



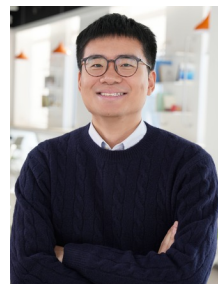
Rethinking Political Meritocracy: An Attention-Based Approach

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Political meritocracy, which selects and promotes officials based on their work performance, is an important explanation for China's rapid development. While prior studies focus on territorial leaders (*kuai*), less attention is given to functional department leaders (*tiao*), whose performance is harder to measure, attribute, or compare. In this talk, Xiao Ma introduces an attention-based explanation, arguing that in China's complex bureaucratic system, marked by intricate divisions of labor and information asymmetry, capturing superiors' attention is critical for official's career advancement. This argument is corroborated through case studies and analyses of original biographical data on functional department leaders. This attention-based framework tries to reconcile debates on competence versus connections in Chinese political selection and explains both the bureaucratic system's successes and its governance challenges.



Xiao Ma is an associate professor of political science at the School of Government at Peking University. His research focuses on comparative political institutions, politics of development, and Chinese politics. He is the author of *Rethinking Political Meritocracy: An Attention-Based Approach* (Cambridge University Press, 2026), and *Localized Bargaining: The Political Economy of China's High-Speed Railway Program* (Oxford University Press, 2022). His work also appears in leading disciplinary and area studies outlets such as *Comparative Political Studies*, *Political Communication*, *Security Studies*, *World Development*, *China Journal*, and *China Quarterly*. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Washington.

Further Information

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