

Central-Local Relations and Party Politics in China under Xi Jinping

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Introduction

Since Xi Jinping came to power, the central government has substantially expanded its control over local authorities.¹ This article investigates central-local relations in China from the perspective of party politics, particularly through the lens of “campaign-style enforcement” (*yundong xing zhibili*) and the “mass line” (*qunzhong luxian*).² The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) generally defines “the masses” (*qunzhong*) to include grassroots cadres and ordinary members of the public, although the definition is kept vague depending on the context.³ “Campaign-style enforcement” involves the large-scale mobilization of the masses and other resources to carry out high-priority tasks. This pattern of policy implementation is reminiscent of Deng Xiaoping’s famous maxim, “Concentrate power to accomplish big things” (*jizhong liliang ban da shi*).⁴

This article proposes that the CCP under Xi Jinping has actively promoted campaign-style enforcement of important policies, and that this reflects the essential nature of the party. To a large extent, the CCP is still a *revolutionary party* that retains the same ability to mobilize China’s population as during the Chinese Civil War. As Elizabeth J. Perry has observed, the CCP draws on its revolutionary experience and uses it to govern China today.⁵

¹ For a discussion of central-local relations in contemporary China, see Chae-ho Chong, *Centrifugal Empire: Central-Local Relations in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

² Marc Blecher, “Consensual Politics in Rural Chinese Communities: The Mass Line in Theory and Practice,” *Modern China* 5 no. 1 (January 1979): 105-126.

³ Maria Edin, “State Capacity and Local Agent Control in China: CCP Cadre Management from a Township Perspective,” *The China Quarterly* 173 (2003): 43.

⁴ “Jizhong liliang ban da shi [Concentrate power to accomplish big things],” Zhongguo junwang [China Military Network], May 23, 2019, http://www.81.cn/big5/theory/2019-05/23/content_9511986.htm.

⁵ Elizabeth J. Perry, “Studying Chinese Politics: Farewell to Revolution,” *The China Journal* 57 (January 2007), 5.

Under Xi Jinping, campaign-style enforcement has been used to drive important policies such as poverty alleviation, anti-corruption, environmental protection, and combating natural disasters. Campaigns have long been an important mode of operation within the CCP system. China's response to the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic saw the use of mass mobilization techniques to wage a new "people's war" (*renmin zhanzheng*) against SARS.⁶ The CCP's frequent use of campaign-style enforcement to implement major policies suggests that its bureaucracy has limited conventional capabilities, leaving it little choice but to resort to political campaigns to implement policies.⁷

The increased use of the campaign-style enforcement model also demonstrates how the central government's control over individual localities has increased. When Xi Jinping has mobilized cadres and the masses to put his policies into practice, he operates through local party secretaries (*dangwei shuji*), the highest-ranking officials at any given level of local governance. We find that party secretaries at the central, provincial, municipal, county, and township levels are required to concentrate their resources and mobilize as many cadres and members of the public as possible to implement the policy in question. In this way, the party center's control over localities is enhanced and a vertical administrative system is reinforced.

The remainder of this article is divided into three parts. First, the paper discusses central-local relations under Xi Jinping. Next, poverty alleviation, environmental protection, and disease control in relation to COVID-19 are used to illustrate the policy implementation process. Finally, the article elucidates the current nature of the CCP and the implications for the future governance of China.

Reinforcing Vertical Management Through the Party Committee System

Xi Jinping has reinforced the functions of party committees. To combat development challenges facing China, Xi has turned to rebuilding the prestige and power of the party, a lesson learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under Gorbachev, the Soviet Union suffered an economic downturn and a host of other problems. Gorbachev believed that political reform—including the introduction of competitive elections in 1987—would ensure the survival of socialism,⁸ but he was proved wrong when the Soviet Union disintegrated. To avoid the fate of Gorbachev, Xi Jinping has sought to strengthen the governing capacity of his party and eschewed liberal political reforms. The most prominent example of this effort is the strengthening of the role of party committee secretaries at all levels, who are now designated the "first accountable persons" (*diyì zerenren*) responsible for all important affairs within their jurisdictions.

⁶ Tony Saich, "Is SARS China's Chernobyl or Much Ado About Nothing," in *SARS in China: Prelude to Pandemic?* ed. Arthur Kleinman and James L. Watson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 86.

⁷ Martin King Whyte, "Bureaucracy and Modernization in China: The Maoist Critique," *American Sociological Review* 38, no. 2 (April 1973): 149-163.

⁸ David M. Kotz and Fred Weir, *Russia's Path from Gorbachev to Putin: The Demise of the Soviet System and the New Russia* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 94-104.

The central-local relationship under Xi Jinping's predecessor, Hu Jintao, was described by Andrew C. Mertha as one of "soft centralization."⁹ This suggests that local governments retained a certain degree of autonomy, although party committees or governments at a higher level could exercise influence if necessary. Since Xi Jinping has been in power, lower-level party committees or governments have been subject to more intense control by their superiors.

The main feature of this new central-local relationship is that party secretaries are held accountable for what happens within their administrative regions, and higher-level party secretaries have absolute leadership over the lower levels. Party secretaries were first designated as first accountable persons in regulations promulgated by the CCP in 2016.¹⁰ Practically speaking, this means that if a county-level cadre engages in wrongdoing or performs poorly, the county party secretary will be punished along with (*lian-zuo*) the cadre themselves. Furthermore, party secretaries must now abide by the instructions of their counterparts at higher levels. This rule goes all the way to the top, extending up to General Secretary Xi Jinping himself. These regulations have transformed the central-local relationship in China into a vertical leadership system, thus reinforcing the authority of the party center over policy implementation.

Campaign-Style Enforcement

Three notable examples of campaign-style implementation of policies by the CCP characterize the Xi Jinping era. The first example is Xi's poverty alleviation policy. After Xi declared that all areas in China must be lifted out of poverty by 2020, party secretaries concentrated nearly all their resources and manpower on achieving this objective. Anyone receiving a government salary, even teachers and judges, were required to throw their weight behind this policy. Progress in this area was the primary indicator used by party secretaries to assess cadre performance.¹¹ Having mobilized the party organization at all levels to carry out this policy, by the end of 2020, the CCP officially announced that it had achieved its poverty alleviation goals.

In the campaign-style enforcement of poverty alleviation, the CCP made active use of "the masses," namely grassroots cadres and local people. Higher-level governments mobilized party and government cadres to conduct poverty alleviation work in townships or villages for at least twenty days per month. Known as work teams (*gongzuo dui*) or cadres resident in a village (*zhucun ganbu*), the performance of these cadres was subject to evaluation by the public. If the results of the evaluation were highly positive, the cadres

⁹ Andrew C. Mertha, "China's 'Soft Centralization': Shifting *Tiao/Kuai* Authority Relations," *The China Quarterly* 184 (December 2005): 791-810.

¹⁰ "Zhongguo gongchandang dangnei jiandu tiaoli [Regulations of the CCP on Inner-Party Supervision]" Xinhua Wang [Xinhua Net], November 2, 2016, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1102/c64387-28829770-2.html>.

¹¹ Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Xingmiu Liao, "Mobilizing Cadre Incentives in Policy Implementation: Poverty Alleviation in a Chinese County," *China Information* 34, no.1 (March 2020): 45-67.

would be promoted or given bonuses; otherwise, they would face sanctions.¹² The CCP sees the mobilization of grassroots cadres and ordinary people as an effective way of addressing problems related to development in poor areas of the country.

China's environmental protection policy provides another strong example. Xi Jinping has attached great importance to the protection of the environment, notably the prevention and control of water pollution. To this end, he has designated party secretaries as "river chiefs" (*hezhang*), responsible for improving the quality of important water courses within their jurisdictions.¹³ Xi has also made party secretaries responsible for controlling other forms of pollution, such as air pollution. Party secretaries are then required to strictly abide by the instructions issued by their counterparts at a higher level. The river chief system illustrates how the CCP has used party secretaries to concentrate its resources on managing river basins and other pollution priorities.

This system of designating local party secretaries as "first accountable persons" for water governance and as "river chiefs" has achieved notable results. In the past, resources were not concentrated on dealing with the main sources of water pollution—the petrochemical industry, agriculture, fisheries, and shipping—because water management was the responsibility of the heads of water conservation departments. These departments did not have the authority to order public security units or inspectors to investigate cases of water pollution. However, as party secretaries, river chiefs have sufficient power to coordinate the work of local bureaucracies and the private sector to reinforce all aspects of the governance of river basins.

Our third example concerns the fight against COVID-19. Party secretaries were required to take primary responsibility for dealing with this major public health crisis from the very beginning. For example, at the very lowest level, township party secretaries had to personally take charge of disease control measures within their areas of responsibility and coordinate their efforts with units at the same level or above.¹⁴

The CCP has mobilized party secretaries, grass-roots cadres, and the masses to implement its "COVID-zero" (*qingling*) policy. This is very different from the current Western practice—one of "learning to live with the virus."¹⁵ There may be an ideological reason behind this policy. The CCP may be seeking to demonstrate that China's socialist institutions

¹² "Dazao tuopin gongjian buzou de gongzuodui [Create a "work team that doesn't leave" for poverty alleviation]" Xinhua Wang [Xinhua Net], May 12, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2017-05/12/c_129602209.htm.

¹³ Shih-Shen Chien and Dong-Li Hong, "River Leaders in China: Party-State Hierarchy and Transboundary Governance," *Political Geography* 62 (2018): 60-62.

¹⁴ "Ge xiangzhen dangwei shuji qinlin yixian yashi fangkong zeren [Party secretaries of all townships came to the front line to fulfill their responsibilities for epidemic prevention and control]" Pengpai [Surging], February 13, 2020, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5989730?ivk_sa=1024320u.

¹⁵ "Renmin zhishang shengming zhishang [Value the people, but also value life]," Zhongguo zhengfu wang [China Government Network], February 20, 2022, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-02/20/content_5674698.htm.

are superior to those in the West and that they can eradicate COVID-19 completely. Therefore, disease prevention has become a political matter, and party secretaries are required to mobilize all available resources to that end.

Conclusion: Contemporary Governance by a Revolutionary Party

The CCP still bears the characteristics of a revolutionary party waging a revolutionary war. Its party affairs system displays a high degree of mobilizational capability, such that in a major crisis, it can not only mobilize large numbers of cadres and members of the public but also concentrate all necessary resources on addressing any given problem. This campaign-style enforcement model is similar to that used in warfare. However, one problem with this model is that it leads to those higher up the hierarchy to not value routine but necessary administrative work. In these circumstances, more mundane tasks tend to be neglected due to a lack of sufficient manpower or other resources.

Xi Jinping continues to reinforce the CCP's "revolutionary" characteristics, and the way he has chosen to do this has resulted in the creation of a highly centralized political system. Party secretaries are held accountable for all important matters within their areas of jurisdiction, and Xi Jinping, as the general secretary, exercises control over all his subordinate party secretaries. This system puts CCP officials under intense political pressure, as they are obliged to fulfill the orders of their superiors at any time.¹⁶ Although this mode of operation may be in line with Deng Xiaoping's idea of concentrating resources on "big things," in the long run it may obstruct the development of a rationalist bureaucratic system in China.

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¹⁶ This is why several scholars have used the term "pressure system" to describe the current regime. Rong Jingben and Cui Zhiyuan, *Cong yalixing tizhi xiang minzhu hezuo tizhi de zhuanbian: xianxiang liangji zhengzhi tizhi gaige* [From Pressure System to Democratic Cooperation: Reform in County and Township Government] (Beijing: Central Translation Publishing House, 1998), 28.