a broader institutional framework. This new model differs not only from the model of “winner-takes-all” but also from other

¹ Tang Tsou, “Chinese politics at the top: factionalism or informal politics? Balance-of-power politics or a game to win all,” in Jonathan Unger (ed), *The Nature of Chinese Politics: From Mao to Jiang* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 98–159.

² The most significant contribution in this regard is Avery Goldstein, *From Bandwagon to Balance-Of-Power Politics: Structural Constraints and Politics in China, 1949–1978* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). A major collective effort is Jonathan Unger (ed), *The Nature of Chinese Politics*.

³ Avery Goldstein labeled unit-level approaches as “reductionalist methodology.” For his criticisms of these approaches, see his book, *From Bandwagon to Balance-Of-Power Politics: Structural Constraints and Politics in China, 1949–1978* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 4.

models of Chinese politics such as bandwagon politics and balance-of-power politics.

WINNER-TAKES-ALL MODEL

The conventional model for explaining Chinese elite politics is winner-takes-all. According to Tang Tsou, the most persistent feature of elite politics in China is that “at irregular intervals the struggle for power among the Chinese elite, involving either supreme political power or power one level below that, always involves one side winning all and/or the other side losing all.”⁴ He insisted that this is a feature not only of elite CCP politics but of Chinese politics throughout the 20th century. He urged scholars of China studies to consider it the central feature of Chinese politics. He used examples from the history of Chinese politics to illustrate its significance. As he stated,

Total victory and total defeat, as distinguished from elite pluralism or day-to-day struggles for power or over policy, frequently signifies important turning points in Party history. Mao's ultimate total victory over Wang Ming in 1938 at the 6th Plenum of the 6th Central Committee meant Mao's policy of “both struggle and unity” with Chiang Kai-shek triumphed over Wang Ming's policy of following a more conciliatory line toward the Kuomintang. Mao's destruction of Liu Shaoqi heralded a partial disintegration of the Party system. The arrest of the Gang of Four marked the end of a ten-year period of chaos started by the Cultural Revolution. The total triumph of Deng and the elimination of Hua Guofeng's “faction” as an effective political force signified the beginning of a new era of economic reform and growth.⁵

The critical point of the theory is that Chinese elite politics is a zero-sum game because “supreme political power is considered one

⁴ Tsou, “Chinese politics at the top,” in *The Nature of Chinese Politics*, p. 100.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

and indivisible.”⁶ A political leader either has the absolute power or has none; there is nothing in between. From the perspective of this theory, the most important thing one would expect is the recurrent pattern of total victory and total defeat. Once one identifies such an event in Chinese politics, one is able to infer with almost certainty that there is the winner of all and the loser of all.

Although this model of “winner-takes-all” is logical and consistent with the facts of elite politics during the Maoist era, it is not yet a full-fledged theory of elite politics and is less applicable to post-Mao eras. The model is logical because a political struggle for power has to be all or nothing if power is absolute and indivisible. The cases of Mao versus Wang Ming, Mao versus Peng Dehuai, Mao versus Liu Shaoqi, and Mao versus Lin Biao are indeed power struggles of increasingly life-or-death nature. Yet the model does not explain what causes the indivisibility of power in China. Is it because of authoritarian personalities of certain political leaders? Or is it because of factional competition or the political structure in China?

BANDWAGON POLITICS MODEL

Based on systems theory, Avery Goldstein developed two models on Chinese politics: bandwagon politics and balance-of-power politics.⁷ Political outcomes, according to Goldstein, are essentially determined by the structure of the political system. A bandwagon polity is hierarchically structured, with little functional differentiation, and a skewed distribution of capabilities. It is hierarchically structured because the authority of position and the authority of expertise are well established. In this structure, a subordinate obeys the commands of a superior either because of the latter’s official status or because of the latter’s expertise. In addition, superiors also have at their disposal negative and positive sanctions. In the bandwagon polity, there is very little functional differentiation since “the locus of political choice is essentially the same regardless of the task

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁷ Goldstein, *From Bandwagon to Balance-Of-Power politics: Structural Constraints and Politics in China, 1949–1978* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

addressed.”⁸ The distribution of capabilities in such a polity is highly skewed in favor of superiors. In such a polity, the typical behavior is getting along, producing a bandwagon effect.

Specifically developed for the analysis of the Chinese politics of 1949–1966, the bandwagon politics model lacks theoretical comprehensiveness. For instance, even though it is basically accurate to describe the Chinese polity in the pre-Cultural Revolution period as one with little functional differentiation, there is no analytical reason why a bandwagon polity as a theoretical model has to be limited to only one variant. It is conceivable that a hierarchically-structured polity could also have functional differentiation. Moreover, because of its historical specification, the bandwagon politics model cannot be used to explain Chinese politics in general.

BALANCE-OF-POWER POLITICS MODEL

To explain the Chinese politics of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1978),⁹ Goldstein developed a different theoretical model: balance-of-power politics. In contrast to the hierarchically organized bandwagon polity, the balance-of-power polity is anarchically arranged. In this polity, the extent of functional differentiation is also minimal, but capabilities are more dispersed among political actors. In such a polity, political survival becomes “a problem of ever-present concern,”¹⁰ and the typical behavior is balancing.

The balance-of-power politics model is less intuitive and less convincing. Why would anyone choose to back the weaker instead of the stronger? Why would anyone join the loser instead of the winner? Goldstein’s argument is that since political actors have to ensure their survival in a condition of anarchy, they would have to balance.¹¹ But how could they ensure their survival if they decide

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁹ Goldstein uses 1978 as the end year, but the Cultural Revolution usually is considered ended in 1976.

¹⁰ Goldstein, *From Bandwagon to Balance-of-Power Politics: Structural Constraints and Politics in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

to go against the winner? Wouldn't their chances of survival in a condition of anarchy be better if they chose to get along?

Admittedly, as Goldstein presented it, the structure of the Chinese political system was fundamentally transformed at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution from one of hierarchy to one of anarchy.¹² As political leaders at various levels were purged *en masse*, their authority was seriously undermined. The hierarchy of political power was destroyed, and anarchy ensued.

Nonetheless, it is not accurate to describe the political behavior during the Cultural Revolution as balancing. On the contrary, the nature of the political behavior during the Cultural Revolution hardly changed: Political actors continued to bandwagon under drastically different circumstances. Red guards and revolutionary rebels, for instance, attacked former authority figures as capitalist roaders, not as a balancing act in a condition of anarchy but in response to Chairman Mao's call. On the surface, political actors acted differently before and during the Cultural Revolution. But in essence, their behavior is the same: bangwagoning. They went along with their superiors in the pre-Cultural Revolution period because their superiors were powerful; they went along with Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution because Chairman Mao was the most powerful. The different appearances are results of different structures. In short, Goldstein is accurate about the structural changes but not accurate about the nature of political behavior.

Again, as a model developed for a specific historical period, the balance-of-power politics model cannot be used to explain political patterns of other historical periods.¹³

POWER BALANCING MODEL

Built upon some elements of the above two models, the power balancing model postulates a fundamentally different conception of

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 137–159.

¹³ Goldstein was well aware of these limitations. See *ibid.*, pp. 255–258.

Chinese elite politics of the 21st century. It argues that Chinese elite politics of the 21st century is fundamentally different from that of earlier eras because of political institutionalization. Political institutionalization refers to a dual process in which the authority of position is restored at the expense of the authority of political correctness, and the authority of expertise is restored at the expense of the authority of “redness.”¹⁴ A hierarchical system emerges when subordinates accept the duty to obey superiors simply because of their higher positions. A system of functional differentiation also emerges when different offices are specialized and officeholders are respected because of either their mastery of a body of knowledge or demonstrated technical competence.¹⁵

Political institutionalization results in a political structure in which formal institutions play more important roles than informal networks do. The structure of the Chinese political system consists of both formal and informal substructures,¹⁶ both of which are hierarchically organized.¹⁷ The formal substructure, because of its clearly articulated superordinate–subordinate relationships, may be represented by a pyramid with the core at the top; the informal substructure, because of its irregular connections, may be represented by a spider web with the core at the center.¹⁸ In the era of Mao Zedong,

¹⁴ “Authority of position,” as defined by Goldstein, is “rooted in the values of subordinates and sanctions at the disposal of superiors” and is “largely independent of the personal ability of the incumbent.” See his book, *From bandwagon to balance-of-power politics*, p. 58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* For a recent analysis of the functional differentiation in post-Deng China, see Andrew J. Nathan, “China’s changing of the guard: authoritarian resilience,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2003), pp. 1–13.

¹⁶ The discussion on the political structure is based on Tsou, “Chinese politics at the top,” p. 131.

¹⁷ For a different understanding, see Xiaowei Zang, “Institutionalization and elite behavior in reform China,” *Issues & Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (March 2005), pp. 204–217. In this article, Zang equated informal politics to hierarchy and formal politics to functional differentiation.

¹⁸ Tang Tsou used different terms for these cores. For the core of the formal substructure, he called it “a leader at the top”; for the core of the informal network, he called it the “core.” Tsou, “Chinese politics at the top,” p. 131.

the core of the formal substructure corresponded to the core of the informal network, because Mao was the embodiment of both. Yet, the informal network played a significantly more important role in politics than did the formal substructure. Mao was able to alter the formal substructure almost at will. The dominance of the informal substructure continued in the era of Deng Xiaoping when Deng was the core of the informal network but not the core of the formal substructure of the political system. Deng was able to wield power over the formal substructure from any position he held. In the era of Jiang Zemin, the formal substructure began to play a more important role than did the informal networks. The fundamental change occurred in 1992 when Deng Xiaoping decided to withdraw from politics completely, and the Central Advisory Commission, the shadow Politburo, was abolished. Consequently, although informal networks still played some accessory roles, formal institutions became dominant in Chinese politics.

As a result of political institutionalization, the nature of elite politics in China has been fundamentally altered. First, the passing of the highest political office from one political leader to another can be politically meaningful because of the authority of position. Second, institutional loyalty can be separated from personal loyalty and may supersede personal loyalty. Third, instead of the winner of all (or the loser of all) in a game to win all, the political game could have multiple winners. Finally, a power balance among political actors could be obtained because of functional differentiation.

POWER BALANCING MODEL AND ITS COMPETING MODELS

The power balancing model is different from the conventional model of the winner-takes-all in two areas. First, instead of envisioning a zero-sum game as in the model of the winner-takes-all, the power balancing model allows the possibility of a nonzero-sum political game. According to the winner-takes-all model, the political game is zero-sum, because political power is indivisible, whereas, according to the power balancing model, the political game can be nonzero-sum because political power can be divisible due to

functional differentiation. In a functionally differentiated system, power is no longer absolute and indivisible, and power space — the domain where power can be exercised — has been expanded. The second difference between the model of power balancing and the model of the winner-takes-all game is that instead of a recurrent pattern of total victory and total defeat, as predicted by the model of the winner-takes-all game, the model of power balancing entertains the possibility of multiple winners in terms of political outcomes.

This model of power balancing also differs fundamentally from Avery Goldstein's two theoretical models. The model of power balancing is different from the balance-of-power model because the latter is based on the assumption that the political structure is anarchic while the former explicitly assumes that the political structure is hierarchically organized. The model of power balancing is different from the bandwagon politics model because there is no functional differentiation in the latter, while functional differentiation is a key feature of the former. Most fundamentally, Goldstein's models are too historically specific to be useful for an analysis of post-Mao eras. Since 1978 when a hierarchically ordered polity was reestablished, as Goldstein has admitted regarding the balance-of-power model, "the necessary structural conditions for the relevance of balance-of-power theory, used to explain recurrent patterns of political behavior and outcomes between 1966 and 1978, no longer obtained."¹⁹

These three competing theoretical models — especially the model of the winner-takes-all game — have tremendous explanatory power for the political dynamics of China's elite politics of the earlier eras. The power balancing model is likely to offer a better alternative perspective on elite politics in the 21st century, because it has taken into account a fundamental structural change of the 1990s — political institutionalization. As a result of political institutionalization, the authority of position has been restored, the formal substructure has become more dominant, institutional loyalty has mostly superseded personal loyalty, and functional differentiation has been substantial.

¹⁹ Goldstein, *From Bandwagon to Balance-of-Power politics: Structural Constraints and Politics in China, 1949–1978* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) p. 255.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The rest of the book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the political transition at the Sixteenth Party Congress and the power balance as a result of the Congress. Chapter 1 introduces the rules of exits for political elites in China and the issue of Jiang Zemin's retirement and explains the power transfer from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao at the Sixteenth Party Congress in terms of the power balancing model. Contrary to the conventional claim that power transfer did not occur at the Sixteenth Party Congress, this chapter argues that due to political institutionalization, power transfer did take place at the Congress. The chapter further argues that the contradiction between Jiang and Hu in the aftermath of the Sixteenth Party Congress was essentially a contradiction between a two-front arrangement and generational succession.

Chapter 2 presents a systematic evaluation of the Sixteenth Central Committee in terms of political entry, demographic characteristics, and technocracy. It introduces formal and informal rules on political entry, especially for Politburo candidates; analyzes the selection process for central committee and Politburo members; describes the Sixteenth Central Committee in terms of their demographic characteristics; and evaluates the thesis of technocracy in the early 21st century with the Sixteenth Central Committee members as a sample of China's political elites. It challenges the conventional wisdom on technocracy and provides an alternative explanation of the dominance of generalists such as political elites with local governance experiences.

Chapter 3 evaluates the balance of power among formal institutions. There are three major formal institutions in China: provincial units, central institutions, and the military. Business people in China are beginning to emerge as a political group in the 21st century, and thus it is important to examine their political power as well. In order to make comparison possible, a power index was assigned to each member of the Sixteenth Central Committee according to his/her status in the central committee, and the resultant power indices were used to illustrate the power balance among the four formal institutions.

Chapter 4 assesses the balance of power among factional groups, the group cohesion of factional groups, and factional overlap. There are four major factional groups in Chinese politics: the Shanghai Gang, the Princelings, the Qinghua Clique, and the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) Group. The power indices of each group are aggregated, and the balance of factional power is depicted in a chart. Using corporate ties as the basis, this chapter also produces a group cohesion index for each factional group and compares the group cohesiveness of these factional groups. Finally, this chapter unravels the myth of factional exclusion. Studies of political factions in China tended to assume that somehow these factional groups were mutually exclusive. The reality is, as this study demonstrates, that there are overlaps among these factional groups with various degrees.

Part II deals with dynamics of factional politics. Chapter 5 discusses politics of severe acute respiratory symptom (SARS) epidemic. The Shanghai Gang under the leadership of Jiang Zemin competed for power at the National People's Congress meeting in March 2003 and made substantial gains. Yet, when the SARS epidemic hit Beijing the Shanghai Gang members were the first to flee. Jiang Zemin, newly "reelected" chairman of the Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China (PRC), disappeared from the scene, so did Huang Ju, Politburo Standing Committee member and executive vice premier. Zhang Wenkang, minister of health at that time and one of Jiang's men, lied to the world about the extent of the epidemic in China at a press conference on April 3, 2003. To deal with this national crisis, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao took effective measures and brought the situation under control. They removed Zhang Wenkang as health minister and Meng Xuenong as mayor of Beijing and mobilized the Chinese people in a campaign against the SARS epidemic. In the process, Hu and Wen also exposed a corruption case in Shanghai involving Zhou Zhengyi, the richest man of the metropolis, which had implications for some of the Shanghai Gang members such as Chen Liangyu, Huang Ju, and even Jiang Zemin himself. Yet the case was not thoroughly investigated because of the Shanghai Gang's strong resistance, and Zhou was sentenced for only three years.

Chapter 6 focuses on ideological institutionalization and factional politics over economic policies. Ideological institutionalization resulted from political institutionalization. Once in power as the Party boss, Hu Jintao began to introduce his own ideological guidelines. He introduced a series of new ideas such as “new three people’s principles,” “two imperatives,” and “building the Party in the public interest and governing the country for the people” within a month of his ascendancy as general secretary of the Party. He also took the opportunity of a routine speech on July 1 and elaborated his own ideas in the name of studying the “Three Represents” and deprived Jiang of the right to interpret this ideology on behalf of the Party, because Jiang was no longer general secretary of the Party. Most importantly, Hu introduced a new ideology of his own — the scientific concept of development — and had it endorsed by the Sixteenth Central Committee of the CCP at its Third Plenum in October 2003 as the CCP’s guideline. Based on the scientific concept of development, Premier Wen Jiabao introduced a new initiative on economic policies in early 2004. Alarmed by the statistics of the first quarter of 2004, Wen called for effective measures to ward off threatening inflation. The Shanghai Gang members such as Huang Ju and Chen Liangyu, however, challenged Wen’s assessment of the economic situation in China. With Hu Jintao’s support, central leaders all jumped the bandwagon of cooling the economy and local leaders demonstrated their compliance with the central policies. In the end, Hu-Wen declared a political victory.

Chapter 7 analyzes Jiang Zemin’s complete retirement. Jiang was reluctant to give up his last post of Central Military Commission chairmanship. Instead of planning a complete retirement, he was actually staging a comeback in early 2004. He walked in front of Hu Jintao at the annual National People’s Congress meeting, promoted 15 officers, including his bodyguard to the rank of general, and played up the Taiwan issue during his meeting with Condoleezza Rice, the US president’s national security adviser. With the approaching of Deng Xiaoping’s centennial birthday, however, Jiang was increasingly under pressure to retire from the Central Military Commission. Jiang wrote a letter of resignation on September 1, 2004, and the central committee accepted his resignation half a

month later. Once Jiang lost his position, his “military thought” immediately lost its luster. The main content of military political indoctrination between June 2003 and September 2004, “Jiang Zemin’s thinking on national defense and army building,” became an empty slogan in September 2004 when Hu Jintao took over as the commander-in-chief of the military. Starting in December 2005, few military leaders mentioned Jiang’s empty slogan. A special column on Jiang Zemin’s military thought in the *PLA Daily* was discontinued in January 2006, and the People’s Liberation Army moved on without Jiang and his “military thought.”

Chapter 8 discusses Hu Jintao’s power consolidation. In addition to ideological gains, Hu Jintao further consolidated his power in policies, in the military, and in the personnel changes. As soon as he took over as chairman of the state Central Military Commission in March 2005, Hu Jintao introduced a new policy toward Taiwan. Coupled with an anti-session law adopted by the National People’s Congress in the same month, this policy proved to be very effective. By altering the nature of cross-strait relations from one of reunification versus independence to one of war versus peace, Hu Jintao raised the stake of cross-strait game. Consequently, opposition parties in Taiwan such as the Guomindang, the People First Party, and the New Party all sent delegations to visit Beijing to ease the tension between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Hu thus regained initiatives in the cross-strait relations. Hu Jintao began to increase his power in the military through Politburo study sessions and introduced his own military thought in March 2005. Known as “three provides and one play,” Hu’s military thought was quickly accepted by the PLA leaders and was subsequently being promoted among the officers and men of the military in China. As a result of the generational changes, the Shanghai Gang furthered its decline following the retirement of Jiang Zemin. Jiang’s son, Jiang Mianheng, was sent back to Shanghai from Beijing; Zhao Qizheng, the mastermind of a notorious biography of Jiang Zemin, was retired; and Huang Ju, Jiang’s confidant, became terminally ill. On the other hand, the CCYL Group was on the rise with numerous promotions in provinces as well as in Beijing. In the meantime, the

Princeling generals were also emerging as an important part of military elites in China. Some of them have overcome the first barrier of deputy positions and will overcome the second barrier of the central committee.

Finally, the conclusion provides some reflections on studies of China's elite politics in the early 21st century. It summarizes the main theoretical themes of the power balancing model and illustrates the usefulness of the model with the major historical developments of elite politics since the Sixteenth National Party Congress in 2002.