



Implementation of Merit System in China's Bureaucratic and Public Administration Sectors

Hu Caihua^{1*}, Akhmad Saufi²

Management Study Program, Faculty of Economic, Universitas Mataram

Corresponding Author: Hu Caihua hucaihua2025@163.com

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the merit system has played a crucial role in China. Previous studies suggest that meritocratic principles enhance governance efficiency by prioritizing qualifications and performance over political affiliations. While many existing studies focus on the theoretical foundations of meritocracy or its implementation in Western contexts, this study specifically examines the merit system within China's unique political and cultural framework. Employing a library research methodology, this study analyzes five academic journal articles sourced from reputable, indexed databases such as Google Scholar, Science Direct, and ResearchGate. The findings reveal how the merit system is implemented in China's bureaucratic and public administration sectors, as well as the challenges it faces. Despite being formally embedded in China's governance structure, the merit system encounters significant obstacles, particularly the influence of *guanxi* (personal networks). This study highlights the complexities of establishing a true meritocracy in China and underscores the necessity of structural reforms to promote a more transparent and equitable bureaucratic system.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the merit system in China has been a critical component of the country's governance, particularly in organizations such as public administration and bureaucratic management. The merit system, which prioritizes hiring and promoting individuals based on their abilities and qualifications rather than personal connections or political affiliations, has played a significant role in enhancing China's administrative efficiency and governance capacity (Li & Gore, 2018). Historically, this system can be traced back to the imperial examination system, which was used to select government officials based on merit rather than birthright, demonstrating a long-standing tradition of valuing competence in governance. In the modern era, China's governance reforms have continued this tradition by incorporating meritocratic principles into the civil service system to enhance bureaucratic professionalism and efficiency (Burns & Zhiren, 2010).

The significance of the merit system in China is closely tied to the broader objectives of administrative modernization and anti-corruption efforts. Since the late 20th century, China has undertaken substantial reforms to improve the effectiveness of public administration by reducing nepotism and political patronage in government appointments (Ma et al., 2015). A major milestone in these efforts was the establishment of the Civil Service Law in 1993, which formalized merit-based recruitment and evaluation processes within the bureaucracy, aiming to create a more transparent and competent public sector (Chan & Rosenbloom, 2010). However, despite these advancements, challenges persist in ensuring the full implementation of meritocratic principles, as political influence, bureaucratic rigidity, and institutional inertia continue to affect personnel decisions (Zhu & Dowdle, 2020).

Furthermore, the implementation of the merit system in China operates within a distinctive political and cultural context. Unlike Western democratic systems that emphasize open competition for government positions, China's meritocratic governance remains deeply intertwined with the influence of the ruling Communist Party (Ma et al., 2015). The balance between professional competency and political loyalty is a defining characteristic of the Chinese meritocratic framework, leading scholars to debate the extent to which the system genuinely upholds meritocratic ideals or whether it primarily functions as a mechanism for political control (Bell, 2015; Li, 2016). While the merit system has undoubtedly contributed to administrative efficiency, its coexistence with party influence raises important questions about its effectiveness in fostering an impartial and merit-driven bureaucracy.

Given the significance of meritocracy in China's governance, this literature review aims to analyze existing studies on the implementation and challenges of the merit system. By synthesizing findings from various scholarly sources, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how the merit system functions in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term *meritocracy* is derived from the word "merit" or "benefit" and refers to a political system that rewards individuals based on their achievements or abilities. It can also be understood as the philosophy of offering opportunities for advancement based on an individual's worth, skills, or excellence. The concept of meritocracy is closely tied to the merit system, a structure that supports advancement based on merit (Utama, 2016). Thus, meritocracy represents a social system where an individual's success is determined by their performance and abilities. The implementation of meritocracy is facilitated by the existence of a merit system (Afrianto, 2020). According to Supriatna (2020), the merit system is a process for promoting and hiring government employees based on their job performance, rather than political connections. It is a method of personnel management designed to enhance the efficiency, economy, and public benefit by ensuring the selection and retention of qualified employees (Supriatna, 2020).

According to merit system, job promotions serve multiple essential purposes within an organization, as outlined by Afrianto (2020). They provide greater recognition and rewards to employees based on their performance, enhancing their personal satisfaction, pride, social status, and income. Promotions also serve to motivate employees by encouraging higher levels of enthusiasm, discipline, and productivity. Additionally, they help ensure job stability by offering transparent and timely advancements based on fair evaluations. Promotions are vital for filling vacancies caused by employee departures, ensuring continuity in staffing, and can also improve employees' status, such as moving from temporary to permanent positions, thereby increasing job security and overall satisfaction (Margahana & Sari, 2019).

According to (Alimuddin et al., 2024), the conditions for merit system include several important factors as follow:

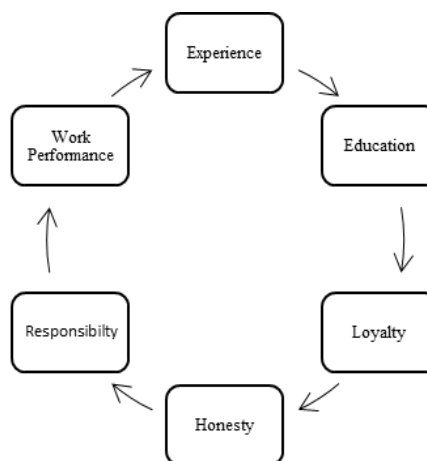


Figure 1 Merit System Conditions

Experience is one of the conditions, as more experience is expected to lead to higher abilities, more ideas, and greater competence. The level of education is also considered important, with higher education associated with better thinking and analytical skills. Loyalty is another key factor, as high

loyalty indicates a sense of responsibility toward the organization. Honesty is a critical requirement, especially for roles such as cashiers, where trustworthiness is fundamental. Responsibility is also emphasized, as companies often require candidates who can handle significant responsibilities.

For certain positions, social skills are necessary, as the ability to get along with others and work effectively in teams is essential. Work performance is another major factor, typically assessed through records of an individual's achievements. Finally, initiative and creativity are crucial, as these traits demonstrate a candidate's ability to innovate and contribute valuable ideas to the organization (Alimuddin et al., 2024). The promotion process creates a "multiplier effect" within the organization, as vacancies at higher levels open up opportunities for others to move up. It also fosters creativity and innovation, allowing employees to take on new challenges and expand their knowledge and work experience.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a library research methodology, collecting data from five academic journal articles sourced from credible, indexed platforms such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and ResearchGate. The selected journals were chosen based on their relevance to the study's objectives and their scholarly credibility. To analyze and interpret the data, content analysis was employed, allowing the researcher to systematically categorize information into key themes, concepts, and terminologies. This approach followed the content analysis framework proposed by Krippendorff (1985), beginning with unitizing, where relevant data were identified and appropriate texts—such as journal articles and interviews—were selected. The next step, coding, involved categorizing the data into structured themes, followed by data reduction, which simplified extensive content into manageable patterns. The researcher then interpreted these patterns to draw conclusions aligned with the research questions.

To ensure reliability and validity, a validation process was conducted by adhering to established coding rules and verifying consistency in the categorization and interpretation of findings. This structured approach ensured that the results were both accurate and reflective of the broader academic discourse.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the merit system in China remains a topic of ongoing debate, particularly concerning its effectiveness in ensuring fairness and efficiency in bureaucratic promotions. This study reviewed a minimum of five scholarly articles examining the merit system's influence on career advancement in China. The analysis identifies two key aspects of the merit system in this context: (1) the implementation of merit system in China and (2) the challenges of merit system. These aspects will be explored in detail in the subsequent sections to provide a comprehensive understanding of their impact.

Merit-Based System in China

The findings from the literature highlight the significant role of merit in China, emphasizing the necessity of a structured and transparent system to ensure fairness and efficiency. A truly meritocratic system relies on clearly defined performance indicators, objective evaluation mechanisms, and minimized external influences to promote individuals based on their contributions and competencies rather than extraneous factors. According to Li & Gore (2018), the cadre management system is theoretically merit-based, with promotions contingent upon performance metrics such as economic growth, policy execution, and administrative efficiency. Ma, Tang, & Yan (2015) further emphasize that professional achievements, leadership skills, and policy implementation outcomes are key indicators used in evaluating public employees.

However, studies indicate that despite the formal presence of meritocratic structures, there are inconsistencies in their application, often caused by a lack of standardized assessment criteria and the subjective influence of higher authorities. This discrepancy between theory and practice means that employees who excel in their duties may not necessarily receive promotions, leading to a sense of disillusionment and discouragement among workers who believe in meritocratic principles. Li (2016) highlights that while performance is a critical factor in career mobility, external influences such as political considerations, personal affiliations, and discretionary decision-making by superiors often interfere with meritocratic principles, undermining the effectiveness of performance-based promotions and fostering skepticism among employees regarding the fairness of the system. The presence of these external factors can lead to a lack of trust in the promotion process, where employees may prioritize personal networking efforts over professional development, further diminishing overall productivity and morale within the bureaucratic structure.

The Challenges of the Merit System in China

A well-functioning merit system is often regarded as a cornerstone of effective organization and governance, ensuring that individuals advance based on competence rather than personal connections or political allegiance. However, in China, while the merit system is formally in place, its implementation is far from purely meritocratic. Instead, political and social influences—particularly *guanxi* (personal networks) and party loyalty—significantly shape bureaucratic promotions, raising concerns about fairness and institutional efficiency.

Empirical studies suggest that *guanxi* plays a pivotal role in career advancement in China, sometimes even surpassing merit-based evaluations. According to Ma et al. (2015), approximately 40% of public employees perceive promotions as primarily merit-based, while 20% believe they are driven by *guanxi*. Another 10% acknowledge a combination of both factors, whereas 30% hold a fatalistic view, believing that neither merit nor *guanxi* alone determines promotion outcomes (Public Employees Perceived Promotion Channels, 2015). These findings suggest that although meritocratic principles exist in theory,

their impact is often diluted by interpersonal relationships and political affiliations.

Further complicating the system is the reliance on subjective recognition from superiors rather than objective performance indicators. Li and Gore (2018) found that appreciation and endorsement from higher-ranking officials are often the most critical factors for promotion, overshadowing measurable professional achievements. This reliance on personal recognition fosters an environment where networking and maintaining close ties with influential figures become essential for career progression. As a result, meritocratic ideals are undermined, as professional competence alone may not be enough to secure promotions.

Another fundamental challenge lies in the structural integration of political and administrative roles within China's governance system. Unlike Western bureaucracies, which maintain clear distinctions between political and civil service positions, China's system merges both under the Communist Party's authority (Li, 2016). This structure reinforces political loyalty as a key determinant of career advancement, further marginalizing objective merit assessments. The intertwining of administrative competence with political allegiance ultimately limits the effectiveness of a merit-based promotion system and raises concerns about governance efficiency.

Thus, while China's merit system is designed to ensure fair and competence-driven career advancement, its practical application is deeply intertwined with social and political dynamics. The dominance of *guanxi*, subjective recognition, and political loyalty over objective meritocracy has significant implications for governance, institutional trust, and employee motivation. If left unaddressed, these systemic challenges may hinder the development of a truly efficient and equitable system, affecting both public sector performance and broader administrative reforms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings indicate that while the merit system is formally embedded within China, its implementation is hindered by systemic challenges, including the pervasive influence of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* has deep roots in Chinese society, where personal relationships and trust networks are highly valued. While this cultural element may contribute to workplace harmony, it also risks undermining institutional meritocracy when personal affiliations take precedence over qualifications. The intertwining of merit and *guanxi* in bureaucratic promotions creates an environment where competence does not always guarantee career advancement. As a result, there is a risk of inefficiency and reduced motivation among public employees who perceive promotions as unfairly distributed. Addressing this issue requires a shift in both organizational culture and broader societal expectations regarding fairness in promotions. By refining the balance between merit-based and politically influenced promotions, China can work towards a more effective and fair governance system.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

The coexistence of meritocracy and guanxi within China's bureaucratic framework presents a paradox that challenges the efficiency of governance and public administration. While the merit system is institutionally codified, its practical enforcement is frequently compromised by informal networks that prioritize personal affiliations over objective qualifications. This duality not only fosters perceptions of favoritism but also erodes trust in the legitimacy of the promotion system, potentially leading to disengagement and inefficiency among civil servants. Moreover, the entrenchment of guanxi reflects deeper socio-cultural dynamics that resist abrupt institutional reforms, necessitating a nuanced approach that balances tradition with the imperatives of modern governance. Strategic policy interventions, such as enhancing transparency in promotion criteria, strengthening oversight mechanisms, and fostering a cultural shift towards performance-based evaluations, are essential to mitigating these challenges. Ultimately, achieving a sustainable equilibrium between meritocratic principles and entrenched social norms will be critical for China's long-term administrative efficacy and political stability.

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