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Editor's Note:

*This is a special theme issue of China Brief, taking the opportunity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s upcoming centennial celebrations (on July 1) to focus analysis on the CCP's past, present and future. Over its 100 years of history, the CCP has proven itself to be a resilient, adaptable organization that has retained authoritarian control over the Chinese state for the past 72 years. Since Xi Jinping took power as CCP General Secretary in 2012, he has elevated the party's role in almost all aspects (with himself as the party's core), tying its successful leadership of the People's Republic of China since 1949 to an increasing promotion of the legitimacy and power of the so-called "China model" and updating its Maoist-Leninist ideological roots for new foreign and domestic challenges. In this issue, China Brief Editor Elizabeth Chen takes a look at this year's party history study campaign, which kicked off in February and bears interesting observations about the party's internal narratives on struggle and sacrifice.*

*Next, Jamestown Foundation Senior Fellow Willy Wo-Lap Lam takes a retrospective look at the CCP's contentious history with liberalization. Although the "crypto-Maoist" Xi has revitalized much of Mao Zedong's ideological, economic and political work, the path from Mao to Xi was by no means pre-determined. Instead, relative liberals and intellectuals throughout the CCP's history have, and continue to, advise the PRC leadership to embrace greater political reforms.*

*Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise summarizes the history of military political work in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which has gained especially renewed importance under Xi. PLA thinkers have conceptualized their political and ideological work as a competitive advantage as the military undergoes historic reforms and seeks to update itself as a modern-day, professionalized and technologically-advanced force capable of fighting tomorrow's wars in an era of renewed great power competition.*

*Daniel Koss has closely followed ongoing trends in overseas party-building, and argues that the CCP has made effective use of "institutional bricolage" to update old Leninist models using new technologies for a party that is deepening and expanding control over its members in new spaces (i.e., the private sector) both at home and abroad.*

*Finally, Harry He reviews post-reform trends in local governance and draws on fieldwork conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic to argue that after state administrative organs withered amid China's rapid economic growth and transformation, the party's focus on building grassroots control in rural villages and urban neighborhoods has filled the gap in local governance, with deeper party penetration being masked as a genuine expansion of civil society.*

*It is the Jamestown Foundation's modest hope that this special issue will contribute towards a greater and more nuanced understanding of the Chinese Communist Party, particularly as it ramps up triumphalist messaging and tightens control over the Chinese state, society and military in anticipation of its centennial anniversary.*

## The 2021 Party History Study Campaign Stresses Revolution and Sacrifice

By Elizabeth Chen

On June 15, *Qiushi*, the leading theoretical journal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) published an article by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平) titled, “Taking history as a mirror, use history to demonstrate convictions, know history and love the party, know history and love the country” (以史为镜, 以史明志, 知史爱党, 知史爱国, *yi shi wei jing, yi shi mingzhi, zhishi ai dang, zhishi aiguo*) ([Qiushi](#), June 15). Comprised of a collection of relevant quotes from Xi that date back to 2013, the article is the latest in a massive party history propaganda and education campaign on a scale unseen since the Mao era. The purpose of this campaign is clear—in Xi’s own words from 2015: “As long as we have a thorough understanding...[of history]...it is not difficult to realize that without the leadership of the Communist Party of China, our country and our people could not have achieved today’s accomplishments, nor risen to the position we currently occupy in the world” ([Qiushi](#), June 15).

To summarize, the party history study campaign is aimed at indoctrinating a “correct” and progressive view of history that presents the CCP as the successful and legitimate leader of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Xi Jinping Thought as the scientific guiding force for the Sinicization of Marxism, shoring up domestic support for the party and bolstering its ideological competitiveness during a new era of enhanced great power competition.



Image: According to media reporting, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping “teaches the first lesson” at the Party History Study and Education Mobilization Conference held in Beijing on February 20. (Source: [Xinhua](#)).

## The 2021 Party History Study Campaign

This year's party history study campaign kicked off on February 20, when Xi delivered a speech at the Party History Study and Education Mobilization Conference ([CCTV](#), February 20). Several days later, the Party History Study Education Leading Small Group issued the "Notice on Seriously Studying and Implementing General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Speech at the Party History Study and Education Mobilization Conference" ([关于认真学习贯彻习近平总书记在党史学习教育动员大会上的重要讲话的通知], *guanyu renzhen xuexi guanche Xi Jinping zong shuji zai dang shi xuexi jiaoyu dongyuan dahui shang de zhongyao jianghua he tongzhi*), calling on party groups at all levels to study and implement the spirit of Xi's speech ([Xinhua](#), February 24).

During his speech, Xi noted that he has consistently prioritized the study of party history since being elected to the Politburo Standing Committee at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 ([Qiushi](#), March 31). Long-time China watcher Bill Bishop observed that Xi also oversaw party history work in the 17th Party Congress, and that "there may be few officials in China more steeped in Party History than Xi" ([Sinocism](#), March 31).

In April, the official state paper *People's Daily* reported on a notice issued by the Central Office of the CCP that provided guidance on propaganda and education activities for the CCP centenary celebration on the mass theme of "Forever Follow the Party" (永远跟党走, *yongyuan gen dang zou*). It said that the centennial publicizing campaign would be split into two stages: before May 2021, propaganda organs were directed to focus on recent developmental and economic policies—highlighting the state's successful achievements in poverty alleviation and the 13th Five-Year Plan (FYP, 2016-2020), as well as spreading awareness about the priorities articulated in the 14th FYP (2021-2025). From May until the end of 2021, the second stage of the CCP's propaganda campaign would focus on "studying, propagating, and implementing" Xi's forthcoming CCP centennial speech in July ([People's Daily](#), April 12). The China Media Project noted a simultaneous release of 80 national propaganda slogans, "unprecedented in the reform era before 2019, when a list of 70 propaganda slogans was issued for the 70th anniversary of the PRC" ([China Media Project](#), April 14; [Shwm.gov.cn](#), April 1).

The party has pursued innovative ways to spread its message. Political organs in the government, military, and judiciary have carried out party history study sessions "at all levels" ([People's Daily](#), April 13). A new museum dedicated to the CCP has opened in Beijing ([Xinhua](#), May 19), and culture and tourism authorities nationwide have also heavily promoted "red tourism" (红色旅游, *hongse luyou*) and leveraging "red [cultural] resources" (红色资源, *hongse ziyuan*) to engage the younger generations in particular ([Xinhua](#), May 10; [gz.xinhuanet.com](#), May 7). The CCP has developed a variety of interactive educational materials including dedicated web portals, televised knowledge competitions, animated shorts, documentaries, feature films, and a 365-episode radio series on "The Hundred Years of the Communist Party of China" ([1921.org.cn](#), accessed June 16; [dswxyjy.org.cn](#), accessed June 16; [Qiushi](#), June 16). It has also published a new "Short History of the Chinese Communist Party" ([中国共产党简史], *zhongguo gongchandang jian shi*) that

appears to obscure previous official criticisms of catastrophes in the party's history, such as the Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward ([China Brief](#), May 17; [RFA](#), April 14). Around the same time, China's internet regulators announced a new platform to fight "historical nihilism"—cracking down on historical narratives (including the defamation of martyrs and other sensitive criticisms) that do not align with what the party deems correct ([ChinaFile](#), May 14).

### **Self-Revolution and Sacrifice for a New Era of Increased Competition**

One interesting theme in the recent party history education campaign is the emphasis on revolutionary zeal and conflict. Although state propagandists have diligently crafted a triumphant and positivist narrative of the party's history, they have also focused on the need to prepare for continuing struggle and sacrifice. This is most evident in the prescriptions to maintain "self-revolution" (自我革命, *ziwo geming*). According to Xi, "Self-revolution is the most unique character of our party, and it is also our party's greatest advantage." Shi Zhongquan (石仲泉), a former deputy director of the CCP Central Committee Party History Research Office, highlighted six specific major instances of self-revolution in the CCP's history, drawing a line from Xi Jinping's famous "fighting tigers," "swatting flies" and "hunting foxes" anti-corruption campaigns back to formative revolutionary moments such as the Zunyi Conference and the Yan'an Rectification Movement. Shi observed that "the hundred years of history of the Chinese Communist Party, from the perspective of party building, is a history of self-revolution with the courage to turn the sword inward...forever maintaining the vitality of the party" ([Xinhua](#), April 6). Building on this notion of self-revolution being integral to the party's future, another article in the *People's Daily* said that continuing self-revolution was necessary to maintain the CCP's purity and vitality in order to achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" ([People's Daily](#), June 18)—tying it to Xi's nationalistic legacy-building project.

A recent manifesto (宣言, *xuanyan*) published by state media on June 7, titled "China has not failed socialism" (中国没有辜负社会主义, *Zhongguo meiyou gufu shehui zhuyi*), declared that "Crisis is the touchstone of the [Chinese] system," and cited recent victories in China's wars against the coronavirus pandemic and absolute poverty as examples of the superiority of the Chinese system—both at home and abroad ([Xinhua](#), June 7). Such war-fighting rhetoric comes against the backdrop of broader trends toward emphasizing military sacrifice and martyrdom—notably demonstrated by Xi's strong remarks last year on the 70th anniversary of the Korean War (which China refers to as the 'war to resist U.S. aggression and aid Korea') as well as a recent propaganda push to recognize Chinese martyrs who died fighting Indian forces during an outbreak of border violence at Galwan valley in June 2020 ([Xinhua](#), October 23, 2020; [Global Times](#), June 16).

### **Conclusion**

Writing in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Daily, a military scholar quoted Xi as saying that "History is the best textbook. For us Communists, the history of the Chinese revolution is the best nourishment," and argued

that as the CCP prepares for its centennial celebrations, the Chinese people must prepare to take lessons learned from the Long March into the new era “to win new victories in the comprehensive construction of a modern socialist country” ([PLA Daily](#), April 7). The manifesto published in early June concluded more explicitly amid exhortations to remember the CCP’s history of “struggle and sacrifice” as China faces a new crisis between two ideas, capitalism and socialism, in an era of increasing global competition ([Xinhua](#), June 7).

Apart from external competition, there are other reasons why the CCP might choose to stress overcoming conflict and sacrifice in the lead up to its centennial celebrations. Although China responded better to last year’s historic pandemic than most other countries, coronavirus-related shocks exposed deep vulnerabilities in the state’s social safety net even as the economy recovers gradually ([Caixin](#), March 8). The party-state has also responded awkwardly to growing demographic pressures by implementing unpopular policies to increase the birth rate and raise the retirement age ([China Digital Times](#), June 1; [VOA](#), March 17). And despite passing multiple measures to further tighten censorship regulations ([China Brief](#), April 23), the CCP has found it difficult to entirely quash continuing pockets of discontent. Amid these challenges, the 2021 party history study campaign has strongly stressed party loyalty above all as well as the recent and highly memorable biological metaphor that younger generations must “inherit red genes” (传承好红色基因, *chuancheng hao hongse jiyin*) ([Chinanews.com](#), April 13). But it seems unlikely that revolutionary callbacks and top-down mass propaganda campaigns alone will be enough to secure such loyalty. To do that, the CCP will need to prove itself responsive to the needs of 1.4 billion Chinese citizens, as well as being flexible enough to adapt to unseen challenges (both domestic and foreign) in the future.

*Elizabeth Chen is the editor of China Brief. For any comments, queries, or submissions, feel free to reach out to her at: [cbeditor@jamestown.org](mailto:cbeditor@jamestown.org).*

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**Looking Back on Short Flashes of Liberalization in  
the Chinese Communist Party's 100 Years**

*By Willy Wo-Lap Lam*

**Introduction**

After Mao Zedong (毛泽东, 1893-1976) became the undisputed leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1936, he began a thorough-going purge of the party's earliest generation of free-thinking intellectuals in the temporary party headquarters at Yan'an, Shaanxi Province. Since then, the CCP has largely followed Mao's dictum that "political power grows out of the barrel of the gun" and that both party members and citizens should remain "cogs of the machine" in the party's socialist revolution enterprise. Brainwashing and ruthless purges of those who opposed Mao's dictums remained the order of the day until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

Before he became the supreme leader of the Chinese party-state in 1949, Mao had posed as an advocate of democracy in many interviews with Western media. In a 1944 press conference with European and American press members, the Great Helmsman said, "China has many shortcomings, the most serious of which is the lack of democracy," adding, for his Western audiences, "The Chinese people need democracy... only then can a good country be constructed" ([Oriental Daily News](#), May 9, 2019). But he was telling opportunistic lies.[1]



*Image: CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping points to a memorial wall displaying revolutionary figures (including Mao) at the Jingganshan Revolutionary Martyrs Memorial Hall during a visit on February 2, 2016. Source: [Xinhua](#).*

## **Early Liberals Purged and Punished During the Maoist Era**

The CCP celebrates its centennial anniversary on July 1 this year. Over the past hundred years, there have been brave party members and intellectuals who thought that the CCP should pivot away from Stalinist totalitarianism and adopt at least some of the universal values of freedom of speech and rule of law that are enshrined in the United Nations Charter. The party's liberal tradition—which unfortunately never became its mainstream opinion—began with its co-founder, Chen Duxiu (陈独秀, 1879-1942), who served as the CCP's first General Secretary and was kicked out of the party in 1929, advocated freedom and democracy while being a confirmed Marxist and later a Trotskyite. Chen noted in 1940 that “proletariat democracy... like bourgeois democracy, requires that all citizens possess the freedom of assembly, [freedom of] formation of associations, freedom of speech, publication and strikes” ([Chenduxiu.net](http://Chenduxiu.net), March 23, 2013).

During the period of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” that culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), most independently minded intellectuals were labeled “rightists” and a majority of these early dissidents were exiled to the barren Northeastern frontier or impoverished Xinjiang. The few liberals, including the students Lin Zhao (林昭, 1932-1969) and Zhang Zhixin (张志新, 1930-1975), who dared challenge Mao, were executed ([VOA Chinese](http://VOA.Chinese), October 7, 2019; [China Digital Times](http://China.Digital.Times), April 29, 2014).

Well-known writers, including the novelist Lao She 老舍 aka Shu Qingchun (舒庆春, 1899-1966), Deng Tuo (邓拓, 1912-1966) and Wu Han (吴晗 1909-1969) either committed suicide or died in prison ([163.com](http://163.com), April 30, 2020; [Eeo.com.cn](http://Eeo.com.cn), March 26, 2016). It was left to Deng Xiaoping (邓小平, 1904-1997) – and his first two designated successors, Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦, 1915-1989) and Zhao Ziyang (赵紫阳, 1919-2005) – to pick up the pieces after Mao's death in 1976.

## **Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up**

Deng, Hu and Zhao spearheaded the thought liberation movement, which can be summarized by the saying “practice is the sole criterion of truth.” It held that a policy can only be validated after successful experimentation ([Guangming Daily](http://Guangming.Daily), May 11, 1978). This ideological reform freed the nation from unthinkingly following the dictates of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. Deng's post-Mao political reforms included introducing village-level elections, the abolition of the personality cult, the establishment of a retirement and succession mechanism and the separation of party and government. The Great Architect of Reform further added that market mechanisms can be employed by both socialist and capitalist countries, thus opening the way for private and foreign-owned enterprises to play substantial roles in the economy ([Finance.sina.com](http://Finance.sina.com), May 6; [People's Daily](http://People's.Daily), December 10, 2014). Deng's successor Zhao, who served as Chinese Premier from 1980-1987 and CCP General Secretary from 1987-1989, was so impressed by the Western laissez-faire system that he frequently consulted with Western and overseas Chinese economists on capitalist economic practices ([ChinaFile](http://ChinaFile), August 18, 2016).

The Tiananmen Square incident marked the full-scale retrogression of Deng-style political liberalization, but even after he turned away from political reforms Deng was still keen to push through at least some market-oriented economic policies. These eventually facilitated China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, for which the top leaders at the time, then-president Jiang Zemin (江泽民, 1926- ) and then-premier Zhu Rongji (朱镕基, 1928- ) could take some credit. Many intellectuals raised the perhaps excessively sanguine scenario that China's "entry to the world" (入世, *ru shi*) would mean that the authoritarian country might pick up not just Western-style financial norms but also adopt global values in rule-based governance ([Radio Free Asia](#), July 17, 2018; [China News Service](#), December 11, 2006). According to Qin Benli (钦本立, 1918-1991), chief editor of the *World Economic Herald* (世界经济导报, *shijie jingji daobao*)—an avant-garde paper shut down in 1989—one of the key goals of China's modernization was acquiring "membership in the world" (球籍, *qiu ji*): global recognition for abiding by international yardsticks. Relatively liberal cadres and academics were optimistic that following China's ascension to the WTO, its adoption of global standards in governance would speed up economic and perhaps also political reforms ([Commonwealth Magazine](#), June 28, 2012).

Under the administration of Hu Jintao (胡锦涛, 1942- ), who served as CCP General Secretary from 2002-2012, China in general became more liberal than under his predecessor, Jiang Zemin (江泽民, 1926- ). Hu largely followed the economic policy of opening up that had been laid down by economic tsar Zhu Rongji. In the political arena, Hu initiated so-called "intra-party democracy," implementing reforms that allowed grassroots officials to be picked partly through public recommendation; introduced the direct election of the party secretaries of towns and rural townships; and *cha'e* elections (差额选举, *cha'e xuanze*) for the CCP Central Committee, which meant that the number of candidates for the top-ruling body would exceed the available positions ([China Daily](#), October 17, 2007; [China Brief](#), May 9, 2007). The Peking University political scientist Yu Keping (俞可平) expressed the wish that incremental liberalization measures within the CCP would gradually trickle down to non-party areas ([Xinhua](#), September 15, 2009; [Econstor.eu](#), December 2008; [CCTV.com](#), December 29, 2007). Another liberalization pushed forward by Hu allowed the first generation of Chinese NGOs some liberty to operate without direct party supervision, benefiting civil society.[2]

Premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝, 1942-), a reform-minded protégé of Zhu's, even went so far as to give theoretical support to China's adoption of the UN Charter on Human Rights. In a much-noted article run by the Xinhua news agency in 2007, Wen wrote that "science, democracy, legal system, freedom and human rights are... common values pursued by mankind" ([Xinhua](#), February 26, 2007). He later told Western media that "we need to build an independent and just judicial system" and that "it is necessary for the government to accept oversight by the news media and other parties" ([CNN](#), September 28, 2008).

But the process of liberalization also suffered setbacks, as party leaders in the early 21st century continued to prioritize maintaining control and stability. The Hu-Wen administration was also responsible for crushing the Charter 08 movement, initiated by the late Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo (刘晓波, 1955-2017) and

300 or so other leading intellectuals. Modeled on the Charter 77 movement in Soviet-ruled Czechoslovakia, Charter 08 called on the party to allow the freedom of expression, assembly and religion and to establish an independent judiciary. It was eventually signed by more than 10,000 people both in China and overseas. Liu was arrested in 2009 on charges of subversion and given a jail term of 11 years. He eventually died in prison in 2017, mainly due to lack of treatment of his late-stage liver cancer ([BBC Chinese](#), July 13, 2017; [SCMP](#), July 13, 2017).

### **Xi Jinping's Maoist Restoration**

All reforms effectively ground to a halt under the crypto-Maoist Xi Jinping (习近平, 1953-), who became CCP General Secretary in 2012 and has subsequently harkened back to many of the Great Helmsman's ideological, political and economic policies. Xi has repeated Hu's mantra that: "What we possessed in the past doesn't necessarily belong to us now; what we possess now may not be ours forever" ([CCPS.Gov.cn](#), December 23, 2018)—emphasizing the CCP's foremost need to hold on to the total monopoly of power.

Despite the tight control that Xi, nicknamed "Chairman of Everything," exercises on the party-state-military apparatus, some political and intellectual leaders still support Deng-style economic and political liberalization. At least in the first few years of his premiership, Li Keqiang (李克强, 1955- ), who became head of the State Council in 2013, underscored the imperative of curtailing government intervention and giving broader leeway to market forces. "We must have the determination of a brave soldier [who is not afraid to] cut off his own arm," said Li, in reference to curtailing bureaucratic interference in market forces. The premier added that government intervention must be minimized so as to "speed up the healthy development of the economy and society and lessen the burden of the government" ([BBC Chinese](#), October 16, 2015; [People's Daily](#), April 5, 2013).

The retired international relations professor and Chinese expert on U.S. studies Zi Zhongyun (资中筠, 1930-) has argued that increased competition with the West might be a good thing, leading the government to "eventually restore its essence of serving the people, not maintaining a monopoly." Zi, who once served as Mao's interpreter, also noted that China had much to learn from the U.S., particularly in the fields of education, medical care and elderly care. "If American-style hospitals flourished in China, China's blood-sucking medical model would be banished," and "If American-style education took root in China, Chinese students need not go abroad to enjoy advanced pedagogical concepts." She added that a quasi-capitalist economic system would mean lower interest rates, greater potential growth for the private sector and a flowering of a more developed consumer society ([Human Rights in China](#), June 25, 2018).

Cai Xia (蔡霞, 1952-), a Chinese dissident and former politics professor at the Central Party School (CPS), was even bolder in criticizing the backsliding of reforms. She called the CCP a "political zombie" and even suggested that Xi should be replaced as a first step to saving the party from itself. "If political reform does not go forward, economic reform cannot make any progress," she said, echoing an earlier statement by

ex-Premier Wen. Cai called for making progress in elections, expansion of the freedom of expression and enhancement of media supervision of the party-state apparatus. However, her criticisms raised enough ire that she was stripped of her party membership in August 2020. Cai currently lives in exile in the United States. ([BBC Chinese](#), August 20, 2020; [Global Times](#), August 20, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

As the party prepares to celebrate its centenary, supreme leader Xi has announced that China has entered a “new phase of socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The propaganda machinery has indicated that Xi Jinping Thought will be the guiding spirit on issues ranging from finance and social welfare to foreign and military policy. According to Xi, the “Chinese path” is more suitable than the “Western model” for the world’s future development, and he has also put forth an international vision of a “community of common destiny for mankind” led by greater Chinese leadership in the global community. While much has been written about the “China model,”<sup>[3]</sup> it basically consists of hard authoritarianism, a police-state apparatus, party-state control of the bulk of the economy, and overt nationalism bordering on jingoism. The Xi administration has in particular relied on the self-serving manipulation of history to bolster the party’s legitimacy. The centenary celebration is important for the CCP leadership because the media has emphasized how China has successfully defied old and new imperialists – including the Western powers led by the U.S. since World War II – and in the meantime realized “the great renaissance of the Chinese nation” ([Xuexi.cn](#), May 17, 2021; [Xinhua](#), September 4, 2020). Grave aberrations including Mao’s Three Years of Famine, Deng’s June 4, 1989 massacre, and Xi’s digitally-enabled national system surveillance and repression—which in Xinjiang led to what has been termed crimes against humanity and genocide by an increasing number of Western countries—are topics rarely touched upon by the heavily censored state media.

For the past several years, President Xi has harped on the imperative of political stability and national security so as to avoid “black swan” events ([China Brief](#), February 20, 2019). The CCP’s tightening grip on civil society—reflected by its recent raising of jail terms even for Internet opinion leaders—betrays the party leadership’s intense fears that the world’s second largest economy and fast-rising global military power cannot rely on brute force alone to cow citizens into subservience. But it is also unlikely that Xi and his advisers will consider the well-meaning advice of liberal-leaning cadres and intellectuals since the CCP’s foundation that the way ahead should involve the embrace of true international values.

*Dr. Willy Wo-Lap Lam is a Senior Fellow at The Jamestown Foundation and a regular contributor to China Brief. He is an Adjunct Professor at the Center for China Studies, the History Department, and the Master’s Program in Global Political Economy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is the author of five books on China, including *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping* (2015). His latest book, *The Fight for China’s Future*, was released by Routledge Publishing in July 2019.*

**Notes**

[1] For a discussion of the pro-democracy promises made by the likes of Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhou Enlai, see Xiao Shu, *The harbingers of history: Solemn pledges made half a century ago*, Shantou: Shantou University Press, 1999.

[2] For a discussion of Hu Jintao's policy toward civil society groups and other NGOs, see Willy Lam, *The Fight for China's Future*, London: Routledge, 2020, pp. 12-15.

[3] Two commonly cited definitions of the "China model" do not preclude at least a modicum of democracy. For example, Daniel Bell argues that the model was "a combination of economic freedom and political oppression." Yet he added that the CCP authoritarianism was tempered with "democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top" (See Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, pp.179-180). Similarly, Suizheng Zhao, who defines the China Model as striking a balance "between a market-oriented economy and an authoritarian state," contended that the country's economy performed best "when China became less brutal and allowed greater personal and economic freedoms" (see Suizheng Zhao, "The China Model: Can it replace the Western model of modernization?" *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2010, pp.19:65).

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## **Military Political Work at the CCP's Centennial**

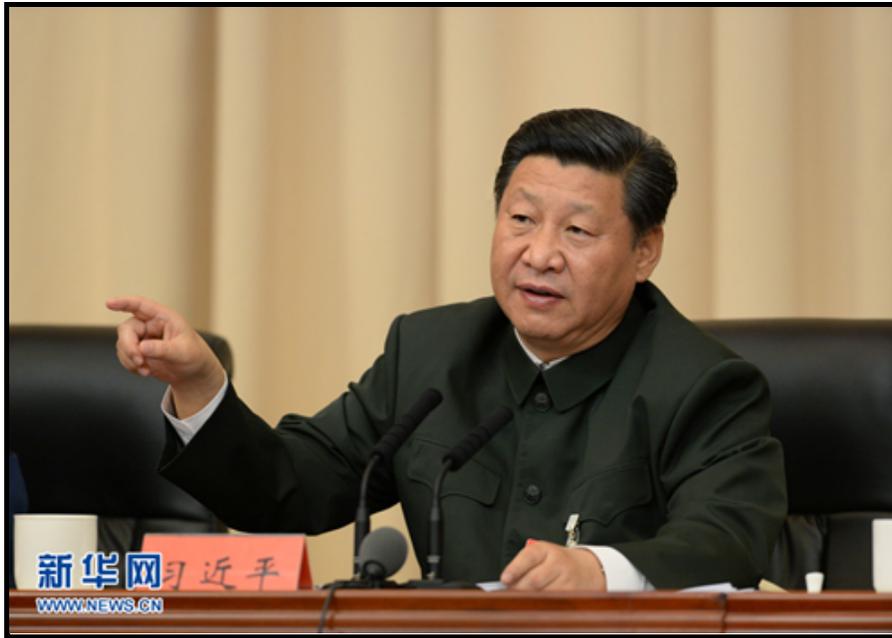
*By Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise*

### **Introduction**

The phrase “military political work” (军队政治工作, *jundui zhengzhi gongzuo*) is an overarching term that describes all the efforts and activities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) aimed at managing human capital and influencing the civilian environment in order to achieve the political and military objectives accorded to it by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).[1] Military political work focuses on the human dimensions of the PLA as an institution, the human dimensions of warfare, and civil-military relations in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It broadly includes:

- *Party functions* that help cement the relationship between the PLA and the party, such as establishing and directing party organizations in the PLA, conducting political values and ethics training for all PLA personnel, and enforcing party discipline.
- *Operational functions* that support the PLA as warfighters, such as handling military public affairs, conducting and supporting information operations, and defending against adversary intelligence or psychological warfare operations directed against enemy forces through cooptation, coercion, and other activities aimed at degrading the enemy’s “will to fight.
- *Administrative functions* necessary for day-to-day operations, such as personnel management, officer selection and professional military education.[2]

PLA approaches to military political work have shifted over time in response to political and military developments both within China and around the world. When reflecting on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, it is useful to examine how CCP thinking on how the nature and importance of political work has evolved over time, with an eye to seeing how it might continue to change in the new age of great power competition.



*Image: Harkening back to Mao, CCP General Secretary and CMC Chairman Xi Jinping gives a speech at the October 30, 2014 ‘New’ Gutian military political work conference held in Gutian, Fujian Province. Notably, this event, emphasizing the importance of party control over the military, took place amid a major anti-corruption campaign in the PLA. (Source: [Xinhua](#)).*

### **The Beginnings of Military Political Work**

The term “political work” was first used by Zhou Enlai (周恩来) at a Whampoa Military Academy speech in 1925, called, “Political Work in the Military” (军队中的政治工作, *jundui zhong de zhengzhi gongzuo*) It was first used by Mao in an essay on “Military Issues” (军事问题, *junshi wenti*), authored in 1928.[3] When discussing the origins of PLA political work, Chinese authors often point to the 1929 Gutian Conference (古田会议, *gutian huiyi*), which formally articulated the principles of building a military under the leadership of the Communist Party of China.[4] It was at Gutian that Mao wrote the resolution on “Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party” ([关于纠正党内的错误思想], *guanyu jiuzheng dangnei de cuowu sixiang*) naming a series of troubling attitudes and behaviors that had emerged among the ranks of the Red Army, arguing that these mistakes would undermine military progress, and laying out a series of steps that the party leadership would take to address these problems. The steps to correct “errors” in thinking among the ranks included increased political education at all levels of the military, greater involvement of party officials in military decision-making, more frequent party meetings at all levels, clarifying and formalizing the roles and responsibilities of party officials and party organs within the military, and writing up a set of regulations that clearly defined the relationship between the military and the party ([Marxists.org](#), accessed June 15).[5]

## **Military Political Work Regulations**

Shortly after Gutian, the “Draft Interim Regulations on the Political Work of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army” ([中国工农红军政治工作暂行条例草案], *zhongguo gongnong hongjun zhengzhi gongzuo zhanxing tiaoli cao'an*) was first formulated. It served both as party and internal military regulations that provided overarching guidance on the conduct of political work in the Chinese military. The regulations clarify the roles and responsibilities of CCP positions within the military and provide standardized guidance on the management of all human-centric tasks within the PLA.

Originally short on detail, CCP guidance on the conduct of political work expanded over time, and the regulations have been revised at least ten times. Known versions of Chinese military political work regulations include:

- 1930: “Draft Interim Regulations on the Political Work of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army” [中国工农红军政治工作暂行条例草案]
- 1938: “Draft Interim Regulations on the Political Work of the 18th Group Army” [第十八集团军政治工作暂行条例草案]
- 1942: “Draft Political Work Regulations of the Eighth Route Army” [八路军政治工作条例草案]
- 1954: “Political Work Regulations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army” [中国人民解放军政治工作条例]
- “Newly Revised ‘Political Work Regulations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army’” (新修订的 [军队会政治工作条例], hereafter referred to as the “PLA Political Work Regulations”), promulgated in: 1963, 1978, 1991, 1995, 2003, 2010, and 2020 ([Xinhua](#), September 13, 2010; [Xinhua](#), February 19).

Overall, changes to CCP guidance on military political work have been driven by a need to respond to domestic political developments, support the needs of PLA modernization, or adapt to the changing nature of modern warfare. Over time, the PLA Political Work Regulations have sought to do the following.

### **1. Reaffirm the Party's Absolute Leadership Over the Military**

First and foremost, each iteration of Chinese military political work regulations has reaffirmed the military's subservience to the party. The PLA has historically held a tension between the need to develop the specialized skills of a professional military and the need to ensure that the military sees itself as an armed body charged with carrying out the political tasks of CCP. In 1929, Mao warned against the dangers of allowing military leaders to prioritize military accomplishments over political competencies: “If allowed to develop.... it would be to take the path of warlordism like the Kuomintang army” ([Marxists.org](#), accessed June 15).

The establishment of party preeminence over the military at Gutian was regarded as a critical development. According to one PRC scholar, it represented “the military’s transformation from a violent tool for protecting the interests of a few people to defending the fundamental interests of the majority of the people” ([Study Times](#), May 30). Affirmation of party control over the military is consistently listed as one of the first principles of any revision to military political work regulations or any discussion of political work in the PLA.[6]

## **2. Establish Systems and Promote Increased Standardization Over Time**

Increased standardization is a common refrain when describing the rationale for adjusting political work regulations, with each iteration attempting to standardize the roles and responsibilities of the key political work “systems” ([Xinhua](#), February 19; [Study Times](#), May 30).

Three main “systems” are charged with the execution of political work in the PLA. These are the party committee system (党委制, *dang wei zhi*), which establishes a mechanism for ensuring that all decisions are made under the unified collective leadership of the party; the political commissar system (政治委员制, *zhengzhi weiyuan zhi*), which establishes political commissars in specific units to exercise joint decision-making and dual leadership in partnership with the military commander; and the political organ system (政治机关制, *zhengzhi jiguan zhi*), which establishes specific organizations within units at the regimental level and above that are responsible for managing, organizing, and implementing political work. Their roles and responsibilities are laid out in the PLA Political Work Regulations and have changed over time.

For example, the role of PLA political commissar has not remained static. Party regulations have sometimes sought to solidify the role of the commissar in military decision-making—this was especially true during the early days of the PRC—and at other times to limit their authority and curb abuses. The latter applied particularly following the Cultural Revolution. The roles played by political commissars were clarified and adjusted in the revisions to the political work regulations in 1954, 1964, and 1978.[7]

The revision of political work regulations has at times lagged behind larger organizational military reforms. For example, the recently promulgated 2020 PLA Political Work Regulations described organization changes necessitated by the abolishment of the General Political Department almost half a decade earlier. Additionally, the 2020 regulations consolidated some political work supervision and inspection responsibilities and refined the duties of political officers and leaders of certain political organs in order to keep up with larger organizational changes taking place within the PLA ([Xinhua](#), February 19).

## **3. Emphasize the Decisive Role of the Human Dimension in Warfare**

Since its earliest days, the PLA has viewed the human dimensions of warfare as a key to achieving military superiority and frequently comment on this when discussing the value of military political work. A recent article published by the Joint Operations College of the National Defense University discussing the release of

the 2020 military political work regulations stated, “No matter how the form of war changes and how the style of combat is updated, the rule that people are the decisive factor for victory or defeat in war will not change” ([PLA Daily](#), June 9).

It is important to note that PLA authors do not portray the types of activities comprising “political work” as unique to the PLA. Rather, they see political work as an effort to imbue a set of tasks that all militaries must undertake with a purpose and approach that supports broader CCP objectives and philosophies. As one scholar described it, “Any military is comprised of people who deal with military activities and have the abilities to think and act on their own, thus there needs to be ideological and organizational work to ensure that these individuals cohesively form a whole entity.”[8]

#### **4. Promote Increased Combat Efficiency**

Each iteration of the PLA Political Work Regulations has asserted that the purpose of political work was to build a stronger military by increasing combat efficiency. The CCP asserted as early as 1930 that purpose of military political work was to strengthen combat efficiency.[9] Although approaches to key aspects of political work have changed over the years, the perceived relationship between successful political work and a more capable military has remained constant.

As the PLA has begun implementing the 2020 “newly revised” PLA Political Work Regulations, training materials describing the new regulations emphasize that one of the principles of the 2020 revision was, “to focus on the main responsibility and main business of preparing for war.” Public comments by the CMC Political Work Department state that “combat effectiveness,” should be the metric used for assessing political work efforts ([Xinhua](#), February 19).

Of note, PLA writings discussing the newly released outline on joint operations, “Chinese People’s Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Trial)” ([中国人民解放军联合作战纲要(试行)], *zhongguo renmin jiefangjun lianhe zuozhan gangyao (shixing)*) often discuss the importance of aligning political work reforms with reforms to military operational doctrine. Updating historic themes, current thinking in the PLA is that political work has the potential to serve as an enabler of integrated joint operations.[10]

#### **5. Respond to Changing Nature of Warfare & Incorporate Lessons Learned From Foreign Wars**

PLA perceptions of political work have also evolved in response to changes in the international security environment and the nature of warfare. One issue that has particularly shaped the PLA’s perception of modern warfare over the past 30 years is the role that the management of information and perceptions can play in military victory or defeat.

Since the days of the Chinese civil war, the CCP has been sensitive to the court of international public opinion and the need to manipulate it to achieve advantage. Starting in the 1990s, the PLA has demonstrated renewed interest in the role that information and perceptions—key areas for political work—play in conflict.

PLA thinkers drew many lessons from their observations of the U.S. Gulf War in 1991 and Iraq war in 2003. They assessed that the U.S. had set conditions for victory through the effective, coordinated employment of global media, international law, and other actions that they considered to be psychological warfare techniques, and predicted that these tools—media, law, and psychological warfare—would only increase in importance as the world became more dependent on information technology. PLA thinkers referred to these tools collectively as “the three warfares” (三种战法, *sanzhong zhanfa* or 三战, *sanzhan*) and sought ways to incorporate them into political work planning for future conflicts.[11] News and public opinion became seen as a “second battlefield.”[12] As one PLA expert wrote:

“It can be imagined that in future battlefields, our side, through legal war, can find the basis for launching an attack; build, through media war, an atmosphere for the illegitimacy of our adversaries; and directly dampen the morale of adversaries through psychological war.”[13]

This assessment informed the CCP and PLA’s decision to incorporate the “three warfares” into the 2003 iteration of the PLA Political Work Regulations. Since then, a virtual cottage industry in the military has sprung up seeking ways to improve understanding of the use of media, international law, and psychological warfare techniques in pursuit of strategic objectives, with an eye towards weakening the will of enemy troops, strengthening the morale of Chinese citizens, and gaining international support for PLA actions. Chinese thinking has increasingly recognized that “three warfares” activities require close coordination between military and state actors will likely be most effective prior to the start of a conflict. For this reason, there is increased civil-military integration in political work and a blurring of the divide between wartime and peace. One initial report suggest that new guidance on these activities is provided in the 2020 iteration of PLA Political Work Regulations, but few additional details are available to date ([Xinhua](#), February 19).

### **Conclusion: Implications for Great Power Competition**

Looking into the future, how is the PLA’s military political work likely to evolve in an age of great power competition? U.S. analysts and policymakers should be prepared for the following:

*Expect to compete with all elements of national power.* Military political work is a means to synchronize military activities with larger CCP efforts, and the most recent guidance on political work reportedly calls for increased civil-military integration ([Xinhua](#), February 19). We should expect to see a continued integration of civilian and military activities across a range of areas to include the information, economic, and scientific domains.[14] We should also expect to see a continued blurring of the divide between war and peace as

PRC leaders leverage all elements of national power to shape the international environment in support of national security objects.

*Anticipate intense competition in the “battle for the narrative.”* Much has been written about the PRC’s techniques and increasing capacity to shape the information environment in recent years.[15] As the U.S. and the PRC vie for influence around the world, one should expect to see more rapid and complex information campaigns that integrate military, civilian, traditional, and non-traditional media. Such campaigns could coordinate rhetorical statements with other military activities including exercises, PLA involvement with humanitarian assistance, or military diplomacy. China’s recent efforts to shape global narratives surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic may be a sign of what is to come in this arena.[16]

*Prepare for a competition in human capital.* Many in the PLA have described military political work as a source of strength or secret weapon. Despite the CCP’s focus on managing the human dimensions of warfare, few would dispute that the PLA lags behind the U.S. in the area of human capital.[17] One of the stated objectives of the 2020 revision to the PLA Political Work Regulations was to support the development of human capital in order to build a military that is better positioned to conduct joint operations. With this in mind, we can expect to see the CCP continue to prioritize PLA efforts to develop personnel equipped to meet the demands of modern warfare. For U.S. military leaders, the challenge will be to continue reinvesting in the force and ensure that we do not lose our comparative advantage.

*Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise is director of the China Studies Program at CNA. The views expressed are her own and do not reflect the position of CNA or any institution with which she is associated.*

## Notes

[1] Bellacqua, James & Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, *Examining the Functions and Missions of Political Work in the PLA*, Alexandria, VA, The CNA Corporation, December 2006. CIM D0014286.A1/Final.

[2] See: Li Yunzhi, “General Political Department,” *Chinese Military Encyclopedia* [中国军事百科全书], Beijing AMS Publishing House, 1997, pp. 398-400. See also: Bellacqua and Kivlehan-Wise, December 2006.

[3] See: Jiang Siyi, ed. *Political Work Dictionary (zhengzhi gongzuo dacidian; 政治工作大辞典)*, Beijing, Military Sciences Publishing House (*junshi kexue chubanshe; 军事科学出版社*), April 1991, pp. 51-102.

[4] Also known as the Gutian Congress or as the 9th Party Congress of the Fourth Army of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army (中国工农红军第四军第九次党代表大会). For examples, see: Zhang Mingcang (张明仓), “Historical Enlightenment of Building a Powerful People’s Liberation Army by a Centennial Party [百年大党建设强大人民军队的历史启示],” *Study Times*, May, 30 2021, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0530/c40531-32117130.html>; and Cheng Baoshan (程宝山), ed.,

*Fundamental Laws and Regulations of Military Political Work in the New Century and New Era—Study the Newly Revised ‘Regulations on Chinese PLA Political Work,’* [新世纪新阶段军队政治工作的根本法规—学习新修订颁布的《中国人民解放军政治工作条例》], Beijing: Academy of Military Science (AMS) Publishing House, May 2004, p. 5-17.

[5] The “errors” included the persistence of a “purely military viewpoint” which failed to recognize that “military affairs are only one means of accomplishing political tasks;” erroneous calls for “ultra-democracy” requiring that all decisions be made from the bottom up; disregard of organizational discipline; calls for “absolute egalitarianism” that attack any form of preferential treatment regardless of whether there is a military necessity; “subjectivism;” “individualism;” persistence of an “ideology of roving bands” and “the remnants of putschism.”

[6] For examples, see: Lin Zhangqing, “Regular Ideological Work,” in *Chinese Military Encyclopedia*, Beijing: AMS Publishing House, 1997, p. 148; Cheng Baoshan, ed., May 2004; Zhang Mingcang, May 30, 2021, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0530/c40531-32117130.html>; and An Sihan, ed., February 19, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/xue-xi/2021-02/19/content\\_9988500.htm](http://www.81.cn/xue-xi/2021-02/19/content_9988500.htm).

[7] Cheng Baoshan, ed., *Fundamental Laws and Regulations of Military Political Work in the New Century and New Era*, May 2004, p. 71-73.

[8] Cheng Baoshan, ed., *Fundamental Laws and Regulations of Military Political Work in the New Century and New Era*, May 2004, p 19.

[9] Cheng Baoshan, ed., *Fundamental Laws and Regulations of Military Political Work in the New Century and New Era*, May 2004, p 5.

[10] For more on this, see: David M. Finkelstein, “Initial Thoughts on the PLA’s New Joint Doctrine Gangyao” CNA, forthcoming.

[11] DuMont, Malia & Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, *PLA Political Work and the “Three Warfares”: A Preliminary Exploration*, Alexandria, VA, The CNA Corporation, December 2006. CIM D0014287.A1/Final.

[12] Cai Huifu et al, “Research into News and Public Opinion Warfare During the Iraq War,” *China Military Science*, August 20 2003, Issue No. 4, pp 28-34.

[13] Li Jian, Li Xuehong, and Bao Guojun, “Military Transformation With Chinese Characteristics Is Underway,” *China Youth Daily*, April 11, 2004.

[14] For more on China's efforts to leverage international and scientific engagements in pursuit of national security objectives, see: Tenyotkin, Rose, April Herlevi, et al, *Economic Statecraft: How China Legally Accesses Foreign Technologies to Build Military Capabilities*, CNA, Arlington VA, June 2020, DRM-2020-U-027240-1Rev, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/DRM-2020-U-027240-1Rev%20\(002\).pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2020-U-027240-1Rev%20(002).pdf).

[15] Some examples include: Holz, Heidi & Tony Miller, *China's Playbook for Shaping the Global Media Environment*, CNA, Arlington VA, February 2020 IRM-2020-U-024710-Final, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/pdf/IRM-2020-U-024710-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/pdf/IRM-2020-U-024710-Final.pdf) and Bachman, Elizabeth, *Black and White and Read All Over: China's Improving Foreign-Directed Media*, CNA, Arlington VA August 2020, DRM-2020-U-027331-1Rev, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/pdf/DRM-2020-U-027331-1Rev.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/pdf/DRM-2020-U-027331-1Rev.pdf).

[16] For more, see: Case, Josiah, *Telling China's COVID-19 Story Well: Beijing's Efforts to Control Information and Shape Public Narratives Regarding the 2020 Global Pandemic*, CNA, Arlington VA, December 2020, DRM-2020-U-028558-Final, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/DRM-2020-U-028558-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2020-U-028558-Final.pdf) .

[17] See: U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress*, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>, Finkelstein, David, *Get Ready for the Second Phase of Chinese Military Reform*, CNA, Arlington VA, January 2017, DOP-2017-U-014677-Final, [https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/PDF/DOP-2017-U-014677-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/PDF/DOP-2017-U-014677-Final.pdf) .

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## Globalizing Leninist Institutions: Trends in Overseas Party Building

By Daniel Koss

### Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Organization Department's initiatives to build an organizational infrastructure with global reach evoke China's revolutionary tradition, drawing lessons from history as the CCP prepares to celebrate its centennial this year. In the early 20th century, overseas party branches of both the Kuomintang (KMT) and the CCP supported the Chinese Revolution. We see KMT overseas headquarters in cities such as San Francisco as remnants of this era. The CCP also boasted international branches early on: a CCP Tokyo Cell (中共东京支部, *zhongdang dongjing zhibu*) was most active in the 1930s, and its precursor was created four months before the CCP itself.[1]

Under General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平), the CCP has re-discovered the potential of extraterritorial party-building, part of a larger trend to resuscitate ostensibly outdated recipes for party-state governance and control. After the “Leninist extinction” of the 1990s (to use a term by the political scientist Ken Jowitt), who could have imagined that a rising world power would use quintessentially Leninist party cells as building blocks to exert authority at home and abroad? Such institutional bricolage, defined as a deliberate, piecemeal, and continuous activity of remodelling an organization that draws resourcefully on a toolbox of ostensibly incompatible devices, including brand-new practices alongside ostensibly outmoded and temporarily neglected ones,[2] allows the CCP to harness the revolutionary potential inherent in Leninist organizing and deploy it to new ends for the modern era.

The multi-pronged enterprise of overseas party building has gained new momentum since 2016, when the National Work Conference on Party Building in SOEs (全国国有企业党的建设工作会议, *quanguo guoyou qiye dang de jianshe gongzuo huiyi*) triggered a wave of party building centered on Chinese companies. While public statements by General Secretary Xi did not explicitly call for extraterritorial initiatives, the term “overseas party building” (海外党建, *haiwai dangjian*) or its variant “extraterritorial party building” (境外党建, *jingwai dangjian*) were prioritized at that time.[3] One widely circulated article published in that year summarized a new consensus: “Companies investing abroad, both SOEs [State-Owned Enterprises] and private ones, certainly have party members among their workforce; and where there are party members, there should also be party organs” ([People's Daily Online](#), August 25, 2016). The call for party cells abroad contrasted with earlier practices of letting CCP members lapse their membership while away from the People's Republic of China (PRC).



*Image: Party branch members of Shenzhen Energy Suogu Power Plant and the Ghana Representative Office of the China-Africa Development Fund jointly organized activities to study the revised party constitution on June 23, 2018. Members retook the party oath against the backdrop of a slogan saying “Do not forget the original aspirations, Review the oath” (Source: [Sohu](#)).*

### **Adaptable Structures**

Overseas party networks are extraordinarily malleable, combining transient and permanent structures. Auditors from Beijing on overseas missions, such as inspectors visiting the UN Geneva headquarters or UNICEF field offices, set up temporary party cells (临时党支部, *linshi dang zhibu*) to facilitate their investigations, ceremoniously passing on the party flag to those cells ([People’s Daily Online](#), July 6, 2012). Overseas party cells are more lasting structures that include those set up on university campuses,[4] in SOEs and in private firms around the world. Overseas party committees are the most permanent form of the CCP’s overseas presence. The symbiosis of transient and permanent structures can be observed at Sinohydro (中国水电, *Zhongguo shui dian*), a state-owned hydropower engineering and construction company. In 2020, its Tanzania project had 26 party members among the 132 Chinese citizens (19.7%). A party cell was set up for this project with a planned lifespan of 42 months, which works closely with the more permanent overseas party committee of Sinohydro’s headquarters in Africa.[5] Applying lessons learned from the revolutionary turmoil prior to the Communist takeover in 1949, the robustness and maneuverability of the CCP’s network comes from anchoring transient cells to lasting organs.

Over time, the CCP’s party building has been notable for its steady innovation. Project-based party building (项目党建, *xiangmu dangjian*), which the party carries out on overseas construction sites, has gradually emerged over at least a decade. Although analyses from 2012 are skeptical about the party’s ability to mobilize overseas members and create a viable international network, the party’s long history gave reasons for at least some confidence.[6] Since then, project-based party building has become routine.

Yet the CCP did not stop there, inventing a new type of party-cell that deviates from the earlier principle that each party cell must be affiliated with one work unit. Joint party cells (联合党支部, *lianhe dang zhibu*), first created in Shanghai, now widespread throughout China and exported abroad, bring together party members from different workplaces based on geographic or sectoral proximity. This new form of organizing solves a series of problems: following the decline of the work unit system in the 1990s, many modern work units were too small and transient to warrant the creation of a party cell, especially since it takes time for new cells to internalize procedures and assert authority. More importantly, if all members of a party cell share the same employer, then that employer has more leverage over the cell. By contrast, joint party cells consisting of members working for different companies are more independent from their employers, which benefits party control.

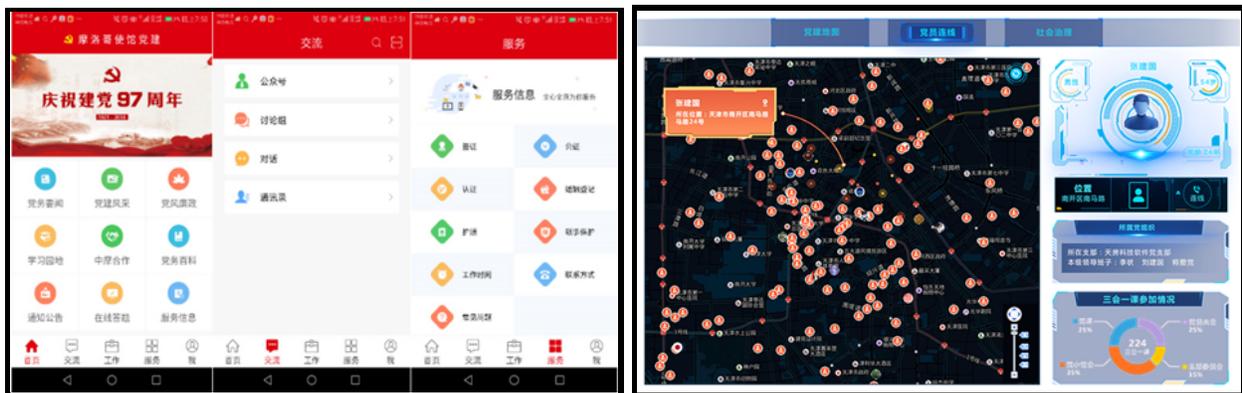
The flexibility of overseas party building is also reflected in country-specific differentiation in institutional design. There is no single global model for overseas party building, but instead multiple competing models involve distinct approaches to organizational setup, ideological training, and practical functions. One example, the “Angola model for extraterritorial party building” (境外党建的安哥拉模式, *jingwai dangjian de angela moshi*), is promoted by the state-owned China Harbor Engineering (中国港湾, *Zhongguo gangwan*). Since this SOE has the privilege of running a fully-fledged party committee in South Africa and employs most of the party members in Angola, it leads party building there. The Angola model combines the conventional approach of building party cells on large construction projects (支部建在项目上, *zhibu jianzai xiangmu shang*) with a joint party cell approach so as to incorporate party members who do not belong to the company.[7]

Different models of party building are usually developed by the same company. For example, a work committee in the international arm of Yunnan Energy Investment Group (云南能投, *Yunnan neng tou*), a provincial SOE operating in Southeast Asia, has 56 party members across six branches: two at the headquarters in Kunming, and one each in Beijing, Hong Kong, Laos, and Myanmar. While targeting countries as different as Singapore, Nepal, and Indonesia—the latter with traumatic memories of Chinese influence in the 1960s—for party building, the company developed a “Country-by-Country Manual for Extraterritorial Party Building,” realizing that one size does not fit all.[8]

### **Competing Hierarchies**

Overseas party organs in companies find themselves under competing authorities. In theory, China’s diplomatic missions carry responsibility for operations in their jurisdiction. Yet as state agencies, embassies have no formal authority over party organs—even the party cell within the embassy typically has no command over party branches in the embassy’s jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the Foreign Ministry creatively seeks influence over party cells: for example, in 2018 a delegation from the Foreign Ministry’s Department of North American and Oceanian Affairs visited the SOE China Harbor Engineering for an exchange on

overseas party building in politically difficult settings. Those with sway over overseas party organs within China Harbor Engineering participated, including leaders of the party committee (who are the overseas organs' superiors) and the workforce from the Division for the Relations Between the Party and the General Public (党群工作部, *dang qun gongzuo bu*), who interact with the overseas party organs on a regular basis ([China Harbor Engineering](#), March 22, 2018). The formal hierarchies ultimately continue up beyond the company to the PRC State Council State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), but SASAC largely delegates companies to handle overseas party building initiatives, presumably because of limited bandwidth.



*Images: Real-time tracking of party members. The front end of the embassy-based party app in Morocco (left) and the back end of a similar party app used in China (right). (Sources: [Vanguard Party Building](#) and [Tianjin Tianfang Technology](#).)*

Competition for control over party cells has also included a digital element. To keep close tabs on party cells in Chinese businesses throughout Morocco, the PRC embassy in Rabat advances digital innovation in the form of a cloud-based party-building app. Launched in 2018, the multi-function platform broadcasts information to party members in dozens of Morocco-based work units, provides bottom-up reporting channels and facilitates consular services ([Xinhua](#), July 2, 2018). Installed as an application on the mobile phones of CCP members, the party maintains a real-time connection to its rank and file. Based on analysis of similar apps, one would expect the back end of this app to provide visualizations of the party members' movements on a map (see above).[9] Thus the embassy not only builds a reputation of diligently following Xi Jinping's call for innovative party-building, but also gains a foothold in Chinese companies based in Morocco. Paralleling such embassy initiatives, in 2019 SASAC worked with the developer of the Morocco party-building app to buy a program allowing real-time access to information about SOE party members, meeting information and communication ([Rxianfeng.com](#), accessed June 11). Taking the perspective of employees on the ground, these competing digital initiatives by the embassy and by SASAC result in a more detailed and robust party-state presence in workplaces. Not so long before, the party's relationship with its members

abroad could have been better described by the common saying “heaven is high and the emperor is far away.”

## **Public Relations**

Depending on the permissiveness of local authorities, the CCP pushes the envelope more in some countries than in others, including when it comes to questions of publicity. Party building is carried out in the open in some countries but concealed in others. Tactics range from covert underground organizing to selective advertising of overseas party building activities. Contrasting with secretive approaches in OECD countries, activities on the African continent tend to be more public.[10] For example, the party cell of a Sino-Africa Joint Research Center in Kenya invited a senior propaganda official for a joint event with party officials of Kenya’s ruling Jubilee Party in early 2018. In attendance were party official representing local chapters from throughout the country ([Sinafrica.cas.cn](http://Sinafrica.cas.cn), January 30, 2018). The primary goal of making party building activities public may be to normalize the presence of the CCP, although the event with the Jubilee Party could also indicate a vision to advertise the party’s grassroots activities as part of the China model, to be emulated by Africa’s governing parties.

The rhetoric on overseas party building consistently emphasizes activity in countries along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[11] But this by no means implies that party building is limited to BRI countries. Companies engage in party building around the globe, pursuing the goal of full coverage (全覆盖, *quan fūgai*), so that all party members living abroad are affiliated with overseas CCP organs. In practice, companies set up cells in all countries where they have enough party members to do so and otherwise create regional party cells. The Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC) has 200 party members in 50 countries covered by 15 party cells, including national ones in the UAE and Zambia as well as continental ones for the rest of Africa and for Europe ([Cannews.com.cn](http://Cannews.com.cn), January 2, 2018). Companies involved in the BRI in general face greater scrutiny from the party-state. The BRI could also reinforce the party’s message to its members: that their presence abroad serves a higher cause. Party members find new meaning in their work, learning to think of it as a contribution to a national project. After joining party members around the world to simultaneously watch the opening of the 19th Party Congress at 4 AM local time in Egypt, one party member at AVIC proclaimed: “Work overseas is part of the BRI and the great national rejuvenation -- missions entrusted to us by the country” ([Cannews.com.cn](http://Cannews.com.cn), January 2, 2018). The BRI thus helps to instill in party members the ethos of combat in the service of a grand vision, which traditionally has been central to Leninist organizing.

## **Conclusion**

It is too early to tell whether overseas party cells will be an effective tool to grow the PRC’s global influence, to give Chinese firms an additional competitive advantage, or to deal with international challenges to the party’s authority. One does not have to agree with the sociologist Philip Selznick’s claim, made half a century ago, that Leninist party networks amount to a potent organizational weapon. Still, the increasingly

international presence of a political organization that has cut its teeth in the Chinese revolution and mastered considerable crises at home invites curiosity. The party certainly deploys considerable resources to build a tight global network, characterized by purposeful complexity, nimble adaptability, and innovation driven by stiff competition. It is quite a spectacle to see Leninist structures from early 20th century Russia perform a formidable comeback in the 21st century, as the CCP becomes a complex and global organism adroitly incorporating new technologies into tried and tested practices.

*Daniel Koss is a research scholar and lecturer at Harvard's Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations. He works on political parties and their history, with regional expertise in East Asia. His first book was published in 2018 and is entitled *Where the Party Rules: The Rank and File of China's Communist State*.*

## Notes

[1] Xu Zhimin (徐志民), "On the CCP Tokyo Branch (中共东京支部考论)," in Chinese Social Science [中国社会科学], vol. 5, May 2019, 186-203, [http://www.cssn.cn/index/index\\_focus/202008/t20200827\\_5174977.shtml](http://www.cssn.cn/index/index_focus/202008/t20200827_5174977.shtml).

[2] Daniel Koss, "Party-Building as Institutional Bricolage: Asserting Authority at the Business Frontier," *China Quarterly* (forthcoming).

[3] The term made its first appearance in *People's Daily* on 22 October 2009 (p.8), but was not used again until June 12, 2017, in an article about party building by the Bank of Communications ([People's Daily Online](#), June 12, 2017).

[4] Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "The Chinese Communist Party Is Setting Up Cells at Universities Across America," *Foreign Policy*, April 18, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/18/the-chinese-communist-party-is-setting-up-cells-at-universities-across-america-china-students-beijing-surveillance/>.

[5] Xiong Yuwei (熊玉位), "On Party Building by the Overseas Project Departments of National SOEs, (央企海外项目部党建工作研究与思考)," *Dangjian Gongzuo*, vol. 10, 2020, pp.40-42.

[6] Chen Liexiong (陈烈雄), "Strengthening Party Building in Overseas Projects: Need and Method (加强海外项目党建的必要性和途径)," *Shijie Youse shu*, vol. 10, 2012, pp.33-34.

[7] Liang Tao (梁涛), "The Angola model for extraterritorial party building by SOEs (国有企业境外党建的安哥拉模式)," *Qiye Dangjian* 2020/11, pp.100-101.

[8] Yunnan Provincial Energy Investment, [http://www.cnyeig.com/gggs/201901/t20190126\\_43631.html](http://www.cnyeig.com/gggs/201901/t20190126_43631.html), accessed May 2021.

[9] Tianjin Tianfang Technology (company), <https://www.dangjianwang.com>, accessed May 2021.

[10] Zheng Xuexuan (郑学选), "Reinforcing party building in SOEs under deepening reform (全面深化改革背景下加强国有企业党的建设研究)," PhD diss., Wuhan University, p.132. The author does not specify which countries need secrecy, only the continents where party building can be carried out in the open.

[11] For more on party building and the BRI, see: Yang Yu (杨彧), "Overseas Party Building—the Motivation for Building 'One Belt One Road,' (海外党建—'一带一路'建设的强大动力)" People's Daily Online, August 25, 2016, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0825/c117092-28666127.html>.

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## Post-Reform Developments in Village and Neighborhood Party Building

By Harry He

### Introduction

The Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) has repeatedly mentioned local governance capacity when reflecting on China's successful management of the Covid-19 pandemic, crediting the active participation of grassroots organizations in the public health response and stressing the need to solidify the foundations of governance in neighborhoods and villages ([People's Daily](#), March 27, 2020; [Xinhua News](#), March 31, 2020). More broadly, the party-state's interests in local governance reform have been a key driver of China's urban and rural policies in the post-reform era.

As changing economic, social, and political landscapes brought by the Reform and Opening campaign presented new governance challenges for central authorities, the party-state has sought to improve public service and encourage greater democracy and self-governance at the local level. Some examples of this include institutionalizing village elections and legalizing homeowners' associations. At the same time, the fundamental principle of party leadership has not been challenged, and under Xi the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has directed greater attention to grassroots party building.



*Image: A young neighborhood committee worker in Wuhan, Hubei on February 23, 2020. The CCP has worked to expand and improve its grassroots governance, privileging more professionalized and younger community workers. (Source: [Sixth Tone](#)).*

**Democracy and Diversity: Local Governance with Chinese Characteristics**

The past four decades of rapid transformation revealed many inefficiencies and weaknesses in China's governance capacity, from incompetent officials to the over-bureaucratization of government organs. Changing social and political landscapes brought by economic reform catalyzed the development of a new structure of local governance, and traditional mechanisms of mobilization of control were deemed outdated and abandoned.

The abolition of people's communes in the early-1980s decollectivized agriculture ([State Council](#), October 12, 1983). Subsequent rural reforms empowered farmers to become independent of village authorities and participate in the market economy. Village officials who once held immense power lost much of their privileges and respect. Demographic changes further weakened state and party authority in rural areas: as millions of young people left home for opportunities in coastal cities, Chinese villages, especially those located in western China, were effectively deprived of their working age population, and leadership quality suffered as a result.

In urban areas, marketization also weakened the party-state's control over people by gradually dismantling the work unit (单位, *danwei*) system throughout the 1980s and 1990s. China revitalized resident committees (居民委员会, *jumin weiyuanhui*) in 1989 and introduced *shequ* (社区), or communities, as the basic unit of urban governance in the early 2000s ([National People's Congress](#), December 26, 1989). Although *shequ* replicated various functions once fulfilled by work units, resident committees lacked the capacity and legitimacy to institute the same level of control. The rise of commercial housing and greater geographic mobility also reshaped China's social fabric, transforming urban communities from "societies without strangers" to "societies of strangers."<sup>[1]</sup> For most citizens, place attachment to their new *shequ* remains low and neighborhood authority has devolved from being a powerful influence to becoming almost negligible.<sup>[2]</sup>

In response to this decay in local governance capacity, the Chinese state implemented a series of reforms encouraging self-governance and non-government solutions. In 1998, the National People's Congress adopted the "Organic Law of Village Committees" ([村民委员会组织法], *cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhi fa*), setting rules and regulations for self-governance, self-education, and direct election in Chinese villages ([National People's Congress](#), November 4, 1998). Under the new framework, villagers practice self-governance by electing village committees (村民委员会, *cumin weiyuanhui*) that consist of three to seven members. Driven by the imperative of economic growth, development has replaced politics as the main driving force for rural affairs. Although wealthy individuals do not directly challenge government or party authority, they command great respect among fellow farmers and frequently outperform party cadres and individuals with political capital in village elections.<sup>[3]</sup>

State influence has similarly diminished in urban neighborhoods with the rise of private governance and self-governance. The introduction of private management companies (物业管理公司, *wuye guanli gongsi*)

in 1994 ([Ministry of Construction](#), March 23, 1994) and the legalization of resident-elected homeowners' associations (业主委员会, *yezhu weiyuanhui*) in 2003 ([State Council](#), 2003) began a new form of hybrid governance in which different interest groups compete. The central government also encouraged the establishment and empowerment of social organizations (社会组织, *shehui zuzhi*) to facilitate the separation between state and society (政社分开, *shezheng fenkai*) and combat the over-bureaucratization of resident committees ([People's Daily](#), November 15, 2013). These organizations provide platforms for self-governance and channels for constructive interaction between the government, the market, and individual citizens.

Xi has recently called for reviving the “Fengqiao experience” (枫桥经验, *fengqiao jingyan*), a Mao-era relic that mobilized the masses to carry out class struggle and rectify “reactionary elements” (四类分子, *silei fenzi*) in society ([China Media Project](#), April 16).[4] Xi has reinterpreted this experiment as a movement that pioneers grassroots self-governance and resolving conflicts locally. He first became a strong advocate for the modern application of the “Fengqiao experience” during his tenure as provincial leader in Zhejiang. More recently, Xi has promoted the model as a template for grassroots governance, stressing deeper coordination among different local organizations and mass mobilization to ensure greater stability ([Qiushi](#), March 2).

### **Activating the Red Engine: Grassroots Governance Under Party Leadership**

Although local governance reforms dismantled traditional mechanisms through which the central government exerted direct and omnipresent control over its citizens, the principle of party-state leadership was never challenged or neglected. Grassroots organizations—from village committees to homeowners' associations—were placed under the leadership, guidance, and supervision of village party branches (村党支部, *cun dangzhibu*) or resident committees ([State Council](#), October 28, 2010). Even non-government organizations not subject to direct state control are hardly independent, because the CCP has incorporated many social organizations into its network by mobilizing party members and financing local party branches or joint study groups. While the CCP has always emphasized grassroots party building, party penetration at the local level has become more intense and conspicuous under Xi's leadership.[5] As Xi has emphasized absolute loyalty to the party from the military and the media, he has also called grassroots party organs the “cornerstone of the CCP” ([People's Daily](#), March 11, 2013; [Guancha](#), February 19, 2016; [Huanqiu](#), August 15, 2020).

Although the party faces similar challenges and issues in rural villages and urban neighborhoods, it has pursued different strategies owing to social, demographic, and organizational differences. In rural areas, the CCP has identified local officials as the main cause of inefficiencies in grassroots party organs. As urbanization drained young talents away from villages, rural party committees and branches became weak or disorganized under the leadership of loyal but often-uneducated senior party members. To revitalize its village party organs, China has commenced a series of initiatives since the mid-2000s to send talents down to the grassroots.

In 2008, as a key component of its “building a new socialist countryside” (社会主义新农村建设, *shehuizhuyi xinnongcun jianshe*) campaign, the central government adopted the “college graduate village officials” (大学生村官, *daxuesheng cunquan*) initiative after more than a decade of experimentation by several provinces. Under this program, the state hired a large number of university graduates each year and assigned them to serve as village officials—either as village party secretaries for party and youth league members or as assistants to the chair of village committees ([Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security](#), April 9, 2009). In 2012, the government published another document on strengthening the “college graduate village officials” (大学生村官, *daxuesheng cunquan*) program. The new guideline set ambitious goals of having at least two university graduates serving as officials in a township, emphasized a preference for party members with leadership experience, and laid out more rigorous selection criteria ([People’s Daily](#), August 17, 2012). Although designed as a policy to spur economic growth in impoverished villages by introducing talents, technology, and capital, the program also directly strengthened party leadership in rural areas. Since its inception, party and youth league members have accounted for more than 90 percent of the program cohort each year and usually occupy more important and influential positions than their counterparts with no political affiliation.[6] As a result, the “college graduate village officials” program has both strengthened the governance capacity of local party organs and solidified the party’s leadership in rural affairs.

In addition to recruiting talents directly from universities, the party-state has also established “targeted partnership” (定点帮扶, *dingdian bangfu*) channels through which government departments (机关单位, *jiguan danwei*), affiliated public institutes (事业单位, *shiyed danwei*) and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are paired with impoverished villages to assist their development. The first group of partnerships was established in 1995. In the beginning work units retained significant autonomy to determine the nature of their partnerships. However, since 2015 the central government has incorporated the “targeted partnership” program as a major component of Xi’s “targeted poverty alleviation” (精准扶贫, *jingzhun fupin*) campaign. New policy guidelines have set specific targets for annual assessment (考核, *kaoh*) and demanded that each work unit appoint young, competent cadres as party secretaries for partnered villages ([State Council](#), November 23, 2016).

In contrast, the major challenge confronting urban party organs is not the scarcity of well-educated party members, but instead weak organizational structures with communities and neighborhoods. Traditionally, neighborhood party committees have had little *de facto* command over party members within their jurisdiction, as most urban residents prioritize their workplace over their neighborhoods. Party branches in many newly established social organizations are also either nonexistent or inactive. Work units have also expanded their partnership with urban neighborhoods, albeit on a more *ad hoc* and temporary basis than what has been seen in rural areas. For example, many government agencies and public institutes assigned their employees to assist resident committees and direct grassroots party branches as volunteers during the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic.[7]

To strengthen the party's organizational leadership, the CCP under Xi's leadership has also utilized the vertically integrated grid-style management (网格化管理, *wanggehua guanli*). In 2015, China rolled out a nationwide grid system to complement the community-driven model of governance ([Sixth Tone](#), June 1, 2018). The government divided urban communities into more precise units that, combined with increasingly sophisticated digital surveillance tools, have grown to form an all-encompassing surveillance grid. More importantly, this new model of governance has provided an ideal platform for grassroots party building. Under the call to “build party branches on the grid” (支部建在网格上, *zhibu jianzai wanggeshang*), many neighborhood party committees have instituted a three-tiered hierarchy consisting of neighborhood party committees, grid party branches, and building party study groups.

By establishing permanent and active party organs within each grid, the CCP strengthened its control of all party members. In the earlier community-driven model, party members could remain invisible within large neighborhood party committees that lacked supervision mechanisms. In contrast, the grid system has refined the party's increasing organization, monitoring, and supervision capabilities. With this model, the party has effectively mobilized inactive members—also known as “pocket party members” (口袋党员, *koudai dangyuan*)—to participate in party-building activities and government campaigns.

Under Xi's leadership, the CCP has also emphasized horizontal party building in new social organizations. While recognizing the benefits of encouraging non-government solutions to address government bureaucratic inefficiencies, the party-state has also sought to guard against chaos and instability by increasing its control. From the official perspective, conflicts between property management companies and homeowners' associations as well as new social organizations' lack of resources and experience are threats to community harmony. While encouraging diverse non-government solutions to such problems, the CCP has also demanded that new social organizations form party branches and study groups under the direct leadership of neighborhood or street-level party committees. Many cities have taken this order one step further, building “red management companies” and “red homeowners' associations” where party members occupy leadership positions and party-building activities are prioritized ([The Paper](#), March 30, 2021; [The Paper](#), July 7, 2017). These experiments have received recognition from the central government as an exemplary model of local governance under party leadership ([Ministry of Civil Affairs](#), June 18, 2020).

Grassroot party building in China has thus taken on different forms in villages and urban neighborhoods, which prioritized focusing on governance capacity and organizational structure, respectively. These different approaches reveal a persistent rural-urban policy divide in China, but ultimately serve the same goal of strengthening and reaffirming absolute party leadership under the new rhetoric of “party building leadership” (党建引领, *dangjian yinling*). The new slogan, which entered common usage around 2018, not only demands absolute party leadership in all activities—ranging from poverty alleviation to garbage classification—but also connects these campaigns under the broader umbrella of party building. It affirms that

party organs should and must expand to all corners of society and that party leadership should start from the bottom up.

### **Conclusion**

Under Xi's leadership, China has achieved unprecedented achievements in local governance and continues to demonstrate the advantage of its political system, according to official accounts ([Xinhua News](#), September 19, 2019; [People's Daily](#), February 22, 2020). Within the “party building leadership” formula, the CCP has determined that organizations cannot thrive without active party branches; self-governance initiatives cannot succeed without party members spearheading those efforts; and social campaigns cannot bear fruit without party leadership and intervention. By improving its grassroots governance capacity, the CCP is legitimizing its claim that harmony, stability, and development cannot exist without party leadership. The space left in local governance by the withdrawal of the state has thus been filled by deeper party penetration masked as a genuine expansion of civil society.

*Harry He is an MA Candidate in Asian Studies at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. His research interests include China's local governance issues, state-society relations, and US-Japan-China trilateral relations.*

### **Notes**

[1] Many Chinese scholars have used the two concepts to describe transitions in Chinese society. See 燕继荣 (Yan Jirong), “社区治理与社会资本投资——中国社区治理创新理论解释 (Neighborhood Governance and Investment in Social Capital—New Theoretical Explanation of Innovation on China's Neighborhood Governance),” *Tianjin Social Sciences* 30, no. 3 (2010): 59-64; 李汉林 (Li Hanlin), “变迁中的中国单位制度 回顾中的思考 (China's *Danwei* System in Transition: A Reflection),” *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 28, no. 3 (2008): 31-40.

[2] Conclusion based on surveys and interviews conducted by the author with resident committee staff and urban residents between 2019 and 2021.

[3] For research on the “wealthy individuals running the village” (富人治村, *furen zhicun*) phenomenon prevalent in China, see 裘斌 (Qiu Bin), 先富能人治村视域中的村民公共参与 (*Villager Participation from the Perspective of Wealthy Talents Running the Village*) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2014); 贺雪峰 (He Xuefeng), “论富人治村——以浙江奉化调查为讨论基础 (On Wealthy Individuals Running the Village—Discussion Based on Research in Fenghua, Zhejiang),” *Social Science Research* 33, no. 2 (2011): 111-119.

[4] Reactionary elements refer to four groups of individuals including landlords, wealthy peasants, counterrevolutionaries and evildoers.

[5] See Gang Tian and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, “Ideological Education and Practical Training at a County Party School: Shaping Local Governance in Contemporary China,” *The China Journal* 85 (2021): 1-25. The trend is also reflected in a sharp increase in scholarly attention on grassroots party building in China. According to data collected by the author on CNKI, the number of published articles on “grassroots party building” (基层党建, *jiceng dangjian*) increased gradually from less than 200 to around 1,300 between 2004 and 2012, remained relatively constant between 2012 and 2016, and has expanded rapidly since 2016, reaching 3,359 articles in 2019.

[6] Annual reports published by the China Association for the Promotion of Village Development (*zhongguo cunshe fazhan cujinhui* 中国村社发展促进会) record breakdowns of college graduate village officials by indexes, including political affiliation.

[7] Conclusion drawn from surveys and interviews conducted by the author with resident committee staff and volunteers sent by local governments during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

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