

# Party membership – a short way to Heaven?

*A study of individual career making among Chinese students.*

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# Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative case study of how the younger generations of China value membership in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Through the use of individualisation theory it has further set out to find out whether and how Party membership is used as a career strategy in their making of a ‘career of their own’. The individualisation thesis states that as the burden of responsibility is increasingly laid upon the individual, the individual is forced to make sense of this new situation through a biographic response: a ‘do-it-yourself biography’. The analysis is based on interviews with 22 students at two universities in Beijing, Peking University and Tsinghua University.

As the CCP controls all assignments to the state and reserve most leading cadre positions to their own members, joining the Party is considered crucial to do career within the state sector. The importance the students interviewed ascribe Party membership therefore to a large degree depended on whether they aimed at a career within the governmental organs or the state-owned enterprises, or not. Among those who had applied for Party membership, the majority saw working within the system as one of their options upon graduation. However, the Party does no longer have a monopoly on career mobility. There are also other pathways to upward mobility and success that might be both quicker and more effective means to success and money than working within the system. Several students therefore did not want to apply for Party membership.

The thesis concludes that there are signs of individualisation in the way Chinese students think about career. They make strategies and take conscious choices to achieve the careers they want. In these strategies, Party membership is important for those who want to pursue state sector jobs. At the same time, the choices they make and the strategies they follow, to a large degree show the same features. This comes down to the fact that the choices they make are institutionally dependent. Their career options are dependent on their education, their contact network and whether they are admitted into the Party.





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Oslo, May 2012

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# 1 Introduction

The starting point for this thesis has been the individualisation process taking place throughout societies in East Asia, and especially China, today. During the last decades, collective institutions and systems have been downsized, and the East Asian countries are leaving increasingly more responsibility up to the individual. China, for instance, during the 1970's and 80's went from a planned economy of rural collectives and a state redistribution system to a privatised economy. During the 1990's, state reforms contributed to the further gradual reduction of collective institutions through the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and housing, and the marketisation of education and medical care. These were reforms directly aimed at forcing individuals to take on more responsibility in favour of the state (Yan n.d. b).

The aim of this thesis is, through use of the individualisation theory, to explore whether and how the younger generations of China value membership in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)<sup>1</sup>, and similarly look at how this is connected to the idea of 'a life of one's own' and the 'do-it-yourself biography' in the way Chinese students think about career. The individualisation thesis states that as the burden of responsibility is increasingly laid upon the individual, as referred to above, the individual is forced to make sense of this new situation through a biographic response: a 'do-it-yourself biography'. In my thesis I will explore how this has influenced the perceptions of Chinese students. I choose to look at perceptions of Party membership in particular, because Party membership since the 1949 revolution has been a road to individual power and upward mobility. During the Mao era, membership in the CCP was vital for anyone wanting to climb the ladder of social mobility (Walder 1986). Today, there are plenty of jobs and opportunities without Party membership, but Party membership is still the most essential factor for achieving elite positions in the state sector (Walder, 1995; Walder, Li and Treiman, 2000; Walder and Li, 2001). As such, applying for and achieving Party membership is important for anyone who wants to make career in the public sector above a certain level. By looking at whether some selected Chinese students seek Party membership, and their reasoning for either applying or not applying for membership, I want to investigate their career making strategies, and how this is connected to the individualisation processes taking place in today's China.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as the Party, and Party membership.

**The main research question of this thesis is therefore:**

*How important is Party membership considered for future career opportunities among students in China today? What does this tell us about perceptions both of the Party and of individual career making among Chinese students?*

To be able to answer the main question, I have outlined the following research questions:

1. Why do some students seek Party membership, while others not? How conscious are these choices?
2. How do students view Party membership in comparison to education and other abilities when it comes to making of one's own career?
3. Is Party membership regarded more important by some groups of students than by others? If so, by whom, and why?
4. How is Party membership regarded in comparison to social relations (*guanxi*)? Are Party relations considered to be *guanxi*?

As can be read from the questions above, I expect that many students seek Party membership, but that they will have various reasons for doing so. I also expect that while Party membership will be a factor in career making, other factors will also matter, and that the different factors will be valued differently by the informants. Because I am mainly looking at the students' perceptions and causal relations, I consider qualitative interviews rather than a quantitative survey as the appropriate methodological approach.

In chapter 2 I will explain the theoretical framework for the thesis, the individualisation theory, and how this theory can be used in an East Asian context. In chapter 3 I go on to the methodological framework. I will explain how I went about to fulfil the study, and explain the choices I have made in this regard. In chapter 4 I will describe the relationship between the Party and the Chinese state, and especially look at the Party's control of state personnel. Chapter 5 is about Party membership, how to get it, and why seek it. I will here answer research question number one, and partly number two, through comparing the answers I got from my informants. In Chapter 6 I go on to explore education and Party membership as two different credentials, and two different roads to career mobility, answering research question number two. In chapter 7 I will look at the labour market, its reforms, and how students view

their chances in it. Comparing the answer of my different informants I will answer research questions three and four. In chapter 8 I will connect my fieldwork findings and the individualisation theory, further analysing the issue of Party membership as career strategy. In the concluding chapter I will argue that there are signs of individualisation among the students, and in the way they think about career. They are concerned with standing out among the others. Party membership is used as a career strategy to do so by many students, but is not the only road to success.





## 2 Theoretical framework

*Modernity in China is understood as the realisation of three dreams: a strong state, a wealthy nation, and a prosperous individual – exactly in that order.*

Yunxiang Yan (2010: 508)

In choosing an angle in which to view an issue, one simultaneously defines the issue, as well as creates the need for a certain theoretical approach. How important Chinese students regard Party membership for their future career, cannot merely be explained through theory, empirical findings are necessary. How these empirical findings are to be analysed and perceived further, is on the other hand a question that needs to be defined theoretically. In choosing to look at these findings from the angle of individual career making, I find it appropriate to choose the theoretical approach of individualisation. Or, the other way around: When choosing to look at the importance of Party membership for future career with the individualisation theory as a theoretical backdrop, I choose to investigate whether Party membership is used as a strategy to make ‘a career of one’s own’.

The individualisation thesis is part of Ulrich Beck’s (1992; Beck and Grande 2010; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) theory of ‘second’ or ‘reflexive modernity’. I will here first shortly explain the main arguments of the second modernity theory and its thesis of ‘risk society’, before moving to its other thesis, the individualisation thesis. Further I will look at some critique that has been raised against the thesis, and especially how this critique on the one hand has *come from* and on the other hand *explained* empirical findings in East Asia. Last, I will take a closer look at individualisation in the Chinese context, focusing on ‘the striving individual’.

### 2.1 Second modernity and risk society

To understand the reflexivity of reflexive modernity, let us first start with the thoughts of Anthony Giddens. He argues that modern social life is characterised by three features: the separation of time and place, the disembedding of social institutions, and institutional reflexivity (Giddens 1991). In pre-modern times, time and space were linked together through place, while in modern times one developed ‘empty’ dimensions of both time and space, disconnected from the place where one was situated. Whereas earlier the *when* of a happening

would always be connected to the *where* of the happening, the mechanical clock, the universal dating system and time zones now make it possible to talk about when something happened without binding it to a specific place. There is still a *where* connected to the *when*, but the *where* can for instance be several different places if an event is coordinated amongst people who are not in the same place (Ibid: 16-17). This has enabled a disembedding of social institutions, the disembedding mechanisms being ‘symbolic tokens’ and ‘expert systems’. Through the prime example of money, we can see that symbolic tokens brackets time and space: Transaction between people who never met is possible because of a standardised value of money (brackets space), at the same time as it is a means of credit (brackets time). The expert systems has made it possible for people all over the world to make use of technology regardless of the validity of the technical knowledge itself (Ibid: 17-18). And it is in this context the institutional reflexivity of modern society takes place: the separation of time and space, as well as the disembedding of social institutions take us away from traditional precepts and practices. Without the certainty connected to old precepts and practices, we find ourselves constantly reviewing our social activities when facing new information and knowledge (Ibid: 20). In trying to establish some certain truths through science, the Enlightenment opened for questioning all established knowledge. Because insight to new knowledge is accomplished through a methodological principle of doubt, instead of certainty, we now experience a constant reflexivity (Ibid: 21).

In accordance to this, Beck sees social change divided into three periods: pre-modernity, simple or first modernity, and reflexive or second modernity. The first modernity can be seen to rest on collective identities like classes, families and ethnicities, with full employment and production based on exploitation of nature as some of the central principles (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 206). The first modernity society is now being challenged by individualisation, globalisation, under- and unemployment, and ecological crisis (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 206), and we are moving into a risk society. This risk society is still an industrial society, as it is the industry that first and foremost produces the risks of the risk society (Lash and Wynne 1992: 3); they are systematic side effects of modernisation (Beck 1992:27).

Beck and Grande (2010: 415) here make the distinction between basic principles and basic institutions of modernity. Modern societies are characterised by several basic principles that have been institutionalised in different ways. The theory of second modernity argues that the

second modernity arrives when the basic institutions are transformed while the basic principles are preserved:

Thanks to the global victory of the *principles* of modernity (such as the market economy) and the '*side effects*' of *industrial modernity* (climate change, global financial crisis), the basic social institutions of the First Modernity have become ineffective or dysfunctional for both society and individuals (Ibid; italics in original).

Institutions like nation-states, welfare systems, families, trade unions and so on are less and less capable of delivering the expected functions and utilities of the modern society, which will inevitably result in individualisation (Ibid).

## 2.2 Individualisation

What is argued is that modernisation has led to “a kind of ‘metamorphosis’ or ‘radical shift’ in the relation between individual and society” (Beck 1992: 127). There has been a ‘*disembedding*’ of the individual from its traditional social forms: an individualisation (Ibid: 128). Individualisation must here be distinguished from other concepts. Individualisation means neither individualism nor individuation (the process of becoming an autonomous individual), but *institutionalised* individualism. Instead of individualism, there lies the inherent paradox that the individual is self-insufficient and increasingly tied to others. As we shall see, it is not about freedom of choice, but getting insight into the “fundamental incompleteness of the self” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: xxi).

The disembedding of the individual means that the individual is removed from the status-based class and becoming the basic unit of social reproduction (Ibid: xxii, 203). The basic civil, political and social rights, employment and other central institutions of society, recognise only the individual, not the group, as its end (Ibid: xxi-xxii). One will be integrated into society only as in having different functions, as student, sister, tax payer, consumer etc. (Ibid: 23). Class differences and family connections recede into the background, and the individual is forced to become the agent of identity making and livelihood (Ibid: 3). Or, as Zygmunt Bauman (2002: xv) writes:

‘individualization’ consists in transforming human ‘identity’ from a ‘given’ into a ‘task’ – and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side effects) of their performance (...)

This is part of the ‘*re-embedding*’ that follows the disembedding of the individual. As Sang-Jin Han and Yong-Hee Shim (2010: 469) note, when the institutions fail, there is a tendency to place the burden of survival upon the individuals, institutionalising the individual to take on more responsibility. One is such forced to take life into one’s own hands, because it would otherwise fall to pieces (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 23). However, as the family and class collapses as social frames, and the individual becomes the basic unit of social reproduction, there is simultaneously a high degree of standardisation (Beck 1992: 130). This standardisation applies to different aspects of life, like money, education etc, but comes down to the fact that “[t]he individual situations that come into existence are thoroughly *dependent on the labor market*” (Ibid; italics in the original). To make a living we need to have a job, and to get a job we have to be attractive on the labour market. Hence a rat race to be more active and resourceful takes place. Therefore, these individual situations are not merely private anymore, but also institutional. They are *institutionally dependent*. Because the individual is dependent on the labour market, he or she is also dependent on everything that makes participation in the labour market possible: education, traffic planning, welfare state regulations, and medical and psychological care etc (Ibid).

In this situation, where the basic rights are internalised and everyone must work to earn a living, the individualisation also destroys the way we live and socialise together (Ibid: xxii). We exchange the restrictions of family life with the restrictions of the labour market (Beck 1992: 131). And so we end up seeking to make our own biography to solve these systemic contradictions (Ibid). We make self-reflexive biographies, in that they are entirely (and continually) self-produced (Beck 1992: 135). And according to Giddens (1991: 14), we not only make, but *live* reflexively organised biographies, always receiving new information on possible ways to live our lives. Answering the question of “How shall I live?” has become an everyday task. Making our own decisions on education, profession, who to marry etc. is no longer optional, but necessary, and with every decision not made, there will be consequences (Beck 1992: 135). Beck further argues that in such a situation we put together different possible biographical combinations, the ‘*do-it-yourself biography*’ (Ibid: 135). The individual has to take control of his/her own life planning, in which ‘society’ only becomes a variable

each of us has to take into account. Institutional problems cannot be solved by the individual; they can only be taken into account when trying to make the best possible decisions (Ibid).

## **2.3 Critique and development of the individualisation theory: East Asian perspectives**

The individualisation theory was first developed by European researchers, and based on European experience. When trying to apply such a theory to other contexts, some differences will inevitably emerge. Several researchers in East Asian studies have used the individualisation theory to try to explain processes and developments in these countries. In doing so, certain critiques against the individualisation thesis has been raised. I will here try to present some of the main critiques, as well as show the significance of the critique for research on individualisation in East Asia; the adaption of the individualisation theory to East Asia.

First of all, there is the difference in how modernity was manifested. Shocked at the military superiority of the Western nations in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the East Asian countries saw fast economic growth as the best way to catch up with the West (Han and Shim 2010: 466). Han and Shim argues that East Asia therefore never saw a modernisation based on their own traditions, but only sought to get as much out of industrialisation as possible and as fast as possible (Ibid). This urge for economic growth was combined with a bureaucratic-authoritarian state, mobilising all available resources to increase per capita GNP and exports. This was seen both in Japan in the Meiji period (from 1862), in South Korea in the 1960s to 80s, and in China from the 1980s. The modernisation process in East Asia consequently emerged as a ‘compressed’ modernity, following the strategy of ‘rush-to development’ (Ibid: 473). Evidently, this rush-to development also brought risks. In addition to the radicalisation of the principles of modernisation, “unintended consequences of the too rapid and successful one-dimensional modernization”, such as large-scale accidents, corruption, family disorganisation etc emerged (Ibid: 471). And these deficiencies of rush-to development and compressed modernity, are affecting the everyday life of the East Asian people more than the other, and perhaps more threatening risks of a radicalising modernity: climate change, terrorism, economic inequality etc. These latter risks seem far away, and as such cannot trump the problem faced by a Chinese rural citizen in need to see a doctor, who is unable to because there are no doctors available (Ibid: 475).

Han and Shim (2010: 469) further argue that because the individualisation process involves not only disembedding, but also re-embedding, the individualisation process will differ according to the degree of individualism in society. In East Asian countries, where individualism is less strong than in the West, the individualisation process will differ significantly.

In South Korea, a highly familial society, Chang Kyung-Sup and Song Min-Young (2010) found that women turn away from family values, marriage and child births, because the social burdens on individuals, and especially the women, are becoming too heavy. The first modernity in South Korea was a family-centered one. Confucian family ideology was mixed with 'instrumental familism' – the ideology that the family's resources should be used to enhance individual family members in society, and thus was the goal of the entire family, and similar ideologies such as 'affectionate familism' – the ideology seeing the family as an arena for interaction and affection, and 'individualistic familism' – the ideology that the family grants a platform for self-realisation. All of these ideologies have a tendency to give the women a subordinate role in the family (Ibid: 544-545). As the first-modern institutions (the welfare system, the corporations, the industrial economy etc.) started to fail (among other reasons because of the 1997 economic crisis), South Koreans turned to the family for assistance, overburdening it, and ultimately turning family relations from a resource to "a source of individual risk" (Ibid: 547). The side-effects and new risks of modernity are therefore causing a change in the family-individual relationship in South Korea (ibid: 543).

Let us also take a look at China and the findings of Yunxiang Yan. He has used the individualisation thesis on his research in China for several years, and has fiercely criticised the 'Europeanism' of the thesis. Yan (2010:506) writes that the individualisation thesis highlights four features of the individualisation process:

- (1) Detraditionalization or 'losing the tradition';
- (2) Individualized disembedding and reembedding;
- (3) Compulsory pursuit of a 'life of one's own' and the lack of genuine individualization
- (4) The internalization or psychologicalization of risks due to the precarious freedoms and uncertainties that the individual is facing.

Further, he says, the thesis rests on two premises: Theoretically, it seeks to be an antithesis to neo-liberalism, liberalism and classic individualism. Socially, it places the individualisation process "under conditions of cultural democracy, the welfare state, and classic individualism" (Ibid: 506-7). The problem lies not in the features of the thesis, but in the premises. Yan (Ibid:

507) argues that these premises relate only to the history of Western Europe, and therefore ultimately “locks the individualization thesis in the particular version of second modernity in Europe, or in a Western European box”.

The Chinese model of individualisation is markedly different from the European model. In China there is neither culturally embedded democracy nor a welfare state. None the less, individualisation is undeniably taking place in China today (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010: xvii). In the European context individualisation was built on the civil, political and social basic rights, won through political struggle. In China individualisation is taking place as the rights of the individual in relations to the state is not yet decided upon. However, it is the state that has provided the situation where individualisation could be established. The Chinese reform programmes, set ahead to reform the economy, also loosened their hold on the institutions that kept the individuals restrained, the rural collectives and the urban work units, and opened for individual assignment of responsibility (ibid: xvii-xviii). But in this also lies a contradiction: “The Chinese reform of the market-economic individualization *truncates* – or, to put it bluntly, *castrates* – the process of individualization in its claims to democratic political participation” (ibid: xviii-xix). The Party-state has never accepted political liberalism, but has instead tried to get the most out of the market reforms without giving any individual rights (Yan 2010: 508). Individualisation is welcomed to the degree it helps keep the CCP in power; by enhancing growth, but not by encouraging civil rights movements. To enforce this, the state tries to restrict the notion of individualisation, linking individualism to values like nation and family (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010: xvii-xviii).

## **2.4 The striving individual in China**

Seeing the individual as subordinate to the state is, however, nothing new in China. Traditionally, the Chinese individual was always secondary to the group; the family or the state. There was no individuality, as the individual only existed in relation to a group. When Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century wanted to liberate the individual, they still saw it as subordinate to the state. One of the most recognised intellectuals, Liang Qichao, saw the individual as divided in two parts: with a small self based on the interests of the individual and a large self based on the interests of the nation (Yan n.d. b).

Then, after the communist revolution in 1949, the individuals' loyalty was turned to the Party-state through several control mechanisms: the class label system, the household registration system, the work unit system, and the political dossier system. Together these systems gave the Party full control of status attainment, citizens' mobility between urban and rural areas, employment and upward mobility. At the same time private ownership and the free market was almost eliminated. All family relations were denounced as feudalistic, and individuals were instead organised to join the communist cause through the rural collectives and the urban work units (Ibid).

Yan (Ibid) concludes that this process was a partial individualisation. It involved detraditionalisation, as well as disembedding and re-embedding of the individual, shifting the individual's social relations from a family axis to a state axis. This was a liberating process for the individual, especially for women and the younger generation that had suffered under the traditional Confucian values of subordination to husbands, fathers and elder brothers. Still, the individualisation was only partial, as it was carried out by the collectives and the Party-state. The 'large self' was still reserved for the nation, represented by the Party-state (Ibid).

During the late 1970's and the 1980's new reforms again changed the situation of the individuals. The Party-state step by step abandoned the rural collectives and the urban work units, and loosened its hold on the economy. Many of these early reforms came after local initiatives and experiments, and were welcomed by Chinese individuals. During the 1990's, however, these initiatives were no longer enough for the state, which started a series of marketisation and privatisation reforms, aimed at reducing public spending through cutting social welfare, and shifting more responsibilities to the individual. At least some of these reforms were promoted despite resistance by individuals (Ibid). Yan (Ibid) argues that, in addition to these reforms, the ideas of *suzhi*<sup>2</sup> and consumerism, working as push-and-pull forces, made sure that individuals took on more responsibilities and worked harder. This in course led to the emergence of "a new type of self" – 'the striving individual' (Ibid).

The 'striving individual' is driven by both the fear of failure and the urge for success. The individual has to be industrious, calculating and pragmatic. Success is here mainly defined in materialistic terms, and therefore the striving individual is apolitical and without civic obligations (Yan n.d. a). This striving individual can be found in all strata of the Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> The term *suzhi* refers to the 'qualities' of a person or group, both moral and other, and the discourse on *suzhi* requires the individual to constantly improve and be self-reliant (Yan n.d. b).



society. Peasants strive to give their children a better and easier life than they had themselves, and leave their villages to take on work in the cities. Factory workers (who are in fact often peasant migrants) are under pressure to deliver more and do better, and compete with each other to work overtime because the pay is too low to save up anything for the future. White collar workers are overworked and compete with younger cohorts. Students are under continuous pressure from teachers and parents to obtain good test scores, so that they can reach their goal in life – which is to enter the best universities (Yan n.d. b). The amount of stress and pressure in society leads to even harder competition to succeed, creating a vicious circle driving everyone to work even more. Thus, the psychological pressure on the individual has risen. Lack of a safety net and pressure to perform at work is reported as one of the greatest causes for the rising need of psychological health care in China (Ibid).

Yan (Ibid) notes that even though the Chinese have always been hard-working, the drive for success in today's China exceeds the traditional notion of hard work. He sees two reasons for this: Firstly, the individualisation process liberated the individual from the family, kinship and work unit, forcing the individual to become more self-reliant and proactive. Secondly, the pressure of personal achievement is laid *upon the individual*. Traditionally, the individual worked hard for the interest of the family. Now, the individual stands alone, striving for self-interest and happiness. And thus, morality is also changing (Ibid). The individualistic morality rises up against both the traditional and communist moralities, leaving it up to the individual to find a balance (Yan n.d. a).

## 2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained the individualisation thesis, and how it is adapted to East Asia and manifested in Chinese society. As part of the second modernity theory, the individualisation thesis claims that the burdens and responsibilities of society is laid upon the individual as the basic institutions of first modernity are less and less capable of delivering the expected functions and utilities of the modern society. As the individual takes on more responsibility he or she has to take life into his/her own hands and create new meaning through putting together a do-it-yourself biography. Life choices are no longer optional, but absolutely necessary, because the individual is so dependent on making a living, and therefore dependent on the labour market. Because of this, the individualisation is always institutionally dependent, and we get an institutional individualisation.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate whether and how Party membership is used as a career strategy among Chinese students. This is a question that goes straight to the core of the Chinese political system. At the same time, it concerns the labour market and how every individual finds his or her place in society, because making a career is so tremendously important in a person's life. Beck's individualisation theory and Yan's idea of the striving individual both point to this as crucial. Before discussing this further, however, I will first explain my methodological approach.

# 3 Methodological framework

In this chapter I will explain and reflect upon my methodological choices, and argue for why I made these choices. I will start with explaining why I did a qualitative study, and give an account of the case study and the research strategy I have followed. I will further discuss some of the problems I encountered and the reliability and validity of the study, before I end with some ethical remarks.

## 3.1 Research approach: Case study research and fieldwork

Robert K. Yin (2009: 4) writes that the choice of research approach depends in large part on the research question. The aim of this thesis is, as earlier explained, to find out how important Party membership is considered for future career achievement in China today and further seek to find out what this can tell us about perceptions both of the Party and of individual career making among Chinese students. This could have been examined through either a qualitative or a quantitative approach, or through a combination of the two. However, the different approaches would have given me different types of data and different backgrounds for analysis. Tove Thagaard (2010: 17) writes that while quantitative studies seek to make statistical generalisations, qualitative studies are used to say something about social phenomena in a specific context through an analytical description.

For my thesis, I chose to do a qualitative case study, using interview data. Yin (2009: 4) claims that case study research is appropriate if the goal is to explain some present circumstances that require detailed description of some social phenomenon. This is exactly what I aim to do. According to Thagaard (2010: 12-13), a qualitative study using interviews is based on a subject-to-subject relation, and interviews makes it possible to better understand the individual's perception of his or her situation. Interviews can as such be used to get information on a person's experiences, views and self understanding. This also fits well with my intentions and the aims of the study. In addition, the lack of statistical data made a quantitative approach impossible. Data on motivations for joining the CCP for a larger group of students was not available, and I did not have the capacity to make such a survey myself.

According to Thagaard (2010: 49), there is no agreed upon definition of what a case study is, but characteristic of the case study is that it focuses upon one or several entities, representing the case or cases of the study. These are typically persons, groups or organisations, and the aim is to gain extensive information about the case under study (Ibid: 48-50). Yin (2009: 18) also underlines that the phenomenon under investigation should be studied within its real-life context. In my study, the case is Chinese students at two universities in Beijing. In addition, Martyn Hammersley and Roger Gomm (2000: 3) add that the term 'case study' often implies the collection of unstructured data and a qualitative analysis of these data. I will in the next sections argue for both my choice of Beijing and the specific universities as my case, and for the choice of informants, as well as explain how I did my analysis.

### **3.1.1 Background for choosing students in Beijing and the specific universities**

I chose to do the study with students as my target group. The reason for this was that the students are in a process of deciding what they want to do and what they want to be. During their studies and the following years they have to make some of the most crucial choices in their personal 'do-it-yourself biography'. Because of this, they are aware the pressure and expectations laid upon them by both themselves and others. As they have not yet started a career, they are only preparing for it. As such the strategies they make might be more clear among this group, than among elder and more established groups that have worked for some time. The idea is that the decision to enter the Party or not is formed in during these years of studying, and that studying students as a group therefore is a good way of investigating this issue.

The field study was conducted in Beijing. I chose to go to Beijing firstly because I was already familiar with the city from living there several months back in 2006, but also because Beijing, as the capital and political centre, makes an interesting case. It has some of China's best universities that attracts students from all over the country and also has a large and varied labour market.

I conducted the interviews at two different universities in Beijing: Peking University (PKU) and Tsinghua University (THU). Both universities are among the best and most prestigious universities in China. They have a large variety of subjects, and students from all over the country study there. These students will be graduating from the most popular universities in

China, and as such they are much-coveted in the labour market. At the same time, as among the best students in China, I assumed that they also have easier access to Party membership.

As I am both a former student of PKU and had some contacts there, I found this to be a good starting point. After conducting interviews there for two weeks, I was recommended to try THU as well, as some of the students I interviewed at PKU thought they might have a more market-like attitude, and therefore might answer differently. While PKU is acknowledged for its studies in humanities, THU is more known for technical and economic studies. They therefore complement each other, while at the same time having many similar features.

I also considered conducting interviews at one of Beijing's less prestigious universities, in order to get a more nuanced picture of Chinese students. However, because I did not know which one would be a good choice, and because there was not enough time, I chose not to. This was a mere practical choice, not a methodological one.

### **3.1.2 Background for choosing informants**

The analysis is based on interviews conducted at Peking University and Tsinghua University in Beijing, during five weeks of fieldwork during May and early June 2011. The interviews were semi-structured, that is, concentrated around some core questions concerning some central issues, as formulated in the research questions. Still, they were also flexible and open for aspects that my informants saw as relevant. All in all I conducted 21 interviews with 22 students<sup>3</sup>, 11 at each of the universities. The sample can be seen as a purposive sample. When making a purposive sample, one will choose cases or informants that illustrate some features or processes that are of interest to the study (Silverman 2010: 141). The most important aspect when making a purposive sample is to think critically about the parameters used, and choose the sample case on this basis. I wanted to get as wide a sample of students as possible in order to get as many opinions and perceptions on the topic as possible. I therefore decided upon a few categories that it was important to include in the sample. Most importantly I wanted to include:

1. Both genders, generally because men and women often have different perspectives, and especially because of supposed gender inequality in the labour market.

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<sup>3</sup> I once interviewed two students together.

2. Students of different age, because they are in different phases of study, some just starting and others soon to be finished.
3. Both bachelor and master students, both because they might have different ambitions and because master students have studied longer and therefore are more likely to already have joined the Party.
4. Students in different study programs (both humanities, social sciences, and engineer/science studies), because I assumed there might be differences in who wanted to work within the state sector, which might influence the wish to join the Party.
5. Both Party members and non-members, because I assumed they would have different perspectives on the subject under study.
6. Students of different ethnical and geographical backgrounds, especially both rural and urban students, as the social and economic differences between rural and urban areas, and between different provinces are significant. Ethnical minorities in some aspects face discrimination, and therefore might have differing views.

I gathered informants through randomly stopping students at campus on their way to the library, from class etc., interviewing anyone willing to talk to me. I made sure to interview students of different backgrounds as described above, to get as much information as possible from the group of informants. I shifted location at campus several times to try to find students of different majoring subjects and of different age. Even though I also tried to find students of a variety of geographical and ethnical background, this was impossible to decide before I actually started the interview and I therefore had no real influence on the outcome. The same also goes for Party members.

In the end, half of the informants were male and half were female students. Eight were master students, thirteen were bachelor students, and one was a PhD student. They differed in age between 17 and 31, and all ages between 19 and 26 were interviewed. Two were majoring in humanities, eight in social sciences (including economics and administrative studies), four in law, and eight in different science and engineering studies. Eight were Party members, and thirteen were not. Out of these thirteen non-members, one was a probationary member (*yubei dangyuan*), and an additional four had applied for membership. Only three were from rural

areas, the rest from cities, and the informants were from fourteen different provinces and municipalities. All in all this group of informants provided me with a lot of information and various perspectives on the topic under investigation.

### **3.1.3 Analysis and interpretation of data**

I have used an issue-focused analysis comparing the answers of the different informants on the same issue (Thagaard 2010: 171). After conducting the interviews, I had them transcribed. Then I read through them thoroughly, and categorised the answers according to the central issues of my thesis. These categories are then the basis for the further analysis. Thagaard (Ibid: 172) writes that it is important that the answers of the different informants are comparable and that one therefore ought to have detailed answers from all the informants on all the categories. On the most central issues of my thesis, I have followed this. On some of the more peripheral aspects, I have not always received answers from all of my informants, but I will point this out in the text when relevant. Thagaard (Ibid: 171) also points out that when comparing bits of interviews with bits of other interviews, the statements are taken out of context, and one can lose the holistic perspective. I have tried to avoid this by only citing statements representative for the persons uttering them, and by making clear the context in which the statements were given.

## **3.2 Doing research in China, problems and solutions.**

As a researcher doing research in a foreign land, cultural, practical and not the least linguistic problems are hard to avoid. In a foreign land one does not necessarily have the same network and knowledge of society as at home, and hence practical considerations will more often play a role in choosing destinations and informants. Elin Sæther (2006: 48), for instance, explains that when coming to China, she had a clear plan for her research project. But she soon had to revise the plan to the reality she met there, choosing informants not because they were the most relevant, but because they were available through common contacts. I will here try to name some of the problems I encountered, and argue for the solutions I chose.

Stig Thøgersen (2006) writes that your language skills are something you have to take into consideration when making the research strategy. He further argues that understanding

Chinese is always a matter of degree, as 'Chinese' has lots of meanings and can be a challenge even for natives. He makes it clear that you do not have to be fluent, but you need to have a language strategy before going into the field. To interview the Chinese students, I saw three options for overcoming the language gap: Conducting the interviews in English, mother language to neither me nor the informants, conducting them in Chinese with the help of a translator, or conducting them in Chinese by myself.

I never really considered the first option as a good alternative. When conducting interviews, making the interviewee feel relaxed and comfortable is important to get him or her to talk about concrete and personal details. Letting them be able to use their mother language was therefore preferable both to get as detailed and good information as possible and to make them relax in the situation. The choice was then to conduct the interviews in Chinese, either alone or with the help of a translator. The two options both have their advantages. Using a translator will help the level of understanding. Conducting interviews alone, on the other hand, gives more freedom and a more intimate relation between interviewer and interviewee. I consider my level of Chinese to be quite good. My pronunciation is of the better and my vocabulary is acceptable, but not optimal.

Mainly because of practical reasons, I chose not to use a translator. I did not plan any interviews ahead, but sought to find informants as I got along. I figured this would not have worked if I was to use a translator. I also did not know anyone to ask. At the time I also felt confident my Chinese was good enough to be able to go through with it. I argue here that this was a good solution in the situation, although it did absolutely have its drawbacks when it came to my understanding. Not having a translator did help the communication between me and the interviewees on the personal level, as not having anyone 'not in the conversation' listening in, made it easier to 'bond', but there is no doubt that I missed a lot of information choosing this strategy.

To try to make up for the lack in understanding, I further used two different strategies: I tried to ask questions when there was something I could not understand, and I taped the interviews, so that I would know what was said even if I could not understand it at the time. The first strategy worked to some degree, but depended heavily on the informants. Some realised instantly when I could not follow, and explained in other words or with other examples. Others did not notice and were hard to interrupt without destroying the flow of the interview.



To tape the interviews was a good choice for preserving as much information as possible, but I also found that it made me lazier: During the few interviews I did not tape I was much better at asking questions when there was something I could not understand, simply because I did not have the choice of going back and listen to it later. The biggest drawback of not using a translator was that it was hard to ask the right follow-up questions. The material I have collected therefore suffers to some degree from the lack of following up contradictions and things not properly explained, and a lack of further details in several occasions.

What I wish I had done differently is to have someone help me transcribe the interviews while in China. My first intention was to transcribe the interviews myself. Thereby I did not try to engage anyone to do this until long after I was back from China, realising I would never be able to finish without help. If I had found someone to do it for me during the fieldwork, I believe I would have gotten a better understanding of the subject, learned new words and phrases as they came along, and maybe realised how to improve my interview skills and go further into the material while I had the chance.

### **3.3 Reliability and validity**

Reliability and validity are two measures used to evaluate research. In quantitative research, reliability means that the same conclusions can be drawn by another researcher using the same methods, also referred to as replicability (Thagaard 2010: 198). In qualitative research, where the data can be seen as developed in collaboration between researcher and informant, replicability is not of interest, because the data is not independent of the researcher (Ibid). Thagaard (Ibid: 198-99) instead highlights that the researcher herself must argue for reliability by making explicit how data has been developed, both in regards to sampling and analysis. I have sought to meet this transparency criteria by having this chapter on methodology, explaining how I proceeded, and why I chose to do it this way.

Validity has to do with how the researcher interprets the data, and whether this interpretation can be seen as valid. Most important is whether the interpretation is in accordance with the reality that has been studied (Ibid: 201). Transparency is again relevant: It is the basis upon which the interpretations are drawn, and how well one argues, that decides whether the interpretations are considered valid. Also, the validity of a study can be strengthened by evaluating critically the analytical process, exploring alternative interpretations, studying

deviant cases and reflecting upon the relation to the informants (Ibid: 201-2), in addition to comparing the findings with the findings of others (Ibid: 204). I have tried to follow these suggestions in my process. Although empirical data and analysis will always overlap to some degree, as all the given examples are picked by me, I have tried to make a clear distinction in the text between what my informants have said and what is my analysis of their statements. In addition to these remarks, I will here give further insight into some aspects regarding the reliability and validity of my research.

### **3.3.1 Sample size**

The study is based upon a quite small sample of informants. Thagaard (2010: 59-60) writes that when defining the size of the sample one should take into consideration the 'saturation point' – the point when new informants do not bring new information to the table. Having several categories under study will increase the need for a larger sample, especially if one aims to make comparisons. In addition she underlines that the sample must not be too large to do deep analysis. Even though I lined out the aim of including several categories of informants earlier in this chapter, the sample is still a relatively homogenous group. The categories are first and foremost meant to secure a better representation of perspectives, not as a basis for comparison. It was the total amount of information and the time available that limited further interviews, not the saturation point per se. All the same, only very few of the last interviews brought me new information, which probably means that the saturation point was not far away. Silverman (2010: 193) also underlines that how many informants or cases one needs depends upon the research problem. He argues that purposive sampling is a way to overcome the reliability gap of a small sample, if the sample is chosen critically (Ibid: 141). My reasoning for choosing the sample is given earlier, and makes account for how and why I ended up with the specific sample.

It follows from my choice of research question and methodology that the sample is not meant to be representative for the Chinese student mass as a whole. However, I will argue that the possibility of generalisation or transferability of the study is not affected negatively by the size of the sample. Thagaard (2010: 207) argues that it is the interpretation done by the researcher, and not the descriptions of patterns in the material, that provides a basis for transferability. The question is then whether and under what conditions the interpretation made in a specific context will also be relevant in a different context (Ibid).

### 3.3.2 The relation to the informants

However neutral one tries to be, the answers given in an interview will always be influenced by the presence of the researcher and how she relates to the informant (Thagaard 2010: 19). Age and gender are typical examples of factors that will influence the situation (Ibid: 82). In my case, being a foreigner was probably the most important factor influencing what information I got from my interviewees. According to Thagaard (2010: 203), not knowing the environment under study, one's understanding will be different than when knowing it. I was not a total stranger to the student environment, being an earlier student at PKU. But as a foreigner I naturally have a different view on Chinese society than Chinese students do. So how did this impact the answers I got? In many of the interview situations, being a foreigner was positive. They did not expect me to know things and therefore explained in greater detail. I could also play out the "unknowing foreigner" card, asking further about things that were obvious for them, but not for me. I believe many also found it exciting to talk to a foreigner, and discuss their situation and thoughts with me. In other situations, the interviewees became impatient when I did not understand, making me uncomfortable, influencing the atmosphere for gaining trust. Others again were visibly nervous, and the fact that I was a foreigner might have added to the stress they felt. As for my topic, there were probably both drawbacks and advantages of being a foreigner. Talking freely about their views on the Party and the advantages of Party membership was probably easier, as they more easily could trust that I had no connections to the Party. But as a foreigner I assume at least some of them expected me to have certain opinions about the Party and Party rule, which might have influenced their answers. I did, however, never consciously express any such opinions.

Also relevant is that I did not develop personal relations to any of the informants, as I met them randomly at campus and talked to them only for a very short time. And because of my very short relation with the informants, I was not able to tell whether they trusted me or were honest with me. Thagaard (2010: 105) points out that the informants' descriptions can be influenced by how they want to present themselves. In relation to their descriptions of motives for applying for Party membership, I especially see this as an issue. This is further discussed in the analysis.

### **3.4 Ethical aspects**

Especially three ethical aspects are emphasised by Thagaard (Ibid: 25): informed consent, confidentiality and the consequences of taking part in a research project. Informed consent means that the consent to take part in the study shall be given freely, without pressure, and with knowledge of what participation in the project implies. I got an oral consent from all my informants before starting the interview. As explained earlier I also taped most of the interviews, and got an oral consent to do this. In the cases where they were not willing to be taped, I only took notes.

As for confidentiality, I have anonymised the informants in the text. Except for age, I have only referred to personal data when I found it especially relevant, and only to such a degree that the person cannot be recognised. This is especially important as identification could cause difficulties for some of the informants. Being publicly recognised as joining the Party for the wrong reasons, or making negative remarks regarding the Party in such a context, could cause negative consequences. One of my informants actually said that being recognized could make her lose her job. I therefore also consequently did not ask for the names of my informants. I have also to my fullest tried to respect their views and perspectives.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

I have in this chapter argued for my methodological choices and assessments. This study is a qualitative case study, using interviews from a field study at two universities in Beijing as its method and analytical data. This was a conscious choice. The aim of the analysis is not to analyse the career strategies of all Chinese students, but through comparing answers from different informants to be able to describe some trends regarding the individualisation of Chinese society and the role of the Party. I have sought to make my choices and assessments transparent by explaining them in this chapter to strengthen the reliability and validity of my results. I have also done my best to take the informants views and rights into consideration during all phases of the study.

## 4 The Party and the state

Moving from the framework of the thesis to the issue under investigation I will start with explaining how and why the issue of Party membership goes right to the core of the Chinese political system. In this chapter I will therefore explain the basic mechanisms of the Chinese Party-state and the Party itself. This is crucial to understand why applying for Party membership stands out as a good and practical choice for many young students. The answer lies in that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dominates the state and controls both government and state personnel (Zheng 2010).

### 4.1 A Leninist 'ruling party'

Frank N. Pieke (2009: 9) defines the Chinese reforms since 1978 as 'neo-socialism'. The 'socialist' part of neo-socialism can especially be found in the continuation of the Party's Leninist rule – Party leadership over governance, democratic centralism, Party discipline, and, of course, belief in and adherence to the Party's principles and ideology (Ibid). As part of the neo-socialist project, the Party has carried out "a combination of centralization, strengthening and selective retreat of the state" (Ibid: 10). While the micro-management of society and the intrusion into the life of ordinary citizens has been reduced, the macro-management has been strengthened and become much more efficient (Ibid).

After redefining the Party from a 'revolutionary party' to a 'ruling party', the Party's interests are no longer equal to the interests of the proletariat. Instead it represents the interests of the broad mass of the population, advanced productive forces and advanced culture (the Three Represents, *sange daibiao*) (Pieke 2009: 11). In this process the communist utopia has also been replaced by a technocratic intention of a strong and peaceful China. The Party's ideology has been downplayed, and faith in socialism is now equated with loyalty to the Party-state (as in the Mao era), and socialist ideology has become the means by which Party rule is maintained instead of the end served by Party rule (Ibid). According to Pieke (Ibid) this means that as long as continued Party rule is secured, the ideological construction of the state could have been just anyone.

Richard McGregor (2010: 26-27) likewise argues that at the same time as the Party has fronted economic reform it has also left behind much of the straitjacket ideology and

withdrawn from the everyday life of ordinary citizens. This has empowered the authorities, linking the Party with economic growth, while maintaining a “secret political life, directing the state from behind the scenes, while capturing the benefits and the kudos delivered by a liberalised economy and a richer society” (Ibid: 27). Despite the economic reforms during the last decades, the Party has kept control of the state, mainly through control of personnel, propaganda and the military (Ibid: xiii).

## 4.2 Parallel systems

In China, the CCP and the government form two parallel systems of governance from the central level, through the province and county levels and all down to the township level – the ‘Party affairs system’ and the ‘state affairs system’ (Zheng 2010: 99). The relationship between Party and state differs significantly from what we are used to in European government systems. Zheng Yongnian (Ibid) indeed claims that the relationship between the Party and the state is “the most important aspect of the Chinese political system”, and compares the Party’s domination over the state to that of the owner’s domination over the manager (Ibid).

Despite attempts to modernise the state, China still lacks the defining characteristic of a modern state: the rule of law. Because the state is incapable of performing what is expected from it, the CCP becomes the most important pillar supporting it (Ibid: 100). There are historical reasons for this ‘arrangement’. The revolutions and wars the Party engaged in from its start in 1921, required a centralised organisation. From 1921 until it took power in 1949, the Party was an opposition party, as well as a revolution and war machine. Only after 1949 the leadership started to explore how to divide the power between the Party and the government (Ibid: 101).

However, because of the continuous revolutions of Mao Zedong and the Party leadership, the Party was not transformed from a revolutionary party to a ruling one. Instead of assuring the political leadership, leaving the governance to the government, the Party established new and parallel organisations to those in the government. And so they formed a political hierarchy enabling the Party to take direct control over the government bodies. Suddenly the Party decided all state affairs, and the Party power was centralised in the hands of the Party secretaries at each level. On a national level, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee

decided all major policies. On a local level, these were made by the Party committee. Through the Party group in the government body, the Party issued directives to the government body, which then reported back, also through the Party group (Ibid).

When Deng Xiaoping came to power in the late 1970s, he started a discourse on Party-state relations, claiming that strengthening the Party relied on a separation of Party and state. At the Thirteenth Party Congress in 1987, the then General Secretary of the CCP, Zhao Ziyang, said that the Party should focus its leadership on political principles and major decisions, and that the Party ought to go through legally defined procedures when exercising political leadership over the government. However, this discourse only lasted until the crackdown of the pro-democracy movement at Tiananmen in 1989. In later reform discourse focus on how to strengthen Party leadership over the government has replaced the idea of separating Party and state (Ibid: 102-3).

### **4.3 Control of government and state personnel**

Today, two main principles ensure Party leadership over the government: Party control of government, and Party management of cadres. In the first principle lies that the Party selects all government officials, and that almost all officials and all top officials are Party members. In addition all Party members in each government agency are organised under a Party committee that is subordinate to the Party committee at the higher administrative level. Because of this organisation, and the parallel hierarchy of Party administration to the government organs, Party leaders are able to supervise Party members in government bodies and lead the work of government from inside (Zheng 2010: 104).

One of the main mechanisms the Party uses to exercise this domination over the state is the Party group (*dangzu*, also named Party core group). The Party group usually consists of two to four Party members in senior positions within an agency, and is in charge of administering the work of the whole governmental agency to which it belongs. The group members are selected by the next level Party committee, and they also answer to this committee. The secretary of the Party group has the final say on main decisions and affairs of the agency, and also approves and issues important documents. The main purpose of the group is to oversee the policy-making, policy implementation and personnel appointments to ensure that the Party's preferences are reflected. In fact, no important activity will take place without

approval from the Party group (Ibid: 111-112). This means that the Minister of an agency does not have any real power unless he is part of the Party group. Zheng (Ibid: 112) gives the example of the Ministry of Science and Technology, where Wan Gang was appointed Minister in April 2007. The ministry's leadership consists of six persons, Wan and five vice ministers. Wan is the only one among these that is not a CCP member and member of the Party group. He is then left with implementing policies, while all the major policy decisions are decided by the Party group.

The second principle, the 'Party management of cadres' (*dang guan ganbu*) secures that the Party controls all state personnel policies and assignments through its organisation department<sup>4</sup> (McGregor 2010: 78), and gives the Party ultimate decision-power across the institutions of formal governance (Pieke 2009: 17). The organisation department has been described as the human resource arm of the Party, but this does not fully give justice to its extent and power (McGregor 2010: 78). According to the department itself, the system gives the Party control over "appointments, transfer, promotion and removal of practically all but the lowest ranking officials" (Ibid). The organisation departments thus are the gatekeeper for anyone wanting to take office in China, and the Central Organisation Department keeps files on every top-level official in the public sector to document their political loyalty and job performance. The files are then cross-checked for corruption or sex scandals with the anti-corruption unit. The same system is found in each level of government, with supervision by the higher level, from province down to township level, giving the party secretary at each level a huge amount of influence over appointments in his or her area (Ibid: 73).

In addition, the organisation department keeps a list of names of Party members who can be trusted to fill important jobs in government, industry and elsewhere, the *nomenklatura* system. Making it to the *nomenklatura* level is the point where an official goes from being a mere cadre to part of the ruling elite (Ibid: 78). As of 1998 this ruling elite consisted of about 500 000 persons, of which 95 percent were Party members. Out of these, 900 were appointed in the central Party apparatus, 2500 were ministers and provincial governors, 39 000 were cadres down to the level of prefecture or bureau chief, and 466 000 cadres down to the county and division chief level. These are recruited among the bureaucracy of about 40 million cadres below the level of county and division chief (Walder 2006: 19).

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<sup>4</sup> At least for leading cadres. For high-level non-leading cadres, appointments used to be managed by the governments personnel ministry or bureau, since 2008 part of the new Ministry of Human resources and Social Security (Pieke 2009: 30).



## 4.4 The cadre system

The term ‘cadre’ (*ganbu*) is used in socialist and communist parties to refer to members in a position of leadership and authority. In China the term got a broader meaning, also including local Party leaders, after the Party retreated to the rural revolutionary base areas in 1927 (during the Chinese civil war). After 1949, the term was used in opposition to the ‘people’ (*renmin*) or the ‘masses’ (*qunzhong*), and was also contrasted to the rank-and-file Party members not involved in management and leadership. If on the state’s pay-roll, they are often referred to as ‘state cadres’ (*guojia ganbu*). In addition, cadre has the looser meaning of any person in officially sanctioned authority, with no regards for whether the person is a Party member or employed by the state, then often referred to as ‘basic cadres’ (*jiceng ganbu*) or ‘local cadres’ (*difang ganbu*) (Pieke 2009: 28).

Cadres are not just bureaucrats, neither are they merely politicians or officials. The term cadre includes all of this, but first and foremost it is crucially linked to the role of the Party as explained above (Ibid: 29). One can distinguish between leading and non-leading cadres. The distinction is not easily explained, but one can say that the leading cadres occupy the strategic positions that in democratic systems would be held by politicians and political appointees (Ibid: 30). All national cadres have both a specific grade (*jibie*) and a specific level/rank (*zhiwu*). I will not go deeply into the system here, but will mention that the level/rank of a cadre mirrors the ranks of all Party and state institutions, and that a cadre can only get appointments in institutions that match his or her own rank (Ibid: 30-31).

Recruitment, training, deployment and rectification of the cadre corps has been part of the Party’s Leninist strategy from the very beginning. After the Cultural Revolution, the Party started on a journey to strengthen the Party’s leading role in society. One of the main components of this strategy was to transform the cadre system. When the reform period started in 1978, the cadre corps was poorly qualified. Many had been recruited as activists in the 40’s and 50’s with little formal education or professional skills, or during the Cultural Revolution, when ability to ‘make revolution’ was the main qualification for appointment (Ibid: 32). In 1984, the Party therefore introduced a programme of cadre system reform. The main contents of reform were mandatory retirement age and minimum education qualifications for specific levels of appointment (Ibid). In 1987, as part of the plan for separating Party and state, Zhao Ziyang also announced the creation of a civil service system.

But because of the 1989 demonstrations, and Zhao's fall from power, the civil service system (*gongwuyuan zhidu*) was not established until 1993. As written above, the separation of Party and state was abolished, and although the terms 'civil service' and 'civil servant' were introduced and are later much used, the reform did not bring much new to the table. Leading cadres, for instance, are on the state's payroll and as such considered civil servants, but appointment decisions are entirely up to the Party (Ibid: 33-34).

#### **4.4.1 Cadre training**

Pieke (Ibid: 19) argues that cadre training (*ganbu peixun*) is not only the Party's way of giving cadres the necessary knowledge and skills needed to perform their job, it also turns the cadres into a ruling elite, as the training programmes prepare the cadres to take up leadership on behalf of the Party (Ibid: 27). The cadre training takes place in the thousands of Party schools, in the cadre academies, the regular schools and universities and through ad hoc training programmes (Ibid: 19). The Party schools provide different kinds of cadre training, both short-term residential courses, long-term residential degree courses, and non-residential degree courses. The most important task for the Party schools is the main training courses, which are all short-term residential courses, lasting from one week up until a few months. These are supposed to give knowledge of and create conformity to the current ideological orthodoxy and the administrative practice. They are required for both leading and non-leading cadres (Ibid: 70).

There are two types of general main courses, but these are again divided into different classes for leading and non-leading cadres. First, there is the 'novice training' for the young and newly recruited civil servants. During this training they learn both the basic skills needed for leadership positions and basic knowledge of Chinese administration, like policies, laws and regulations. For more experienced cadres ready for promotion, there is a similar training programme called 'training for office'. Second, there is the 'refresher training' that all cadres have to go through every five years (Ibid: 71-72). The training can be said to have two main objectives: to better the cadres' understanding of Marxist and CCP theory, the Party's ideological line, orientation and policies, and to unite this theory with the practice of administrative work (Ibid: 73).

#### 4.4.2 Degree courses

In addition to these main training courses, they also provide both residential and correspondence degree courses, as mentioned above. In the early 1980's, the Party school started up on-site and correspondence degree courses to help the cadres meet the new educational requirements for cadre positions at different levels. Residential degree teaching still blossoms at the Central Party School, but at the provincial Party schools, the number of full-time students has been greatly reduced. Instead many enrol to correspondence courses. These prepare for degrees from middle vocational school (*zhongzhuan*) and all the way up to master's degrees. The most popular degree courses are in economic management, law and public management (Ibid: 75). In the correspondence courses the cadres have to study on their own, and get assignments through email or postal correspondence. In addition, they have to spend a fixed number of days a year in class. When asked why he takes the degree, one of Pieke's informants answers that signing up for the degree course was his own wish, but that the "main reason is not to be out-competed, and I also do not want to fall behind" (Ibid: 76).

These degree courses taught at the Party schools are not recognised by the State Council's degree committee as full academic degrees (*xuewei*). They are instead called *xueli* degrees, and are approved by the Party. Thus they are acknowledged as good enough to fulfil the educational requirements of cadres (Ibid: 77). Between 1984 and 2006 3.7 million students graduated from the Central Party School's correspondence Academy, and it had an additional 600.000 students enrolled in 2006. The Party Schools' correspondence courses have such brought degree education within the reach of millions of cadres across China that would otherwise not have received it. At the same time it has also fulfilled the Party-state's ambition of raising the educational level of the cadre corps (Ibid: 79).

#### 4.4.3 Cadre careers

The careers of leading cadres at provincial or lower levels follow a certain pattern, at least in Yunnan where Pieke has conducted his fieldwork. Cadres are recruited into the administration as high school or university graduates. Recognised as promising young people while maybe working in non-administrative careers for a period, they are invited over to their local organisational department for a conversation. After starting in non-leading cadre positions, the organisation department will select some of them for promotion to the lowest step on the leading cadre hierarchy (*fuke* level). They will then be rotated between several jobs at this

level, before an eventual promotion to full section level (*zhengke* level) (Ibid: 151). Positions at this level are executive positions, and after new rotations, they will usually get a period as full head or Party secretary of a town or township. Only very few, and the most successful, are promoted further on from *zhengke* level (Ibid: 152).

It is usual to serve in several posts of the same rank (Ibid), but these are not necessarily within the same part of administration. The organisational department treat all parts of the administration as one, and move people between the Party, the government, the people's congress, the judiciary and so forth (Ibid: 154). The organisational department control all promotions, although for lower level cadres Pieke (Ibid: 160) writes that connections are also considered important. In addition, they use education and cadre training as means to get ahead (Ibid: 162).

Since the late 1990's, the Party has also used democratic elections and public examinations to fill some leading cadre positions. However, this does not mean that positions are opened up to just anyone, the candidates still need approval both by the organisational department and the Party committee before appointment (Ibid: 164). Initially, the examinations were used to select possible cadres for non-leading positions (civil servant exams, *gongwuyuan kaoshi*), through unified provincial examinations. Those who passed the exam could then apply for civil servant positions. From 1998 onwards this was changed to giving competitive examinations for specific jobs (Ibid: 166).

From 1995 on, there is even held examinations for the selection of leading cadre positions, though these are only open to cadres meeting several criteria (Ibid: 167). Pieke (Ibid: 169) mentions an example from Yunnan in 2002, where the criteria for taking the exam was that they had already held a post at full office level (*zhengchuji*) or had a minimum of three years' experience at the deputy office level (*fuchuji*). This proves that starting with examinations is not a new system for appointing cadres, it is only an additional mechanism to manage the careers of cadres (Ibid). Pieke (Ibid: 174) claims that because of these new examinations, there has occurred a new type of cadre, loyal first and foremost to his or her own individual career instead of to the Party. These are career professionals that do not necessarily intend to spend their whole career in administration. This again has created market competition even in this area of the Chinese society, and contractual obligations are increasingly supplementing the open-ended Leninist principles of Party discipline. Still, it is too early to say how this eventually will change the future of the cadre corps (Ibid: 174-175).

## 4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that the CCP keeps a tight hold on the Chinese state. Redefining the Party as a ruling party, the Party has strengthened the micro-management of the state, while at the same time withdrawn from the straitjacket ideology and the interference in the everyday life of the citizen. The strengthening of the state has meant controlling the government through Party groups and control of state personnel. The recruitment and appointment of all leading cadres has been taken care of by the Party's organisation department. Further training of cadres is aimed at giving them leadership skills, while keeping them in line with current ideological policies. To keep up with the challenges of a modern state, new educational requirements for cadres were introduced in 1984. This led to a rush to start degree courses at the Party schools, both on-site and correspondence courses. As a consequence the educational standard of the cadre corps was significantly improved. Since 1993, a new civil servant system was introduced. However, cadre careers are still ruled by the organisation department. The department moves cadres around between different administrative units with no regard to whether they are Party or government organisations. Since the late nineties the Party has also held examinations for appointment to some cadre positions. Although this is a new development (that has also created a new sort of cadres who do not consider administration as a lifelong career), the Party's grip on appointments to the state is still intact. Being a Party member can therefore be an important step to a future career in the state sector.



# 5 Becoming a Party member, how and why?

“Party membership is a commitment, not a simple enrolment”, writes McGregor (2010: 11) in his book titled “The Party”. Not everyone can join the Party. In fact, becoming a Party member entails a long process over a period of several years, where candidates are screened for political loyalty. I will in this chapter investigate both how members are selected and what motivates individuals to seek Party membership.

## 5.1 Admission into the Party: Screening and criteria.

China and the CCP has gone through periods of changing political climates. The recruitment priorities and policies have hence differed with the changing political climate (Bian 1994: 126). According to Bian, Shu and Logan (2001: 806), a party’s recruitment strategies will change with the regime agenda. Political loyalty will be valued highest in revolutionary times, while “educational credentials and occupational competence” is most valued in post-revolutionary times. In China, this transformation from valuing political loyalty to valuing education and competence happened first in the 1990s (Ibid).

Still, CCP has gone through four distinct periods with different recruitment criteria (Ibid: 809-810). The pre-1949 period was the revolutionary period of the Party. The Party sought to liberate workers and peasants, and so recruited mostly among these groups. As such, working class background was seen as the most important criteria in the recruitment policies (Ibid: 819).

In 1949 CCP came to power after beating Guomindang in the Chinese Civil War. With this started a period of establishing a new political and economic order, and the Party grew from scarcely 4.5 million to 18 million members. Peasants and workers were still the main aim for recruitment, but urban youth with better education were also welcomed into the Party, many of whom soon rose to cadre positions. Political screening continued as before. Political loyalty and the right family background were still necessary factors for recruitment (Ibid: 810-811).

The period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), was marked by a power struggle in the Party. Mao Zedong tried to overturn the political order and start a new revolution. Every Chinese citizen was given either a “red” or a “black” label, based on criteria of class background and political virtue. Red labels were for peasants, workers and revolutionary cadres, black labels for landlords, antirevolutionaries, rightist intellectuals etc. A black label meant exclusion from the Party, while a red label meant easier access to party membership. Educational credentials would under these circumstances negatively influence one’s chances of joining the Party (Ibid: 811).

In the post-1978 period, after Mao’s death, a period of opening and reform, the Party tried to build a modern economy, and thus needed members with the necessary competence. To secure this, intellectuals were included in the worker’s class. Family background was no longer emphasised, while educational credentials became an important criterion. Instead of class background, political screening emphasised Communist League membership and political attitudes (Ibid: 812). Through the ideology of the ‘three Represents’ (that the Party will “represent the advanced social productive forces, the most advanced culture and the fundamental interests of all the people” (Saich 2004: 85)), the Party from 2002 sought to recruit also the new economic elite and the middle class. These groups were seen as a possible threat to Communist rule, and it was therefore better to include them in the system (Hansen and Thøgersen 2008: 66-67; Saich 2004: 106). Today, the Party’s recruitment strategy focuses on the top students and the wealthy entrepreneurs. Between 2002 and 2007 party membership among these groups grew by respectively 255 per cent and 113 per cent. Quotas of party membership are offered as prizes for the top students both at high school and university level (McGregor 2010: 31). In 2006 the Party recruited 1554 private entrepreneurs, and in 2010 it was reported that China’s richest man was elected to the Party’s Central Committee (Xinhuanet 2007; The Economic Times 2010).

### **5.1.1 The screening and selection processes**

As mentioned above, one cannot simply enrol in the CCP. Instead, after handing in the application one is subjected to a screening process involving five stages: “(1) self-selection, (2) political participation, (3) daily monitoring, (4) closed-door evaluation, and (5) probationary examination” (Bian, Shu and Logan 2001: 813). All these stages must be passed to achieve membership, which usually takes several years. In practice, many applicants have



already served apprenticeships in the Communist Youth League (CYL), and therefore have already been through a screening process there with some of the same stages as for Party membership (Ibid).

The CYL is the youth organisation of the Party. Membership is offered to young people between fourteen and twenty-eight. What they do is to promote Party policy among youth, and to train future Party members. In addition it guides the All-China Youth Federation (a mass organisation for youth), the All China Students' Federation, and the Party's children's wing, the Young Pioneers (Pong 2009: 336). As of 2007 the CYL had 75,439,000 members, almost 25 percent of the relevant age group. Half of these were students of all ages (Ibid). According to Pong (Ibid), many young people want to become CYL members, not because they are so into Party politics, but because they want to make a career within the state or Party bureaucracy. In addition, many also join because of the activities and outings they arrange.

All of my interviewees were CYL members, and quite a few of them either had or used to have duties or positions in the CYL, and had received training there over several years. To be admitted into China's best universities, they have to be bright, and thus were probably attractive members for the CYL. One student also told me it was mandatory to be a CYL member to go to PKU. Although he had never applied to be a member, his student card said he was registered as one at the university.

The CYL's political screening is carried out through several steps. First, the application process can be seen as a self-screening. After handing in an application, the youths are subject to monitoring, taking place every day at school. Attendance to CYL study sessions, participation in activities organised by the CYL, and political behaviour are some of the things they look at. Those who survive the monitoring will then, in a closed-door evaluation, get the political background of both themselves and close relatives checked. This will be compared against the information given by the applicant. If the applicant is found trustworthy, he or she is usually admitted into the CYL (Bian, Shu and Logan 2001: 811-12).

According to Yanjie Bian, Xiaoling Shu and John R. Logan (Ibid: 814), the screening process for Party membership is, however, more vigorous than that for CYL membership. The self-selection consists in that a person (18 years or older) expresses that he or she wants to become a member. The applicant must then declare loyalty to the CCP and participate in activities organised by the Party. These activities typically involve lectures by the branch secretary,

study-sessions to study the Party constitution and politics, and voluntary activities and community service. The applicant then becomes an activist (*jiji fenzi*). The activist reports on his or her self-assessment to the Party branch authority, and the Party branch authority will then assign him or her one or two members as liaisons (*lianxiren*). These liaisons observe and evaluate the activist's progress and report back to the Party branch authority. In time, the Party branch engage its full members in a closed-door evaluation, examining the applicant's political performance (*biaoxian*), personal and parental history, as well as kinship and marriage connections. They then vote on whether the applicant should be admitted into the Party. If admitted in, the applicant must go through a formal recruitment meeting and membership registration, before starting a one-year probation. Probationary members (*yubei dangyuan*) are monitored, but can take part in all meetings and activities. However, they do not have voting power, and cannot take any positions in the organisation (Ibid).

The Party committee (*jiguan dangwei*, or unit Party affairs committee) is the organ in charge of supervising Party members and recruiting new Party members. It is placed under the direction of the Party group in the same governmental agency, and belongs to the Party organisational system. The Party committee focuses on Party affairs, and in addition to recruiting new members, they provide political and ideological classes for its members (Zheng 2010: 111).

They select new members following a certain procedure, according to Yanjie Bian (1994: 126)<sup>5</sup>. First, recruitment policies are evaluated according to the needs of the Party.

According to these policies, party committees or branches in work organisations make annual plans for recruitment. They project the total number of members to be recruited, and determine recruitment priorities (Ibid).

After making these plans, the next-higher level of government has to approve the plans. In cases where the Party secretary has good relations with the government, or the work unit (*danwei*) is considered important, their plans are more easily approved, and they will be able to recruit more members. A higher-level *danwei* will often be granted more Party memberships because of their greater influence on the recruitment plans. The number of applicants in the unit is, however, never the basis on which Party memberships are granted (Ibid: 126-127).

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<sup>5</sup> However old, this is the only account of the selection process I have found, and it might have changed since then.

### 5.1.2 The Party's recruitment strategy

Xinhuanet (2005) reported in July 2005 that the Party had approximately 70 million members, accounting for five percent of the total population. For undergraduate and graduate students, however, the percentage of Party members is considerably higher. From 1990 (just after the attack on students demonstrating at Tiananmen), when only 1.6 percent of students were Party members, the numbers have risen steadily. By 2003 eight percent of university students were Party members, which rose again to ten percent in 2005 (Xinhuanet 2005; Walder 2006: 23). The number of students applying for Party membership has also seen a magnificent rise – it seems that students now fight to get into the Party. In 2002 about one third of university students applied for Party membership (Rosen 2004). In 2003 half the student mass had done the same (Walder 2006: 23), and in 2009 a Chinese survey showed that 46.5 % of the students had applied for membership, in addition to those who already were members (Zhang and Liu 2009). These large numbers of applicants compared to the more modest numbers of actual student members<sup>6</sup> seem to imply that most applicants are turned away. The complaints from one of the students in my study, confirms this impression:

I think that... to become a Party member, not only do you need to have good grades (...), in addition you also have to be enthusiastic in your work, your student work, and you also have to do a lot of things, like student work. And before you can enter the stage [as a Party member], well... you have to be a fully developed person, eh... and your morals have to be excellent, and everybody's evaluation of you have to be good, really good. I think these demands are rather strict. (...) So the gate is narrow (*baguan hen yan*), it's considered narrow.

The common term used by my interviewees when talking about someone (themselves or others) who wanted to join the Party was also to 'fight for Party membership' (*zhengqu rudang*).

Stanley Rosen (2004) writes that this rise in student applicants and members followed a conscious decision by the Party. This is particularly apparent when comparing the numbers of university members to other strata of youth, as the young workers and peasants have not been cultivated to join the Party. An example Heilongjiang Province is telling. Here the numbers of young activists (*jiji fenzi*) saw a decline of 28.2 percent from 1995 to 1999, most notably among the young workers and peasants (Ibid).

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, I have not found any statistics on student Party members later than 2005.

Research by Hansen and Pang (2010: 56) indicates that also the youths themselves believe that without an education there would be no point in going for Party membership. They found that among young rural Chinese Party membership was regarded as totally irrelevant “unless you had a higher education or were employed in a state unit” (Ibid). A 28-year-old female shop attendant said it like this:

I do not care about village affairs. I care about my own affairs. (...). What would it help to join the Party? Those with jobs can advance if they are Party members. Even if we peasants join the Party, we remain peasants! (Ibid: 57).

Andrew G. Walder (2006: 27) also comments on the Party’s recruitment strategy. He describes how the non-elite members are in fact the social base of the regime:

“They comprise a strategic social base, because the party over-recruits people in key occupations and positions. And they comprise a dynamic and changing social base, because the regime recruits its leading cadres almost exclusively from this group, because young people with higher education are the most rapidly growing element, and because those with higher education are being recruited into cadre posts at much higher rates than others.”

We are now gradually moving into the motivations, both for joining and not joining the Party. As these paraphrases show, there seems to be a correlation between the Party’s recruitment strategy and the motivation for Party membership among youths, and who benefits from Party membership.

## 5.2 Why join the party?

Yanjie Bian (1994:124) writes that being a Party member in the revolutionary period meant great personal sacrifice. After the revolution, however, it was to become a great advantage:

[P]arty membership came to mean power, privilege, and upward mobility. Government posts were offered to party members. (...) Workers were granted party memberships in order for them to be promoted to administrative and managerial positions” (Ibid).

To join the Party during the Mao era you had to be an activist (Walder 1986: 152). However, Walder (1986: 147) argues that it is difficult to know what the main motive for the activists was, as the rewards for activism were so varied: “career and material advantages, officially conferred status, moral approval and recognition by the party”. He further argues that seeing the activists as driven by career and material advantages only, would be a mistake, here

especially making the distinction between the ‘truly committed’ and the ‘unprincipled careerists’ (Ibid). It is also reasonable to think that values that a person adopts from a status reference group higher than ones own will be grasped very strongly, and that the validity of these values therefore will be perceived as very convincing for this person (Ibid).

Walder’s arguments probably hold for the period of the Cultural Revolution. But Simon Appleton et al (2009: 260-261) argue that while commitment and belief in communism was likely to drive people to seek party membership in the early years of communist rule, this kind of commitment likely disappeared as the realities of life in communist China were revealed. The many mass campaigns under Mao was an attempt to keep this commitment alive, but in the reform period “it seems increasingly unlikely that people joined the CCP for ideological reasons as the Party gradually abandoned most of the ideology that was its *raison d’etre*” (Ibid: 261). They even point out that the more committed might indeed have been less encouraged to join the party as membership was seen as a vehicle to promotion and privileges (Ibid).

Walder and Li (2001: 1374), on the other hand, make the point that people will join for various reasons and have a various degree of commitment to the party. While some will be found to be committed patriots, some will be motivated by career advancement, and others yet in response to recruitment efforts at their workplace. For some, Party membership was merely a necessity. Bian (1994: 131), give us the example of a Communist League member, who joined the worker’s union staff. She got this message when she hesitated to apply for party membership because of all the extra classes and meetings she would have to attend: “You should apply, you know. Trust me. If you are not a party member, how could you do the union work in the administrative building here? Do you want to keep this job?” (Ibid).

### **5.2.1 Students’ motivations for seeking Party membership**

Students’ motivations, like others’ motivations, are diverse. Many Chinese studies (see for instance Chen 2000; Zhang and Liu 2009; Wen 2009) have looked at what motivates university students to apply for Party membership. They all have different ways of categorising these motives, but the different motivational factors they have found seem to match the answers from my respondents quite well. Among the students I interviewed, eight were members, and another five had applied for membership, among whom one was a probationary member. They had various reasons and motivations for wanting to join the

Party, and their answers can be divided into four main categories of reasons of motivations. However, the informants do not fall neatly into one or the other reasoning, but often give several reasons that fall into two or three different categories.

Some of the students in my study say they strongly believe in the Party and communism. Like one 24-year-old Party member told me:

If you ask for my motives for joining the Party, they are rather pure. It's that I have a strong belief in CCP's ideology. I have my own set of... images of communism. Yes. You could say it's like my own belief. Communism is the goal we fight for. It's like having a set of beliefs.

Another student, non-member, but activist, told me that he was inspired by the Red army, and had been fascinated by them ever since he was a small child. Like them he wanted to serve the people (*wei renmin fuwu*), and found it was easier to do this if organised through the Party. Still, only five of my informants gave these kinds of reasons. This finding corresponds well with other surveys on the issue. In a survey of more than 2000 students at different universities in Xi'an, only 11.5 percent gave belief in communism as the reason why they joined (Rosen 2009). In another survey of university students, seven percent chose the answer "to fight for Communism", and two percent for "to better serve the people" (Zhang and Liu 2009).

Others again are not so categorical in their love for the Party, but express that they see the Party as the force most suited to rule the country, or explain that they have seen what good the Party has done and is still doing for the country. Like this one student, who had earlier been sceptical towards the Party, said to me:

After the earthquake in Wenchuan in 2008 and later those other... those other large accidents, it affected... well, it made me realise that in critical times, having a central power organisation that can play an active role can have advantages for the society. This is of course biased, as I have been raised under an educational system like this. It's just that I'd suddenly realised that what I'd been told... when something happened, it seemed to be true.

He therefore found it acceptable to pursue Party membership to gain a career advantage and follow his father's wishes, even though he did not particularly believe in communism.

In addition to this student, three others in my study expressed that one of the reasons they wanted to join was the advantage in their future career. There was also one student still considering applying for membership that said membership might give him a better

development, which I interpret as career development. One of these students, who had already accepted an offer to work as a “recruit student” (*xuandiaosheng*), a cadre recruit on grassroots level in the countryside, explained that it would mean a lot for his career if he could become a member. It would mean having access to the decision making power:

In every place there is a Party committee, a Party committee and a government. Generally it is the Party committee that (...), yes, the certain power is there. If you want to have anything done, then you need to... have this status [as Party member]. Otherwise... there are just too many things you want to do, but you will not be able to carry them out.

For him, therefore, becoming a member was a constant struggle. Another student expressed himself like this:

Another aspect is that I hope that I later might, through my own... after all I'm a student at Peking University. Later I might need to use my own knowledge and experience to take part in some administrative work. If I do, I believe having this status [as Party member] might let others recognise me (*dajia bijiao rentong*).

Stanley Rosen (2009) comments that the results you get when asking for motivations on joining the Party, depends on how the question is asked. Earlier studies have found that respondents will often give politically correct answers. The way this student replied shows that although he sees the advantages it could have for his career, he is not comfortable expressing it. It is not considered as a “correct” motive to seek Party membership for your own advantage. I therefore believe it is probable that several of the students in my study who did not state this as a motivational factor, were actually motivated by career advantages. This is a point I will return to later. Rosen (2004) also refers to a survey among university students and intellectuals who were Party members, where nearly half of them said they had joined the Party “because it would help them find a good job”. In another survey of 232 university students (not only Party members), fully 82 percent answered that it would be helpful in finding a good job later (Zhang and Liu 2009).

In addition to these motives that seem to have a goal (to achieve communism/continue Party rule, and career advancement), there are also some motivational factors that are not so targeted. One of these is the phenomenon of following the herd. Like one student, 18 at the time of achieving membership, told me:

First it was because it was a trend among the youth. Every advanced (*shangjin*) youth would hand in an application to join the Party. So I just handed in an application together with everyone else.

Two of the other students I interviewed also expressed similar motives. Although not exactly the same, but still along the same lines I also got this answer:

At the time when I joined the Party I was very young, so I didn't consider it that much. Instead I thought that this group of people seemed like good people, and wanted to study with them. That was it.

This student saw Party membership as means to join a group of people he admired. As such he can also be described as looking for recognition, which was another motive brought up by several of the students I interviewed. For them, Party membership is an accomplishment, something they can show around to achieve recognition by others. For instance, one student, although expressing that he had a real interest in politics, also said it was because Party membership shows that you're ideologically progressive and rather advanced in politics. Another told me that "it was just an honour. (...) Only those who perform rather good can become Party members, so that you can join the Party is just a very honourable thing." Carolyn Hsu (2007) received similar answers during her fieldwork in Harbin. A 27-year-old told her that in addition to her belief in communism, it was the competition that was important: "A lot of people want to enter the Party, but only a few are chosen.... Being a Party member has not been actually helpful to my career, but I still feel like it's a sign of accomplishment" (Ibid: 105). From my impressions of the students who answered like this, they did not see Party membership as a means to achieve something else. Instead, it seems that joining the Party has not been a very conscious choice. It is better described as something they stumbled into while wanting to be like everyone else or because they happened to take part in an activity organised by the Party.

In addition, some had felt pressure to join the Party from persons they felt it was hard to say no to. One was the student mentioned above, whose father wanted him to join. His father wanted things to be easier for his son, and urged him to become a member under the belief that hindrances in society are more easily avoided by Party members. Another told me that the teacher in charge of her class urged her to join the Party. This student said the teacher continued to push her until she felt she had no other choice but to join.



## 5.2.2 Reasons for not seeking membership

Joining the Party is therefore not only a matter of whether they *can* join, but whether they *want to* join. In research by Hansen and Pang (2010: 56) among rural youth, they found that for these youths not joining the Party, the reason was not only that the Party was not interested in recruiting them, but that it was a matter of personal choice (Hansen and Pang 2010: 56). This can also be seen in the material I have found among the best educated youth. Even though they have a great opportunity to join, many of them are either uninterested, or have actively chosen not to seek party membership. Nine of the 22 students I interviewed were neither Party members nor had applied for membership. One student argued that she did not want to be part of a system she did not recognise. Instead she wanted to be free and independent. Independence and freedom was also the reason another student gave, although she did not express any opposition towards the Party. She just did not want to have to attend meetings or report on her thoughts to someone else.

Others again do not see any advantages in their own case, and so they do not see the point of joining. One 21 year old student planning to study abroad after graduation told me he thought it could even be a drawback:

I'm not planning to go into politics, and... and if I join the Party it will not be favourable if I want to go to study abroad, or even maybe emigrate. If you for instance want to go to study in the US and you're a Party member, when you apply for a visa, maybe they will ask you: "Hey, why are you a Party member?" (...) If you're going to choose one of these options, it could create problems..., so it's better not to join.

In addition to these rather specific reasons, there was also just a general lack of interest among some of the students who were not seeking membership. Some told me they do not have any political beliefs. Others say they do not know enough about it to actually take a stand. Only one of those who had not applied was still considering joining the Party. This 20-year-old student said he had some ideals he wanted to realise, but was not sure whether he wanted to try to join the Party to realise them. He mentioned that there might be political hindrances for him if he joined the Party. Still, he thought most of the prominent persons over the last decades were Party members, and that Party membership therefore might mean that he could achieve more, as well as give him a better development.

### 5.2.3 'Good' and 'bad' motives

This same student, although quite positive towards the Party, was not so positive towards fellow students pursuing Party membership. He could not find the selflessness of the old heroes among them:

Those heroes of a few decades ago, they actually established the CCP, and joined the CCP because of their ideals, to save our fatherland. But today, many people join more because of their own future career, and do not really consider the ideology.

He obviously does not approve of these students' motives. A few of the other students also had similar feelings. They seem to divide the motivational factors into good and bad motives. And not only the "red" Party members or activists display such thoughts. Also among non-members such thoughts can be found. A 24-year-old female student expressed that she cannot stand how other students only use Party membership as a method to achieve a better prospect.

Finding such attitudes among Chinese university students is not surprising. In fact, this method of dividing motives into good and bad ones is part of the Chinese discourse on motivations for joining the Party. In the Chinese research articles I have read on the subject, they all name self-serving motivations as either 'deviate' (*piancha*), 'harmful' or 'bad' (*buliang*), 'irregular' (*bu duanzheng*) or similar (Chen 2000; Zhang and Liu 2009; Yu and Cai 2008). The naming of the 'truly committed' and the 'unprincipled careerists' that Walder (1986) refers to, suggests that this way of thinking first started in the Mao era, and has remained part of Chinese discourse ever since.

## 5.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at how Party members are recruited and the Party's recruitment strategy. With different policies, the recruitment strategy has also shifted. I have shown how the recruitment of college students has increased over the latest decades, and how at the same time there has been a spur in interest for Party membership among these students. Although earning Party membership is a long and hard process, today's students 'fight' to get into the Party. Still, their motivations for applying for Party membership differ. Among the students in my study, I found four main categories of motivational factors. These were belief in communism and/or the Party, advantages for future career, more unconscious reasons like following the herd or wanting glory, and finally pressure from authoritative figures. These

findings match other studies, although fewer students gave career advantages as a motive than other studies have shown. This is a point that I will return to in later chapters. In addition, I have shown how not all students seek Party membership. The reasons for this are varied as well as sometimes quite specific. Some say they do not like the system, others that they do not have any interest or say that it could cause problems for future studies abroad.



## 6 Career mobility: education versus political loyalty

While career mobility is viewed as one of the main motivational factors for joining the Party, the mechanisms at work regarding Party membership and career mobility in China are actually not straightforward. Education is also an important factor in this process. So what role does Party membership and education play for promotion into political and professional elites? The short answer is that education is necessary for all kinds of elite positions, while Party membership is an additional requirement for some positions. I will continue with the longer answer, in presenting some of the research on the subject. The research is unfortunately not always up to date, but mostly based on surveys from the 1990's. This means that the circumstances will probably have changed since then, but it is hard to tell how and how much. The answers from my interviewees though indicate that the tendencies are still the same.

### 6.1 The dual path system

Andrew G. Walder (1995), using survey data from Tianjin – the third largest city in China, found that there were two distinct pathways which lead to elite positions in China. He was puzzled by the fact that Party members in communist states seemed to have a higher concentration in high status occupations than others, when educational credentials were equally strong markers for upward mobility as in the market economies (Ibid: 310). This led to the development of the *dual path model*. In social mobility research one differs between a particularistic system emphasising a person's relationship with those with wealth and power (in this context Party membership) and a meritocratic or technocratic system, emphasising education. Walder argues that in the Chinese context, education and Party membership are two qualitatively different credentials working within the same system. Party membership certifies that a person at one point met the standards for political trustworthiness necessary and has not violated these standards since admittance. In the same way as people spend time and effort earning educational credentials, they also spend time and effort earning Party membership, or political credentials. The main argument of the dual path model is that persons on the path to elite managerial or administrative (cadre) positions are screened for both political and educational credentials. And for the higher positions, Party membership

becomes a minimum requirement for consideration, as the Party wishes to control those who occupy strategic positions in both enterprises and state institutions. *Professionals* (including scientists, doctors, engineers and lawyers), on the other hand, are screened only for educational credentials. These positions also give high social prestige, but do not have the same kind of authority and material privileges as the administrative elite positions.

Andrew G. Walder, Bobai Li and Ronald J. Treiman (2000) investigate the dual path model further analysing the 1996 national survey of China. They find that between 1949 and 1996

Party membership increased the odds of attaining an elite status by a factor of almost 4. A high school education increased the odds by a factor of 3, while a college education increased the odds by an additional factor of 2.7 (Ibid: 198).

When looking at how these credentials work separately, they find that Party members are five times more likely to become cadres than non-members. They are not more likely to become professionals. And college graduates are 6 times more likely to become professionals than are high school graduates. They are however not more likely to become elite cadres. Party membership is therefore the single most important criterion for becoming an elite cadre, while each level of education greatly improve the chances of becoming a professional, Party membership being almost irrelevant (Ibid:198-99).

But when they change focus, and instead of looking at the whole 1949-1996 period, look at changes through time, the results are completely different. By the 1990's, the advantage of Party membership for entry into the cadre elite had been reduced by fifty percent. For entry into the professional elite the importance of education had doubled. Party membership had virtually been eliminated as a factor. Still, the clear boundaries between the cadre and professional elites remain, and the boundaries may even be clearer than before.

Xiaowei Zang (2001) further extend the dual path model to the political (or cadre) elite. His hypothesis is that those on paths to government positions are screened more vigorously for educational credentials, and those on paths to CCP hierarchy are screened more vigorously for political credentials. Looking at the profiles of central and local cadres from 1988 and 1994, he finds first of all that most post-Mao leaders are both college graduates and Party members, and alas that both educational and political credential play a role in elite recruitment. Still, he finds no direct relationship between college education and elite recruitment: Different types of cadres ranked the same in the civil service scale have widely different percentages of college

educated. Supporting the dual path model, however, he finds that there are more cadres with formal college education in the government system than in the CCP system, and the gap in educational attainment between governmental and CCP cadres widened between 1988 and 1994. Also supporting the hypothesis, he finds that CCP seniority has a negative impact on recruitment to the government system, while is positive to the CCP hierarchy.

## 6.2 Party-sponsored mobility

Bobai Li and Andrew G. Walder (2001) to some degree confirm earlier findings, but at the same time contradict some of the earlier conclusions. They propose a model of a *Party-sponsored mobility*. In this model the crucial point is *when* in an individual's life one entered the Party. Early entry into the Party indicates selection for potential sponsorship, leading to promotion into elite positions, while late entry does not give these career advantages.

In their research they find that the Party indeed focuses on the very young in its recruitment. And that they are not just anybody. If looking at the period from 1949 to 1996 as a whole, the trend is that college educated have been recruited at later stages in their career than those from 'red' households, suggesting that those groups favoured by the Party have been sponsored into elite positions in higher degree than college graduates. However, when dividing this period into three, the Mao-era, the early and late reform periods, it turns out that there is a dramatic shift in recruitment strategy emerging after 1988. In the early reform period (1977-88) it seems that the Party-sponsored pattern disappears. After 1988 it reemerges, but it is now college students and college graduates rather than the 'red' that are sponsored into elite positions.

Li and Walder (Ibid) further ask how a cadre elite with such a low percentage of college educated could ever administer the country. The answer turns out to be simple: These 'red' and uneducated Party members received college education from the Party, as discussed in chapter 4. Therefore, Party members are much more likely to return to school for college education than non-members throughout the whole period studied. These Party members educated by the Party have a far higher probability of being promoted into an elite administrative position than regular college students. In the late reform period, while the Party focuses recruitment on college graduates and students, they still continue to offer adult college education to Party members without such education. Their conclusion is therefore that

it is not Party membership per se, but early entry into the Party that leads to elite administrative positions. Through sponsoring young recruits, the Party secure that they

go through such an extended process of screening, cultivation, and training, permitting the evaluation of such perceived attributes as loyalty, reliability, and “ability” that otherwise are difficult to judge (Ibid: 1405).

The strong correlation observed between education and elite occupation, can therefore not be taken as proof of a meritocratic system, as it is partly caused by prior political selection.

Frank N. Pieke (2009: 163) writes that this pattern described by Li and Walder continues to apply, but with some changes. The discontinuation of the Central Party School’s Correspondence Academy is a clear signal that the Party’s former reliance on cadres with a modest educational background perhaps will have to make way for a greater emphasis on achieved education prior to appointment. The new appointment mechanisms of examination for positions described in chapter 4, is another indication of a meritocratisation of cadre appointments. In 2011 18.000 government posts were open to examination, though all jobs with the central organs and provincial-level agencies required a minimum of two years work experience (Clems 2011).

Pieke (2009: 163) also writes that “[g]reater participation in government by non-CCP members is actively promoted and engineered by the CCP”. Both members of the eight so-called democratic parties as well as people with no party membership are recruited to the Party. These are appointed both in professional non-leading cadre positions as well as leading cadre positions. These leading cadres are usually appointed in organisations linking government and non-communist forces in society, or in non-political departments requiring a high degree of expertise (Ibid: 62-63). However, the percentage that these non-CCP members now constitute I do not know.

### **6.3 The non-state sector**

Yanjie Bian, Xiaoling Shu and John R. Logan (2001) similarly find evidence of screening for both political loyalty and education in elite recruitment. What is interesting is that they also look at the administrative positions in the non-state (i.e. non-cadre) sector. They find that for *non-Party members* a college degree increases the chances of entering elite managerial positions in the *non-state* sector, albeit not in the state sector. Yang Cao (2001) find evidence



that there was a change in recruitment in state firms as they became more dependent on the market instead of the state. Comparing state firms and state non-profit organisations in both Shanghai and Guangzhou in 1994-95, he finds that in Guangzhou human capital (i.e. education) has a greater effect on promotion in state firms than in state non-profit organisations. This trend is not evident in Shanghai. He explains the differences with the different timing of market transition reforms in the two cities. In the early 1990's, reforms were only starting to take place in Shanghai, but already in full effect in Guangzhou, where reforms started already in the 1970's.

## 6.4 Career advantages: empirical findings

There is a high degree of consciousness regarding the advantages of Party membership among Chinese students. Andrew G. Walder (2006: 23) writes that as college education has become more common, the competition in the labour market between the college educated has increased. A college degree no longer makes you stand out among the other “upwardly mobile individuals”, and Walder (Ibid: 23) claims that Party membership therefore has become an important factor in career advancement for the college educated.

### 6.4.1 Students emphasise education, experience and personal ability

When I asked my interviewees what they considered most important to be able to obtain the job they wanted (or eventually any job if they did not have their plans mapped out), there were especially three answers that stood out: having an education and a solid professional knowledge (*zhuan ye zhi shi*), having done an internship or had work experience, and finally their personal abilities (*ge ren neng li*). Only 19 of the respondents answered this question, and out of these, eleven mentioned education and/or professional knowledge, eight mentioned their abilities, and seven mentioned experience important factors for securing a job. In addition, four also answered that it was advantageous to have good contacts (*guan xi / ren mai*). This is one of the answers I got:

I think experience, and also.. eh... your professional knowledge are the most important. (...) And if your future work is in China, you had better have some human relations (*ren ji guan xi*) – and by that I mean contacts (*ren mai*).

Only one of my respondents answered Party membership to this question, even though they all knew the topic of my thesis. This was a bit surprising, considering the contents of the research summarised above, as well as the great numbers of students applying for and competing to get Party membership. However, it should not be surprising that Chinese students see education, experience and abilities as more important than Party membership. This is also what I found when I asked the students how they regarded the importance of Party membership compared to their top university education. No one thought Party membership could compare to their education. One pointed out that if you do not have an education, being a Party member would be pointless, and one Tsinghua University student was almost offended by my question:

I think this Tsinghua education... when you ask which is more advantageous of Party membership and an education from Tsinghua, don't you think it's rather... what shall I say? But Party membership actually doesn't have the same impact (*chongjili*) as education, that's for sure!

Other students I interviewed pointed out that the two were not really comparable:

I think maybe that Party membership and an education from Peking University, these two... and their competitive advantages... they are just not at the same line. Right. Maybe you can say that if you're a Party member in a group of Peking University students, you would stand out, but if you compare Peking University to another school, then... I mean, if you only look at it from the angle of finding work, [those hiring] will be more likely to value your abilities. The extra points you gain from being a Party member should not be more than the extra points you gain from being a student of Peking University.

They all agreed that having a first class university education was more important than Party membership, although one also concluded that "Having an education from Peking University, and also being a Party member, that may be even better".

#### **6.4.2 "It depends on what you want to be"**

The answers I got from my respondents concerning the advantages of Party membership for future career prospects were quite unanimous. After sorting the different statements that came up during the interviews, I find that 21 out of the 22 students in my study either explicitly say there are advantages, or can name a career that requires you to be a Party member either in order to get the position or to be promoted. Only one of the respondents can or will not mention any advantages bestowed by Party membership. It is interesting to note that this student is one of the students who said that belief in the Party and communism was their main

reason to apply for membership. He argues that one cannot talk about advantages of Party membership, since “the Party does not exist to give advantages to the members, but to support the people”. Even though he admits that rumour has it that Party membership can be beneficial in some areas, he is certain that it does not give any privileges.

Among the other respondents, there is a clear tendency to see the labour market as divided in two: ‘Within the system’ (*tizhi nei*) and ‘outside the system’ (*tizhi wai*). Like one student explained to me:

In China we have the two expressions of *tizhi nei* and *tizhi wai*. *Tizhi nei* there are state-owned central enterprises, civil servants, the army, and teachers at colleges and universities. This is... these all counts as *tizhi nei*. Then *tizhi wai* there are every kind of private enterprises, like... those who sell cars, real estate, this and that, there are all kinds...

Furthermore he told me that advantages of Party membership depend on whether you’re trying to get a career ‘within the system’ or ‘outside the system’: “If you want to get ‘within the system’, then the difference between being a Party member and not being a Party member is huge”. This is a difference that seems to be common knowledge among the university students. This is a typical answer I got:

If you want to pursue a (...) job as civil servant or a similar kind of job, then it certainly has [advantages]. It’s like... if you later are going to work..., well, for general jobs it seems that whether or not you’re a Party member... does not seem to make a very big difference.

Among the students I interviewed the majority mentioned that Party membership would be an advantage if you wanted to do one of the following: become a civil servant (*gongwuyuan*), work in the government departments (*zhengfu bumen*) or any other governmental organs (*jiguan bumen/xingzheng jiguan*), or work in the (larger) state-owned enterprises (*guoqi*).

There also seems to be a general understanding on the difference between the state-owned enterprises (*guoqi*) and the foreign invested enterprises (*waiqi*). Like this one student explained above, the state-owned enterprises belong to the ‘system’, while private enterprises do not. Still, only a few of the respondents talked about the private enterprises per se. It was mainly the foreign invested enterprises that were seen as the opposite of the state-owned enterprises and used as a comparison with regards to advantages of Party membership. As this 25-year-old student explained:

I think you have to think of this as divided. You see, in some places it could be that [Party membership] is not an advantage at all. Say for instance the foreign invested enterprises or..., they're maybe not considering this at all. Then if it's the state-owned enterprises or administrative organs, they might see it as rather important.

Or, to put it more bluntly, as another of my respondents did:

If you only want to work in for instance... Goldman Sachs or Morgan Stanley, actually... what does it matter if you're a Party member? But if you want to work in Sinopec (...) or China Mobile, these government controlled companies. Or say in the government – the government or the government controlled companies, then joining the Party is definitely better than not joining.

The conclusion is then that Chinese students are aware of the divided labour market they are dealing with, and see that in the state sector there is a definite advantage of Party membership. Actually, one of the standard answers to my questions on advantages of Party membership was that “it depends what you want to do” or “it depends on where you want to work”. In addition, five of my respondents mentioned that Party members would more easily get promotions, some of them clarifying that this was for employees in state-owned enterprises or civil servants. Two others also stated that Party members would have a better chance of becoming leaders.

A few of the students I interviewed also argued that Party members are more outstanding and active than other students, and because this is common knowledge, companies are more inclined to hire Party members. One student told me this, in a rather matter-of-factly way:

Being a Party member when looking for work, that's certainly advantageous! Since you are able to... It's not everyone that can become a Party member already as a student. If you can become a Party member, this proves that you're among your school's most 'outstanding elements' (*youxiu fenzi*). (...) It will just prove that this person's abilities are quite strong, that's how I see it.

She thus seems to have a clear feeling of what Li and Walder (2001) described: that it is early entry into the Party that sets you apart. One other student made this point even more explicit when adding to a similar point of view that joining the Party after you already started working would not make any difference to your career. Another student also told me this:

To be precise: leaving a good impression does not necessarily mean you will do a better job, but if you're a Party member, the possibility of you being a good person is higher, and your moral character is probably better.

From this statement, one can sense that the risk of hiring a Party member is considered lower than hiring another person, as Party members are already screened severely by the Party. This again resembles the thoughts of some other students, who claimed that Party membership is actually just a certificate, a proof of status.

### 6.4.3 “Not being a member is not a disadvantage”

But even though most students both see and express that there are advantages of being a Party member, they also believe that non-members will not face disadvantages when looking for work. One student who himself wanted to become a member because he wanted to take part in decision making, told me that not being a member would not affect your career negatively. And when at one point I interviewed two Party members together, the dialogue went like this:

ME: *In what respects can Party membership give you a better competitive advantage than education, when it comes to career? Are there any?* S1: No. ME: *No?* S2: No. S1: That's right. Just because you're a Party member it wouldn't... S2: Because there are so many Party members now. S1: Yes. S2: There are so many student Party members, so it doesn't matter. ME: *So if you graduate as a master student and you're not a Party member, would this...?* S1: It wouldn't be a disadvantage. S2: It wouldn't, it wouldn't. S1: No, it wouldn't, so [Party membership] is just not an advantage. S2: It's just a personal target (*zhuiqiu*). There are many who choose not to join the Party, who are not actively seeking Party membership. S1: Yes. S2: But it won't be a disadvantage when looking for work.

Some of the students in my study, who had not applied for membership, also said that for others it might give advantages, but it would not for them, as they did not plan to work in the government or the state-owned enterprises. Some others pointed out that the labour market is changing, and that Party membership no longer holds the same importance as it once did. Others brought up that in some cases, Party membership can also be a disadvantage. I already touched upon this in the previous chapter, when writing about why some students chose not to apply for Party membership. Basically, they believe that it can create hindrances if you want to work in foreign companies or go abroad to work or study. All of these statements are consistent with the findings of Carolyn Hsu (2007) who did fieldwork among residents in Harbin. She writes that 42-year-old ex-cadre told her that Party membership is just not as important as it was before and that nobody really cares about it anymore (Ibid: 98). Another Harbiner explained to her that you do not have to be a Party member to become a cadre, as long as you have a college degree (Ibid: 99), and a young waitress said that “rumour has it that *sanzi* [foreign, joint, and private] companies won't want you if you're a CCP member”

(Ibid: 99). Hsu explains these attitudes with the narrative stories of Party membership in Harbin that do not take into account the objective advantages of Party membership (Ibid). When it comes to my own findings, I choose to look at these contradictions as another way to express what I explained above; that there is a divided labour market, and that these students see that there are plenty of opportunities also if you're not a Party member. And for some of the students, these opportunities are more attractive.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown that the advantages of Party membership are not straightforward. Education and Party membership are two different criteria that both play a role in career mobility in China, but lead to different careers, as professionals or as cadres in administrative or managerial positions. Education has become necessary for both kinds of positions, but Party members without education have received college education from the Party. The meaning of Party membership has, however, been reduced in the late reform period. After the market reforms took place in China, the private sector has given college educated new opportunities, and administrative elite positions in the state firms have also to some degree been opened up to college educated without Party membership.

The students in my study are all very aware of this divided labour market. They point out the advantages of Party membership if you want to work as a civil servant, in any of the government organs, or in the (larger) state-owned enterprises. Still, they also see that there are possibilities 'outside the system', in the private and foreign invested enterprises. They therefore do not see it as especially disadvantageous not to be a Party member. Thus they also value education above Party membership.

# 7 Finding a job: The labour market and how to work it

To find a job, you have to know how. In chapter 6 I described how the Chinese labour market can be regarded as divided between the jobs ‘within the system’ and those ‘outside the system’. In this chapter I will look more closely at the labour market, starting with the labour market reforms that took place from the 1980’s onward, and continuing with findings from my fieldwork related to expectations and the needs of specific groups in society. The importance of personal relations (*guanxi*) to secure a job will be discussed towards the end.

## 7.1 From *guojia fenpei* to labour market

From 1949 and through the 1980’s there was no labour market in China. In the cities, all jobs in the state and collective sector were based on state distribution (*guojia fenpei*), as the work force was considered a “national resource that requires centralized planning” (Bian 1999: 258). Three groups of authorized agents controlled all job assignments: the government labour officials, the employers, and the school and residential leaders. Employers would submit wish lists for new workers, but the final power lay with the government labour officials. They decided the number of workers designated for each work unit (*danwei*) and assigned the individual workers to the specific jobs. However, all agents were involved in this process. Employers would send the hiring announcements to schools and residential districts where youths were waiting to be assigned jobs. There, the school and residence leaders would screen the youths and make their recommendations to the government labour office (Ibid: 258-9).

This system of assigning the workers to jobs was closely related to the *danwei* system. After being assigned to a certain *danwei* one would most likely stay there the rest of one’s life. Life in the *danweis* secured an ‘iron rice bowl’: Lifelong employment from graduation onwards (Hansen and Thøgersen 2008: 122-3). As job alternation was so severely restricted, the first job laid the foundation for one’s whole career. Therefore it was also a race to try to get assigned to both a good *danwei* and a good position within the *danwei* (Bian 1999).

After the new reforms opened for market liberalization in the mid 1980's, the inefficient *danweis* were seen as hindrances for industrial development. In 1986 lifelong employment was therefore replaced by contracts of limited periods, and in 1995 employers were allowed to fire redundant workers. In today's China, enterprises strive for surplus, time limited work contracts are the rule, the workers change jobs, and there is an actual labour market (Hansen and Thøgersen 2008: 124-5).

In this new labour market, it is not always easy for newly graduated to find jobs. Yan (n.d. b) writes that national statistics from 2008 and 2009 showed that only 68 percent of college students could find employment upon graduation. But according to a survey conducted in 2010 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), 89.6 percent of graduates had found employment within six months of graduation. Although this is not an alarmingly low percentage, the same survey showed that the average monthly salary for graduates was just below 2500 yuan (Xinhuanet 2011c). This is even lower than the average monthly salary of *all* urban employees. By end of 2010 this was about 3000 yuan, though it varied enormously between regions and sectors (National Bureau of Statistics 2011). Especially because of a tough *urban* job market, graduates have found it necessary to pursue a career in rural areas. In 2008 the government launched a campaign to encourage graduates to work in grassroots organizations in rural areas, and in 2011, 200 000 graduates had found such employment (Xinhuanet 2011a). The tough situation for graduates continues to worry the leadership. In May 2011, the State Council issued a statement saying that the graduates' concerns over income and social welfare should be properly addressed. Simultaneously, they also raised concern that some graduates' expectations for jobs do not match the demand of employers (Xinhuanet 2011b).

## **7.2 Searching for work: aspirations and expectations**

Amy Hanser (2002a) in 1998 interviewed young urbanites in China about their work aspirations and expectations. This was a period when the job market was still in transition from the old to the new system. Fourteen years later, circumstances and attitudes have probably changed to some degree, but there are still some interesting observations that can be related to my findings in different ways.



First, the competition became fiercer within the new labour regime. Hanser notes that especially the well-educated, well-trained and well-connected of her interviewees saw this competition as “necessary, natural, and fair” (Ibid: 193). This was not really a subject in my interviews, but it is interesting in this context to mention the comment one of my informants made about the difference between foreign invested enterprises (*waiqi*) and state-owned enterprises:

In for instance most of the *waiqi* the competition is fairer, they do not especially value [Party membership], but if you want [to work] in a state-owned enterprise, this might be a... a competitive advantage – being a Party member.

She sees the competition as fair, but the need for Party membership in the state sector is, in her eyes, an inherent injustice in the system. Hanser (Ibid) further writes that for these most competitive informants, the competition in the labour market, combined with the advantages that education bring, caused a high confidence, with one of her interviewees uttering “Whoever’s best is most successful”. This attitude was also mirrored by some of the students in my study. One history student, showing some insecurity in regards of how useful her education would be on the labour market, still showed confidence when I asked her what she wanted to do after graduation:

Maybe I can’t say exactly what I want to do, maybe I’ll just... prepare with both hands. Well... maybe take the civil service exam, and at the same time prepare to go to an enterprise, and at the same time... send my resume to both state-owned and foreign enterprises. And while sending my resumes, I’ll send lots and lots. Then I’ll see who gives me response and do interviews, and I’ll do quite a few. Then I’ll look back and compare which offers are better before I make a decision on where I want to work.

She does not doubt her abilities to find a job, nor that she will find a good one. The possibility that she will not get several offers does not seem to occur to her. Another student is equally confident that she will find a job, but still fears the tough labour market:

Graduating from Peking University, finding a job shouldn’t be too hard. But say you want a job that is both not tiring and you earn good money, and that in addition is suitable for women. It... it won’t be too easy.

Hanser (Ibid) similarly found that although the competition meant motivation, challenge and confidence to some, it also meant unwanted pressure, and the youths of the late 1990’s apparently felt a need to change and adapt to this new labour market. Thus, job search and work became ways of defining and fulfilling themselves. Hanser (Ibid: 194) found two pairs

of factors that in this context were especially important to the youths: autonomy and mobility, and self-development and fulfilment. They said they did not want to be told what to do; they wanted autonomy in their job. And those who felt confident with the competition tended to switch jobs often. They saw this as important to broaden their experience and get where they wanted. And correspondingly, job stability was at least by some seen as something that “prevented people from reaching their full potential” (Ibid: 195). These findings actually do *not* match what I have found in my study. One student mentioned that later in his career he wants to start something for himself, “Because always working for others you’re actually not free at all (*hen bu ziyou de*)”, but he is the only one mentioning anything to do with autonomy. Instead, two persons mention stability as an important criterion for the work they want to find upon graduation, and another one uses the word ‘safe’ (*baoxian*) to describe her ideal workplace. At least two of them by this pointed to a state sector job, the third never said where he thought he could find such a stable job. The reason for this disparity between mine and Hanser’s findings might come from an even fiercer competition in today’s labour market than in the 1990’s, which makes stability and state sector jobs more attractive. One other student informed me that working in the private sector one will face many changes, and might have to change jobs every two to three years. In comparison, the state sector jobs are more stable, and one can stay five to ten years in the same job. Another student added that not only is the salary high for state sector jobs, the welfare benefits are also good. Facing an unstable situation in the private sector, stability might not be considered as something preventing people from reaching their potential anymore, but simply as something safe. The high number of persons sitting the civil service exam suggests that this is not just a phenomenon among my students, but also nationwide. In 2011 more than 970.000 sat the exam, down from 1.03 million in 2010 (Clem 2011). This development can also be related to the increasing individualisation of the Chinese society, the weakening of a safety network, and how all responsibility is put on the individual.

Hanser (Ibid: 196) further writes that especially for the well-educated she interviewed, personal development and fulfilment were equally or more important for work success as autonomy. One of her interviewees, a graduate student, had received a job offer from a state unit in Beijing as an accountant. Not yet started there, she already talked about how she had initially wanted to find something more exciting, and how personal interests were more important than income. This last comment is not something I heard much of from my informants. Only one stressed that money is not important, as long as the work is interesting.

Others again say receiving an okay or proper payment is important to them, while one says the pay is the most important criterion. This is consistent with Hanser's findings as well. She writes that "material concerns were a consideration for all of them", and that even those who said that other things were more important, had certain expectations when it came to payment (Ibid: 194).

But what concerns personal development and fulfilment, these attitudes can also be found among my interviewees. Six of the students I interviewed said they wanted to find a job matching their interests: They want to find "important" work, that "reflects their own values", that is "challenging and innovative", that "gives them happiness" and so on. One of my interviewees, soon graduating as an accountant, had just found a job in a bank. This was the job she wanted, but, as she said:

I don't know how the future will be, so I think... I still have to start before I can say anything. Now I have found a job matching my own interests, it's... according to my own initial idea, just... what I want to do. I picked a job I wanted, then if the future... First I'll just have to... first start and see how it develops.... First start and see how the situation is, see if I'm really interested, and then... let's see.

This shows that not only her interests, but also the possible development she expects in the job is important. Another student, who was just finishing his master's degree, had found a job in a private enterprise. He had originally hoped for a job in a state-owned enterprise, but when he decided to take the job it was "one, because it's close to home, two, because the pay is ok, and third, because I will at least to some extent see some development to my career".

### **7.3 Different groups, different needs?**

I also asked my respondents whether Party membership was more important to some groups than to others. For instance did Amy Hanser (2002a: 200) find in her study that women were often discriminated against on the labour market. The young women felt they were not as attractive to employers as their male counterparts. This was especially true for the well-educated women. One female master student in Hanser's study recounted an incident of a female friend. This friend had been in touch with a work unit for about a year. Despite the fact that she was a good student and had the right qualifications, the work unit was not willing to sign a contract for all that time. In the end they hired a male student from the same school that was not even really interested in the position and was less qualified (Ibid).

Hanser (Ibid: 201) also reports on one woman that enrolled in graduate studies to better her chances of finding a job in Beijing that could secure her a residency permit (*hukou*). Her long-time boyfriend lived in Beijing, and she wanted to live there with him. But without such a residency permit, her future children would not be able to go to school there, without them having to pay a lot to purchase school services on the open market. The men Hanser interviewed, on the other hand, did not feel that a residency permit made much of a difference, as “[t]he permits are no barrier to moving”, as one of them said (Ibid).

Expecting that female and rural students might face discrimination or would be in need to secure an urban residency permit, I also expected that these groups might see Party membership as even more important than others did. The answers I got, though, did not confirm these expectations. The most common answer to my question was instead that Party membership was more important to those who wanted to work in the government, or pursue a career in politics. This was the answer I got from ten out of the seventeen of those who were asked this question. Nine of the students I asked more directly about groups like women and those from the countryside. Most of them did not see the relevance. One female student answered that this did not “seem to be a problem”, when I asked if Party membership was more important for women than for men. A 25-year-old could not see that this should make any difference either:

If you think of specific groups, rural/urban or women/men, I actually think this is really... how to say it? Really... really not important. The key is rather, whatever group you belong to, whether you want to pursue a career in politics.

As one rural student told me:

It's not necessarily [more important] if you're from the countryside. [It is] rather that even if you're from the countryside, you're not necessarily going to work there. You're already a person of high education, you... you can absolutely go to a large company or a large law firm. (...) It's not like just because you are come from the countryside... you need Party membership to... obtain something. But because you're from the countryside, and you have the possibility to go to China's best university, you already have a high diploma in itself, so you have a lot of possibilities, so... (...) There is no need to distinguish between the countryside and the cities, I think. That's it.

Still, two students saw that there could be good reasons for women and rural students to seek Party membership. This one male student had to stop and think before answering, as he had never considered this before. Then he reasoned that it would be more important to women

because they are facing discrimination, and that a work unit will always pick the man if a man and a woman apply for the same post. Then being a Party member could be used as a bargaining chip, and not having this bargaining chip could make the situation worse. He saw this as especially true for students from the countryside because “many rural people don’t have any sense of security, compared to urban people. They will early choose to actively join the Party, to ensure some sense of security”. He had himself experienced rural students speaking with greater weight after joining the Party. The other student first told me that it only depends on what kind of job you are looking for, but as he was giving me an example of how China is developing the countryside, he realized that there are some policies making it easier to be appointed and promoted to governmental positions if you are both from the countryside and a Party member.

I also asked everyone in my study what their parents did for a living. Although this information does not enable me to define their economic backgrounds, it gives some indicators. Among the students, two told me that both of their parents were workers, and two that both were farmers. I feel confident in drawing the conclusion that all of these are from low-income families. Like the other students, these did not mention any groups as in special need to secure Party membership, but still all of them had applied for Party membership. One was already a member, and two said they were soon to be members.

From these findings I conclude that it does not seem that Chinese students in general see some groups as more disadvantaged on the labour market, and thus in greater need of securing Party membership. However, from what two of my informants tell me, there seems to be both negative and positive discrimination towards some groups that point to a greater advantage from Party membership for the individuals of these groups. Still, neither the female respondents nor the rural ones, the two groups I looked at in particular, specified a greater need to secure Party membership. The perceptions of the students from low-income families did not distinguish themselves from the other’s, but all had applied for membership.

## **7.4 The importance of *guanxi***

In addition to Party membership and education, *guanxi* is another factor important in order to obtain a job in China. As earlier mentioned, this was one of the things emphasized by the students in my study when I asked them what was most important in order to obtain a job.

*Guanxi* is Chinese for ‘relationship’ or ‘connection’, but also has a broader sense. According to Yanjie Bian (1999: 260), *guanxi* “refers to the interpersonal connection in a dyad in which the involved parties have high intimacy to each other and a mutual understanding of reciprocal services between them”.

Having the right network of *guanxi* can therefore significantly increase the chance of getting a preferable job. During the period of state controlled job assignment, students waiting to be assigned a job were not supposed to achieve any information about available jobs. However, they all tried to activate their personal networks in order to pull their connections (Bian 1999: 259). Bian (ibid) claims that this is evidence that the system of government-ruled assignment was not water proof, i.e. that there were ways to work around the strict system. For instance, school and residence leaders would recommend persons who were not formally qualified for a position, and the other agents would accept the recommendations. The government labour officials and the employers would in their turn suggest persons to be recommended at a later point. To be able to secure a good job assignment through influencing one of the parties in this process, the job-seeker would need to have a certain position in a web of *guanxi* connected to these agents. Both direct strong ties with great mutual trust and reciprocal obligation and strong tie intermediaries were ways to work around the system (Ibid: 260-1).

Using intermediaries made the system more complicated. It was no longer only one person doing a favour for a friend or relative. Exchanges for the favour between the job-seeker and the intermediary and between the intermediary and the job provider could be postponed to later because there were strong ties of mutual trust. The exchange for the favour between the job seeker and the provider, however, were expected to take place at once, through a gift at a proper price (Ibid: 261).

After the system of assigning jobs was abolished, the use of *guanxi* to secure jobs has changed, but it is still evident. However, there are different opinions on how widely used or accepted the use of *guanxi* is. Bian (2002: 128-133) explains the persistence of *guanxi* use by some institutional holes in the labour market. Because of low information flow, lack of trust between employer and employee and the need for obligation from both parties, the use of *guanxi* is still essential in allocating jobs. Still, he finds that there exists a labour market also for those without the right *guanxi*.

Amy Hanser (2002b) has looked especially at how youths go about to get their first jobs, and how they change jobs. She finds that for Chinese youth, *guanxi* is not the preferred way to secure a job. This especially holds for those who are graduated from university or college and have high job specificity. Instead, they relied on formal job search methods like phoning interesting firms, job fairs, and paper ads. There are several reasons why *guanxi* is often not used by youth. Firstly, because of their high job specificity, their parents and their *guanxi* cannot help them. Secondly, because they are young and new in the labour market, they do not have their own network of work relations. Third, they often move to cities far away from their home town, and therefore have no relevant *guanxi* to rely on. And fourth, they see it as important to rely on their own abilities (*nengli*), and as a shame not to be able to secure a job on their own. In the degree *guanxi* is used, it is often to pass on information. For those with only lower education, and often lower job specificity, the need to rely on *guanxi* is more evident, as the competition is harder. Nonetheless, they still need to prove their ability to both get and to keep the job.

According to some of the students in my study, *guanxi* use is very common. One 17-year-old student said it like this:

Oh, like this, then Party membership is not important at all anymore. Now everyone looking for work lean on... the channel you just mentioned [social relations], yes. Except you have an excellent background, for instance if you achieved some prize... or if you're just awesome (*niu*) at school, and your school is also good, otherwise, generally all university students, or let's say the people around me, that I know of, even if they're graduated from Tsinghua, they also have to lean on (*kao*) *guanxi* to enter any one enterprise.

This was also confirmed by two other students. One of them had just secured a job, and told me that during her job search her experience was that while Party membership was not important, *guanxi* could sometimes be quite useful. Another student, working in a government department, said that it is only in the foreign invested enterprises that one does not need *guanxi*. To get a job in a department, *guanxi* is absolutely necessary.

I asked my informants how they valued Party membership in comparison to *guanxi*. It turned out they all see *guanxi* as somewhat important, and ten out of the seventeen that answered this question considered *guanxi* as more important than Party membership in order to get a job. As one said:

It's just that it's not as important as before, joining the Party, not as important as before. (...) On the contrary, compared to other social relations (*shehui guanxi*), for instance if your relative is... is some State Council leader. This is certainly... the best. This *guanxi* is the best.

Only two students thought Party membership was more important than *guanxi*. One of them saw *guanxi* use as some kind of help from the outside, while Party membership is a help from the inside, as “you are ideologically more advanced and outstanding than others”. The other, a PhD student, believed that most bachelor and master students would consider working as civil servants, and Party membership would then be more important. Several of the students in my study underlined that there are many factors that play a role in job search, *guanxi* and Party membership being only two of them. Therefore, Party membership and *guanxi* are also hard to compare, and five of the students could not say which is more important. As one of the students explained to me:

You can say that [Party membership and *guanxi*] exist side by side; there is no which is more important than the other, or which is less important than the other, it's just... It's an important component, and if you don't have it then maybe you'll be comparatively... weaker. But (...) I feel that... they don't have to be horizontally compared, rather it is... whether you have it or not, and not how much it weighs.

Because these are only two of several factors, some also pointed out that none of them are especially important. One explained that *guanxi* is a complicated thing, and that even if it can be useful sometimes, it eventually all comes down to yourself and your own abilities. This was also mirrored by two others.

But can Party membership be used as *guanxi* connections? I did not ask directly about this, and only three, and none of them Party members, brought it up within this context. This might indicate that they do *not* consider Party contacts to be useful *guanxi* contacts. One informant was very clear in this matter:

I think... when it comes to politics and the government in China, Party membership is still rather important, but in your other civil exchanges no one uses Party membership to... weave their own *guanxi* web, well, yes, generally not. In fact, especially in private exchanges... alumni ought to... school... the *guanxi* web of friends from school is really, really important. Yes, yes, who would use Party connections (*dangyuan lianxi*)?

On the other hand, two other (non-member) students mentioned that it might help expand your *guanxi* web. As one of them said: “To join the Party is equivalent to join some kind of



organization, so... for the aspect of your interpersonal relations (*renji guanxi*), this certainly (...) will be of help.”

## 7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how China has gone from a system of state distribution of jobs to a labour market. This new labour market is tough and competitive, especially for the newly graduated, who are facing low payment and tiresome jobs. Especially the urban labour market has been tough, and students have had to seek employment in the countryside. Still, none of the students I interviewed were too frightened by the competition, and many were confident that they would find a job. And they did not only want a job, they wanted jobs where they could fulfil and develop themselves: Interesting, innovative and non-repetitive jobs that are also well paid. But for some getting a stable job was also important. It does not seem that Chinese students see any groups as more disadvantaged than others. Neither the female nor the rural students in my study saw a greater need to secure Party membership to be competitive on the labour market, even though there is likely to be some discrimination towards these groups.

*Guanxi* use, on the other hand, was considered somewhat important by all the students in my study, by some as the most important factor to secure a good job. *Guanxi* has a long tradition in China, and was especially important during the time of state distribution, because it was likely that the job one was assigned would be kept until retirement. After the reform period, *guanxi* is still much used, and can be important to secure a good job. Most of the students I interviewed considered it more important than Party membership, although many underlined that both *guanxi* and Party membership are only two of several factors important in job search.



# 8 Biographic patterns in career making

In this chapter I will connect the empirical data and analyses with the theoretical approach. I will start to further investigating patterns in the interview material, focusing on the informants' motivations for joining the Party and what kind of work they want after graduation. Next I look at how the importance of personal choice and family pressure influence their decisions regarding Party membership and work, and finally I look at how these patterns relate to the individualisation thesis.

## 8.1 Me and the others: differing biographies

In her chapter on youth's job search and the use of *guanxi*, Amy Hanser (2002b: 143) writes:

Perhaps it is best to think of *guanxi* use, and in this case the job searches of young urbanites, as strategies reflecting both institutional conditions as well as cultural knowledge, experience, and skills.

She uses Ann Swidler's definition of strategy: "the larger ways of trying to organize a life... within which particular choices make sense, and for which particular culturally shaped skills and habits are useful". In this definition culture is seen as a 'tool kit', which means that in a changing environment, "new strategies are not built from scratch nor are they determined solely by 'tradition' or 'common sense' " (Swidler 1986, in Hanser 2002b: 143).

Although *guanxi* use and Party membership are two different aspects of Chinese society, they can both be seen as part of the 'tool kit' a Chinese job searcher has to choose from when trying to secure a job. To the degree that Party membership is used instrumentally to broaden one's options in the labour market or secure a future career, then this would be a strategy "reflecting both institutional conditions as well as cultural knowledge, experience, and skills" (Hanser 2002b: 143). I will now investigate whether this is the case among those Chinese students that I have interviewed.

Out of my 22 informants, nine mentioned during the interviews that they believed career advantage was a common reason to join the Party. Only two of these I asked directly, as a follow-up question to something they said. One actually used the word 'tool': "I also know that in the situation we have in China now... the status of Party membership... is used as a

tool by many students”. Another student I asked whether what he was trying to say was that students do not use Party membership to gain advantages, to which he replied:

They do, many do. (...) I have a lot of these students around me. They don't understand the Party at all, neither do they understand the theory nor the history, nor the honourable traditions and so on, these advanced things. They join the Party for the simple reason of making it easier to choose their own career.

This student is a Party member himself, and it is tempting to draw the conclusion that Party members point to others and say they join to gain advantages, while they themselves are not joining for these reasons. This does however not match my findings. Although nine of the students say they believe others join to gain career advantages, only five of these are members or have applied for membership. Out of these, three actually mentioned that this also was one of their motives for applying for Party membership. Still, it is evident that many students believe career advantages are a main motivational factor among their fellow students for joining the Party. The same has been found in other studies. Rosen (2004) refers to a study that compared probationary members' and non-members' views on the probationary members. The probationary members, unsurprisingly, had a far more positive view on themselves and their motivations than the non-members had.

When investigating further the students' plans for the future, and comparing it to their motivational factors, some interesting patterns also come to the surface. Let us first look at those who have applied or already are members. I have in this section also counted the one student who considered joining but had not applied, into this category. Unlike the others who had not applied, he named reasons for why he wanted to join the Party, and therefore fit into the statistics. The members, those who have applied and the one who considers joining, altogether make fourteen informants.

Eight of these students plan to work in the state sector or see work in the state sector as one of the options upon graduation. In addition, I suspect that one other student, talking about wanting a “not too stressful job” where she could also “earn good money” was implying a cadre position. Still, only five<sup>7</sup> mentioned career incentives as a motivational factor for applying for membership. It therefore seems that there is a discrepancy between what they say and how they act. This does not necessarily mean that they are not honest about their

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<sup>7</sup> The student who considered applying for membership also named this as a motivational factor, hence the discrepancy from chapter five.

motivations, but only that they take advantage of the fact that being a member expands their options. However, because of the survey findings of other researchers cited in chapter 5, I see it as probable that some of these have had career incentives as a motivational factor without acknowledging it to me. This is especially possible because the discourse on motivational factors for joining the Party makes it difficult to speak about such motivations, especially for those who are not yet members. In one of my last interviews I also asked an informant about this, as she was very categorical in saying everyone who joins the Party does it to gain some advantages at a later stage. She then said that “not everyone is willing to tell the truth”.

Further I find that four of the five (or six, if also counting the person I suggested was implying a cadre position) who do not mention state sector work as an option are science/engineer students. This could indicate that for science and engineer students the most interesting career options are outside the state sector, although two of these students also plan to work within the state sector. However, three of those not interested in a state sector job named working as a teacher or professor at a university or college as a possible future career. According to two of my informants, these jobs also count as *tizhi nei* (within the system), but I have not found any other sources to confirm this. But if this is the case, almost all of the students who applied for membership planned to work within the system, or saw this as one of their options.

There is also a preponderance of male students seeking Party membership, although this could be a coincident due to my small number of informants. I do not see any reasons for this other than that males maybe being more preoccupied with making a career than females, but this is just a guess.

## **8.2 The importance of personal choice**

Among the eight who had not applied for membership, none said they wanted to pursue a career ‘within the system’: three wanted to work in a bank, one as a lawyer, one in IT, one in *waiqi*, and one law student simply stated that she did not want to work in a department or at a level of power. The last one did not know yet. Several of my informants told me that for lawyers, Party membership can be an advantage, as the law system is not entirely separate, and hence partly under control of the Party. Still, there are also jobs outside the system for lawyers. For the other students, there ought to be no problem to achieve a career without Party

membership. As explained earlier, and underlined by many of the students I interviewed: It is up to the individual to find out where he or she wants to work, and thus it is optional to join the Party. There are also plenty of jobs outside the system.

Also, out of these who had not applied for membership, all but one were bachelor students. This does not seem to be a coincidence. One master student in law told me that she expected eighty percent of her class to be Party members before graduation, and there seemed to be a high percentage of Party members at other master programmes as well. I see three possible reasons why this is the case. One, the master students have studied longer, and there is accordingly a naturally higher percentage of Party members among them, as it takes a few years to be admitted into the Party. Two, those who go on to study a master's degree are the best students, and are more likely to be actively recruited by the Party. As the above-mentioned student said: "Everyone that can enter the master's programme at PKU is already rather outstanding, (...) so more of them will be able to join". Three, those who do a master's degree at a Chinese university do not plan to study abroad. Among the five who mentioned that they plan to study abroad after graduating from their current studies, four did not apply for membership.

Among those who have a distinct career strategy, there then seems to be two distinct trends: Joining the Party to work in government or *guoqi* (state-owned enterprises), that is within the system, and studies abroad to find work outside the system. This is not to say that one has to choose one or the other, and several of my respondents are neither Party members nor plan to study abroad. Studying at a top university is in itself a great achievement, making them attractive to employers. But it seems that those who seek Party membership do not plan to go abroad, and that those who want to study abroad do not seek Party membership. This again shows that Party membership is optional.

The importance of personal choice was also evident with regards to family pressure. Rosen (2009: 365) notes that because Party membership is so valuable for finding employment, many youth are under pressure from their parents to join. My findings reveal the same. Discussing my thesis with some fellow students in Norway, a Chinese exchange student told me that she only joined the Party because her parents wanted her to. She originally was not very interested, especially because it took a lot of time and effort writing reports. But her parents urged her to do it, and said it would make her grandfather happy, and so she gave in.

Two of my respondents similarly reported on such familial pressure. One I already wrote about in chapter five. He applied for membership partly because his father urged him to:

Actually I think... my personal opinion is that it doesn't matter that much, because the whole system is changing, it's not as... fossilised as before, right? But... but... [my father] believes this is still very important, so he always, every year supervises and urges me: Quickly find a way to join the Party!"

The other student, however, had not applied for Party membership even though her father strongly urged her to join:

He says: "Now, when [our work unit] hires master students, all of them are already Party members. If you wait until you are a master student to join, you have no advantages in relative to others to speak of! If you want it to seem like you have some other strong points, then you need to join already as a bachelor student."

She herself wanted to study abroad upon graduation, and was influenced by other students telling her that Party membership was of no value abroad. Hence, she had not taken any steps to approach the Party. For this student, consequently, not joining the Party was a personal and active choice.

### **8.3 The striving student individual**

As I described in chapter two, there is a constant struggle to succeed in China, due both to the drive for success and the fear of failure. Children are raised to be attractive on the labour market already from kindergarten on (Yan n.d b), and parents continuously strive to get their children into the best primary and secondary schools to secure that they get into the best universities (Rosen 2004). The students at the same time continuously strive to achieve good grades and good test scores, in such a degree that "studying hard and testing well has come to define life for most Chinese students" (Yan n.d b). Rosen (2004: 35) describes them, and their parents, as "pragmatic, individualistic, even self-centred in their values and strategies". He refers to the most successful book published in China in 2001 *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting*, selling more than 1.1 million copies. In this book Liu Yiting's parents describe how they raised their daughter to get into Harvard at the age of eighteen.

Making it to university, however, does not mean that the struggle is over, neither for parents nor children. In 2000 the university tuition alone comprised 23 percent of an average urban family's annual income and 60.5 percent of a rural family's income (Rosen 2004: 36-37).

Also, on graduating from university, there is a struggle of finding employment. Chinese media in 2000 reported that Chinese students in average spent 2000-3000 yuan looking for employment. The money was spent on phone calls, the purchase of cell phones, faxing documents, and putting together a 'booklet' to advertise their skills. On top of this came travels to other cities for job interviews (Ibid: 41).

I argue that the struggle to achieve Party membership can be seen as a continuation of this struggle. Gaining entrance to a good university might not be enough, and one again has to strive to stand out among the others. Because the society does not provide a safety net anymore, the individual has to take full responsibility for his/her own life. Achieving Party membership can then be a means to broaden one's safety net, by broadening one's possibilities on the labour market. I have not asked the students directly about their views on Party membership as a 'safety mechanism', but there are some indications of this in the material I have gathered. Students underline that Party membership can make you look better to employers, because Party members are generally seen as active and excellent. Party membership is a way to 'add extra points', as one student expressed it. It is also interesting that I have informants uttering that "it is better to have both", both about education and Party membership, and about *guanxi* and Party membership. The fact that parents push their children to strive for Party membership is also pointing in the same direction. That all of my informants that I can be certain are from low-income families have applied for membership, is also evident. The most striking evidence, though, is the high percentage of students applying for membership, and how they describe their wish to join the Party as a fight or struggle. What can be argued against such an interpretation is that advantageous groups like women and rural students are not seeking Party membership in greater numbers than others, nor see it as more important to achieve. But as just explained, it seems that the students from poor households strive to secure Party membership.

## **8.4 Manifestations of individualisation among Chinese students**

According to the individualisation thesis, the individual situations we end up in, concerning education, career strategy etc. are not merely private situations, but also institutional. Because we are dependent on the labour market to make a living, we are also dependent on the institutions that make us attractive on the labour market and that make it possible to



participate in the labour market (Beck 1992). From what I find, and have described in this and previous chapters, Chinese students are dependent on a diversity of factors to make themselves attractive on the labour market; education, *guanxi*, and Party membership being three such *institutional* factors.

With regards to education, not only the level of education, but also the quality of the school, college or university, as well as the prestige of your majoring subject is important. From what I find in my study, the usefulness of the majoring subject on the labour market is a factor of concern for the students. The one history student I interviewed told me that whenever she told people she was a student of PKU, they were really impressed. However, when she told them she was a history student, they could not understand what benefit this study was supposed to have. She used a lot of time telling me that also the humanities are important studies, but it was clear to me that she, regardless of her confidence in finding work, was influenced by this thought, and felt insecure in this matter. In this context it is also noteworthy that both the archaeology student and the philosophy student (in addition to the history student maybe the two with the least ‘useful’ educations), both planned to study abroad after graduation. They then planned to study law and accounting, both much more ‘useful’ subjects.

As for Party membership, it is regarded as necessary to achieve a career in politics and the state sector, and this was common knowledge among the students I interviewed. *Guanxi* is used both to get information about jobs and to secure jobs that it could otherwise be difficult to get. From what I find, Chinese students see education as the most important factor, while Party membership and *guanxi* are additional and elective choices. Having one or both of these additional factors is considered an advantage, especially to pursue a career in the state sector. But as working in the state sector is optional, the students in my study underline that this is a personal choice. One can choose between different pathways, the state sector or the private sector, the foreign invested enterprises being the preferred part of the latter sector. But because they are all dependent on the same institutions, the choices they make tend to be the same. The pattern shows that they to a large extent make up the same strategies to stand out in the crowd; they either fight to join the Party, or they study abroad to be more attractive to foreign invested enterprises.

## 8.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how there is a discrepancy between what the students in my study say and how they act with regards to their reasons to join the Party and the job opportunities they consider. Of the students who had applied or considered applying for membership mentioned state sector jobs as one of their options, only half mentioned this as a motivational factor. At the same time, many students say about others that they join only to gain advantages.

Among the students that had not applied for membership, and did not consider it an option, none planned to work in the state sector. Instead half of them planned to study abroad after finishing their current study. This shows that Party membership really is a matter of personal choice. Furthermore, this indicates that two trends stand out as particularly popular choices among Chinese students: joining the Party to obtain a cadre position, and studying abroad to get a job in foreign invested companies.

I have also shown that there are indications of individualisation among Chinese students. The students strive to get into the best universities even from early childhood, and when they are finally admitted, a new struggle begins to stand out among the other upwardly mobile individuals. Here, Party membership is one of the options available. I also argue that Party membership in such matter can function as a kind of safety net in an individualistic society where failure is entirely your own fault. In addition I argue that the choices that Chinese students care to take are institutionally dependent, and so they often end up choosing the same strategies.

## 9 Conclusions

In this thesis I have investigated the career strategies of Chinese students by interviewing 22 students at two of the best universities in China. The focus has been on the Party's role in society, and the students' motivational factors for joining or not joining the Party related to their plans and hopes for future career. In this chapter I will answer the main research question and summarise the results of my study.

### 9.1 The importance of Party membership

The high numbers of both student applicants and student members in themselves indicate that Party membership is considered important by Chinese students. And because only a fraction of those who apply are admitted in, there is hard competition to join the Party. The reason students compete to join the Party is not mainly because they believe in communism. Other surveys (Rosen 2004; Zhang and Liu 2009) find that only a minority seek membership in order to achieve communism. My fieldwork and analysis support these findings. The studies show that the students have various reasons to join. My findings suggest that they join because others do, because it is an honour to become a Party member, because parents and teachers urge them to join, and not least because it is an advantage on the labour market.

My informants described the labour market as divided between *tizhi nei* (within the system) – the state and the state-owned enterprises, and *tizhi wai* (outside the system) – the private sector. Outside the system the advantages of Party membership are small or non-existent, according to both Walder, Li and Treiman (2000) and my informants. Inside the system, however, there is a big difference between being a member and not being a member. Although the Party actively recruits some persons that are not Party members into leading cadre positions, most of these positions are reserved Party members (Pieke 2009; Walder 1998). This means that the importance my informants ascribed to Party membership depended on whether they planned to work within the system or not. Those who did not plan to work within the system, mentioned that there could even be disadvantages from Party membership, like restrictions on travels abroad, and fear of not being admitted into foreign universities due to Party membership.

## 9.2 Party membership as a strategy to make ‘a career of their own’

Although many of the students I interviewed did not have their career plans made out, it was apparent that many had considered many of the aspects I asked them about, and to some degree had a clear career strategy. As students at China’s best universities, they considered the education they received there as the most important step in this strategy. When asked about what they considered the most important factors for making a career, they answered education, personal abilities, work experience and connections (*guanxi*). However, Party membership was also part of the strategy for several of them, and only a few did not know whether they wanted to pursue Party membership or not.

Because Party membership gives career advantages within the system, the desire to get a share of these advantages is naturally present among my informants. Several mentioned career advantages as one of the reasons they applied for membership. Among those who had applied for Party membership, the majority saw working within the system as one of the options upon graduation. Even though most of these did not state career prospects as a motivational factor for joining the Party, it is hard to believe that they did not see the advantages to their own career. This is also the impression the students themselves had of others seeking Party membership. As one student expressed it: “They join the Party for the simple reason of making it easier to choose their own career”.

## 9.3 Perceptions of the Party

So what can these findings tell us about the students’ perceptions of the Party? What is evident in my findings is that very few of my informants see communism and the Party’s ideology as especially important in today’s society. Neither does the Party organisation or ideology seem to play an important role in their lives. Party classes and ideology is for many simply something they have to go through in order to achieve Party membership.

In contrast, the Party’s role as the most important pillar in Chinese society does not seem to be changing. When approximately half the student mass apply for Party membership (Liu and Zhang 2009), this is a sign that the Party as an institution is rock solid. However, in today’s Chinese society there are also other pathways to upward mobility and success that might be both quicker and more effective means to success and money than working within the system.

This means that the Party does no longer have a monopoly on career mobility, and that money and welfare are not entirely dependent on your relation to the Party, as before the reform period. What it can provide is a stable and safe life, and positions of power in Chinese society. Party membership is not a short way to Heaven, but it is certainly a means to stand out among others and to compete for certain positions in society.

## **9.4 My findings and the theoretical approach**

I have found that the students are making strategies to form their own career, while constantly striving to stand out among the others in order to achieve the best possible careers for themselves. Striving for Party membership is one of the options available to them. Other options are being an excellent student, or studying abroad. This latter option was preferred by several, and among those who did not seek Party membership, half was planning to study abroad after finishing their current studies. It therefore seems that joining the Party and studying abroad were two different and in some sense conflicting strategies used in individual career making among my informants.

In accordance with this, the students I interviewed underlined that joining the Party is a personal choice. It is possible to pursue a career outside the system without being negatively affected. At the same time, the choices they make and the strategies they follow, to a great degree show the same features. This comes down to the fact that the choices they make are institutionally dependent. In fact, the students recognise that if you want to work within the system, being a Party member is crucial. This does not mean that this is their only choice, but that not being a Party member to a large degree excludes certain career possibilities. To be able to work within the system they therefore have to be both calculating and pragmatic, features Yan (n.d a) ascribe the striving individual. All of this points to certain processes of individualisation in career making among the students.

What I also find is that they in some regards tend to make their own biographies. Even though women can expect to be discriminated against on the labour market, they choose not to see this as an option. Similarly, even though they know the labour market is tough, many choose to believe that they will find work that is interesting, fulfilling and in accordance with their values. But maybe can having all these choices also create risks. If they fail in their strategy, the failure is their own, and they have no institutions, and only a limited safety net to lean on.

There are tendencies in my material that point in the direction of Party membership being used also as a means to broadening one's safety net.

Are these features consistent with the findings of other studies on East Asia? As can be seen in the descriptions of Chinese parents pushing their children to be successful in their education and to join the Party, the educational and career strategies of Chinese students are part of a family strategy. Even though the Chinese family has been altered during the last century, the individual is not left entirely to itself. This is not matching the findings of Chang and Song (2010) from South Korea, where the burden on the family has made Korean women avoid starting a family. Still, as Han and Shim (2010) noted, the individualisation process will differ according to the degree of individualism in society. It is not surprising if the individualisation processes in China and Korea differ to some degree, as the societies do not share the same institutions and systems. It is also difficult to draw a clear conclusion on potentially changing family-individual relations on these few grounds.

Han and Shim (Ibid) also claim that the unintended consequences of the rush-to development and compressed modernity, like large-scale accidents, corruption, family disorganisation etc, affect people more than the risks of radicalising modernity, like climate change, terrorism and economic inequality. I did not enquire especially about any of these topics, but both development of the country to better the conditions for those living in the less-developed areas and corruption were issues that concerned especially some of those who planned to work as civil servants. However, it is difficult to argue that economic inequality or corruption is directly affecting their lives based on this information. As Han and Shim also places these two risks in different categories, it would be impossible to say which is affecting their lives more if at all. In addition, the scope of my study is too small, and the matter under investigation too specific, to conclude in any firm direction on this matter.

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# Glossary of Chinese words and expressions

<i>baguan hen yan</i>	把关很严	the gatekeeper is strict; the gate is narrow
<i>baoxian</i>	保险	insurance, safe
<i>biaoxian</i>	表现	show, performance
<i>bu duanzheng</i>	不端正	irregular
<i>buliang</i>	不良	harmful, bad
<i>chongjili</i>	冲击力	force of a thrust/impact; impact
<i>dajia bijiao rentong</i>	大家比较认同	everybody recognizes (me)
<i>dang guan ganbu</i>	党管干部	Party management of cadres
<i>dangyuan lianxi</i>	党员联系	Party connections
<i>dangzu</i>	党组	Party group, Party core group
<i>danwei</i>	单位	work unit
<i>difang ganbu</i>	地方干部	local cadre
<i>fuchuji</i>	副处级	deputy office level
<i>fuke</i>	副科	deputy section
<i>ganbu</i>	干部	cadre
<i>ganbu peixun</i>	干部培训	cadre training
<i>geren nengli</i>	个人能力	personal abilities
<i>gongwuyuan</i>	公务员	civil servant

<i>gongwuyuan kaoshi</i>	公务员考试	civil servant exam
<i>gongwuyuan zhidu</i>	公务员制度	civil servant system
<i>guanxi</i>	关系	relations; connections
<i>guojia fenpei</i>	国家分配	state distribution
<i>guojia ganbu</i>	国家干部	state cadre
<i>guoqi</i>	国企	state-owned enterprises
<i>hen bu ziyou de</i>	很不自由的	not free
<i>hukou</i>	户口	registered permanent residence
<i>jibie</i>	级别	grade
<i>jiceng ganbu</i>	基层干部	basic cadre
<i>jiguan bumen</i>	机关干部	organs and departments
<i>jiguan dangwei</i>	机关党委	Party committee; unit Party affairs committee
<i>jiji fenzi</i>	积极分子	activist
<i>kao guanxi</i>	靠关系	lean on/depend on connections
<i>lianxiren</i>	联系人	liaison
<i>nengli</i>	能力	ability
<i>niu</i>	牛	cow; slang for awesome
<i>piancha</i>	偏差	deviation, error; deviate
<i>qunzhong</i>	群众	the masses, the people
<i>renji guanxi</i>	人际关系	human/interpersonal relations

<i>renmai</i>	人脉	contacts
<i>renmin</i>	人民	people
<i>sange daibiao</i>	三个代表	three represents
<i>sanzi</i>	三资	three capital; foreign, joint, and private capital
<i>shangjin</i>	上进	go forward, make progress; advanced
<i>shehui guanxi</i>	社会关系	social relations
<i>suzhi</i>	素质	quality
<i>tizhi nei</i>	体制内	within the system
<i>tizhi wai</i>	体制外	outside the system
<i>waiqi</i>	外企	foreign invested enterprises
<i>wei renmin fuwu</i>	为人民服务	serve the people
<i>xingzheng jiguan</i>	行政机关	administrative organ
<i>xuandiaosheng</i>	选调生	recruit student
<i>xueli</i>	学历	record of formal schooling
<i>xuewei</i>	学位	academic degree
<i>youxiu fenzi</i>	优秀分子	advanced element
<i>yubei dangyuan</i>	预备党员	probationary member
<i>zhengchuji</i>	正处级	full office level
<i>zhengfu bumen</i>	政府部门	government departments

<i>zhengke</i>	正科	full section
<i>zhengqu rudang</i>	争取入党	strive/fight/compete to join the Party
<i>zhiwu</i>	职务	rank, level, post
<i>zhongzhuan</i>	中专	middle vocational school
<i>zhuanye zhishi</i>	专业知识	professional knowledge, expertise