

Blurring the Boundaries of Governance: China's Work Teams in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

A notable feature of Chinese Communist rule, from revolutionary days on, has been the blurred boundaries of its governance mechanisms. The lines separating formal from informal, legal from illegal, and state from societal have – at least until quite recently – proven exceptionally permeable. This paper focuses on an especially fluid and flexible means of Chinese Communist governance: the deployment of mobile task forces, or “work teams,” for both routine and crisis policy implementation. Directed by higher-levels of the party-state to advance a specific mission at the grassroots, work teams mobilize society in a manner that reflects the continuing influence of China’s revolutionary experience. The paper assesses the contributions and costs of this “campaign-style” of governance in comparison to the practices of other Communist and non-Communist systems, past and present.

Keywords

bureaucracies, China, democratic theory, non-democratic regimes, political regimes, governance, revolution

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The People's Republic of China (PRC) poses challenges for anyone interested in issues of governance. Defying persistent predictions of its imminent demise following the Tiananmen Uprising of 1989 and subsequent collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union ([Chang, 2001](#); [Gilley, 2004](#); [MacFarquhar, 1991](#); [Shirk, 2008](#)), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains firmly in command in Beijing. Among surviving authoritarian regimes across the globe, only North Korea can claim a longer lifespan—the Democratic People's Republic of Korea having been established on September 9, 1948, just a year before the founding of the PRC on October 1, 1949. But the Chinese political puzzle goes beyond the matter of regime durability. In contrast to many other countries – whether dictatorships or democracies, developing or developed – CCP governance is known for producing spectacular results, both good and bad.

On the positive side, even in Mao's day, despite terrible damage caused by disruptive campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the PRC saw major gains in longevity and literacy. And in the post-Mao era, China has logged the fastest economic growth and lifted the most people out of poverty of any nation on earth. These accomplishments are particularly impressive when we consider the outsized scale on which they have taken place. As [Dreze and Sen \(1990\)](#) noted some time ago, the contrast in development records between China and the other "Asian giant," India, has been stark.

But state capacity is not synonymous with good governance. Over the years, the PRC's programs have proven far from uniformly positive in either execution or outcome. To cite one well-known example, the draconian single-child policy that prevailed for much of the reform period inflicted serious and lasting damage on the demographic composition of Chinese society ([Greenhalgh, 2008](#); [White, 2006](#)). More recently, China's zero-tolerance response to the COVID-19 pandemic was a shockingly coercive and costly effort that ultimately proved unsustainable ([Yang, 2024](#)). While the combination of massive testing and municipal lockdowns drew some plaudits in the initial phases of the pandemic, the refusal to transition gradually to an alternative approach once the Omicron strain of the virus gained dominance had devastating consequences, exacting a major toll on the Chinese national psyche as well as its economy. Subsequently, the abrupt abandonment of virtually all Covid restrictions resulted in tragic loss of life and an attendant erosion of public trust ([Ong, 2023](#)).

Whether we admire or abhor various PRC policies, we can surely agree that they are often implemented with a degree of speed and coordination that lies beyond the reach of most polities. China's governance record, while remarkable for any country, is especially unexpected because the political system of the PRC is, at least superficially, very similar to that of the Soviet Union and other formerly Communist regimes across Eastern Europe. In those

cases, political scientists have attributed the collapse of political regimes more than thirty years ago to the dysfunctional design of Communist party-states; institutional controls were weak, allowing government officials themselves to “steal the state” (Bunce, 1999; Solnick, 1998). Yet in the Chinese case, political scientist Bruce Dickson asserts that “[t]he CCP has survived as China’s ruling party for more than seventy years because it was built on Leninist organizational principles and continues to abide by them” (Dickson, 2021, p. 12). Chinese political institutions, like those of Eastern Europe, largely replicate the classic Soviet pattern of Leninist organization; how then do we explain China’s different trajectory?

Blurring the Formal/Informal Distinction

Many factors have contributed to the endurance of Chinese Communist rule. Political leadership is critical. Charismatic party secretaries, constrained cadres, and committed rank and file members all play vital roles (Cai, 2015; Koss, 2018; Schram, 1967). Institutions matter as well. *Formal* “input institutions,” such as the People’s Congresses and Letters and Visits Offices for handling citizen complaints, have figured to some degree (Chen, 2011; Nathan, 2013). *Informal* institutions, from “red hat capitalists” to temple and lineage associations, have been significant as well (Mattingly, 2020; Tsai, 2007, 2007). As Joseph Fewsmith points out, however, the contemporary Chinese political system is not well institutionalized: “In China, [regime] longevity has occurred through manipulation and violation of the rules, not through the creation of binding institutions” (Fewsmith, 2021, p. 8). Strong leaders have often bent or reconfigured the institutional framework to suit their own agendas.

A notable feature of CCP governance resides in blurring the boundaries between formal and informal governance mechanisms. Practices introduced for the very purpose of evading government regulations may in time gain official recognition. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, for example, the initially informal (sometimes even illegal) entrepreneurial activities of Chinese businesspeople were recognized and rewarded by membership in the Chinese Communist Party itself (K. Tsai, 2007; Dickson, 2003). Leninist organizational principles of discipline and hierarchy notwithstanding, CCP governance has in practice often shown remarkable flexibility (Shambaugh, 2009; Shue and Thornton 2017; Heilmann, 2018; Tsai et al., 2021). Non-state actors, including gangsters and other “thugs-for-hire,” are relied upon to coerce and mobilize society for state purposes (Ong, 2022). The lines separating formal from informal, legal from illegal, and state from society have proven exceptionally permeable. The result is a bewildering array of mixed signals that nevertheless provides the state “a low-cost way to contain dissent, gather information and keep options open” (Stern & O’Brien, 2012, p. 174).

An important advantage of the ambiguity inherent in blurred boundaries lies in its encouragement of productive experimentation on the part of grassroots officials seeking authorization for new initiatives that invite citizen participation (Heilmann, 2008). But boundary shifts can also inhibit bottom-up creativity if cadres come to fear the consequences of taking bold action that may later be deemed improper or illegal. A continuing challenge for the party-state – one which it does not always meet – is to strike a productive balance between the formal and the informal. The relentless party-building and anti-corruption campaigns that have prevailed in China for over a decade threaten to permanently recalibrate the equilibrium in the direction of formal regulations that favor clear party control over innovation and societal incorporation (Mittelstaedt, 2023).

From its earliest days, the fluidity of CCP governance techniques was clearly visible in one of its most pervasive, powerful and persistent practices: the deployment of work teams for both routine policy implementation and crisis management. Work teams are absent from official organization charts and active for only an interim period, yet they are authorized and operated by state and party agencies that also recruit ordinary citizens as members. Perhaps because they blur the distinction between formal and informal governance mechanisms, work teams have received almost no discussion in standard textbooks on Chinese politics. While several monographs by Western social scientists include illuminating accounts of work team activities in villages and factories alike (Andreas, 2019; Oi, 1991), these studies do not attempt to place work teams in comparative perspective. Chinese observers have been more attuned to the unusual importance of work-team governance, with scores of recent master's theses and doctoral dissertations focused on the topic. But almost without exception such studies are limited in purview to a single Mao-era mass campaign – either the Land Reform of 1950-52 or the Four Cleans of 1964-65 – with little consideration of the continuing implications of work-team deployment.

This article considers China's ubiquitous work teams in a broader framework, drawing upon the author's ongoing research on the evolution of campaign-style governance from revolutionary days to the present (Perry, 2019, 2021, 2024). The larger project is based on a wide array of primary and secondary sources: interviews, diaries, letters and memoirs of current and former work team members; confidential policy documents, government reports and work-team bulletins held in PRC archives; speeches and writings of CCP leaders; and Chinese and Western scholarship focused on a variety of individual campaigns.

Work-Team Governance

Work teams are task forces appointed and directed by higher-level Party and government organs to advance a specific mission and dispatched to the

grassroots for a limited period to carry out their assignment by means of social mobilization. Their composition, which typically includes outside cadres as well as party and non-party activists from multiple jurisdictions and work units, is designed to skirt bureaucratic resistance in favor of a swift (and sometimes ruthless) execution of state policy. Initially a product of the tutelage of Comintern advisors to China in the 1920s, work teams underwent important transformations in response to China's own revolutionary experience (Perry, 2019).

With roots in "shock brigades" and other Soviet methods of state mobilization, work teams were the Chinese Communists' principal medium for realizing Land Reform and Collectivization during the early PRC period, and for conducting a host of subsequent CCP-sponsored campaigns, as well as a favored means of responding to unexpected natural catastrophes and political emergencies. Although the threat of coercion was integral to work teams' authority from their inception, in time their disciplinary power came to be exercised in more subtle fashion. These innovations distinguished the Chinese transplant from Soviet precedents while rendering its practices similar in some respects to organizational models designed for very different contexts.

Departing from Russian prototypes, Chinese work teams enlisted a sizeable number of students and intellectuals along with grassroots activists, women as well as men, young and old, party and non-party members, cultivated over the course of struggle. Thanks in part to this diverse membership, procedural protocols evolved to include intensive pre-placement instruction, comprehensive on-site investigation, close and continued interaction with higher-level Party authorities, repeated deployments, and frequent "self-criticism" and "summing up" exercises to assess and learn from the shortcomings and achievements of previous and ongoing efforts. Because work teams include participants recruited from multiple locations and work units, they afford an opportunity for otherwise insular members to enlarge their personal networks across jurisdictional boundaries and beyond the span of any particular campaign. A village Party secretary who participated as a rural activist on numerous work teams in the Mao period credited his later success as a cadre to the lasting value of relationships forged over the course of his arduous assignments: "A true, durable friendship is one that develops when people struggle through real hardship together. These connections . . . have now turned into political capital" (Huang, 1989, p. 71).

At times work teams have conveyed a broad, nationwide mandate for programmatic change, with hundreds of thousands of teams deployed simultaneously across the country. In the Four Cleans Campaign of 1964-65, for example, work teams were sent to virtually every village in China, with a mandate to rectify grassroots cadre corruption. At other times their mission is narrowly circumscribed by task and locale, and their number can even be limited to a single team. For example, in September 2011 Lufeng city and Donghai township organized a joint team for the purpose of investigating and

pacifying a mass protest over land seizures that had broken out in nearby Wukan village.

Team membership size varies greatly as well, from as large as several hundred members to as small as one individual. Large teams (sometimes referred to as 工作团) are generally divided into smaller units (or 工作队) which may be further sub-divided into still smaller groups (工作组). During the Four Cleans, when more than three million people joined work teams, county-level teams (known as 工作团) typically included several hundred members. Their constituent commune-level teams (工作队) averaged several dozen members and were in turn comprised of village-level teams (工作组) ranging in size from half a dozen to a dozen members. Each team had a small leadership group, including a head and deputy head (who were generally party cadres) and a recording secretary (with enough education to be able to keep accounts and write reports). Except for highly sensitive or specialized assignments that demand particular political or professional credentials, the majority of team members are ordinary people.

Depending on their mission, teams may operate under a variety of other names such as 巡视组 (inspection teams), 突击队 (shock brigades), 督查组 (investigation teams), 督导组 (supervisory teams), 宣传队 (propaganda teams), 慰问组 (comfort teams), and so on. Regardless of nomenclature, the basic operational units are usually comprised of a handful of members appointed for temporary service by the personnel or organization departments of their permanent work units. Selection criteria include one's age, experience, gender, education, political activism and personal character – with an eye toward assembling a diverse group. Since subsequent career advancement is often contingent upon a successful record of work team participation, volunteers are seldom in short supply. But if necessary, work units will appoint additional team members to fulfill the quota set by higher levels. In the case of involuntary appointments, sending units may tap unpopular or unproductive employees as a way to temporarily rid themselves of troublemakers. The wages of work team members continue to be paid by their home units, to which they are expected to return after completing the grassroots assignment. While in the field, work teams report not to the local government authorities where they are deployed but to the higher-level party or state agency overseeing their deployment.

To this day, work teams – albeit in somewhat attenuated form – remain a critical weapon in the CCP's arsenal of governance techniques. The practice of dispatching ad hoc work teams and inspection teams to promote developmental priorities, manage crises, combat pandemics, propagate ideology, and monitor and discipline grassroots cadres, among many other purposes, remains one of the most common methods of addressing societal and intra-state concerns alike. Xi Jinping's signature anti-poverty and anti-corruption campaigns have both relied heavily on team deployment. Work teams are

a prime illustration of the Chinese Communist Party's continuing penchant for fashioning revolutionary modes of mass mobilization into flexible and functional, if sometimes coercive and costly, mechanisms of rule.

Why has the Chinese leadership returned repeatedly, if intermittently, to the use of work teams? The answer hinges on its assessment of the regular party-state bureaucracy. Party authorities are apt to resort to work teams whenever they believe that the bureaucracy alone is incapable of fulfilling a pressing assignment, whether due to lack of administrative capacity or to lack of political will on the part of lower-level bureaucrats. In either case, the leadership perceives a need for extra-bureaucratic assistance in pushing through its priorities. And why do work teams sometimes manage to fulfill and at other times fall far short of achieving designated goals? Mission accomplishment is of course contingent upon many things, including the clarity and wisdom of the campaign objectives themselves, but much also hinges on the complex and dynamic relationship between work teams and grassroots officials. When local officials welcome work teams as bearers of scarce and desired expertise and material resources (as was the case after the Wenchuan earthquake), they are motivated to engage in cooperative efforts that often result in impressive outcomes. When, however, lower-level bureaucrats resent and resist the interference of outside work teams in their operations (as is generally true of anti-corruption initiatives), the outcome may be less clear-cut.

Scholars have debated whether work teams are better conceptualized as a “regular” (常规) or an “irregular” (非常规) mode of governance (Li, 2010; Zhou, 2023). On the one hand, they are accorded no formal place in the official hierarchical structure of either the Chinese Communist Party or the PRC government. On the other hand, they are widely recognized as a staple feature of both party and state operations. In some cases, multiple work teams are even deployed simultaneously in the same location, creating uncertainty among team members themselves as to the appropriate scope and limitations of their mandate. Although work teams are used to advance a broad range of policy goals, they may vary greatly in size, duration and results – from one initiative to the next and from one place to another. Work teams are intended to contradict and crosscut the formally established jurisdictional and operational boundaries of state governance.

China's ubiquitous deployment of work teams has contributed to a widespread (mis)interpretation of the phenomenon – among ordinary people, scholars and government officials alike – as a product of “traditional” Chinese modes of governance. Xi Jinping himself (2015) has likened the Central Discipline Inspection Teams charged with carrying out his anti-corruption campaign to the Imperial Commissioners (钦差大臣) of dynastic China. As personal envoys of the emperor, imperial commissioners were vested with authority that trumped that of the regularly appointed provincial officials and were dispatched to trouble spots throughout the realm. Specious though the

alleged connection to contemporary work teams may be, the assertion is politically beneficial to a Communist regime that claims legitimacy not only on the basis of Marxist ideology and revolutionary and post-revolutionary accomplishments, but also on the basis of traditional “Chinese characteristics.” To liken work teams to imperial commissioners is to reference a venerable practice that credits the ruler’s direct intervention with rescuing the polity from bureaucratic mismanagement. The claim of deep cultural roots for modern revolutionary methods serves to familiarize and naturalize foreign practices, making Soviet imports appear indigenous and time tested rather than alien and transitory. The auto-Orientalizing of China’s revolutionary tradition is a centerpiece of the CCP’s ongoing propaganda effort to inoculate the PRC regime against the sort of nationalist challenges that contributed to the collapse of regimes elsewhere in the formerly Communist world (Beissinger, 2009).

Connecting State and Society

In any modern polity it is the official bureaucracy, the formal institution charged with implementing government policy, that serves as the chief administrative arm of the state. But, as Weber’s image of the “iron cage” and Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” would suggest, bureaucracies are notoriously susceptible to ossification. To combat the seemingly inevitable tendency toward bureaucratic inertia that besets democracies and autocracies alike, regimes adopt various (often short-lived) countermeasures. China’s work teams stand out as among the most enduring and effectual efforts by modern authoritarian regimes to enlist the aid of ordinary citizens (unlike imperial commissioners, who were drawn exclusively from the ranks of high government officials and military generals) to check and complement bureaucratic governance.

Since the Jiangxi Soviet of the early 1930s, which marked the Chinese Communists’ first experience in governing an extensive territory with a sizeable population, CCP-sponsored work teams have served as crucial conduits of resources, information and influence between state and society. Sometimes their purpose was primarily extractive, as with grain requisition teams, in which case they functioned in a manner quite similar to that of heavy-handed Soviet precursors (Viola, 1996). At other times, as during Land Reform, work teams were tasked with carrying out dramatic redistribution, mobilizing ordinary villagers on the basis of emotionally charged moralistic appeals to attack those with property and divide up the spoils (Javed, 2022).

Frequently, Chinese work teams are charged with more mundane developmental duties, disseminating knowledge and disbursing money, medicine, machinery, and other materiel as needed. Periodically, work teams undertake disciplinary assignments. In these instances, a chief responsibility is to gather

sensitive intelligence on the ground about potential targets and relay it confidentially to higher levels. Often teams have multiple overlapping missions. During the Four Cleans Movement, for example, they were instructed to solicit peasant complaints and investigate grassroots malfeasance, sanction offending cadres, clarify class labels, and reclaim and redistribute embezzled funds and goods (Baum, 1975). In such situations, work teams act simultaneously as top-down and bottom-up channels of communication and reallocation.

Work teams have long been regarded as a key means for strengthening the dynamic connection between Party leaders and grassroots society that Mao Zedong advocated as an antidote to ineffective governance. Mao wrote during the war with Japan: “One fundamental reason why the work in many places and many organizations cannot be pushed ahead is the lack of a leading group which is united, linked with the masses and kept constantly healthy . . . Whether in carrying out the central tasks – war, production, education (including rectification) – or in checking up on work, examining the cadres’ histories, or in other activities, it is necessary to adopt the method of linking the leading group with the masses” (Mao, 1943, p. 289). When the extant bureaucratic apparatus was considered unfit or unable to provide the requisite elite-mass linkage, due to incapacity or inertia, work teams were dispatched as a “leading group” to perform this critical function.

It is the dual role of work teams, as two-way transmission belts between state and society, that renders them a particularly powerful mechanism of governance. Although their earliest appearance can be traced to Bolshevik models, subsequent Chinese permutations evinced a vitality and versatility that eluded Soviet counterparts. In the Soviet Union, too, “shock methods” that had originally been introduced to meet wartime exigencies were later resuscitated in what Thomas Remington (1984: 163) has characterized as an attempt “to reassemble a revolutionary society into a centralized state.” But in the USSR, Stalin’s efforts to revive and redirect modes of revolutionary mobilization toward purposes of state building are said to have backfired, leading to “larger losses of control and information” (Remington, 1984, p. 162). The brutal methods of Soviet grain-requisition brigades, collectivization brigades and shock brigades had evidently bequeathed a lasting revulsion among the Russian populace. As a result, Stalin’s successors distanced themselves from this mode of governance in favor of more bureaucratic, less disruptive methods.

The relationship between ad hoc work teams and the bureaucracy varies by task and circumstance. When their chief mission is to combat official corruption, work teams typically assume temporary control of the local Party and government apparatus. In that case, grassroots cadres are either suspended or removed from their posts and replaced by work team appointees. When the mandate is primarily developmental rather than disciplinary, teams are more

likely to work in tandem with local authorities who remain at their posts. If a developmental initiative encounters opposition from entrenched bureaucratic interests, as can be true of more ambitious campaigns whose goals are difficult to attain, work teams may be authorized to overrule grassroots officials as needed. In instances where work teams and local governments share a common commitment to both ends and means, when providing disaster relief or preventing the spread of a pandemic for example, the teams are more likely to play a complementary rather than a commanding role vis a vis the extant power structure. Even then, the work teams' demand for rapid results can cause friction with beleaguered cadres whose time and resources are already stretched to the limit. The governance outcome may be more "performative" than substantive (Ding, 2022).

Relations with local officials are critical to the success of a work team's mission, but equally vital are the connections forged with ordinary citizens. Work teams are charged with identifying and incorporating "activists" who can be relied upon to provide insider information on local conditions and to reach out to their neighbors for assistance in implementing policy priorities. These activists (also known as "roots" and "backbones") may be recruited into the Party or granted an official position by the work team, but often they conduct their assignments outside of the formal party-state hierarchy. While the prominent participation of ordinary people in carrying out the Party's agenda has been a core characteristic of Chinese Communism, distinguishing it from many other authoritarian regimes, it is by no means an unproblematic mode of governance. Preexisting conflicts and longstanding divisions within local society are liable to become magnified and weaponized if (some) citizens are empowered by an outside work team to take matters into their own hands. Moreover, new cleavages can arise between those included and excluded from participation in the work team's operations. One reason for the repeated rounds of work teams that characterize many Chinese campaigns is precisely the residue of rifts and resentments left in the wake of previous teams.

In addition to recruiting ordinary residents, work teams often invite students and teachers from nearby schools to participate as auxiliary members. Such individuals can be helpful in deciphering the local dialect and navigating local cultural norms. These "homegrown intellectuals" may be tasked with conducting door-to-door surveys, communicating information about new programs, and compiling summary reports. In some cases (such as disaster relief or anti-poverty initiatives) work teams are expected to liaise with other agencies or enterprises, both inside and outside the locale, to attract material support to enable the team to meet reconstruction or development goals. Teams may also arrange for experts based at more distant universities and research institutes to join them for a time in the field to provide onsite professional advice. The prominent place of educated intellectuals distinguishes Chinese work teams from Soviet prototypes and contributes to their pedagogical potential. Reliance on

students and teachers to promote party policies takes advantage of the respect which intellectuals generally enjoy in Chinese society while at the same time providing an opportunity to monitor and mold their political attitudes in directions that serve state interests (Perry, 2021).

Controversy, Continuity and Change

Despite significant differences between the Russian and Chinese variants, in both the Soviet Union and the PRC the continued deployment of work teams and inspection teams after the founding of a Communist party-state bespoke unresolved tensions between the legacy of revolutionary mobilization and the new demands of post-revolutionary rule. In the case of the USSR, in addition to various mobile units tasked with achieving specific goals such as grain requisition and agricultural collectivization, the People's Commissariat of Workers' and Peasants' Inspection (known also as NK RKI or Rabkrin) was introduced by Lenin in 1919 to involve the proletariat in the work of state administration as part of the envisioned transition to Communism. The NK RKI was responsible for supervising governmental policy implementation while combatting "bureaucratism" (Rees, 1987). In China, the Jiangxi Soviet government established in Ruijin in November 1931 also featured, in obvious imitation of Rabkrin, a Worker-Peasant Inspection Commission (工农检查委员会) charged with investigating misuse of public funds, cadre corruption and other abuses of bureaucratic authority. When the Chinese Red Army fanned out from Ruijin to occupy a new area, one of its first tasks was to organize a workers and peasants inspection team (工农检查队) to deal with citizen complaints. These teams "served as the eyes and ears of the local soviet government and helped it to determine whether economic equality and social justice had resulted from land confiscation and distribution" (Kim, 1973, pp. 48, 78, 122, 124). The inspection teams were in turn comprised of two subunits: an appeals bureau (控告局) to process grassroots grievances and a shock brigade (突击队) to conduct surprise raids on government agencies. Shock brigade membership was open to all adult citizens of the Jiangxi Soviet on a temporary, rotating basis. Additionally, a light cavalry brigade (轻骑队) operated under the auspices of the Jiangxi Soviet's Communist Youth League to enlist younger participants in the task of fighting corruption (Yu et al., 2001, p. 923). With origins dating back to the Russian revolution, shock brigades and light cavalry brigades were mobile units repurposed from the battlefield to the task of combating official malfeasance.

In both China and Russia, the involvement of ordinary citizens in the internal affairs of the post-revolutionary party and state would spark disagreement among political elites. Whereas charismatic leaders like Lenin and Mao argued for the continuing necessity of direct popular participation to sustain revolutionary *elan* and serve as a check on the burgeoning

bureaucracy, more institutionally inclined rulers like Stalin and Liu Shaoqi favored a statist approach that called for the party to exercise strict control over its deployment of mobile task forces. The debate outlived the revolutionary generation. Upon acceding to power, Khrushchev initially denounced Stalinist “bureaucratism” for having supplanted the Leninist model of “participatory democracy,” yet in the end he and his successors would gradually do away with work-team deployment altogether. By contrast, Xi Jinping – while relying heavily on work teams and keen to present himself as a latter-day Mao Zedong committed to mass-line governance – on the question of party control versus populism is more closely aligned with Mao’s Cultural Revolution nemesis Liu Shaoqi than with the Great Helmsman himself.

In the mid-1960s, China’s paramount leaders – CCP Chairman Mao Zedong and PRC President Liu Shaoqi – locked horns over the issue of work teams. At first it seemed that this rift might presage a major shift in governance techniques similar to what had taken place in the Soviet Union a few years earlier. Mao’s harsh condemnation of the “human sea tactics” and other overbearing practices employed by the work teams overseen by Liu during the Four Cleans and early Cultural Revolution led the sociologist Franz Schurmann to conclude in 1968 that “the work-team method was branded as fundamentally wrong, and rejected for all time.” The result, Schurmann opined, was to deprive the PRC of “one of the key devices of the Chinese Communist Party’s organizational handbook” (Schurmann 1967, p. 508).

Fortunately for the fate of the CCP, however, Schurmann’s obituary proved premature. In the summer of 1968, work teams known as “Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams” (composed of factory workers and commanded by the People’s Liberation Army) were dispatched across the country to put a lid on factional strife and restore political order. Soon thereafter other mobile units were deployed on a large-scale under the name of “Comfort Teams” (慰问团) to supervise and support the millions of youths sent from the cities to the countryside (Honig & Zhao, 2019). By the end of the Mao era, the term “work team” itself had reentered the administrative lexicon in the form of “Learn from Dazhai work teams” and “Learn from Daqing work teams” to promote radical Maoist policies in agriculture and industry respectively. To the extent that Mao’s condemnation of Liu Shaoqi’s approach to work teams was more than simply a convenient excuse to attack a political rival, it did not indicate a wholesale rejection of work-team governance. Instead, it pointed to Mao’s preference for a greater degree of spontaneity and mass participation than Liu Shaoqi, disciplined apparatchik that he was, had been willing to countenance.

Although work teams are organized by party and government entities at all levels of the political system, their authority derives from the general assumption that they represent the will of the ruler at the grassroots. Continuity and change in operations and objectives are primarily a reflection of the preferences of the supreme leader.

In the post-Mao period, despite Deng Xiaoping's dramatic declaration that the era of mass campaigns had ended, Deng and his successors returned repeatedly to the main mechanism for waging such campaigns as a standard mode of governance. In addition to recurring waves of work teams to advance longstanding Party priorities such as family planning and public health, work teams were dispatched intermittently to spearhead programs associated with individual leaders: Three Represents work teams to disseminate Jiang Zemin's ideology, New Socialist Countryside Construction work teams to promote Hu Jintao's rural development initiative, and Precision Poverty Alleviation work teams to conduct Xi Jinping's war on poverty, for example. But this is not to say that work team operations have remained unchanged from Mao's day to the present. Contemporary work teams, in the spirit of Deng's call for an end to mass campaigns, have increasingly exhibited the tighter Party control that Mao railed against at the start of the Cultural Revolution as symptomatic of "bureaucratism" and "revisionism." The turbulence of the Cultural Revolution, followed by the traumas of 1989 and the Soviet collapse, have impressed upon Mao's successors the need for stronger Party direction.

Pros and Cons of Work Team Governance

Work teams promote the Party's agenda by supplementing or supplanting routine administration with an empowered task force focused squarely on mission completion, yet whether they further "good governance" depends on the wisdom of the policies they are called on to implement. On the one hand, for example, in the early years of the PRC, public health work teams helped rid the country of the devastating scourges of smallpox and schistosomiasis; on the other hand, in that same period similar kinds of teams were deployed in an ill-advised Eliminate Four Pests Campaign that resulted in severe ecological imbalance (Gross, 2016; Shapiro, 2001).

Regardless of the positives or negatives of the various initiatives they are tasked to advance, work teams harbor the potential to deliver a significant political dividend in terms of state-society relations. As a complement and counterweight to the normal bureaucratic chain of command, prone as it is to paralysis and peculation, this form of ad hoc governance promises an alternative, more immediate channel of communication and implementation. But to function as an effective transmission belt that redounds to the state's advantage, work teams must be subject to higher-level supervision. If not well instructed and overseen by the agencies that dispatch them, work teams can easily generate commotion and confusion at the grassroots. This was the situation at the start of the Cultural Revolution, when work teams sent in haste to schools and factories in the spring of 1966 triggered intense factionalism on the ground (Walder, 2012). Lack of a clearly specified mission, fueled by deep divisions within the Party leadership, contributed to the chaos. Mao's decision

to pin the blame on Liu Shaoqi and order the withdrawal of work teams in favor of unmediated mass activism unleashed a torrent of violence that even he could not abide for long, however. In the summer of 1968 Mao deputized Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams (work teams by another name) operating under the supervision of the military to reimpose order.

Work teams are valuable to the regime not only as a potentially controllable method of involving ordinary citizens in carrying out party-state initiatives. They serve as a powerful check on rent-seeking tendencies within the party-state itself. The collapse of the former Soviet Union has been ascribed to rampant corruption among state officials; bureaucrats lined their pockets with the very resources they were supposed to be safeguarding. The result, according to Steven Solnick, was that “Soviet institutions were victimized by the organizational equivalent of a colossal ‘bank run’” (Solnick, 1998, p. 7). In the Chinese case, unannounced inspection teams help to lessen the likelihood of this kind of institutional implosion by monitoring and disciplining cadres at various levels of the system. While Party rectification and anti-corruption campaigns operate under the command of higher levels of the party-state, the teams responsible for implementing such campaigns elicit essential information from ordinary citizens and enlist their participation in publicly criticizing (and sometimes also in sentencing and punishing) targeted officials. In this way both top-down and bottom-up pressure is brought to bear on middle and lower-level bureaucrats, serving to mitigate temptations toward embezzlement or other sorts of misappropriation and malfeasance. Of course, such extra-bureaucratic “shock” methods may also intimidate and alienate local officials, discouraging them from undertaking innovative activities (Wang, 2019). The challenge is to curb corruption without sacrificing cadre initiative in the process.

The disciplinary effects of work teams are not limited to bureaucrats. According to first-hand accounts, work team participation is experienced as a kind of rite of passage by many team members themselves. The assignment often entails a dramatic change in environment and routine. High-level cadres and distinguished professors from Beijing can suddenly find themselves thrust into an unfamiliar rural setting, hundreds or even thousands of miles from home, tasked with the challenge of getting close enough to the local inhabitants (who may speak an incomprehensible dialect) to be able to understand their complaints and ignite their enthusiasm for Party priorities. As a result, team members are apt to acquire new perspectives and versatile leadership skills that outlive their deployment. Reminiscences by officials and intellectuals alike often point to work team participation as a quasi-religious transformative experience that improved their understanding of societal conditions and enhanced their identification with state initiatives (Perry, 2021).

Such changes in the thought and behavior of work team members are not an unanticipated, serendipitous byproduct of their deployment. As a work team at

a Shanghai shipbuilding factory summarized its purpose during the Socialist Education Movement in 1965: “The work team not only helps other people engage in revolution; during the movement it also furthers its own revolutionary transformation” (工作队既要帮助别人革命, 又要在运动中促进自己的革命化.) (Shanghai Municipal Archives, 1965). Throughout their tour of duty, work team members are themselves subjected to intensive instruction, investigation and assessment. They undergo demanding training programs before and during their assignment that are designed to strengthen support for the party-state’s policies and priorities. They endure frequent evaluations and criticisms from team leaders and fellow members and engage in periodic self-criticism intended to dampen any inclination toward dissent or disobedience. Their own work is subject to inspection and evaluation by follow-up (回头) teams, with prospects for promotion contingent upon a favorable performance review.

It is not uncommon for cadres and intellectuals to participate in multiple work teams over the course of their careers, reinforcing the propensity toward regime loyalty. The result, according to later memoirs as well as contemporaneous diaries, can be a change in outlook that increases sympathy toward the party-state’s agenda. Here, too, the Chinese situation departs to some degree from Soviet precedents. In Stalin’s day, groups of CPSU activists from factories and towns were sent to the countryside several times a year as part of campaigns intended to convince Russian peasants to work harder and surrender more grain to the state. First-hand accounts indicate, however, that many team members did not feel uplifted by the experience; they report having returned from these assignments “morose and angry” (Andreev-Khomiakov, 1997, p. 65). In the Soviet Union, periodic participation in mobile units seems to have underscored the distance between city and countryside, thereby alienating urban activists and rural villagers alike. The differing scenarios in the two countries is perhaps best explained by dissimilar revolutionary experiences. Unlike China, where impoverished peasants in the remote countryside constituted the backbone of the Communist revolution, the Russian revolution took hold among relatively privileged factory workers in the major cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg (Koenker, 1987; Mandel, 2018). When such workers were sent down to the villages in the name of imposing the “dictatorship of the proletariat” on the “backward” peasantry, it was hardly surprising that they were not greeted with open arms.

In the Chinese case, although there are many egregious exceptions, work teams appear on the whole to have moderated the urban/rural divide and magnified grassroots trust in the Party center. As direct emissaries of higher levels of the party-state, with a mandate to improve local conditions, work teams personify the leaders’ concern for the needs of the people. In the wake of major catastrophes or crises (e.g., the Great Leap Famine, the 1989 protests, and the Wenchuan earthquake) this reassurance from the center takes on heightened importance, but even during more normal times the fact that upper-level authorities have gone to

the trouble of sending down a work team offers a tangible manifestation of their attention and involvement. Many Chinese citizens, especially those who reside in the countryside, reportedly see work teams as a welcome means of disciplining grassroots cadres and distributing state resources. This positive image is the result of decades of efforts to render work team operations compatible with grassroots conditions. At the end of the 20th century, when the use of work teams for anti-corruption campaigns in the Chinese countryside had temporarily subsided (soon to be revived under Xi Jinping), villagers were said to “yearn for agents of higher levels appearing in their villages to clean things up” (O’Brien & Li, 1999, p. 377). Urban residents have also expressed appreciation for the assistance of work teams, especially in times of crisis. As recently as the 2020 Covid lockdown of Wuhan, even as sharp a critic as the novelist Fang Fang commented favorably on the “humanistic” method of dispatching work teams “to oversee a group of families in order to help the government understand their current health condition and what they might be lacking in their daily lives right now in terms of supplies and other items” (Fang, 2022, p. 87).

Its multiple contributions notwithstanding, work-team governance entails severe drawbacks. Even when teams act to promote enlightened policies, their campaign-style methods incur substantial costs. The disruption of bureaucratic procedures creates uncertainty that can sometimes prove counter-productive to state objectives. Competent and creative officials may be chastised and sidelined by uninformed or over-zealous teams. Local cadres may feel threatened by the work teams’ authority to disparage or displace them. The result can be passivity or even outright hostility on the part of grassroots officials. Ordinary citizens may also grow weary of the urgency and intensity that work-team governance entails. Particularly in the case of unpopular policies (e.g., the one-child campaign and, over time, the zero-covid mandate) the public response may be estrangement rather than enthusiasm. Work teams must be deployed strategically and sparingly, with careful attention to their effect on bureaucratic operations as well as public opinion, if their initiatives are to be successful and sustainable.

A legacy of the revolutionary era, work teams, shock brigades, inspection teams and the like are emblematic of a “guerrilla policy style” that is antithetical to the rule of law (Heilmann & Perry, 2011). Invested with pleni-potentiary powers that override the authority of established government institutions, these task forces militate against the predictable procedures of a rational-legal bureaucracy that are the hallmark of a modern Weberian state (Weber, 2013: chapter 3). Moreover, the effects are not necessarily confined to the grassroots. Cadres assigned to distant work-team duty, even in the event of a protracted deployment lasting for years, continue to be counted officially as active employees of their home unit, thereby preventing replacement by new hires. In depleting the ranks of the higher-level agencies from which their members are drawn, work teams sap the strength of sending units as well.

Although latter-day teams share many characteristics with their revolutionary forebears, they have undergone important changes over a century of evolution. Compared to the Soviet Union, Chinese teams developed closer connections to grassroots society through their identification and instruction of local activists tasked with fulfilling the teams' mission on the ground. This mass-line approach had the advantage of allowing the state to implement its policies "on the cheap," inasmuch as unsalaried activists shouldered the lion's share of the operational burden. Equally important, it meant that ordinary people themselves took ownership of state initiatives. At the same time, however, the work teams' injection of outside resources and support along with their reliance on a particular segment of society – whose composition might vary in response to the demands of different campaigns – had the notable downside of introducing or intensifying serious (and sometimes violent) societal divisions. In part because of concern over the social disruption associated with campaign-style governance, work teams in the post-Mao era have increasingly shied away from mass mobilization in favor of a more restrained, managerial method that relies primarily on cadre involvement and implementation. If the engagement of intellectuals, grassroots activists and other citizens was the feature that most distinguished Chinese work teams from counterparts in other Communist settings, then one wonders whether the diminished popular participation of recent years will jeopardize the usefulness of this mode of revolutionary governance. The more tightly controlled teams of the post-Mao period are surely less prone to ignite social conflict, but can they still be relied upon to excite enthusiasm for the state's agenda and serve as a credible check on its officials?

Likely and Unlikely Parallels

In considering the continuities and contributions of work-team governance, it is instructive to put the Chinese case in comparative perspective. As noted above, the historical origins of China's campaign work teams reside in Russian revolutionary precedents such as shock brigades and light cavalry brigades. However, the divergent trajectories of the Russian and Chinese revolutions shaped important differences in both the composition and the operations of their respective mobile task forces. Whereas the Soviets dispatched untrained and heavy-handed groups of urban factory workers to install a coercive "dictatorship of the proletariat" in the countryside, Chinese work teams were comprised of a more diverse membership that typically included a substantial number of students and intellectuals drawn from rural as well as urban backgrounds. From an early period, the CCP also devoted serious attention to both pre-deployment and in-service instruction and evaluation for team members. Unlike the Soviet Union, where popular opposition helped persuade the post-Stalin leadership to forsake this

revolutionary holdover in favor of a more bureaucratic approach, the PRC continues to rely upon work teams for a wide variety of administrative challenges.

While the former Soviet Union presents the most obvious (albeit dissimilar) parallel, it is not the only apposite comparand. Other, still-surviving Communist regimes may owe their staying power in part to a reservoir of legitimacy generated by the deployment of work teams at critical junctures in their history. For example, Fidel Castro's famed Literacy Campaign of 1961, credited with giving Cuba one of the highest literacy rates in the world, was conducted by "brigades" of teachers, students and factory workers sent from Havana and other urban centers to rural villages (Herman, 2012). Inspiration for the Cuban initiative came in part from China's Great Leap Forward, in which stamping out illiteracy formed a pillar of Mao's crusade to overcome the inequalities separating cities and countryside. The impact on Cuba was profound: "The National Literacy Campaign gave the Revolution an educational foundation from which to build a new citizenship and the result has been a socialism that is uniquely Cuban and a commitment to reinvent it with mass participation from ordinary citizens" (Abendroth, 2009: xxiv). Despite severe economic difficulties, Cuba continues to guarantee free education, universal health care, and social security for all citizens. Similarly, Land Reform in North Vietnam was closely modeled on the Chinese example – with work teams sent down to the countryside to practice the "three togethers" of living, eating, and working with the peasants and charged with recruiting local activists as "roots" to complete the process of land redistribution (Moise, 1983). Although neither Cuba nor Vietnam still relies on Chinese-style work teams as a mainstay of policy implementation, their storied legacy lives on as a point of pride in both countries. Even today, literacy and land reform campaigns are referenced frequently as treasured results of the revolution in their respective settings. But just as Chinese discussions of work teams rarely mention their Russian origins, so Cuban and Vietnamese accounts seldom give credit to Chinese precedents.

Communist countries past and present do not exhaust the universe of intriguing and ironic parallels. Over decades of CCP experimentation before and after 1949, Chinese work teams acquired characteristics that bear a surprising likeness to prescribed "best practices" in certain circles of American management theory. The temporary, task-driven, and crosscutting nature of work teams resembles the approach that management theorists such as Warren Bennis (1968) and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. (1993) advocated under the label of "adhocracy." Defining "adhocracy" as "any form of organization that cuts across normal bureaucratic lines to capture opportunities, solve problems and get results," Waterman, (1993: 16) touts it as "*the* most powerful tool we have for effecting change." Key to adhocracy's effectiveness is its reliance on teams that combine a diverse membership with a unity of purpose:

“Apples from one department, oranges from another, coming together to find solutions to common problems . . . it cuts through organizational charts, departments, functions, job descriptions, hierarchy, and tradition like a hot knife through butter” (Waterman, 1993: 16). Despite the groups’ decidedly unbureaucratic work style, their “frequent interaction with upper management” is what “keeps teams on track” (Waterman, 1993: 31). While under adhocracy the units formed to tackle any particular problem are by definition transitory, according to Waterman the practice of deploying such task forces should be enduring: “Teams are temporary, but adhocracy is permanent, just like bureaucracy” (Waterman, 1993: 26). The recipe for successful corporate management, in this view, requires the skillful balancing of interim and institutional approaches, “the ability to move seamlessly from adhocracy to bureaucracy and back again” (Waterman, 1993: 26).

Beyond the school of “adhocracy,” Chinese work teams resonate with features of what are often referred to in the mainstream management literature as “parallel teams” or “project teams” – namely, groups of employees who are pulled together from different work units at the behest of central management to operate outside the formal organizational structure to solve pressing problems. Encompassing quality improvement teams, employee involvement teams, special task forces, and the like, these temporary groups reflect a diversity of expertise and report directly to higher-ups in the organization. Although team members will return to their original units once the project is completed, their close connection to top-level management while on assignment affords them a time-limited authority that transcends the regular organization chart. Charged with tackling multiple tasks simultaneously, rather than sequentially, such groups are credited with the ability to effect rapid breakthroughs in the case of organization bottlenecks (Cohen & Bailey, 1997).

Perhaps even more unexpected than these analogues in business management, core features of Chinese work teams also dovetail with prescriptions to be found in a wide range of contemporary theories of democratic governance. With governance commonly defined as “the interactive processes through which society and the economy are steered toward collectively negotiated objectives,” the involvement of citizens is a core concern (Ansell and Torfing 2016, p. 4). Theories of “deliberative governance,” “regulatory governance,” “collaborative governance,” “heterarchical governance,” “participatory governance,” “representative governance,” “network governance” and the like have all been proposed as means of deepening and strengthening democratic regimes through the activism and incorporation of ordinary citizens (Ansell and Torfing 2016). Political scientist Robert Putnam in his influential studies of Italy and the United States argues that what “makes democracy work” are the civic associations that engage ordinary Italians and Americans in public life. Democracies perform best, Putnam contends, when citizens are themselves actively and collectively involved in political affairs; a

robust civil society contributes both to state capacity and to good governance (Putnam, 1993, 2000). In the case of China, operating under a radically different type of political regime, work teams played something of an analogous role – “making Communism work” not through strengthening civil society but by enlisting ordinary people collectively and collaboratively in the Party’s ambitious agenda (Perry, 2019).

There are fundamental differences between democratic civic associations and authoritarian work teams, to be sure. Whereas democratic theorists stress the “co-production of public policy” by state and society through various kinds of horizontal connections, Chinese work teams operate in a top-down fashion, with authority vested in higher-level party and government agencies and citizens expected to play a supportive rather than a proactive role in the policy process. The primary job of citizens (or “masses” as they are referred to in Maoist theory) is to enhance and implement Party policy, not to initiate it. Although Mao Zedong’s signature “Mass Line” method of governance hailed the masses as the inspiration for all sound policy (Liu, 2006), Mao also – in good Leninist fashion – highlighted the role of Party leadership in formulating “correct” policies that the masses would then accept as their own and carry forward with enthusiasm:

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily “from the masses, to the masses.” This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time (Mao, 1943: 290).

Mao’s vision of Party guidance is obviously a far cry from what liberal democratic theorists have in mind when they advocate for civil society governance, but the work teams’ deputizing of ordinary Chinese to execute the Party’s projects does differentiate the classic PRC pattern from the former Soviet Union and most other authoritarian states. By incorporating the “masses” as agents of policy implementation, work teams can strengthen state capacity. Enhanced capacity has implications for government responsiveness and political legitimacy. As Pratap Mehta (2010, p. 381) notes of both China and India, “state capacity can, to a certain extent, mitigate the ill effects of unaccountable government.” The fact that civic associations in democratic societies are also subject to strong state influence further complicates any facile attempt to draw categorical

contrasts in modes of governance on grounds of regime type alone (Naim, 2009; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999).

Conclusions

Work teams afford insight into one of the most durable and malleable instruments of Chinese Communist rule. Functioning within an otherwise quite conventional Leninist party-state institutional framework, work teams – at least until recently – have helped facilitate an unusual degree of governance flexibility. If the demise of European Communist regimes was due in large measure to the rigidity of their bureaucratic political institutions, then the dynamism and dexterity enabled by China's work-team governance may help to explain its relative robustness. Alternatively, if we attribute the collapse of European Communism less to its institutional flaws than to its ideological and moral failings and the attendant alienation of intellectuals and other dissidents (Chirot, 1991), then the close collaboration between "activist" intellectuals and the state exemplified in the practice of Chinese work teams underscores yet another telling difference.

The signature features of PRC rule, fashioned in response to China's revolutionary and post-revolutionary challenges, have by no means proven wholly benign or beneficial. From the perspective of the Chinese state, however, work teams have served over the years as powerful tools of policy implementation and political control. Although continued deployment (in altered and attenuated form) does not ensure the success or survival of the Chinese Communist regime, the significance of blurred governance boundaries to the resilience of CCP rule should not be minimized. Work teams have repeatedly marshalled the energies and allegiances of ordinary citizens, from impoverished villagers to educated intellectuals, in response to the state's ambitious demands. They have also tightened the party-state's grip on its officials, reducing cadres' tendencies to feather their own nests while reinforcing deference to higher-level orders. At times when the regime faced serious challenge, work teams played a crucial role in helping the PRC to weather a series of self-inflicted crises and natural disasters (the Great Leap Famine of the early 1960s, the Tiananmen Uprising of 1989, the Wenchuan earthquake of 2008, the Covid pandemic of 2020-22, among other events) that would likely have spelled the end of less nimble regimes. By blurring the rigid division between the party-state hierarchy and society-at-large that is typically associated with Leninist systems, Chinese governance benefits enormously from the backing and the buy-in of ordinary citizens.

Work teams are but one of myriad ways in which CCP governance blurs the distinction between state and society to augment administrative capacity. Rank and file Party members who are not government officials also play a role in implementing and fine-tuning hard-to-enforce state policies – from tax

collection to family planning (Koss, 2018). Non-Party volunteers are mobilized to “care for the elderly, help out at major sporting and diplomatic events, give tutoring support for migrant children, engage in environmental cleanups, or travel as volunteer teachers to remote rural and ethnic minority regions” (Palmer & Ning, 2020, p. 314). “Covert informants” who are neither Party members nor formal state employees collect sensitive intelligence on suspected counter-revolutionaries and other targeted individuals (Dimitrov, 2023, pp. 249–250). “Social brokers” operating as community activists provide additional assistance with respect to surveillance, public goods provision, conflict mediation, and other key state-mandated tasks (Ong, 2022, p. 7).

Considering the important contributions of boundary blurring in bolstering CCP rule, recent developments pointing in the opposite direction should perhaps be a cause for concern among the Chinese leadership. Since the 1990s, the growing emphasis on “stability maintenance” (维稳) as the party’s number-one priority has been accompanied by a dwindling role for ordinary Chinese citizens in state-sponsored campaigns. Work-team participation is increasingly confined to CCP members, often drawn from a single department or work unit, whose task is to monitor or minister to – rather than to mobilize – a mass constituency. This bureaucratization of campaign-style governance predated Xi Jinping’s rise to power and has only intensified under his administration.

The move away from mass participation toward greater Party control has occurred alongside an increased specialization and professionalization in both the mission and the composition of work teams. Environmental inspection teams are staffed primarily by scientists, medical work teams are dominated by doctors and nurses, disaster recovery teams are composed largely of public health experts, engineers, and so on. These secular trends reflect a general retreat from “class struggle” and rise of “stability maintenance” in the post-Mao era. They are also shaped by the particular preferences of individual leaders.

Xi Jinping’s strong-armed rule is frequently likened to that of Mao Zedong, but when it comes to the matter of mass mobilization Xi’s position shares more in common with that of Mao’s onetime rival, Liu Shaoqi. Denounced in the Cultural Revolution as “China’s Khrushchev,” Liu was accused (with some justification) of promoting Soviet-style “revisionism” that advocated for unambiguous, top-down lines of party authority in place of Mao’s mercurial penchant for “continuing the revolution.” Like Liu Shaoqi in an earlier era, Xi Jinping fears the dangers of unbridled popular participation and calls for tight party control to counter the potential for social unrest. Cadres have replaced ordinary citizens as the main constituency and point of contact.

Xi Jinping’s ongoing anti-corruption and anti-poverty programs are conducted via party-appointed work teams, yet their *modus operandi* is far removed from the tumultuous brand of “campaign-style governance” that

obtained in Mao's day. In post-Mao China, the vertical concentration of disciplinary power up to the Central Commission for Discipline and Inspection in Beijing has substantially reduced the space for grassroots inclusion. Instead, higher levels of the party direct the process of investigation and punishment for all government personnel, including non-Party members and employees at state-owned enterprises (Li, 2016; Liao & Tsai, 2020).

Xi's aspiration is apparently to cultivate a de-politicized public willing to accept without complaint whatever policies the party leadership deems to be in the interest of the greater Chinese nation. The demise of the Soviet Union offers a cautionary tale, however. Although "stability maintenance" was adopted by the Chinese leadership as a prophylactic against the threats posed by the Tiananmen Uprising and subsequent demise of Communist regimes across eastern Europe (Wang & Minzer, 2015), its ultimate effect, ironically enough, could well be to weaken the sinews of PRC resilience. If a key to regime capacity and legitimacy in earlier decades lay in a creative blurring of the demarcation between state and society in ways that encouraged mass involvement and popular acceptance of government initiatives, then the hardened boundary lines that increasingly serve to separate party members from ordinary Chinese citizens may undermine the very "political security" (政治安全) that Xi advocates. The more China strives to avoid the fate of the former Soviet Union, the more it seems to replicate bureaucratic patterns of governance that foreshadowed the Soviet collapse.

Yet the prospects are not entirely bleak. The Covid lockdowns in Wuhan and Shanghai not only demonstrated the immense coercive power of the Chinese state. These incidents also revealed an impressive ability on the part of ordinary Chinese to take matters into their own hands—arranging for group deliveries of food and other necessities, checking in on vulnerable neighbors, sharing information by social media to counteract government propaganda, and the like (Yang, 2022). Despite the state's efforts in recent years to weaken NGOs and other expressions of civil society, voluntarism and community activism were on full display during the pandemic. If one outcome of the sharpened separation of party from people has been a rise in political alienation, another may be a heightened public awareness and appreciation for the capacity and civility of Chinese society itself.

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