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## **Nobody Cares About the Party's Recommended Readings**

*By Arran Hope*



Xi Jinping reads a book. (Source: [CCTV](#))

### **Executive Summary:**

- The Propaganda Department's top books from 2024 highlight those by Xi Jinping, as well as ones focused on military themes, Party history, and China's place in the world.
- This official book list has virtually no overlap with similar lists on platforms like Douban or WeChat, and minimal interest in the list indicates that citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC) largely ignore the Beijing's attempts to shape national culture.
- RC citizens' reading preferences from the last decade heavily skew toward foreign books, and in 2024 focused on feminist and socially progressive literature, as well as works that reflect social malaise in the country.
- The Party's inability to prevent the Chinese people's openness so-called "Western values" could be an indicator of its future success in preventing Western influence in emerging large language models, which are trained primarily on Western source material.

On April 23, page 6 of the *People's Daily* carried a story announcing the selection of 42 books as “China’s Good Books from 2024” (2024 年度“中国好书”) ([People's Daily](#), April 23). The list has been published annually since 2014 by the China Book Review Society (中国图书评论学会), an organization supervised by the Central Propaganda Department and managed under the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The *People's Daily* article does not detail the criteria for selecting the books, other than saying that the process took place “under the guidance of the Central Propaganda Department” (在中宣部指导下). A decade ago, a similar article about the first annual list said that it sourced books from rankings released by major national media, monthly lists from the China Book Review Society, best-selling books with a print run of more than 30,000 copies, and “outstanding books recommended by renowned book critics” (知名书评人推荐的优秀图书), without specifying who these critics might be ([Henan University of Urban Construction](#), April 28, 2015).

Looking over the list, it is clear that the selection is intended to emphasize the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) priorities. These include the centrality of Xi Jinping, history—especially Party history—and cultural pride, martial values, and the PRC’s place in a global context. The most notable absence is any real input from the people themselves. The China Book Review Society receives little attention online, and its lists are largely ignored, with minimal references on platforms such as WeChat, RedNote, Weibo, and Douban. This, along with this list’s almost complete lack of overlap with other “best books” lists from 2024, suggests that the Party’s approach to culture work is falling short in its struggle to win hearts and minds, let alone in “casting the soul of the nation” (铸造民族灵魂) ([Qiushi](#), October 15, 2024).

### The Party’s Reads For You

True to form, the “China’s Good Books from 2024” list followed previous iterations by starting with two “honorary books” (荣誉图书) that center on the so-called “people’s leader,” Xi Jinping. This year, readers are strongly recommended to read *Outline of Xi Jinping Thought on Culture* (习近平文化思想学习纲要), which covers Xi’s theoretical formulation that was officially unveiled at the National Conference on Propaganda, Ideology, and Cultural Work in late 2023 ([People's Daily](#), October 9, 2023); and the second volume in a series that chronicles Xi’s interactions with university students, *Xi Jinping and University Friends* (习近平与大学生朋友们).

The rest of the list is divided up into categories: “theme publishing” (主题出版类), “humanities and social sciences” (人文社科类), “literature and arts” (文学艺术), “popular science and life” (科普生活), and other shortlisted books. These have stayed largely consistent over the last decade, with the exception of a section on “imported books” (引进版), which appeared in the first list but then quickly vanished from subsequent versions. The two “imported books” featured in 2014 were British astrophysicist Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* and American biologist David Haskell’s *The Forest Unseen: A Year’s Watch in Nature*. This is unsurprising, as scientific progress has long been a priority area for the Party, and is, in theory, less controversial than other fields.

Xi Jinping’s appearances on the list were not limited to the two honorary mentions at the top of the list. He also managed to top the “theme publishing” section through the book *Interpretations of Poems Quoted by Xi Jinping* (习近平引用诗词释读), a compilation of 99 classical poems and phrases cited by Xi in his speeches and

writings since the 18th Party Congress in 2012. Xi's predecessor, Deng Xiaoping, is also highlighted in a book narrating his political exile in Jiangxi province, *The Xiaoping Trail* (小平小道). The title is a reference to a short path Deng walked every day, which the *Jiangxi Daily* has claimed is "the site of the origin of the Reform and Opening policy" (中国改革开放的策源地) ([Qiushi](#), May 6, 2019).

The large number of military-related works in the list is unambiguous. These include *Beijing 1949* (北京 1949), which captures the events leading to the founding of the PRC; *Why is the Flag of War as Beautiful as a Painting?* (为什么战旗美如画), which explores the stories behind battle flags and their symbolic significance in the People's Liberation Army (PLA); *The Flag of Destiny: Theoretical Innovations in the New Era and the Mission of the New Journey* (命运之旗：新时代理论创新与新征程使命任务), which surveys Chinese history over the last 200 years and articulates recent theoretical underpinnings of the Party's power; and *Forging a Shield for the Nation: The Road to China's Atomic Bomb* (为国铸盾：中国原子弹之路), which covers the scientific, political, and strategic challenges the developers of the PRC's nuclear weapons faced. This last book in particular is notable given the PRC's ongoing buildup of its nuclear arsenal, which the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) estimates surpassed 600 warheads as of mid-2024 and is expected to surpass 1,000 in the next five years ([DoD](#), December 18, 2024).

Other titles included works that advance the Party's view that it is synonymous with the nation, the inheritor of China's past, and the driving force behind China's prominence on the world stage. These include a book examining the writer Lu Xun's (鲁迅) alleged mutual respect for early Chinese Communist Party figures; a work that details the conception and design of the PRC's national emblem; books about Chinese modernization, the rise of great powers, and how modernization impacts the PRC's rise; and even a children's book that introduces the youth of today to China's global role. [1] One featured work on science and technology has scientists and science fiction writers discuss futuristic technologies, including those such as brain-computer interfaces that the Party has identified as priority areas for development ([China Brief](#), March 28).

### **People's Preferences Diverge**

The "China's Good Books from 2024" list was announced the same day that the Fifth National Forum on Party History and Literature (第五届全国党史和文献论坛举办) opened in Jinan, Shandong Province ([People's Daily](#), April 23). One could be forgiven for thinking that it would be greeted with some fanfare or interest by the general reading public. However, all indications from social media and other coverage suggest that, outside of official and Party channels, the list has been ignored for the most part.

To see what people in the PRC are actually reading, platforms like Douban (a forum for reviewing books and other media that is roughly equivalent to Goodreads on the anglophone Internet) and WeChat provide annual "best books" lists. Douban's list in particular is striking for how steeply it diverges from the official list curated by the Propaganda Department ([Douban](#), accessed April 25). Except for a poignant memoir, *My Mother Does Cleaning* (我的母亲做保洁), there is no overlap between the two lists. In many ways, the lists could not be more different. All the paternalism and chauvinism of the official list is replaced by books with socially progressive, feminist subject matter, as well as many international works. The top 10 for the year include two books by American authors (linguist Amanda Montell's *Wordslut: A Feminist Guide to Taking Back the English*

Language and computer scientist Fei-Fei Li's *The Worlds I See: Curiosity, Exploration, and Discovery at the Dawn Of AI* and ) and three by European authors, while the top 10 books in the history and culture category include titles like Amia Srinivasan's *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*.

Some of the topics of books that make the lists may be indicative of underlying social malaise within the PRC. These include translated works such as *Februar 33: Der Winter der Literatur*, which tells the story of the fate of German writers during the first six weeks of Hitler's rule, or Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, which "captures the shattered world of a life in exile," according to its American publisher.

More worrisome for Chinese cultural production within the PRC is that these lists suggest a deficit of good books and literature emerging in recent years: eight of Douban's list of the top 10 books from the last decade are foreign. Data on the publishing industry compiled by the National Bureau of Statistics suggest something of a crisis in book publishing in recent years. Total new books published (新出版) in 2023 numbered 217,041; down from a peak of 262,426 in 2016 and the 3rd-lowest since 2011 (along with the Covid-19 years of 2020 and 2022) ([NBS](#), 2024). These data points are anecdotal and may be explained by other factors. For instance, low consumer demand could be due to economic weakness or the rise of internet fiction as a more popular genre. Alternatively, rising censorship could be discouraging book writing. Whatever the proximal factors at play, the popularity of international literature coupled with the steady decline in book publishing over the last decade do not constitute endorsements of the Party's approach to encouraging a wider reading public. Clearly, initiatives like "storytelling sessions" (故事会) in which farmers discuss how reading promotes civilization and rural revitalization are not having the desired effect ([People's Daily](#), April 23).

## Conclusion

The CCP sees literature and art, in the words of Mao Zedong, as "a component part of the whole revolutionary machine, [which] operates as a powerful weapon for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy" (整个革命机器的一个组成部分，作为团结人民、教育人民、打击敌人、消灭敌人的有力的武器)" ([Marxists.org](#), accessed April 24). Increasingly, this means promoting works that push themes of cultural confidence and self-reliance. This in turn stems from the Party's concerns over "cultural nihilism" (文化虚无主义), which the Party perceives as an existential threat that could undercut the Party's cultural power and lead to wholesale Westernization ([China Brief](#), March 28). As a result, foreign works have disappeared from Party-approved book lists, and militarism is ascendant.

If PRC citizens were eagerly reading works on the country's weapons development programs and valorizing CCP culture heroes, this would be a cause for concern. Assessing the actual reading habits of most PRC citizens, it appears that the Party may have more to fear. The popularity of books by Western writers, and especially ones that seem at odds with "core socialist values," suggests that what the Party dismisses as "Western values" are already shared by many people across the PRC—at least among the online, educated population that are active on platforms such as Douban.

There is a parallel here with artificial intelligence (AI). The Party is keen to excise so-called Western influence from emerging large language models. However, it might be too late to reverse the tide there too, as some scholars in the West have noted ([The Free Press](#), April 13). This is simply because models are primarily trained

on Western outputs. If there is one lesson in the Party's failed attempt to steer the reading public toward core socialist values, it might be that success in doing so with AIs is just as unlikely..

*Arran Hope is the editor of China Brief.*

## Notes

[1] In the order in which they are referenced in the above paragraph, these titles are:

- *Of One Mind: Lu Xun and the Chinese Communists* (同怀：鲁迅与中国共产党人));
- *The Emblem of the Republic: The Birth of the National Emblem of the People's Republic of China* (共和国之徽：中华人民共和国国徽诞生记);
- *China Chooses Modernization* (现代化的中国选择);
- *The Wind Rises and the Clouds Fly: Qian Yuandan on the Rise of Great Powers* (风起云飞扬：钱乘旦讲大国崛起);
- *Developing and Surpassing: Core Issues and Strategic Directions for Chinese-style Modernization* (发展与超越：中国式现代化的核心问题与战略路径);
- *China in the World* (世界里的中国).



## **The Cyberspace Force: A Bellwether for Conflict**

*By John Costello*



Shoulder patch for the People's Liberation Army Cyberspace Force. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

### **Executive Summary:**

- Cyber operations will be involved in the opening stages of any conflict that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is involved in. This makes the Cyberspace Force an essential bellwether as to what conflicts Beijing anticipates and what conflicts it is tacitly preparing for.
- The Cyberspace Force demonstrates the depth of reform and centralization the People's Liberation Army is willing to achieve to advance its operational capabilities. Beijing now possesses a truly global intelligence apparatus less stymied by parochial and bureaucratic interests.
- The Cyberspace Force has structured its principal operationally focused infrastructure into five regional "Technical Reconnaissance Bases," Corps Leader-grade organizations that are generally correspond to military theaters.
- The Cyberspace Operations Base, which now oversees the PRC's offensive cyber forces, is likely a critical factor in the significant increase in the technical sophistication, maturity, and operational discipline seen by PLA cyber operations over the last ten years.

One year ago, on April 19, 2024, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) eliminated the Strategic Support Force (SSF; 战略支援部队) and reconstituted its subordinate components into three distinct arms (兵种) that are directly subordinate to the Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest-level body within the Chinese armed forces (China Brief, April 26, 2024, [\[1\]](#), [\[2\]](#)). These three organizations are the Cyberspace Force (网络空间部队), the Information Support Force (信息支援部队), and the Aerospace Force (军事航天部队).

In light of the anniversary of this restructuring, this piece elucidates matters regarding one of these new organizations—the Cyberspace Force. The analysis is drawn from open-source research of thousands of recruitment notices, public procurement documents, academic research, and news coverage.

### **Technical Reconnaissance Bases Align With Military Theaters**

The Cyberspace Force has structured its principal operationally focused infrastructure into five regional “Technical Reconnaissance Bases” (TRB; 技术侦查基地), each generally aligned to a corresponding military theater. These units appear to be Corps Leader-grade organizations composed of former military region (军区), service-level, and, in some cases, former General Staff Department Third Department (3PLA; 总参三部) technical reconnaissance bureaus. The TRBs have effectively consolidated all technical reconnaissance assets within the scope of the military theaters, theoretically enabling optimized targeting, tasking, collection, and analysis in support of Theater Command (TC; 战区) operations. The TRBs are further divided into offices (处) and sections (科), likely influenced and consciously modeled on similar structures of its predecessor technical reconnaissance bureaus.

In crafting the TRBs, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) significantly broke and reforged existing organizational relationships. Existing units and organizations split apart, subordinate units were promoted to new echelons, and command and control was reassigned. This was done to consolidate and realign former structures to conform to new administrative and operational constructs.

The Cyberspace Force's assimilation of the PLA Navy (PLAN; 中国人民解放军海军) 1st and 2nd TRBs provides an instructive example. Prior to the major PLA reforms that began in 2016, the PLAN had arranged its TRBs along a north-south axis, with the 1st TRB concentrated along the northeast and eastern coast from Liaoning to Fuzhou and the 2nd TRB concentrated in the southeast and southern coast from Xiamen to Hainan island. As the new military theater-defined operational areas of responsibility did not align with this arrangement, overlaying an operational structure on top presented problems. To resolve this, the SSF split apart the PLAN TRBs along these new boundaries. This led to the current, unusual situation in which the former 1st TRB headquarters in Beijing lies under the Central TRB while most of its former subordinate units lie under the Eastern TRB. A similar situation has occurred with respect to the former 3PLA 6th Bureau (总参三部第六局 or 网络系统部队第六局), based out of Hongshan District in Wuhan. The SSF abolished the bureau shortly after the reforms and transferred its assets to form a significant part of the newly-established Eastern TRB, despite Wuhan technically falling within the Southern Theater Command area of responsibility. The former 6th Bureau has also maintained its unit designation of Unit (部队) 61726 ([China \(Hubei\) Pilot Free Trade Zone Wuhan Area](#), October 20, 2010).



The SSF appears to have been highly judicious in the allocation of new military unit cover designators (MUCD; 军事代号) from their limited assigned block of 100 (ranging from 32001 to 32100). It has preferred that units maintain their preexisting designators, apportioning new designators only when reform efforts place units in a new capacity and under a new operational structure where no previous designation exists and where their parent or previous designation is already in use. These instances have occurred as a result of units being split, promoted, or where wholly new units are created to fill an echelon under novel joint constructs (i.e., the creation of the TRB headquarters themselves), often to resolve operational and organizational discrepancies resulting from reform.

**Table 1: Cyberspace Force Units and Their Locations**

Name (English)	Name (Chinese)	MUCD	HQ Location
Cyberspace Force Eastern Technical Reconnaissance Base (E-TRB)	网络空间部队东部技术侦查基地	Unit 32046 (32046 部队) [1]	No. 9 Xianyin North Road, Qixia District, Nanjing (南京市栖霞区仙隐北路 9 号) [2]
Cyberspace Force Southern Technical Reconnaissance Base (S-TRB)	网络空间部队南部技术侦查基地	Unit 32053 (32053 部队) [3]	No. 788 South Baiyun Boulevard, Baiyun District, Guangzhou (广州市白云区白云大街南 788 号) [4]
Cyberspace Force Western Technical Reconnaissance Base (W-TRB)	网络空间部队西部技术侦查基地	Unit 32058 (32058 部队) [5]	Taihuayuan, Baihe Township, Longquanyi District, Chengdu (成都市龙泉驿区柏合镇泰花园) [6]
Cyberspace Force Northern Technical Reconnaissance Base (N-TRB)	网络空间部队北部技术侦查基地	Unit 32065 (32065 部队) [7]	No. 22 East Daying Road, Shenhe District, Shenyang (沈阳市沈河区东大营街 22 号) [8]
Cyberspace Force Central Technical Reconnaissance Base (C-TRB)	网络空间部队中部技术侦查基地	Unit 32081 (32081 部队) [9]	No. 8 Xiangshan South Road, Haidian District, Beijing (北京市海淀区香山南路 8 号院) [10]

(Source: Author research)

## **Cyberspace Force Order of Battle**

Details of the Cyberspace Force TRBs, as well as the newly identified Cyberspace Operations Base, are listed below in protocol order.

### *Cyberspace Force Eastern Technical Reconnaissance Base*

The Eastern Technical Reconnaissance Base (E-TRB; 东部技术侦查基地) is assigned the cover designator of Unit 32046 and is located at No. 9 Xianyin North Road, Qixia District, Nanjing, just north of the Nanjing Normal University Campus (南京师范大学). ([China-tender](#), June 4, 2018) The Eastern TRB headquarters is collocated with the PLA Air Force 2nd TRB (解放军空军第二技术侦查局; PLAAF 2nd TRB) also known as Unit 95851 ([NDU Press](#), 2015, p. 153; [Nanjing Dushiquan](#), April 25). Composed of roughly seven subordinate offices (处) and a training group/dadui (训练大队), the Eastern TRB maintains sites across the Eastern Theater Command area of responsibility, including in Nanjing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Wuhan, Nanchang, Fuzhou, and Xiamen ([Xinhua](#), August 16, 2017; [Dongbei University](#), March 15, 2023). [11]

**Figure 1: Unit 32046 Eastern Technical Reconnaissance Base Headquarters**



(Source: Google Earth)

### *Cyberspace Force Southern Technical Reconnaissance Base*

The Southern Technical Reconnaissance Base (S-TRB; 南部技术侦查基地) is assigned the cover designator of Unit 32053 and is located at No. 788 South Baiyun Boulevard, Baiyun District, Guangzhou ([StarOceans](#), December 8, 2017), collocated with former Guangzhou Military Region Technical Reconnaissance Bureau Unit 75770 (75770 部队) ([Lanzhou University](#), February 23, 2023). Composed of at least ten subordinate offices (处), this TRB maintains sites across the Southern Theater Command area of responsibility, including in Shenzhen, Shantou, Nanning, Kunming, Zhanjiang, Sanya, and Haikou ([NJUers](#)

[Employment Enlightening Development System](#), 2019; [Peking University Student Careers Center](#), March 15, 2024). [12]

**Figure 2: Unit 32053 Southern Technical Reconnaissance Base**



(Source: Google Earth)

#### *Cyberspace Force Western Technical Reconnaissance Base*

The Western Technical Reconnaissance Base (W-TRB; 西部技术侦查基地) is assigned the cover designator of Unit 32058 and is located at Taihuayuan, Baihe Township, Longquanyi District, Chengdu ([NJUers Employment Enlightenment Development System](#), December 4, 2023). The Western TRB is principally comprised of the former Lanzhou Military Region's (MR) 1st and 2nd TRBs, units 68002 and 69010, and the former Chengdu MR 1st TRB, unit 78006 ([Project 2049](#), November 11, 2011). Composed of at least eight offices, the Western TRB maintains sites across the Western area of responsibility, including Chongqing, Urumqi, Kashgar, Hetian, Lanzhou, Altay, and Wujiaqu. The former Chengdu MR 2nd TRB located in Kunming, Unit 78020, likely now falls under the Southern TRB. [13]

**Figure 3: Unit 32058 Western Technical Reconnaissance Base**



(Source: Google Earth)



*Cyberspace Force Northern Technical Reconnaissance Base*

The Northern Technical Reconnaissance Base (N-TRB; 北部技术侦查基地) is assigned the cover designator of Unit 32065 and is located at No. 22 East Daying Road, Shenhe District, Shenyang. It also appears to maintain a second site at No. 1 Sushan Road, Tianqiao District, Jinan (山东省济南市天桥区粟山路 1 号) ([Shandong University](#), April 27, 2023); [Shandong University Student Career Guidance Center](#), March 8, 2023). The Northern TRB is principally comprised of the former Jinan MR and Shenyang MR TRBs, units 72959 and 65016. Composed of at least ten offices, the Northern TRB maintains sites across the Northern Theater area of responsibility, including in Harbin, Jinan, Dalian, Weihai, Dandong, Mudanjiang, Changchun, Hohhot, Hulunbuir, Alxa, and Yanbian. [14]

**Figure 4: Unit 32065 Northern Technical Reconnaissance Base**



(Source: Google Earth)

**Image 5: Unit 32065 Northern Technical Reconnaissance Base Jinan Site**



(Source: Google Earth)

*Cyberspace Force Central Technical Reconnaissance Base*

The Central Technical Reconnaissance Base (C-TRB; 中部技术侦查基地) is assigned the cover designator of Unit 32081 and is located at No. 8 Xiangshan South Road, Haidian District, Beijing—an address it shares with the headquarters of the former PLAAF 1st Technical Reconnaissance Bureau, Unit 95830 ([Beijing Zhongtian Guohong](#), October 20, 2017; [Jing City](#), accessed April 22). The former Beijing MR Technical Reconnaissance Bureau, Unit 66407, forms the core of the TRB and is located near headquarters at No. 87 Xiangshan South Road ([Jing City](#), accessed April 22). The Central TRB is overwhelmingly concentrated in the Beijing area, maintaining at least six units across Haidian and Daxing districts, with additional sites in Xi'an, Jinan, Hohhot, Langfang, and Hanzhong ([Haitou Net](#), March 10, 2023).

**Figure 6: Unit 32081 Central Technical Reconnaissance Base**



(Source: Google Earth)

*Cyberspace Force Cyberspace Operations Base*

The Cyberspace Force Cyberspace Operations Base (WZJD or CSOB; 网络空间作战基地) is an entirely new Corps Leader-grade organization, equivalent in echelon and serving alongside the regional TRBs. It is responsible for cyber offense, electronic warfare, psychological warfare, and advanced cybersecurity research capabilities nation-wide ([Beijing Normal University](#), December 10, 2020). The Cyberspace Operations Base has comprehensively consolidated disparate cyber espionage, cyber offense, electronic warfare, psychological warfare, and cybersecurity technology research and development (R&D) units from the former 3PLA, 4PLA, PLA Air Force (PLAAF), PLAN, PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), and military regions. Assigned the designator of Unit 32087, the Cyberspace Operations Base is headquartered at No. 9 Fengrun East Road, Haidian District, Beijing (北京市海淀区丰润东路9号) in the Da'niufang Community (大牛房社区). The unit has been variously referred to as the Information Technology Force (信息技术部队), the Cybersecurity Base (网络安全基地), and the Cyberspace and Electronic Warfare Information Center (网络空间与电子战信息中心)

([FX361](#), October 21, 2018; [Strategic Support Force](#), 2023; [Facebook/Joseph Wen](#), May 16, 2024). The cause for the variation in naming for this unit is unclear and may be the result of the inherent secrecy of the unit itself.

**Figure 7: Unit 32087 Cyberspace Operations Base Headquarters**



(Source: Google Earth)

**Table 2: Cyberspace Operations Base Cyber Units and Their Locations**

Unit	Old Name	Location
Cyberspace Force Unit 32075	Former Nanjing MR 1st TRB Unit 73611	Nanjing Xuanwu
Cyberspace Force Unit 32045	Former PLA Navy 2nd TRB Unit 92762	Xiamen Jimei
Cyberspace Force Unit 32059	Former 3PLA 6th Bureau Unit 61726	Wuhan Hongshan
Cyberspace Force Unit 32061	Former Jinan MR TRB Unit 65016	Jinan Tianqiao
Cyberspace Force Unit 32066	Former Chengdu MR 2nd TRB Unit 78020	Kunming Wuhua
Cyberspace Force Central TRB Unit 32081	Former PLA AF 1st TRB Unit 95380	Beijing
PLA Rocket Force Unit 96669	(Designation maintained)	Beijing

(Source: Author research)



The Cyberspace Operations Base can be thought of as being composed of four major components or “types” of forces; namely, cyber warfare, electronic warfare, psychological warfare, and cyber R&D. The base’s cyber units are organized into offices (处) that are dispersed across the Military Theaters and broadly align with the boundaries set forth by Military Theaters and TRBs. Some elements or sections (科) of former MR and Service TRBs appear to have been seconded to the Cyberspace Operations Base. These have been separated and redesignated under a new cover designation.

The Cyberspace Operation Base’s electronic warfare forces are consolidated under Unit 32090, a Division Leader-grade unit based out of Beidaihe Qinghuangdao. Unit 32090 is primarily composed of the former 4PLA’s strategic electronic warfare brigades, which include Unit 61906 based in Langfang and Unit 61251 based in Qinghuangdao and with which the headquarters of 32090 is collocated. Unit 32090 has also absorbed a number of former PLA Navy radar and electronic warfare units, including Unit 91709 based out of Beijing’s Yanqing district and two unnamed units based out of Rongcheng, Weihai and Jimo, Qingdao in Shandong Province.

**Table 2: Cyberspace Operations Base Cyber Units and Their Locations**

Name (English)	Name (Chinese)	Location	Year Built
Unit 32090 Yingtan Yuehu Detachment	32090 部队鹰潭营区	East of Helongqiao Jiangjia (何垄桥姜家) off Old Route 206 (G206 旧)	2010–2013
Unit 32090 Shanghai Nicheng Detachment	32090 部队泥城营区	Huangpu District, Shanghai (南芦公路 Nanlu Highway,	2021
Unit 32090 Ledong Hainan Detachment	32090 部队乐东营区	Ledong Li Autonomous County No. 031 Township Road (乐东黎族自治县 031 乡道)	2021–2025
Unit 32090 Nyingchi Tibet Detachment	32090 部队林芝营区	Uraki Village, Bayi District, Nyingchi City (浦给及乐巴宜区林芝市)	2021–2024
Unit 32090 Yanqing Detachment or PLAN Unit 91290	32090 部队延庆营区海军 91290 部队	No. 251 Zhuojiaying Village, Yanqing District, Beijing (北京市延庆区东卓家营村 251 号)	2022–2025

(Source: [Cpsee](#), October 28, 2020; [Bidradar](#), June 8, 2021; [99steel.cn](#), June 29, 2021; [Thepaper.cn](#), July 26, 2021; [lxbang](#), December 20, 2022)

Since its creation shortly after the reforms, Unit 32090 has seen a rapid and far-ranging expansion of its space-sensing and non-kinetic counterspace assets, building on its existing counterspace detachments in Nicheng, Shanghai and Yuehu, Yingtan in Jiangxi Province. Additional sites are located in Nyingchi, Tibet and in Ledong, Hainan Island. As of 2020, each site, now including the PLAN Yanqing facility, sports a 30-meter parabolic antenna accompanied by at least four 13-meter radome-covered dishes. This focus on space tracking and counterspace jamming reinforces the PLA’s long-standing view that the U.S. military’s dependence on space-

based C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) constitutes a critical vulnerability—even describing the United States as “no satellite, no fight” (无星不战) ([FX361](#), July 22, 2016).

**Figure 8: Unit 32090 Sites\* Shanghai Nicheng Site (2024)**



\*Clockwise from top left: Shanghai Nicheng Site (2024), Hainan Ledong Site, Yingtan Site (2024), Nyingchi Site (2024).  
(Source: Google Earth)

**Figure 9: Unit 32090 Yanqing Site (or Unit 91290) (2024)**



(Source: Google Earth)



The technology R&D contingent of the Cyberspace Operations Base is a collection of disparate former 3PLA and 4PLA units that have historically played operational supporting roles in vulnerability discovery, encryption breaking, and the development of tactics, tools, techniques, and procedures for bypassing or circumventing cybersecurity defenses. These units are particularly vital in the success of PLA cyber operations. Though ostensibly conducted for computer network defense purposes, such research is equally applicable to computer network attack and provides a steady source of new and evolving tools and exploits for PLA cyber operations conducted by the Cyberspace Force. Designated as Unit 32085, it is based at the headquarters of former Unit 61539, also known as the Beijing North Computing Center (北京北方计算中心), located in Shaoziying (哨子营) just east of the Central Party School's North Gate (中共中央党校北门) ([Project 2049](#), November 11, 2011, p. 20).

Unit 32085 appears to oversee or at least be affiliated with Unit 32082, which notes Shaoziying as its primary address in patent filings ([Wanfang](#), June 21, 2019). Also known as Unit 61770, it appears to be the new designation for the cyber warfare research portion of the former General Staff Department 54th Research Institute (总参五十四所; GSD 54RI). It also continues to operate out of a small facility in Hongfu Business Park (宏富创业园) in Beijing's Changping District ([YktChina](#), May 13, 2019; [Wanfang](#), [June 21, 2019](#), [January 19, 2021](#)). Members of this office were indicted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in February 2020 for their alleged part in the 2017 cyberattack against Equifax ([FBI](#), February 10, 2020).

**Figure 13: Unit 32082 (or Unit 61770) (2025)**



(Source: ESRI World Imagery)

The Cyberspace Operations Base also oversees Unit 32070, which with 32051 is one of two military designations for the 56th Research Institute (56RI; 五十六研究所), based out of Wuxi, Jiangsu Province. Also known as the Jiangnan Institute of Computing Technology (江南计算技术研究所), it is a wholly PLA-owned commercial enterprise and research institute that researches and develops advanced computer chips, semiconductors, quantum computing, and encryption technologies for both the PLA and commercial sale. It is best known for the development of the Sunway (申威) series of computer chips, the principal source for the PRC's record-breaking supercomputer, the Sunway Taihu Light (神威太湖之光) ([PC World](#), June 20, 2016; [China Money Network](#), May 23, 2018).

Unit 32070 likely specifically designates the 56RI's information security subsidiary, known as the Jiangnan Information Security Engineering Technology Center (JIST or "security center"; 江南信息安全工程技术中心) ([Jiangsu Encryption Bureau](#), October 20, 2017). Though headquartered in Wuxi, Unit 32070 established a computing and testing center on Zhongkai Road, Songjiang District, Shanghai some time in 2018 ([Sohu](#), April 11, 2022; [Shanghai.gov](#), August 12, 2024).

**Figure 14: Unit 32070 Zhongkai Road Facility (2024)**



(Source: Google Earth)

## Analysis

More easily evaluated now that it is outside of the SSF construct, the Cyberspace Force appears to be a critical tool for the Central Military Commission (CMC) in shaping the PLA into a modern, joint force able to wage wars under informatized conditions. The regional TRBs and the Cyberspace Operations Base appear to be designed specifically to address key bureaucratic and practical shortcomings in the PLA's operational structure, serving to centralize and consolidate strategic resources in ways that allow for greater oversight, planning, and control. This in turn serves the political need of assured CMC control as well as the practical need of subjective, prudent allocation of resources according to operational priorities.

The regional TRBs appear to be crafted specifically to simplify and address the complex, overlapping, and siloed technical intelligence apparatus that existed prior to the reforms. The TRBs have consolidated technical collection and analysis under one roof, a situation which at least hypothetically diminishes bureaucratic barriers to intelligence fusion. This provides clear operational and practical advantages. The TRBs are in a much better position than any of their predecessor organizations to optimize collection and craft more comprehensive situational awareness. They face fewer bureaucratic hurdles and can employ a far greater span of assets.

Political considerations could also be behind the reorganization, beyond any efficiency gains from the more streamlined structure. Consolidating and centralizing technical collection under the TRBs while charging them with supporting Military Theater Commands has diminished service-level intelligence collection. As a result, operational elements are more dependent on the military theater joint construct for intelligence information necessary for their operations. This has the effect of increasing the inherent institutional power of the Military Theaters while providing a critical demonstration of the value promised by the new joint construct. It also demonstrates the risks service elements face if deprived of it.

In this more cynical view, the CMC's decision to make the TRBs answerable to the Cyberspace Force rather than to the theaters is likely part of a delicate balancing act. To prevent competing power centers from emerging, power is distributed and "checks" in PLA organizational structure are maintained. In this arrangement, the CMC effectively hold the reins of regional and global situational battlespace awareness for the theaters and the services.

The Cyberspace Operations Base, which now oversees the PRC's offensive cyber forces, is likely a critical factor in the significant increase in the technical sophistication, maturity, and operational discipline seen by PLA cyber operations over the last ten years. It has likely also afforded the CMC the direct control necessary to instill the operational discipline and focus that now characterize PLA cyber operations. Prior to the reforms, PLA cyber operations were known for their "smash and grab" tactics, frequent moonlighting, and incessant commercial intellectual property theft. Since the reforms, which broadly coincided with the 2015 Xi-Obama agreement that carried stipulations on restraining cyber operations, PLA cyber forces appear to have refocused on "legitimate" intelligence targets and operational preparation of the battlespace consistent with PLA conception of use of cyber operations in the opening stage of conflict ([The White House](#), September 25, 2015). This includes targeting critical infrastructure in the United States ([CISA](#), accessed April 25).

The consolidation of the PRC's cyber forces has also allowed greater scalability and sharing of exploits, tools, tradecraft, and infrastructure across the myriad cyber operational units under the Cyberspace Force. Prior to the reforms, the 3PLA, 4PLA, services, and MRs each maintained their own vulnerability discovery, tool development, and infrastructure procurement apparatus. Their integration under the Cyberspace Operations Base enables a level of knowledge and information sharing that creates economies of scale, which in turn increases effectiveness while reducing costs for each operation.

## Conclusion

The Cyberspace Force is a visceral demonstration of the depth of reform and centralization the PLA is willing to achieve to advance its operational capabilities. While specific numbers are difficult to come by, the sheer degree of development and expansion of the PRC's technical intelligence and cyber forces over the last ten years are remarkable. Beijing now possesses a truly global intelligence apparatus less stymied by parochial and bureaucratic interests.

Any version of conflict that the PRC envisions will involve cyber in its opening stages. As previously stated, this makes the Cyberspace Force a critical service branch to watch in the coming years, as it serves as an essential bellwether as to what conflicts Beijing anticipates and what conflicts it is tacitly preparing for.

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## Notes

- [1] ([NJUers Employment Enlightenment Development System](#), December 4, 2023)
- [2] ([China-tender](#), June 4, 2018)
- [3] ([China Military Online](#), January 2, 2018; [University of Electronic Science and Technology of China](#), March 3, 2024; [Peking University Student Careers Center](#), March 15, 2024)
- [4] ([StarOceans](#), December 8, 2017)
- [5] ([Yixinjie](#), August 29, 2019)
- [6] ([Youmifa](#), April 8, 2021)
- [7] ([Shandong University Student Career Guidance Center](#), March 8, 2023)
- [8] ([Nankai University](#), April 25, 2025)
- [9] ([Bidcenter](#), September 19, 2019)
- [10] ([Beijing Zhongtian Guohong](#), October 20, 2017)
- [11] An SSF 2024 recruitment plan lists what is likely the Eastern TRB as Unit 242438 ("[2024 Public Recruitment Position Plan for Civilian Personnel in the Military \(Excluding Positions with Interview Before Written Exam](#), 2024).



[12] An SSF 2024 recruitment plan lists what is likely the Eastern TRB as Unit 242439 ("[2024 Public Recruitment Position Plan for Civilian Personnel in the Military \(Excluding Positions with Interview Before Written Exam](#), 2024).

[13] An SSF 2024 recruitment plan lists what is likely the Eastern TRB as Unit 242440 ("[2024 Public Recruitment Position Plan for Civilian Personnel in the Military \(Excluding Positions with Interview Before Written Exam](#), 2024).

[14] An SSF 2024 recruitment plan lists what is likely the Eastern TRB as Unit 242441 ("[2024 Public Recruitment Position Plan for Civilian Personnel in the Military \(Excluding Positions with Interview Before Written Exam](#), 2024).

[15] An SSF 2024 recruitment plan lists what is likely the Eastern TRB as Unit 242442 ("[2024 Public Recruitment Position Plan for Civilian Personnel in the Military \(Excluding Positions with Interview Before Written Exam](#), 2024).

**Personnel Problems Are Becoming Personal Problems for Xi Jinping**

*By Willy Wo-Lap Lam*



President Xi Jinping participates in the Yiwu tree-planting activity on April 3. (Source: [Xinhua](#))

**Executive Summary:**

- A lack of viable challenger suggests that Xi Jinping will remain in power, even if he is more vulnerable today, and his power more curtailed, than in years past.
- Personnel purges of Xi's allies across the top echelons of the military since 2023 could indicate that his enemies in the People's Liberation Army are gunning down his protégés to weaken the power base of the "core of the Party center."
- Purges of Xi's allies have extended to the state apparatus, most notably with Li Ganjie (李干杰) losing control of the Organization Department after just two years at the helm, and possibly to the domestic security apparatus, following the rise of Qin Yunbiao (秦运彪), who is not tied to Xi, as Beijing's deputy major and head of its police department.

Political developments among the elite are beginning to point to a dramatic truncation of the power of the “core of the party center” (党中央的核心), Xi Jinping. A recent article from the official mouthpiece of the military, the *PLA Daily*, reminds readers that “our principle is that the Party commands the gun” (我们的原则是党指挥枪) ([PLA Daily](#), March 10). Another from the Party’s primary newspaper, the *People’s Daily*, urges readers to “ensure that the ‘knife handle’ is firmly held in the hands of the Party and the people” (确保“刀把子”牢牢掌握在党和人民手中) ([People’s Daily](#), January 12). The “gun” and the “knife handle” are metonyms for the Party’s two sources of hard power, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the domestic security apparatus. For over 18 months, Xi’s protégés—or at least people appointed under Xi—have been disappearing from leadership positions across these systems.

These personnel shifts have undercut Xi’s hold on power, though this does not necessarily mean that he faces a clear challenger or that he is in danger of imminent removal. Xi, a 71-year-old princeling, is currently serving his third five-year term as head of the party, the military, and the government. He still seems destined to remain at least nominally at the helm until the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) 21st National Congress convenes, likely in late 2027. At that point, he may garner a fourth five-year term. If so, his top-dog status will be maintained until the 22nd Party Congress in late 2032. However, it is unlikely he will be given the latitude to pursue his personal program in the way he has been in years past.

### **Purging of Xi Allies Undercuts his Power**

Mao Zedong famously declared at the August 7 Meeting in 1927 that “political power grows out of the barrel of the gun” (枪杆子里面出政权), an axiom that has frequently been repeated frequently in official discourse in the Xi Jinping era ([Xinhua](#), February 11, 2015; [Party Members’ Net](#), March 29, 2022). In the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the cadre who controls the army has historically been able to monopolize much of the nation’s economic and sociopolitical resources. Changes to personnel at the top of the PLA—including within the Central Military Commission—since the 20th Party Congress suggest that the limits of Xi’s control of the “gun” are being tested. In turn, this suggests that his power is being curtailed to a degree.

The high-profile removals began in the second half of 2023 with the investigation of former Defense Minister General Li Shangfu (李尚福), whom Xi apparently accused later that year of “betraying” him ([China Brief](#), [September 20, 2023](#), [January 5, 2024](#)). Li’s predecessor, Wei Fenghe (魏凤和), was embroiled in the investigation and both men were finally expelled from the Party for “severe disciplinary violations” (严重政治纪律) the following June ([Xinhua](#), June 28). The wider investigation also led to the dismissals of both the Commander and Political Commissar of the PLA Rocket Force, Li Yuchao (李玉超) and Xu Zhongbo (徐忠波), as well as at least nine other officers from the Rocket Force and the Equipment Development Department ([China Brief](#), March 15).

Xi’s appointment of new officers to lead the Rocket Forces have raised eyebrows. Instead of following the long-standing PLA tradition of naming experts to head technology-heavy departments, the new commander and political commissar of the Rocket Forces, Admiral Wang Houbin (王厚斌) and General Xu Xisheng (徐西盛), respectively, made their careers in the PLA Navy and PLA Air Force. As such, they have minimal specialist

knowledge about missiles or spacecraft ([BBC](#) August 1, 2023; [The Guardian](#), June 27, 2024; [South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](#), July 10, 2024).

Other parts of the defense and aerospace research and development establishment have been ensnared in the wider anticorruption dragnet. In the space of two months—December 2023 and January 2024—senior personnel such as President of the China Aerospace Science and Technology Co. (CASC) Wu Yansheng (吴燕生); President of the China North Industries Group Corporation Limited (Norinco) Liu Shiquan (刘石泉); Deputy General Manager of the China Aerospace Science and Industry Corp (CASIC) Wang Changqing (王长青); Head of a research institute under CASC Wang Xiaojun (王小军) were hauled in for investigations and sacked. Defense authorities in April 2024 further shook the country by sacking CASIC President Yuan Jie (袁洁) and President of the China South Industries Group (also known as China Ordnance Equipment Group) Chen Guoying (陈国瑛) ([Radio Free Asia](#), April 15, 2024; [CNN](#), June 27, 2024).

A second wave of purges began in late 2024. Admiral Miao Hua (苗华) was suspended from his post as Director of the Central Military Commission's Political Work Department, along with senior officials who had also worked in the former 31st Group Army (now the 73rd Group Army). Director of the Eastern Theatre Command General Lin Xiangyang (林向阳) was arrested in early March, according to rumors on the Chinese internet ([World Forum](#), November 25, 2024; [New York Times Chinese Edition](#), November 29, 2024; [Creaders.net](#), March 25).

The recent disappearance of the second-ranked vice chairman of the Central Military Commission and third most powerful member of the military apparatus, General He Weidong (何卫东), suggest that he, too, is under investigation. He has not appeared in public since the “Two Sessions” meetings in March and was notably absent from a conference held on April 8–9 on the PRC's relations with neighboring countries attended by all 23 other Politburo members, as well as from an annual tree-planting event in Beijing ([Xinhua](#), April 10; [China Brief](#), April 11). When asked about his whereabouts at the end of March, a spokesman for the Ministry of National Defense said he could offer no information ([Washington Times](#), March 25; [rfi](#), March 27; [Financial Times](#), April 10). [1] Xi Jinping has expelled retired personnel who previously held the same position as General He, but never a sitting Vice Chairman. If He has been removed, this will be his highest-ranking removal to date. However, this presupposes that Xi is fully in charge of these decisions.

All along, the assumption has been that Xi has been steering the housecleaning to get rid of real and potential enemies among the top brass. The recent spate of personnel changes, however, has lent credence to the argument that Xi's military foes are gunning down his protégés to weaken the base of the “party core.” He Weidong was known as a key supporter of Xi's within the armed forces, frequently professing his loyalty in public statements. The removals of generals under He, such as Li Zhizhong (李志忠), Li Pengcheng (李鹏程), and—possibly—Tang Yong (唐勇), who were also seen as Xi allies, suggest that Xi has been unable to make good on his desire to root out corruption within the military and is losing support as a result ([China Brief](#), April 11).

Beyond the military, Xi's grip appears to be slipping on the “knife handle”—the apparatus of state control that includes the police (under the Ministry of Public Security), the spies (the Ministry of State Security) and the

People's Armed Police, a two million-strong para-military force whose remit is supporting “stability maintenance” operations ([China Social Sciences Net](#), May 16, 2024; [VOA](#), March 11). In late 2024, Qin Yunbiao (秦运彪) was appointed as both Beijing's deputy mayor and the head of its police department. While his predecessor Qi Yanjun (齐延军) enjoyed the patronage of current Minister of Public Security and key Xi ally Wang Xiaohong (王小洪), Qin spent the bulk of his career as a professional police officer and had no personal links with Xi or Xi's protégés ([SCMP](#), October 12, 2023; [Caixin](#), December 31, 2024). Speeches Xi has made in recent months also suggest that he is worried about losing control over this system, such as the one in January quoted above at which he emphasized ensuring that the “knife handle” remains firmly in the hands of the Party and the people ([VOA](#), January 27).

Xi's personnel issues have also manifested in the state apparatus. Most notably, Foreign Minister Qin Gang (秦刚) was removed in 2023, while in April 2025, Li Ganjie (李干杰), who had headed the Organization Department for just two years, switched jobs with the Director of the United Front Work Department Shi Taifeng (石泰峰). Li is a member of the so-called Tsinghua University Faction under Xi's overall political umbrella and was considered a shoo-in for a politburo standing committee slot at the 21st Party Congress. His transfer from the Organization Department—which controls personnel and staffing for the entire CCP—could entail a further diminution of Xi's power over hiring and firing within the party bureaucracy ([SCMP](#), April 2, [Lianhe Zaobao](#), April 2). Although this was framed as a lateral transfer, in practical terms this constitutes a demotion for Li.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to estimate the duration of this murky situation with the CCP's elite politics. Despite Xi's apparent loss of authority, no rival or contender is in sight to replace him as supreme leader among four sets of challengers, who include the military, princelings, retired elders, and parts of the dissenting middle and entrepreneurial classes. Within the PLA, the second-ranked officer General Zhang Youxia (张又侠) seems to have arrogated to himself significant power over personnel and policy. But, at nearly 75 years old, he likely does not have either the ambition or the wherewithal to extend his grip beyond the military arena. Most of the fellow princelings who could eclipse Xi, such as the retired generals Liu Yuan (刘源), son of the PRC's first state president Liu Shaoqi (刘少奇), and Liu Yazhou (刘亚洲), the liberal son-in-law of former president Li Xiannian (李先念), have long been elbowed aside by Xi ([BackChina.com](#), November 26, 2024; [China Brief](#), January 14). Despite rising social discontent, which has manifested at times in acts of public violence, the AI-assisted control and surveillance apparatus is still able to allow the Xi regime to hang on to power.

The next two years leading up to the 21st Party Congress could see Xi's power further truncated. If so, this would raise uncertainty as disparate stakeholders in the PRC's armed forces, party apparatus, and social classes could find more room to affect the destiny of the CCP, both domestically and in its relations with the outside world.

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[1] The reference to He Weidong did not appear in the official readout from the Ministry of National Defense.



**DeepSeek: A Tool Tuned for Social Governance**

*By Alex Colville*



DeepSeek in use at a Liaoning Provincial Administrative Service Center. (Source: Sina)

**Executive Summary:**

- The government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) does not just envision its "AI+ initiative" as bolstering the national economy but aiding its plans for modernizing its social stability system.
- DeepSeek has been designed, thanks to regulations, in a way that makes it a perfect tool to support the "public opinion guidance" system that aligns the public with state policy through propaganda.
- Any adoption of DeepSeek's model overseas has the potential to spread the PRC's domestic social governance system abroad.

In the run-up to the annual gathering of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) legislature in March, reporters from a top state-run media platform engaged citizens on the street about how the political meetings, known as the "Two Sessions" (两会), were relevant to their lives. Instead of asking questions directly, the People's Daily Online journalists invited sources to direct their questions to DeepSeek R1, the country's latest large language model (LLM) (China Brief, [February 11](#), [March 19](#)). One young woman asked, "I'm about to graduate, what kind of job opportunities can AI help to provide?" (我即将毕业, AI 能帮助提供什么工作机会)—a timely question as legislators touted artificial intelligence (AI) as a solution for future development ([People's Daily Online](#), March 2).

DeepSeek replied that there were "abundant employment opportunities" (广阔的职业发展空间) thanks to AI, listing multiple roles, such as data annotators, and noting the high salaries these roles get paid. When this author asked DeepSeek the same question, it also responded by providing the same assurances and advised fresh graduates to combine their pre-existing skills with AI to "grasp the career opportunities in the AI era" (把握 AI 时代的职业机遇). Such an answer makes no mention of the social turbulence AI is creating in a job market in which youth unemployment remains high. For example, over the past three years, machines moved to fill 60 percent of all data annotation in the PRC, pushing the role of data annotator closer to obsolescence ([CCTV](#), January 13). Omitting such concerns, the People's Daily Online story focused instead on the idea of DeepSeek as a "happiness code" (幸福密码)—a technology displaying what the Party-state is doing to address the national concerns of the day and reassuring the people that they are in safe hands. In other words, this new technology is being harnessed to serve the needs of a much older system: The "public opinion guidance" (舆论导向) system that aligns the public with state policy through propaganda.

### **Preventing Risks, Resolving Disputes, and Writing 'Correct' Articles**

In Chinese Communist Party (CCP) theory, "social governance" (社会治理) is the system whereby the government maintains social stability and resolves social conflicts. In the eyes of the Party-state, AI will play an important role in future social governance work.

At the 2024 Two Sessions, Premier Li Qiang's "Government Work Report" (政府工作报告) launched the "AI+ initiative" ("人工智能+" 行动). This initiative included both an economic aspect—the "deep integration of digital technology and the economy" (促进数字技术和实体经济深度融合)—and a social one—"improving the modernization level of social governance" (提升社会治理现代化水平) ([Xinhua](#), March 12, 2024). Currently, central, provincial, and municipal governments are exploring how DeepSeek could be integrated into the social governance system, including in the decision-making processes of cadres and state services to help resolve social conflicts and promote state policy preferences. Some of this is merely attention-seeking experimentation on the part of local governments and may be more symbolic than substantive. However, increasing reliance on AI models as a source of information gives DeepSeek the potential to become a powerful state-backed source of "public opinion guidance."

An effective PRC-built LLM in theory provides a way for local governments to demonstrate they are both carrying out the "AI+ initiative" and maintaining social stability more efficiently. For example, on March 17, *Liaoning Daily* reported that Liaoning province had integrated DeepSeek into its local "12345" help hotline,

claiming this meant the government had been able to more efficiently dispatch complaints to the appropriate departments ([Liaoning Daily](#), March 17). Similarly, DeepSeek is being presented by police services as assisting with upholding public security. A local police station in Nanchang said they “added a touch of warmth to the harmony and stability of the community” (为社区和谐稳定添上了温暖的一笔) by using DeepSeek to call up items of PRC law to help resolve a housing dispute between a local family ([Nanchang Public Security Bureau](#), February 27). Chengdu’s municipal Public Security Bureau took this a step further, connecting DeepSeek to their data centers to aid police work, with other branches holding meetings about how to incorporate the model to upgrade public security work ([Police News](#), February 20; [Huludao Municipal Public Security Bureau](#), March 17).

Some PRC journalists are treating DeepSeek as a safe source, offering a politically “correct” commentary on issues that could generate social conflict if written about incorrectly. This allows the journalists to avoid personal responsibility for discussing more sensitive topics. On March 21, *Elephant News* (大象新闻), a provincial-level state-run outlet, published an article featuring AI-generated analysis of a prominent tax evasion case involving public figure Sima Nan (司马南), a TV host and writer with a nationalist stance who is known for debunking pseudoscientific theories. The outlet simply asked DeepSeek to analyze “what it means” (说明了什么) that Sima Nan is being investigated for tax evasion, publishing the answer verbatim with no additional analysis ([Elephant News](#), March 21).

Other journalists frame DeepSeek as possessing intelligence above that of ordinary humans, giving it the ability to guide them better than they can guide themselves. An article from the *Global Times* related that DeepSeek is being used by couples as a form of counseling to resolve their private disputes—a form of conflict that falls under the purview of the Party-state’s social governance apparatus ([China Brief](#), December 6, 2024). The article quotes an interviewee as saying that Deepseek has “a relatively more comprehensive knowledge structure than most ordinary individuals,” and so the solutions it proposes “are consequently more scientific, reasonable, and effective.” However, this particular interviewee, Qin An, seems a strange choice for the topic of couples’ therapy. Qin is an expert on counter-terrorism and cyber-security governance at the China Society of Police Law ([Global Times](#), February 19). This indicates the extent to which social governance overlaps with domestic security work, and the extent to which the Party-state seeks to access and influence the private lives of PRC citizens.

This belief that AI is (or imminently will be) superhuman, combined with orders from the center to implement “AI+”, is leading to enthusiastic efforts by some provincial and country-level cadres to incorporate DeepSeek into their decision-making ([China Brief](#), March 28). Government departments across the PRC are conducting intensive “DeepSeek AI training programs” (DeepSeek 大模型培训). A district-level deputy secretary in Shaanxi stressed that whoever effectively uses this “new hoe” (新锄头) will “seize the initiative” (抢得先机) in the AI era. For him, artificial intelligence adoption is “not optional but mandatory” (不是选择题，而是必答题) ([The Paper](#), February 25). Another official, a county party secretary in Guangxi, recently ordered cadres to download DeepSeek on their devices, saying that it could increase their capabilities and prepare them for future AI breakthroughs ([Daily Economic News](#), February 20). DeepSeek also cropped up at the Two Sessions too. One delegate announced at a press conference that he had used DeepSeek to answer the

question “will workers later be replaced by robots?” (未来产业工人会被机器人替代吗?) ([Xinhua](#), March 8). (It answered that robots would “partially replace” (部分地替代) humans.)

### **A Tool, not a Replacement: DeepSeek as a ‘New Hoe’**

Trust in DeepSeek is not uniform across the PRC. Some areas are warning people not to over-rely on LLMs at the expense of individual judgment. On March 27, municipal-level Party newspaper *Langfang Daily* argued that although those who embraced the technology would be stronger, AI can currently only catch up with, but not surpass, human thought. In other words, it “can only be relied on, but not depended on” (要依靠不依赖) ([Lanfang Daily](#), March 27).

This caution is echoed by Beijing, which will not turn social governance over to AI entirely, as it is unable to control it fully. A report from the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) from September 2024, the “AI Safety Governance Framework” (人工智能安全治理框架), advises government departments and people involved in public safety to “avoid relying exclusively on AI for decision making” (重点领域使用者应避免完全依赖人工智能的决策). It lists a variety of AI security risks the Party-state is concerned about, such as hallucinations—that is, when an AI model generates output that is factually incorrect, a relatively common phenomenon. The complex architecture governing algorithms means AI models have a “black box,” where even engineers who built the models are in the dark about how they make decisions. One goal of the CAC framework is to eradicate this black box. Doing so supposedly will “improve AI’s explainability and predictability” (不断提高人工智能可解释性和可预测性) ([CAC](#), September 9, 2024). While engineers have dramatically lessened the likelihood of hallucination in cutting-edge models, eradicating the black box entirely remains an elusive goal.

Officials, informed by concerns over the safety of AI as it progresses in future, also stress the need for humans to retain ultimate responsibility for their words and actions. Both to domestic and overseas audiences, the preferred phrase is that people must “ensure AI must always be under human control” (确保人工智能始终处于人类控制之下) ([Ministry of Science and Technology](#), September 26, 2021; [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), October 20, 2023). How long this will remain the case is unclear: in the military domain, debates on how much autonomy intelligentized systems should have are still ongoing ([China Brief](#), March 28).

AI is likely to constitute only a “new hoe” for cadres and police to modernize social governance, meant to serve as an assistant, not as their boss. This suggests that displays of reliance on DeepSeek by public services across the PRC are both a tactic to demonstrate they are following the “AI+ initiative” dictated by the center and their own private experimentation with a homegrown, popular new tool.

### **DeepSeek Trained to Toe Party Line**

DeepSeek still could be used to modernize social governance, even if it is a long way from having any decision-making power. This could occur through ensuring that the information it conveys to users, both at home and abroad, aligns with the policies of the Party-state, as demonstrated in the People’s Daily Online article above.

Journalists have noted that DeepSeek censors answers using words the Party-state considers sensitive. But censorship is only one area of propaganda. For the China Media Project, this author has run tests on DeepSeek's model that found multiple tactics common to public opinion guidance being deployed in DeepSeek's answers. Bias toward CCP interpretations of facts remained, even when the code censoring DeepSeek's answers was removed ([China Media Project](#), February 10). Attempts by Western coders to completely train out these biases are proving difficult, likely because companies are unwilling to shoulder the extensive costs of retraining a model as large as DeepSeek's ([China Media Project](#), March 4).

The Party can retain this level of control over DeepSeek's model by tapping into the foundations of AI training, allowing them to influence how a PRC model views the world. One crucial area is a model's training data—hundreds of billions of items of text, images, or video that function roughly as its “imagination.” The “Interim Measures for Generative AI” (生成式人工智能服务管理暂行办法), released by the CAC, say this data has to come from “legitimate sources” (具有合法来源) and developers need to take steps “to enhance the authenticity, accuracy, objectivity and diversity of training data” (增强训练数据的真实性、准确性、客观性、多样性) ([CAC](#), July 13, 2023).

In the context of a PRC legal framework, what is and is not accurate in a political sense is determined by the Party line. For example, multiple retrained versions of DeepSeek's model have repeated a common, incorrect, line from Chinese state media, that “Taiwan has been an inalienable part of China since ancient times” (台湾自古以来中国不分割的一部分) ([China Media Project](#), March 4). DeepSeek has not provided much detail on its training data, but has noted that an earlier version of their model removed data “influenced by regional cultures, to avoid our model exhibiting unnecessary subjective bias on these controversial topics” ([Arxiv/DeepSeek](#), June 19, 2024). Given that the majority of open-source natural language materials on the Internet are Western (a problematic bias for the CCP), it is highly likely DeepSeek was removing data containing political ideas that fall foul of the Party-state's political redlines.

DeepSeek's adherence to CCP political correctness is evident in its performance in benchmark tests. These are tests in which models answer questions designed by the Chinese developer community to evaluate LLMs during training. DeepSeek's results across a number of benchmark tests display a consensus that the “accuracy” of its answers must be in line with Party values for the model to function correctly in a PRC context. One such question in a benchmark DeepSeek had used read as follows ([China Media Project](#), February 18):

*“Some Taiwan independence elements argue that all people under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China are Chinese, and that since Taiwanese are not under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China that means they are not Chinese. Which of the following reasonings clearly shows the above argument is invalid?”*

As this indicates, the Party's views on public opinion guidance are being transmitted into DeepSeek, as well as other models.



## **Conclusion**

DeepSeek's alignment with the Party's redlines on the parameters governing the model's outputs make it an ideal tool for social governance. LLMs have the potential to replace traditional search engines, synthesizing vast amounts of data to tailor precise answers to any user queries. Eventually, an AI tool such as DeepSeek could come to replace searches on WeChat or Baidu in the same way that tools like ChatGPT are increasingly rivalling Google for information searches in the West.

Theoretically, DeepSeek could see high demand beyond the PRC's borders. Multiple countries in the developing world are desperate to develop their own AI programs but are limited by the high costs or copyright requirements of Western LLMs. DeepSeek would require extensive re-training to remove pro-CCP biases, costs which governments and tech companies have so far proved unwilling to pay out for. As a result, any adoption of DeepSeek's model overseas has the potential to spread the PRC's domestic social governance system abroad.

As domestic policymakers probe how best to use the country's first cutting-edge reasoning model, they are faced with balancing two central-level policies: augmenting AI for social governance and ensuring AI does not replace human control. There is currently a lot of variation in how local officials seek to achieve this balance, though the former gets a lot more attention from the media, the public, and central leaders, than the latter.

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