

Unveiling the Political Elite: High-Ranking Chinese Officials on Television Talk Shows

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Abstract Many high-ranking Chinese officials have recently changed their low-key persona and have discussed sensitive issues on television talk shows. Using complete participant observations of a CCTV talk show, we argue, besides officials' personal factors, that the unequal power distribution between the central ministries and the promotion competition among officials is the mechanism that motivates senior officials to enter the spotlight. State ministries with less political clout and local officials are more active talk show guests. They take advantage of media interviews to enhance policy adherence, signal administrative needs, and display achievements to the central government. The media political platform also brings more personal interaction between Chinese media and political elite, which may increase personalization of politics and autonomy for the media.

Keywords Media · High-Ranking Officials · Talk Shows · Personalization of Politics · China

Beginning in the 1980s, the Chinese government gradually liberalized its news media by partially transforming the party mouthpieces of the earlier Mao-era into profit-making ventures financed by sales of advertisements and private investments. As long as they do not step over the permissible political boundaries, the media in China today enjoy great autonomy in news reporting [1]. However, liberalization of the media system does not mean that the Chinese officials are personally open to the media. Unlike politicians in western democracies, who are more used to media pursuit, such as one-on-one interviews, press conferences, and live debates on television [2], most Chinese officials have avoided over-publicity and prefer to operate within a secretive decision-making apparatus. Although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has always been aware of the need to make use of the media,

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direct personal interaction between media elite and political elite, revealing government policy-making procedures, and even politicians' own opinions and personality, has been rare. Thus, political elites in China are often veiled with more mystery than their counterparts in democracies.

Interestingly, recent years have seen more high-ranking officials as guests on television talk shows in China. Taking China Central Television (CCTV) Station for example, there are programs like *Policy-Makers Remark*, *Dialogue*, and *China Economic Forum*. Phoenix Satellite TV in Hong Kong launched a similar program in 2006 called *Sally Wu Eye on China*. All of these talk shows frequently invite senior officials, for instance vice-ministers and above, to discuss current social political affairs and/or their personal experience. The cynical ones may view these shows just a fancier form of, or "soft", propaganda of the CCP [3]. This may be true. Political elites, whether in democracies or authoritarian societies, all tend to take advantage of mass media as means of framing issues, exercising agenda control, and cultivating popular support [4]. What is important is the difference between these talk shows and the old propaganda programs, such as the CCTV seven o'clock news report. These new talk shows, with their personal-level interaction between journalists and officials, are able to bring more "human" aspects of political elites, and even the government, to the audience. They are popular for their open and frank conversation style, as well as sharp critiques of social problems and questioning of government policies. This new mode of interaction between media and government officials is a sign of an increasing personalization of politics in China. Cases of western democracies show that personalization of politics may empower the media by increasing their influence on the way that government communicates to the public. The media influence could make leaders' personality "an anchor around which political information is organized" in affecting the electorate's preferences in democracies [5]. For Chinese high-ranking officials, accepting this kind of TV interview can be challenging indeed. Although good performance on TV helps to publicize their charisma and popularity, talking too much in public could actually trouble them politically and improper responses to the questions might bring embarrassment and taint their reputation.

Existing research on the changing relationship between the Chinese media and the state often focuses on structural factors pushing for more autonomy in news reporting and treating the government as one cohesive actor [6]. Little attention has been given to the varied attitudes of different state agencies toward the media and the altered interaction between the media and officials at a personal level. Some scholars argue that those talk shows sometimes help advertise officials, which gives them incentive to speak up [7]. This might be true to some degree, but after all publicity is not crucial for official promotion in China since there are no open competitive elections. Also, if advertising is so beneficial to them, why doesn't every official want to get on TV? Therefore, how has this kind of media platform for political elite, which allows disclosure of policy-making process and personalization of politics, evolved in an authoritarian country like China? Why are some high-ranking Chinese officials more open to television interviews than others?

We explore these questions by analyzing a CCTV talk show, *Policy-Makers Remark* (*juecezheshuo* 决策者说, PMR hereafter). The program was created in early 2005 with a focus on senior Chinese officials at ministerial and provincial levels. It was the first and the only one of its kind in China that particularly interviewed high-ranking officials, who

are at the core of the decision-making process of specific policies and important events [8]. One of the authors of this article is a CCTV journalist who participated in producing this program, from designing the program format, to selecting interview topics, and to conducting preliminary interviews with officials. Thus, we use first hand information from a complete participant of the program and content analysis of each interview to study the patterns of guest officials [9].

We find a mutually constitutive relationship between the media and the Chinese high-level officials. The fact that many high-ranking officials are willing to take TV interviews is related to the CCP's more flexible and practical mindset toward media. The CCP hopes to employ national television programs to more skillfully deal with public relations in the media sensitive age. This intention gives the media industry more autonomy in selecting interviewees and allows them to push the boundaries by asking more sensitive questions. Although this cannot be equated to media liberalization or freedom of speech, it still provides valuable opportunities to unveil the previously mysterious political elites, to publicly discuss previously sensitive topics, and get direct answers from officials. Moreover, we find that high-ranking officials have different incentives to get on TV. Leaders of state ministries with less political clout and local officials are more active talk show guests; and young officials and those who would retire very soon have constituted the two largest groups of interviewees. Therefore, this case study indicates that besides some external structural factors, power competition among political elites within the formal political system can also produce some room for media autonomy, if not liberalization, in a changing authoritarian country.

In the following, we first briefly introduce the birth of *PMR* with the backdrop of the changing Chinese media to understand the evolution of the elitist media platform from the media side. We then discuss the general structural factors that have pushed the government to exploit the opportunity of this new media platform. However, this cannot explain why some political elites have been more active than others in granting interviews. We propose answers from two perspectives, the first, power competition among high-ranking officials, and second, some personal characteristics of political elites of the new generation. The last section concludes the article with major findings.

The Birth of *PMR* in the Backdrop of the Changing Chinese Media

Although commercial liberalization of the media is commonly thought to link with political liberalization as media outlets cater to popular preferences and become more independent from the state [10], many scholars have argued that commercialization has not changed the propaganda nature of Chinese media [11]. Television broadcasting is the least liberalized form of media in China when compared to print media and radio broadcasting, as it has been defined as first and foremost an institution of propaganda since the 1982 national television conference [12]. CCTV, as the country's only national television network, is under special scrutiny and strict government control. It falls under the dual supervision of the CCP's Propaganda Department, responsible ultimately for media content, and the Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, which oversees its operations. And nowhere is it more important than for news programming, where tight control remains and probably becomes

stronger with the addition of previews and reviews. The CCTV 24-hour news channel was given specific requirements of “correct guidance of public opinion, unity, stability, and the cultivation of propaganda art” by the Politburo and the Propaganda Department, at its launch in 2003 [13].

Nevertheless, commercialization of television media and the rise of many competitive local television stations, such as Hunan Satellite TV, have forced CCTV to act more as a broadcasting company. Like western media, CCTV has an interior evaluation system which attaches great importance to the audience rating and strictly follows the principle of survival of the fittest. Programs that are not well received will be cancelled and replaced by others. CCTV’s audience share in the national market is closely monitored so as to guarantee a leading position of CCTV in the competition with local television stations. To ensure its revenue from commercials, CCTV simply cannot act in any way the government wants. The program *Modern Workers* (*dangdai gongren* 当代工人), which is directly backed by the government, has frequently got warnings of low ratings from the station. In a market economy, CCTV has to strive for more autonomy in terms of program content, design, and information processing to make its programs appealing to the audience. This is also true for many news programs. In the recent years, CCTV has responded to several significant domestic and international events in a prompt and active way, with a CNN style both in terms of format and content. These changes have not only built viewer credibility but also brought in advertising profits [14].

Besides, similar with many other more commercially liberalized media, many journalists within CCTV are idealists. They have dreamed of being government watchdogs, improving government transparency, and exposing social problems. For example, in the 1990s one of the most celebrated CCTV critical report program *Focus Interviews* (*jiaodian fangtan* 焦点访谈) attracted many idealists and socially conscience young professionals to the program production team from places all over China.

PMR was nurtured in this half-government and half-commercial environment. It was invented by a famous CCTV hostess, Shen Bing, who had worked for *Lianhe Zaobao* in Singapore for several years before joining CCTV. She wanted to unveil the mystery of government decision-making in China by interviewing high-ranking officials directly. However, CCTV producers had some concerns, which postponed the creation of PMR. Their greatest concern was that the Chinese officials would come across as boring and dull, ill-suited for the talk show format. The producers also worried that their program would not be able to survive if not enough senior officials were willing to show up on TV. Previous interaction with officials left an impression on journalists that government officials, especially those outside the media/propaganda system, tended to be hesitant to accept TV interviews, because, first, officials might be concerned with being in agreement with their leaders. They were afraid of speaking differently from their superiors, such as missing one or two points emphasized by the upper level officials while accepting TV interviews, consequently being misunderstood. For instance, the former Party Secretary General Hu Yaobang’s response during a Hong Kong journalist’s exclusive interview about the high-level personnel issues in 1985 was said to be dissatisfying to Deng Xiaoping, the supreme leader at that time. This event was suspected to be partially responsible for triggering Hu’s removal from office in early 1987 [15]. Hence, CCTV producers thought that officials usually were cautious in front of media, talking as little as

possible to journalists. Second, officials did not have experience with TV interviews. In democracies, politicians have to learn how to manipulate the press for their own interests and attract media attention to get elected or re-elected in the current televised world. Media consultants and public relations specialists are often hired to be the producers and directors of today's presidential campaigns [16]. In contrast, most officials, especially high-ranking officials, in China are selected by their superiors through promotion within the CCP. The Chinese officials are not in an urgent need of publicity to get career advancement. Many of them for a long time were inexperienced and even uncomfortable when dealing with the media. They were afraid of behaving improperly in front of the camera, thus ruining their public image. Finally, accepting TV interviews could be interpreted as showing off, which has been considered by many officials as contradictory to the common principle of keeping a low profile for public servants [17].

Not much progress was made until the end of 2004, when the CCTV news channel made a series called *Annual Report of Chinese Ministers*. Four ministerial officials were interviewed by the program in sequence to talk about their jobs [18]. This series drew a large audience and attracted a lot of social attention in early 2005. The four senior officials were very outspoken and frank when answering questions from the interviewer, which exceeded the program producers' expectations. Seeing this as a sign of significant change of Chinese high-ranking officials' attitude toward media and their increased ability of public communication, the producers proposed that the program could be regularized and made weekly. After two months of preparation, a new program, PMR was born on 25 March 2005.

Positioned as "news plus high-ranking officials", PMR was built as the first talk show in the country that specifically and regularly invited senior officials to talk about ongoing and hot socio-political issues. Between 2005 and 2007, the period when one of the authors worked for the program and the heyday of the program, 56 senior officials from 50 different government agencies accepted interviews and made 76 episodes [19]. Among them, 58 episodes were about national issues. They covered from China's higher education, to public health, to rural policies, such as sending digital media to villages, to environmental and energy concerns, such as global warming, to some social hot spots, such as people's fanaticism of taking civil servant exams. There were also eight episodes on local government, such as Beijing's preparation for the 2008 Olympics. Four episodes focused on the large State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), and five on China's foreign relations, for example Chinese economic cooperation with Northeast Asian neighbors and international trade negotiations.

The continuous participation of senior officials from a wide range of government agencies was one of the keys that enabled the program to survive. This was certainly helped by the CCTV's mainstream status and the program's overall intention to assist government to establish a positive public image. But these factors did not guarantee officials' willingness to accept interviews. Especially in the early stage of the program, the producers often had to seek all opportunities to approach ministers and constantly persuaded them the importance of communicating with people publicly, and explained to them the objectives of the program. One of the objectives of PMR was to provide information behind government decisions, such as their causes, goals and the forming process, in other words, to help the public understand government decisions, which was welcomed by the current administration. Nearly every

episode did some introduction and interpretation of some new government policies and regulations, for instance water usage policies, amendment of the law on the protection of women's rights and interests, and reforms on the publication systems.

However, from the very beginning PMR did not attempt to play simply as the government mouthpiece and to solely disseminate information. The rising professionalism of the journalists and the pressure to create appealing programs naturally made the producers want to have more breakthrough than conventional programs, hence bring challenges to the interviewees. First, PMR was featured by its "bold" topic selection. Although the general tone of the program was positive, more than half of the interviews have focused on or touched upon sensitive and negative issues in different aspects, such as official corruption and malfeasance, misconduct of some People's Congress representatives, and soaring housing prices. Wang Longde, the Vice-Minister of Health, talked about the previously taboo topic AIDS and homosexuality in China during his interview. Li Yizhong, the Minister of State Administration of Work Safety, was invited to particularly talk about the sensitive issue of coal mining disasters.

Importantly, some of the hot topics discussed on television were actually an outcome of negotiations between the producers and guest officials. For example, when the Vice-Minister of Land and Resources, Lu Xinshe, was interviewed, he originally wanted to talk about the policy of land saving, but the journalists insisted on having him talk about the then hot issue of land hoarding by real estate developers and land reserve. The suggestion was finally accepted by the minister. He talked about land hoarding in the first part of the program and land saving in the second half. Thus, the media and the government officials have adapted to each other.

In addition, PMR also took a relatively aggressive interview style, because the program also aimed at setting up a bridge for equal communication between officials and ordinary people. Each time up to 100 people were invited to the studio as the audience, who consisted of university students, scholars, professionals, journalists, and some topic-related guests. For instance, if the topic was about agricultural policies, peasants affected by the policy might be invited to talk to officials directly on TV. PMR producers were less willing to compromise with officials in terms of selecting topic-related guests. On one circumstance, the colleagues of a minister disagreed with inviting a certain guest to the interview of the minister. However, the program producer told those officials, "Although we respect your opinion, we think that using our program to equally communicate with grassroots is beneficial to your work." The guest was finally agreed by the officials to join the interview [20].

Officials invited to PMR needed to answer questions from not only the host or hostess but also the studio audience, who were less concerned about "guiding public opinion" and saving face for officials. For example, Li Jinhua, the Auditor-General of the State Auditing Administration, was made to face the tough question: Why was there constant violation of law by officials in spite of frequent investigations and inspections? The Vice-Minister of Education was bluntly asked, "Why is the Ministry of Education, which you are in charge of, the most problematic among all the ministries?" [21] Although how the officials answered questions was out of control of the program producers, this intensive and spontaneous question style have marked another distinct characteristic of the program. PMR producers believed, "as long as we ask the questions that the public cares about, no matter whether they are answered eloquently, by euphemisms, silence, or shrugs, it is all informative indeed" [22].

Actually, many interviewees answered tough questions quite frankly. In an interview, two retired workers expressed their dissatisfaction to the current social security pension system and asked the Minister of Labor and Social Security for possible reform. The minister honestly answered, “I am afraid that in the short run we won’t have any solution” [23].

The bold topics and the open conversation style won a large audience for PMR. In 2005, the average reception rate reached 0.3017, which means that for every episode more than 3 million people watched the program. Following PMR, there appeared other similar programs mentioned previously. However, the question remains: Why were many high-ranking officials willing to not only speak out but also talk about sensitive topics on TV? As these officials’ behavior was not a scattered phenomenon, we argue that their new attitude toward media first of all reflects the party-state’s changing mentality about the role of mass media, and moreover, the new image that the party-state wants to deliver to the public.

Governing China by Changing the Role of the Mass Media

Authoritarian states often tend to influence the mass media to forge supportive sentiment of the government [24]. The CCP has always seen the mass media as an integral part of the governmental apparatuses and has been able to change and attach importance to different roles of media to assist in governance in different time periods [25]. The media is primarily the party’s mouthpiece, responsible for producing positive propaganda [26]. It is also the “eyes” and “ears” of the party to acquire information, especially problems, from the grassroots. The “internal reference material” (*neican*), which started as early as 1950, served this function. However, journalists’ pursuit of investigative reporting in this era was inconsistent due to the repeated ideological struggles and the lack of institutional imperative before the economic reform [27].

In the reform era, the CCP emphasized the supervisory role of the media to “reassert control over its unruly and dysfunctional bureaucracy,” coordinate different interests in the society, and more importantly, to show the paternalistic commitment of the party to the public [28]. The fore-mentioned CCTV’s most celebrated critical report program *Focus Interviews* was initiated in the early 1990s to meet these objectives. Former Premier Zhu Rongji also visited the production team to show central government’s support of media supervision. However, while nondemocratic regimes need media criticism to “provide an incentive system for low-tier officials”, they also “fear the free flow of information as a threat to their political survival” [29]. The CCP has cautiously balanced between increasing media freedom and maintaining social stability. While cases of “power abuse, bureaucratic delinquency, and inhumane economic exploitation” were allowed to report, politically sensitive issues such as mass protests were strictly prohibited from being touched [30]. *Focus Interviews* since its launch has mainly targeted local levels without implicating higher-level officials in policy violations. The mass media in this period was characterized as “watchdogs on the party leashes” [31].

Moreover, government was not accustomed to media inquiry about state policies and the details of decision-making process. This is related to the authoritarian nature

of the regime. In democracies, television networks, such as CNN and C-SPAN, continuously broadcast legislative debates on major policy proposals, which removes some of the mystery from the decision-making process. In contrast, decisions in China are often made within a small leadership clique that enjoys ultimate authority within the country. This leads to a rubric of secrecy, ignoring the “citizen’s right to know” [32]. Most officials had averted exclusive interviews from news media, with the exception of news reports on leaders’ activities. It was not until 1998 that the CCTV program *Oriental Sons* (*dongfang zhizi* 东方之子) made in-depth face-to-face interviews with high-ranking officials, such as state ministers, provincial governors and party secretaries. However, this program only focused on the senior officials’ life experiences and sharing their views of life with the audience. Officials at that time still hesitated to talk about personal views on socio-political issues on TV.

In the recent decade, the CCP has increasingly wanted to show the world a transparent image, as China cares more about using its “soft power” to charm the world [33]. The CCP has also gradually realized the importance of utilizing news media mediating public relations domestically and internationally, especially now with the internet making complete information block impossible. China today has the largest population of netizens (i.e. more than 500 million). Access to the internet has greatly multiplied Chinese citizen’s access to information from a variety of sources. The internet has had a dramatic effect on the speed and scope of information dispersion as well as people’s ability to skirt official censorship. People can learn “almost instantaneously about events happening overseas and throughout the country, from a toxic waste site, corruption scandal in any Chinese city, to a politician’s speech in Tokyo or Washington.” This impact is further amplified by other complementary technologies, such as cell phones [34]. Thus, the public today is more likely predisposed by the virtue of personal values and opinions and is harder to be “indoctrinated” [35]. This raises the stakes for the CCP to keep control over information and the media agenda, spurring them to take a more active approach. As the former Director of the Information Council of the State Council, Zhao Qizheng, commented,

“When events occurred, even if you (the Chinese government) don’t speak out, other people will talk about them, and possibly with rumors and speculations. This will only give rumors an advantage to mislead the public. The government will also be misunderstood and distrusted by the public” [36].

Therefore, several departments of the party-state have set up information offices and a spokesperson system to effect better communication with the media and public [37]. The directors of each government agency come to the press conferences regularly held at the Information Council of the State Council to explain policies and problems relevant to their agencies. Some local governments also set up special columns in local daily newspaper to respond to local complaints. President Hu Jiantao and Premier Wen Jiabao also chatted with netizens online as a gesture of the government’s willingness to listen to people’s voices and encourage freedom of speech [38].

In this backdrop, high-ranking officials felt permission and even encouragement from the central government to accept face to face interviews from programs like PMR. For example, Vice-Chairman of National People’s Congress Standing

Committee Han Qide told PMR hostess, “It is very good to have a communication platform between officials and the people” [39]. Many guest officials disclosed the government decision-making process on PMR. For instance, the Vice-Minister of Finance Lou Jiwei explained in a series of questions: how every year the central government’s budget was made, spent, and adjusted, and how the government decided to add or cut the budget for each field, such as education, technology, and environment protection.

Some officials took the opportunity of appearing on the talk show to give their take on social speculations regarding government policies. For instance, the Minister of Commerce Bo Xilai responded to the western argument of “China’s new colonialism” in Africa by emphasizing that China’s foreign aid toward Africa has been in huge amount and unconditional. The directors of the Three Gorges Dam responded to a series of questions raised domestically and abroad, such as the difficulties of migrating thousands of people, the transparency of financial management, and the security concern of the project from military perspective. They were also questioned about the relation between the extraordinary high temperature of Chongqing area and the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. To make the program appealing, the producer also invited an independent researcher to talk about his opinion on how the dam had changed the ecological environment of Chongqing area and led to the high temperature. Many questions about the Three Gorges Dam were deemed sensitive politically in the past, because it is a large national project especially pushed by the former Premier Li Peng [40]. Any problem or weakness of this project could be interpreted as a policy mistake of the national leaders and therefore undermine their authority. Thus, simply willing to discuss various inquiries and different opinions publicly indicates a progress of the Chinese government.

To build a new image of being transparent, the party-state now needs “someone” to play the role of an independent intermediary to speak equally to the government. Having journalists interact with officials at personal level also helps present an approachable government to the public. Those news programs serving as the party’s mouthpieces directly have been out of date. Programs such as PMR happened to fill this role, giving PMR its niche, and even some power to select interviewees and guide the conversation. According to the producers of PMR, the program would not take the same stance with the officials and make policy propaganda. Neither did the program attempt to act as ordinary people’s “petitioning representative.” “We only want to inquire into government decisions”, said Shen Bing [41]. However, these were still the wish of program producers. In reality, the relationship between the program and officials was mutually constitutive. Sometimes to attract interviewees, it was hard to avoid guest officials from reaching their own goals through the media platform.

Power Competition as the Real Driving Force of Officials on TV

Government’s changing view regarding the role of media can explain why many officials have been willing to accept media interviews, but not why some ministries and officials have been more active than others in talking publicly. In American politics, scholars find that media coverage of national institutions is imbalanced. Press coverage tends to focus on the executive branch, and more specifically the

president. This is because the president “is looked at as the greater explainer and a personified demonstration of today in government” [42]. There are also worries that media imbalance could “result in constitutionally equal branches being politically unequal,” because media coverage may inherently enhance presidential power [43]. In our case here, the imbalanced coverage of Chinese high-ranking officials by PMR resulted from both the media selection and officials’ self-selection.

Since PMR targeted senior party-state officials at or above vice-ministerial/provincial level and below the Politburo, theoretically speaking, its potential interviewees should include leaders of: 1) the departments and offices directly under the Central Committee of the CCP; 2) the ministries, commissions, organizations, various offices and institutions directly under the State Council; 3) the 34 provincial-level administrative units; 4) the Supreme People’s Court and the Supreme People’s Procuratorate; 5) the national and provincial People’s Congresses and People’s Political Consultative Conferences; 6) the large SOEs under central government and national higher education institutions under the Ministry of Education.

However, 51 out of 76 PMR interviews were given to officials from the State Council system (see Fig. 1). This significant imbalance partially was a design of the PMR producers and reflected the power of media, which can decide who to interview and consequently influence, to some degree, what kind of message to be delivered to the public. From the perspective of the journalists, in contrast to the party organs, which usually take care of the general party line and direction, the State Council is the Chinese executive branch and its offices are charged with more specific duties. Their policies are more directly related to the life of ordinary people. State Council bureaucrats are also thought to be less conservative than officials from the party organs. As for local governments, the producers worried that the interviewing topic might be too regional to arouse general interest of the audience. Therefore the program spent more effort inviting officials from the State Council system.

What is interesting is the unequal frequencies of appearances of the central ministries under the State Council on PMR, as shown in Fig. 2. PMR producers had no special preferences among different ministries and had reached out to almost every ministry equally, save a few very sensitive ones, such as the Ministry of Defense, Public Security, and State Security [44]. Hence ministers’ exposure on PMR was based on their/or their ministries’ own level of interest. We argue this is related to the power distribution among government agencies. Government institutions with less political clout attempted to gain strength by increasing their publicity

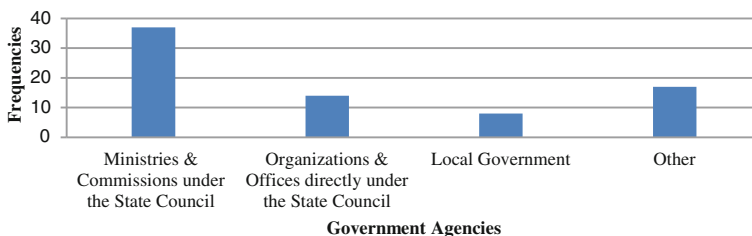


Fig. 1 Frequencies of government agencies interviewed by PMR. Note: “Other” includes 4 interviews with the National People’s Congress, 5 on the SOEs, 2 with the institutions of higher education, 4 with organizations and offices lead directly by the Central Committee of the CCP, and 2 with the Supreme People’s Procuratorate

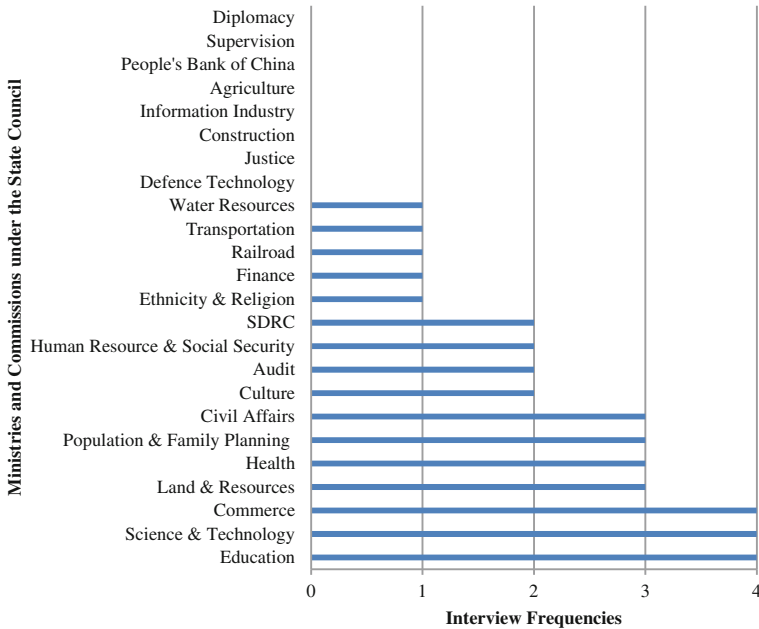


Fig. 2 Frequencies of the state council ministries and commissions interviewed by PMR

through taking TV interviews. We discuss this from the horizontal and vertical distribution of political power.

Horizontal: The Implicit Uneven Power Distribution among the Central Ministries

It is no doubt that all the ministries carry important functions for the state. Each of them can be considered a powerhouse, even eroding the authority of the central government [45]. However, there is very likely an underlying uneven power distribution among the central bureaucracies. This delicate horizontal power inequality is mainly reflected in personnel arrangements especially during crucial moments, such as the transition of power [46]. Some central bureaucracies, such as the Department of Organization and the Ministry of Public Security, had always been considered sensitive by the elder comrades, who preferred to put them under control of their own men for safety [47]. Reviewing the curriculum vitae of all the Politburo members since the economic reform also reveals that officials who previously worked in certain fields seemed to enjoy higher opportunities of promotion. Figure 3 shows that, among those divisions which have survived several rounds of State Council reforms, the State Development and Reform Commission (SDRC) and Ministry of Information Technology are the two largest sources of Politburo members. Following them, Ministry of Commerce, Diplomacy, Defense, Defense Technology, Railroad, Water Resource, and Construction have also produced more Politburo members than the rest of the ministries. It is hard to pin down the reasons behind the different promotion priority given to each ministry and the subsequent uneven power distribution among central bureaucracies. Given the pattern of previous promotions, it seems that the ministries and commissions taking care of national security, sectors of

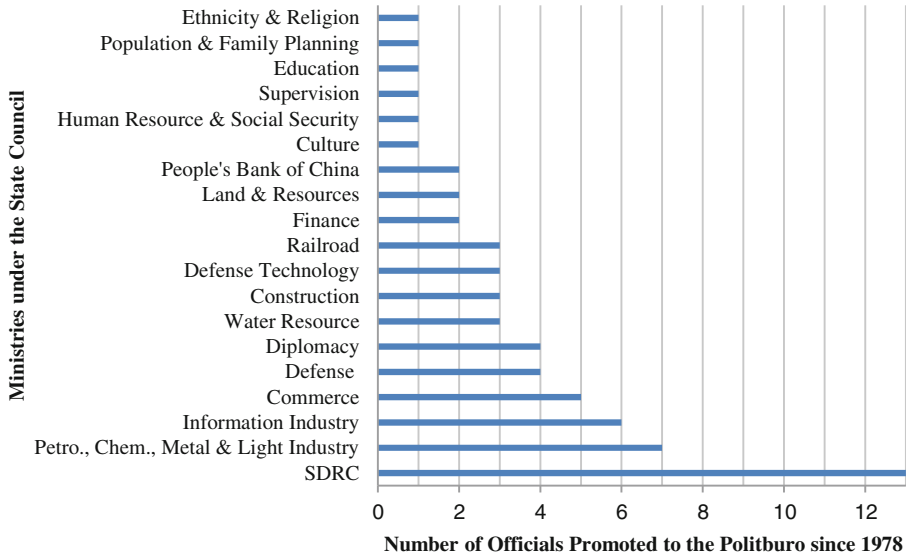


Fig. 3 Number of officials promoted to the Politburo from central ministries since 1978. Note: Names of the ministries were adjusted for several times in the past along with their jurisdictions. Petro., Chem., Metal & Light Industry refers to the former ministries of petroleum, chemical industry, metallurgy, and the light industry. These ministries were abandoned during the economic reform. The former Ministry of Labor and Social Security was merged to present-day Ministry of Human Resource & Social Security. The former Ministry of Hydrology was merged to Ministry of Water Resource. Ministry of Electronic Industry was merged to Ministry of Information Industry. State Economic and Trade Commission developed into the Ministry of Commerce. The State Council Fiscal and Economic Commission developed into the Ministry of Finance. Number of officials promoted was counted based on both the former and current ministries in a sector

economic engines, personnel, and government budget tend to exert more power than those not directly managing cadres and money or contributing to economic growth.

This power inequality is also reflected in the central ministries' different attitude towards the interview invitation from PMR. More interviewees were from the public service sphere. As Fig. 2 indicates, up to 18 interviews were with the ministries in charge of education, science and technology, culture, public health, population and family planning, and civil affairs. This accounted for nearly 50 % of the 37 interviews with State Council ministers. These sectors have generated few Politburo members historically and do not directly produce any GDP. It is also harder for them to produce tangible results for their efforts. They have been traditionally put into a secondary position after other areas that are assumed to contribute more to national economic development. These public service sectors have been given more attention by the Hu/Wen administration which emphasizes "people's livelihood", resulting in the status of these ministries being strengthened. However, many problems and existing conflicts have not been solved. These ministries participated in the show in hopes that more public attention might help solve these problems. In particular, they had two purposes.

First, these service type ministries need more help from the media to promote their policies. For example, during an interview, Pan Guiyu, the Deputy-Director of the State Population and Family Planning Commission, talked about a policy that

monetarily rewarded rural families with only one child or two girls. After the show, many viewers called CCTV asking whether there was this policy in their provinces and the criteria of application to compensation. Thus, coming to PMR did help increase policy popularity sometimes, especially for those service type ministries, whose policies may not reach grassroots level effectively.

According to the concentration of national development plan, and possibly the power of different factions within the central government as well as the compromise of interest, government policies are enforced with different strength [48]. Some policies are enforced strictly by the government, such as the “one-child policy.” Officials failing to implement this policy can be demoted. But some policies are not seriously enforced or are only viewed as suggestions by the central government. Naturally those policies are not implemented with any regularity regardless of their value. These ministries have realized that sometimes rather than relying on the local governments and local functional departments, it is more important to inform the public as to the policies and win their support. Deputy-Director Pan said, “Putting money into the hands of local governments is like water flowing into desert”, showing her distrust of local officials [49]. In fact, the State Population and Family Planning Commission has an education center, which has full financial support from the central government. This education center promotes many compensation policies for families with only one child besides making propaganda of the “one-child policy.” The Ministry of Education also owns a television station dedicated to education. Both examples show that the service ministries are especially in need of the media to be their megaphone.

The second purpose for the senior officials to appear on PMR was to court the country’s ultimate policy-makers for support. Television talk show was also a channel for the ministers to communicate with their superiors. In the interviews, financial restraint was repeatedly mentioned by the guest officials. For example, the inadequate financial inputs in education and medical care have become open topics.

In contrast, most departments showing less incentive to accept interviews were those with more real power or closer to the core of economic development. As Fig. 2 illustrates, Ministry of Supervision (essentially the Central Discipline Inspection Commission), Information Industry, People’s bank of China, and even the Ministry of Construction never appeared on PMR. However, as more ministers came to the show, those who had not appeared on TV might also feel pressured and obliged to do so. For instance, the Ministry of Finance actively offered to be interviewed by PMR, resulting in the interview of its Vice-Minister previously mentioned. But it was also the only interview accepted by that Ministry. Similarly, the SDRC did accept the invitation from PMR a second time. The SDRC, formerly the State Planning Commission, is central in reforming China today. It has a nick name of “the little State Council”, as it makes many national economic policies and controls national economy, such as prices and energy supply. However, the two officials interviewed by PMR were both from the less influential offices within the SDRC. The first guest official was the Vice-Director of the West Development Office, which is only an ad hoc office within the SDRC. The second guest official was from the resource and environmental protection department in SDRC. And very likely, their appearances on TV were a gesture to show the SDRC’s response to the current administration’s call for “balanced regional development” and “sustainable development”.

Vertical: The Central-Local Relation

“The largest problem encountered by the Chinese government today is local government’s in compliance of the central government’s orders. The policies made in Zhongnanhai sometimes can’t take effect barely beyond the compound of Zhongnanhai,” said Zhang Baoqing, the former Vice-Minister of Education, in a PMR interview. His comments pointed out a huge difficulty—local disobedience of central orders—facing the current administration [50]. Minister Zhang was not the only one who had showed concern for this on PMR. In at least 13 out of the 76 episodes, the interviewees complained about insufficient policy implementation at the local level. For example, Li Yizhong, Director of the State Administration of Work Safety, didn’t mince his words when saying “the illegal collusion between coalmine bosses and local officials constitutes the main cause of the failure in eliminating the black coalmines” [51].

The reason for local disobedience is that most central ministries and commissions only have professional leadership in their local branches and no administrative relationship. Except for a few departments, such as the Ministry of Public Security, the Supreme Procuratorate and the Supreme Court, which have direct vertical management of their local branches, most ministries only give policy guidance to local administrations. Central ministries are not in charge of their finance and personnel. This deprives effective means for the central government to enforce policies locally and leaves local governments with great autonomy. Land management is the best example of this. While the Ministry of Land and Resource only oversees macro land utilization policy, the local government has the *de facto* autonomy of land disposal [52]. This weakens the power of the central ministry and partially explains why the land ministers were willing to accept interviews three times. By criticizing local disobedience publicly, the ministers “hit two birds with one stone.” On the one hand, they earned sympathy from the people, who got the idea that the central government cared about people; it was only the local governments’ failure to follow through with central policies. On the other hand, the ministers cultivated a public opinion to pressure local governments, which might help compel them to implement central policies locally [53].

In comparison to central ministers, local officials were more available for interviews, motivated by the fierce promotion competition among them [54]. For local officials, the PMR producers only chose timely topics and topics that were able to reflect wider national problems. For instance, the Party Secretary of Lanzhou talked about dealing with incompetent officials. This topic has wide implications around China, since many Chinese officials, though not necessarily corrupt, are unable to respond to social problems effectively. Some of them intentionally choose to do little during their term so as not to make mistakes. The Deputy-Mayor of Chongqing, Huang Qifan came to PMR twice and discussed issues related to the Three Gorges Dam and how local government cleaned up educational debt. The Party Secretary of Suzhou responded to social questioning of the “Suzhou Development Model”, rethinking China’s developmental path in the past decades.

For three consecutive years, PMR had also made special editions interviewing more than ten provincial governors and party secretaries during the “two-conference period.” The producers apparently felt more leeway in choosing both interviewees and topics when inviting provincial officials. Comparing to the ministers at the central government,

provincial governors were much more active in getting onto PMR. They also had strong incentive to report upward on the show, because local governments did not have many opportunities to exhibit their administrative achievements to central policy-makers. Media became an “irregular tool” for them to realize this purpose. These officials were all eager to display their high degree of competence by presenting clear knowledge of the administrative jurisdictions governed by them, although the program producers had very carefully avoided official reporting on TV. Every local official invited was able to give relevant numbers, such as GDP output and financial input, accurately. Nobody dared to criticize the central policy. Therefore, appearing on the talk show might help local officials and even central ministers as well to get more attention from the national leadership and earn further promotion. At least 36 interviews had officials pontificating on their administrative achievements.

Who Liked “Talking”? Guest Officials’ Personal Characteristics

Despite the advantages discussed previously, accepting television interviews could be a risky strategy for officials, because many challenging questions were often asked to guest officials on PMR. If officials avoided answering the tough questions in public, the populace might deem them incapable. If they answered the questions, they might offend some powerful people, including their leaders, and ruin their career. Thus, we argue that besides power competition, ministers’ personality could also directly affect their frequencies to appear on PMR. Two examples were the Ministry of Commerce and the State Auditing Administration. Both of them accepted interviews on several occasions. It is widely known that Minister Bo Xilai and Auditor-General Li Jinhua who led the “Audit Storm” in 2003 and 2004 [55], were two famous outspoken officials, good at interacting with media to promote their esteem. In this section, we explore some personal characteristics shared by the guest officials and see what kind of political elites are more open to media interviews. We focus on officials’ age, education background, and previous experience to analyze the pattern [56].

Age, for Chinese officials, has special significance. It is one of the factors determining an official’s political prospects. It also helps in telling a person’s growth background. The age factor for Chinese officials is also reflected in PMR, where young and relatively old officials had formed two major groups of interviewees. We find that ministers and vice-ministers who were going to retire soon were more open to interviews and spoke more frankly. Compared with those younger officials, they were more relaxed and worried little about their political prospects. For instance, Zhang Baoqing said, “anyway, I am going to retire, I can speak more from my heart.” This attitude was shared by several other retiring officials.

At the same time, there was another large group of 22 interviewees who were not yet 55 years old. These officials fit the rising star archetype, not only young but also well-educated. Among the 22 officials, 13 had a post-graduate education and eight earned a bachelor degree. More important, most of them received their college education after the resumption of the college-entrance examination in 1977. Thus, they are the direct beneficiaries of the reform and open door policy, and therefore its strongest advocates. This also means that they were influenced by the western

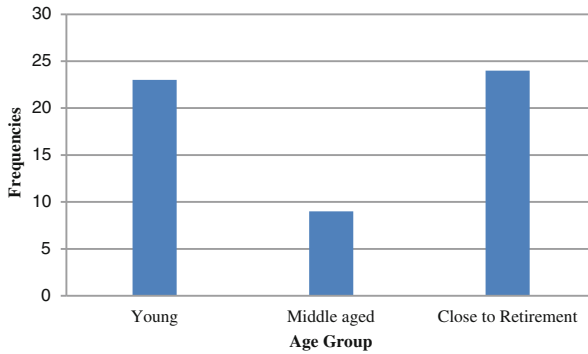


Fig. 4 Official's interview frequencies by age groups

liberalism at college for it was at that time China's adherence to old Maoist ideology faded away. With this general background, this group of officials developed a common characteristic of open-mindedness not seen in the previous generation. Hence, they are also more open to TV interviews.

We roughly divide PMR's guest officials' ages by the time of interviews into three categories according to their proximity to retirement. In China, the formal retirement age is 60 for vice-ministers and 65 for ministers. The first category includes young officials, whose ages were below 55 or ministers who were 56. The second category includes officials who were close to retirement, that is vice-ministers at or above 58 and ministers older than 61. And the third category includes all the guest officials whose ages fell between the two groups. Figure 4 clearly shows a "U" shape distribution of guest officials based on their age categories. There were 23 young officials, accounting for about 41 % of guest officials, and 24 elder officials, taking about 43 % of all the guest officials, and only 9 officials in the middle.

In addition to age and education, officials' personal experience may also influence their attitude toward media. Officials with overseas study and work experience, or international communication experience tended to be more familiar with the special traits and requirements of news media. Among the 56 guest officials, 11 of them had overseas experience, such as studying abroad in Western Europe or the United States, working as diplomats and staying abroad all year, or studying at China's most internationalized School of Business Administration. These officials also showed a certain degree of affirmation in regards to the relationship between news media and government in western societies. For instance, during a preliminary interview, one guest official explained clearly to the journalist that western politicians often hire a team of image consultants to manage their image in the media. This also indicates that Chinese officials have started to think more about their media image. The Minister of Commerce, Bo Xilai was one of these new types of officials. His first interview was right after the conclusion of the Sino-EU textile negotiation. In order to explain the complicated issue clearly to the audience, he asked his secretary to generate some tables and charts. Right before recording the interview, the program producers thought of preparing a pen for the minister during instruction. However, when Minister Bo came to the studio, he took out an adjustable pen particularly for this scenario. This little detail clearly illustrated that Bo was very familiar with media operation and cared about public impression about him.

Previous work experience in the propaganda field might also make an official pay more attention to the effects of media. Four interviewees had pertinent work experience. For example, Chen Baosheng was previously the head of the Propaganda Department of Gansu province. After he assumed the Party Secretary of Lanzhou, he launched a new program, “First-Hand Official on TV.” He required the leading official of every major government department to appear on TV interviews and give feedback to candid audience questions.

Finally, a group of “scholar type officials” rising recently are also good at public communication [57]. They are open-minded, knowledgeable, and confident. Some officials of this type are academically transformed, such as Xu Guanhua and Wang Longde, who are academicians and experts in their field. Other officials in this group may not have high degrees, but they too are very versed in the area they manage and willing to answer challenging questions. For example, the Director of State Copyright Bureau, Yan Xiaohong, told the interviewer, “the sharper the questions you ask me, the better.” Huang Qifan said, “I have no objection to sensitive questions. I will answer the question whatever it is.” And Wang Rong, faced with all the questioning about the “Suzhou Development Model”, simply claimed, “No question is needed to be averted. I would rather face them.” These personal characteristics, in particular age, education, and overseas experiences, were especially prevalent among several officials who accepted interviews more than once (see Table 1). This provides further proof that personal factors are quite important in determining whether an official is open to TV interviews.

Conclusion

In this article, we use a CCTV program featuring senior central and local officials, PMR, as a case study answering the questions: How is a new form of media platform for political elite, TV talk shows of high-ranking officials, possible to evolve in China? Especially, why officials are willing to accept challenging TV interviews? Besides the commonly argued social changes which urge the CCP to learn to manipulate media more skillfully, our case shows that officials’ willingness to enter the spotlight may result from two sources: the overall matrix of the political structure in China, and some idiosyncratic factors in officials themselves. In particular, we find central officials from less powerful ministries are more willing to accept interviews, so that they could utilize the media as an effective channel to advertise their policies, call for central government’s attention, or increase social oversight on the policy implementation at the local level. Meanwhile, local officials are more active in coming to the show on average, since media appearances give them an opportunity to report their achievements to their superiors, possibly contributing to career advancement [58]. At the individual level, those young “reform generation” rising stars tend to be more open to media, which is very likely related to their younger age, background of higher and overseas education. On the other spectrum, officials retiring soon are also more willing to accept interviews, as they have less to lose even if speaking frankly.

Table 1 Brief bio of the interviewees who appeared on PMR more than once

Name	Title	Age by then	Education	Overseas experiences	Interview frequencies
Lu Xinshe	Vice-Minister of Land and Resources	49	Bachelor	Studied in Germany	2
Yan Xiaohong	Director of State Copyright Bureau	51	Bachelor	No	2
Li Liguo	Vice-Minister of Civil Affairs	52	Master	No	2
Huang Qifan	Deputy-Mayor of Chongqing	54	MBA	Studied at China-Europe Business School	2
Bo Xilai	Minister of Commerce	56	Master	No	2
Wang Longde	Vice-Minister of Public Health	58	Master	No	3
Li Yizhong	Director of State Administration of Work Safety	60	Bachelor	No	2
Li Jinhua	Auditor-General	62	Master	No	2
Xu Guanhua	Former Minister of Science and Technology	65	Academician of the Chinese Academy of Science	Visiting Scholar in Sweden	3

Officials are sorted by their age from the youngest to the oldest in this table

However, not to be over-conclusive, we want to point out that since people also vary in their personalities, not all young or retiring officials are open to media. For instance, the Party Secretary of Shaanxi province, Zhao Leji, born in 1957 and enrolled into the elite Peking University in 1977, so also from the reform generation, and one of the youngest provincial secretaries in China, has never accepted any interviews from media. Similarly, Wang Yang, the Party Secretary of Guangdong province is also widely regarded as a young and promising official. But he refused the interview invitation by CCTV during the 2006 big drought in Sichuan and Chongqing when he was the Party Secretary of Chongqing. His rationale was that, “people want to see what an official has done rather than what he has said.”

Besides, officials’ differing attitude toward media may also be owed to the political culture in China. In Confucian culture, officials are supposed to be a moral model for ordinary people. They are largely unwilling to reveal their personal side to the public. Unlike their western counterparts, Chinese officials generally avoid talking about their personal lives; rather, they choose to talk about work. A minister burst into tears during an interview, and he insisted that particular scene be deleted. Obviously, they do not want to draw too much public attention to themselves. Actually, the recent expel of Bo Xilai might become a lesson for outspoken officials that, in Chinese politics, excessive self-promotion publicly and revelation of political ambition can be dangerous. Thus, this dramatic event might generate some impact to this new type of TV interviews, though we still need longer time to observe the ultimate effects. However, our case study still shows that besides structural factors, power competition within formal political

institution and officials' personal changing mentality can also help improve media access to some degree, though limited.

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