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PARTY AND STATE IN CHINA

Beyond the Soviet Model

'The party's strength comes from organization.'
—Xi Jinping[1]

That the people's Republic of China is led by the Chinese Communist Party is a truth universally acknowledged. Yet the modalities of this leadership—the organizational underpinnings of the party-state complex and their political significance—are rarely discussed, outside highly specialized circles. Party and state are typically assumed to overlap, or to have merged, or to be, at bottom, one and the same thing. As a result, the dynamic coordinates of the Chinese polity may be misunderstood.[2] There is nothing simple or obvious in the relations binding party and state in the PRC, any more than in other communist-led regimes, starting with the Soviet Union itself. How does a political party go about steering a state in the desired direction, keeping a firm grip on an administrative apparatus much larger than itself, without dissolving into the bureaucratic morass that it seeks to helm? Many defunct communist systems, the USSR's included, were said to be ruled by the bureaucracy in essence, and by the party in name only. This makes it all the more vital to grasp the character of relations between party and state in today's People's Republic—the awesome survivor of twentieth-century socialism's ruination.

This essay investigates the party-state tandem in the PRC through the prism of the post-Stalin USSR. The Khrushchev and Brezhnev years, in so far as they correspond to a period of institutional stabilization, offer a sounder basis for party-state comparisons than the dramatic

decades of Stalin's dictatorship or the turbulent 1980s of Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev. The point is not to suggest an essential identity between the Chinese and Soviet polities, still less a common historical destination. The aim is rather to cast light on the Soviet origination of many features of present-day China, and on the important ways in which China has departed from the Soviet template—and continues to do so today, in the context of ongoing organizational change under Xi Jinping. To that end, what follows will first discuss the communist party structures and state forms that emerged from the turmoil of the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions. The mechanisms through which the party leaderships have attempted to direct the state will then be examined, before going on to consider how these have been recodified historically, in response to periods of crisis. If the perspective adopted here is chiefly formal and organizational, this is not to say that other factors—social and economic pressures, ideology, coercion—do not matter; they do. This study's premise is rather that any assessment of the PRC, whichever way it leans, requires a realistic understanding of its organizational substratum.

I. ORIGINS

The model of party-state relations that emerged during the first decade of Soviet Russia's existence was not anticipated, let alone intended, by the Bolsheviks. In *State and Revolution*, penned just weeks before the storming of the Winter Palace, Lenin had looked for inspiration to the Paris Commune, seen through the lens of Marx's *Civil War in France*. Post-October, however, it gradually became clear that this particular prefiguration—a 'simple organization of the armed people' dutifully keeping watch over 'technicians, foremen and accountants, as well as all officials'[3]—would never come to pass.

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[1] Xi Jinping's address to the National Organizational Work Conference, 3 July 2018. See 为夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利提供坚强组织保证 ('Provide strong organizational safeguards for seizing the great victory of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era'), 新华社 (Xinhua News Agency), 6 July 2018.

[2] This essay is adapted from an article originally published in French: 'Les rapports entre parti et État en Chine aujourd'hui: une clé de lecture soviétique', *Actuel Marx*, vol. 73, 2023, pp. 21–39.

[3] V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution*, written between August and September 1917, *Selected Works, Vol. 2*, Moscow 1967, pp. 304, 336.

Historians of early Soviet Russia have provided detailed accounts of the dramatic upheavals between 1917 and the mid-1920s through which the inner workings of the Bolshevik Party were radically transformed and its relation to the former Tsarist government apparatus redefined.[4] The Civil War and Western invasions of 1918–20, which threatened revolutionary Russia's very existence, were major catalysts for the Bolsheviks' organizational reinvention. The existence of the Politburo was only formalized at the Eighth Party Congress in 1919, for instance. It was in these decisive years that the party's fledgling Secretariat—led in succession by Sverdlov, Stasova, Krestinsky, Molotov and eventually Stalin, in 1922—began to grow, forming specialist departments to oversee data collection, cadre assignments, coordination with local party committees, agitation and propaganda, etc.

By the beginning of the NEP in 1921–22, the Secretariat was taking over cadre appointments in party and state, while government officials were increasingly in the habit of seeking the Politburo's word on matters of administration. Heading the Sovnarkom—the Council of People's Commissars, the earliest form of Soviet central government—Lenin observed these developments and did not appear to approve of them. At the Eleventh Congress in March 1922, he openly complained that 'everything that comes up on the Sovnarkom is dragged before the Politburo'—adding however: 'I, too, am greatly to blame for this.'[5] His failing health, followed by his death in early 1924, only diminished the Sovnarkom's standing further. By the mid-1920s, little doubt was left about the dominance of party bodies—Politburo and Secretariat foremost—within the political system. 'Gradually and insensibly, the party had been transformed into a machine geared to conduct and supervise the affairs of a great state.'[6]

In 1926, Stalin argued in *Concerning Questions of Leninism* that this emergent configuration constituted 'the system of dictatorship of the proletariat'. The party's function here was 'to *combine* the work of all the mass organizations of the proletariat without exception and to *direct*

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[4] E. H. Carr, *The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin, 1917–1929*, London 1979; Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle*, New York 1968; Robert Service, *The Bolshevik Party in Revolution: A Study in Organizational Change, 1917–1923*, London 1979.
[5] V. I. Lenin, 'Political Report of the Central Committee to the Eleventh Congress of the RCP(B)', 27 March 1922, in *Collected Works, Vol. 33*, Moscow 1965, pp. 237–42.
[6] Carr, *The Russian Revolution*, p. 69.

their activities towards a single goal, the goal of the emancipation of the proletariat.' This did not mean that the party should 'be identified with the Soviets, with the state power':

> The Party, with a membership of several hundred thousand, guides the Soviets and their central and local ramifications, which embrace tens of millions of people, both Party and non-Party, but it cannot and should not supplant them.[7]

This account of the party's role—leading the polity, yet not supplanting the state—would be a defining statement for the Soviet template of party-state relations. Originating not with Lenin, but with Stalin, it identified the formal parameters within which the Soviet system would consolidate and evolve, up to its eventual demise. Other communist-led regimes, the PRC's included, embraced the same formula: party and state would remain distinct—at most imbricated, but not fused—and the former would assume direction over the latter.

2. PARTY STRUCTURES

The CCP's Charter offers a useful entry point for considering its formal organizational structures. The present text, rewritten in 1982 and amended several times since, comprises a 9,000-character 'General Programme' (*zong gang*), expounding the party's history, doctrine and aims, followed by 55 specific articles arranged under eleven chapter-headings, including membership, structure, cadres, discipline, the Youth League and the party's emblem and flag.[8] The CCP, like the CPSU in its time, identifies three different forms of party sub-organization.

First, the 'base-level party organizations'—in the USSR, 'primary party organizations'—that members are tasked to set up within non-party institutions: enterprises, associations, schools and so on. The CCP

[7] J. V. Stalin, *Concerning Questions of Leninism* [1926], *Works, Vol. 8*, Moscow 1954.
[8] The closest Soviet equivalent in the post-Stalin era would be the two documents adopted at the 22nd Congress of the CPSU in 1961: 'The Third Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union' and the 'CPSU Statutes'. For a general account of the post-1953 political system of the USSR, see Gordon Smith, *Soviet Politics: Continuity and Contradiction*, London 1988. A reliable introduction to the contemporary Chinese polity is Sebastian Heilmann, ed., *China's Political System*, London 2016.

currently applies the same three-member rule as in the former Soviet Union, whereby a party branch or committee should be created if three or more party members are working within a given non-party institution. This cellular model found its original justification in the early 1900s, when Lenin's Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) was operating illegally in the repressive conditions of Tsarist Russia.

Second, mirroring the structures of regional and local government, party organizations assume leadership over party work in their respective jurisdictions, such as the *sheng* (province) or *xian* (county)—just as in the *oblast* (region) or *raion* (district) in the USSR. At each of these levels, a local CCP party congress meets at regular intervals, bringing together delegates from local members and electing a local party committee, led by a 'secretary'—in the CPSU, it used to be a 'first secretary'—who acts as the number-one party official in the jurisdiction.

Third, central party organizations: a CCP National Party Congress is convened every five years, with delegates sent from provincial-level jurisdictions.[9] (The CPSU used to convene an All-Union Party Congress, bringing together delegates from the local party organizations of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the other Union Republics.) The Congress elects the Central Committee, which is composed of full members—205 in China today, compared with 293 in the USSR in 1976—and 'alternate' members. The Central Committee, in turn, elects the members of the Politburo, of the Politburo Standing Committee and of the Secretariat, as well as the General Secretary. With the exception of the Politburo Standing Committee—currently seven individuals, chosen from the Politburo's 24—these same institutions existed in the CPSU.

The CCP Central Committee, like the CPSU's Secretariat in its time, oversees a number of central party organs, known as commissions (*wei*) or departments (*bu*; in Russian, *otdely*), responsible for different policy areas: the economy, ideology, foreign relations and so on. Major central-level bodies include, for instance, the CCP's Central Propaganda

[9] Under both Stalin and Mao, intervals between Congresses varied widely: a maximum of thirteen years passed between the CPSU's 18th Congress (1939) and 19th Congress (1952); the same between the CCP's 8th Congress (1956) and 9th Congress (1969). In subsequent periods, both parties settled on a five-year interval.

Department,[10] officially established in 1924, and the Central Commission for Discipline and Inspection (CCDI), the organ charged with enforcing party discipline, re-established after the Cultural Revolution. (The CPSU equivalent was the Party Control Committee, originating in the Central Control Commission set up by Lenin in the early 1920s.)

Formally speaking, all party sub-organizations—base-level, local, central—operate according to the doctrine of democratic centralism, which also dates back to Lenin's RSDLP. The 'democratic' element in democratic centralism is meant to ensure that elections pervade party activities at all levels, whether to decide on a course of action or to select a delegate or a secretary. The 'centralist' element, on the other hand, holds that the minority must then submit to the majority and that lower party organs must take orders from higher ones. In practice, however, in today's CCP, as in the CPSU for most of its history, all significant decisions tend to be issued from above, with elections serving chiefly as ceremonial *post hoc* validations. For example, the members of a *shengwei* (provincial party committee) in China today are selected by a Central Committee body before the provincial party congress that is supposed to elect them is convened. Equally, the delegates attending this provincial congress will have been selected from above, prior to their official election. The same was true for the composition of, say, an *obkom* in Brezhnev's day.

Like so many aspects of party life in China, this truncated implementation of the original Leninist tenet—democratic centralism *de jure*, hierarchical centralism *de facto*—can be traced back to the Soviet 1920s. There, the hand-picking of local committee members by a central party body only became the norm during the Civil War, as a means to address the dramatic emergencies of the period. Yet it persisted, and became entrenched, during the NEP years. Further, from the early 1920s onwards, Stalin's Secretariat took over the selection of Congress delegates, making it impossible for any formal oppositional majority to emerge—as Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev would soon discover.

CCP membership rules and practices also bear many resemblances to those of the late CPSU. Among other commonalities, members are

[10] The official translation, given the negative connotations of 'propaganda' in English, is 'Central Publicity Department'. Its Soviet equivalent was the CPSU's Department for Agitation and Propaganda, created in 1920 during the Russian Civil War.

recruited by cooptation—that is, on the recommendation of existing members—and serve a one-year probationary period. For some, participation in the party's youth organization—the Communist Youth League, equivalent of the Soviet Komsomol—acts as a gateway. Both parties are gigantic organizations, far removed from Lenin's conception in *What Is to Be Done?* of a tight cadre of dedicated revolutionaries. In 2022, the CCP counted 98 million members, or 7 per cent of the Chinese population, while in 1974, the CPSU had 14.5 million members, some 6 per cent of Soviet citizens.[11] Sociologically, party recruitment in China has been skewed towards the well-educated and white-collar strata since the early Deng era, with the public sector having the largest proportion of CCP members. Similarly, in Brezhnev's Soviet Union occupations with the highest share of CPSU members included officials, judges and prosecutors, followed by journalists, writers and scientists.[12]

Despite the striking similarities, the Chinese party displays certain organizational features that the late CPSU lacked. Some of these are essentially procedural, while others are politically significant and illuminate wider contrasts between the Chinese and Soviet polities. Most salient is the status of China's armed forces, which answer to the party, not the government. The ur-form of the People's Liberation Army was founded by the CCP in August 1927 for its own self-defence, following the Kuomintang's massacre of Communists in Shanghai. It has remained a party institution ever since, reflecting the old Maoist adage, 'the party commands the gun' (*dang zhihui qiang*). The highest military decision-making body in China is thus the CCP Central Committee's Central Military Commission (CMC). By comparison, the state's 'Central Military Commission of the PRC' and 'Ministry of National Defence' are chiefly government 'nameplates' (*paizi*) for the activities of the party's CMC. This superficial state labelling of party bodies—by no means limited to the military sphere—serves to facilitate international exchanges,

[11] See respectively, 中共中央组织部 (Central Organization Department of the CCP), 中国共产党党内统计公报 ('Intra-party Statistics Bulletin of the Chinese Communist Party'), 30 June 2023; Thomas Rigby, 'Soviet Communist Party Membership under Brezhnev', *Soviet Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1976, p. 322.

[12] On the CCP, see Yanjie Bian et al., 'Communist Party Membership and Regime Dynamics in China', *Social Forces*, vol. 79, no. 3, 2001, pp. 805–41; Andrew Walder, 'The Party Elite and China's Trajectory of Change', *China: An International Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2004, pp. 189–209; Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, 'China's Communist Party: From Mass to Elite Party', *China Report*, 2018, vol. 54, no. 4, pp. 385–402. On the CPSU, see Smith, *Soviet Politics*, p. 63.

allowing the PRC Minister of National Defence to meet with foreign counterparts, for example. Repeated calls in the official media to resist a hostile agenda of armed forces' 'nationalization' underline how firmly the PLA belongs to the party, not the nation.[13] In the USSR, by contrast, the highest-level military organ was the Defence Council—a body created in 1955, which the Soviet Constitution of 1977 placed under the authority of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet.

A second feature peculiar to the Chinese party are the *dangzu*, or 'party-groups', which, as we will see, play a key role within non-party organizations. There are reportedly over 125,000 *dangzu* in China at present, in addition to the 5 million or so CCP base-level branches and committees.[14] *Dangzu* have been established within many of the most significant public institutions, including government bodies, large state-owned enterprises, and so forth. According to Article 48 of the party's Charter, the *dangzu*, which are composed of three to nine party members, led by a secretary, are meant to 'play a leadership role' and 'discuss and decide important issues' in their respective institutions.[15]

3. STATE FORMS

What of the state forms that these communist parties were to 'guide'? In China, the decades of warlordism, Japanese aggression and civil war before the CCP's victory, as well as the enmeshing of the pre-1949 Republic of China administration with Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang, ensured a radical institutional discontinuity between the People's Republic and its predecessor—to a degree even greater than that of Russia in 1917. The state apparatus of the PRC was built afresh by the party, from the convening of a People's Consultative Conference in 1948—even before the official founding of the People's Republic

[13] An example: 'At present, Western hostile forces are intensifying their agitation in favour of "de-partyfication and de-politicization of the army" and of "nationalization of the military". They are attempting to muddle our thinking in a futile attempt to pull our military out from under the party's flag.' 陈杰 (Chen Jie), 在弘扬古田会议精神中铸牢军魂 ('Forging the military's soul by carrying forth the spirit of the Gutian Conference'), 解放军报 (*PLA Daily*), 27 October 2014.

[14] This is up from 80,000 *dangzu* in 2015. See 时隔70年首发党组工作条例有何深意? ('What is the meaning of the first *dangzu* work regulations in 70 years?'), 中国共产党新闻网 (information web portal of the CCP), 17 June 2015.

[15] CCP Charter, last amended 22 October 2022. See also 中国共产党党组工作条例 (*Dangzu* work regulations of the Chinese Communist Party), April 2019.

on 1 October 1949—to the drafting and adoption of the PRC's first Constitution in 1954. Throughout this process, China's leaders looked to the Soviet exemplar not only as the world's first and most powerful socialist state, but also as a close geopolitical ally whose expertise and guidance extended to matters of administration.

In constitutional terms, the most salient contrast between the two is that the PRC is a unitary state, while the Soviet Union had a federal structure. The very name, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, with its complete lack of geographical referent, spoke to the Bolsheviks' initial revolutionary aspiration for a universal socialist state. By comparison, 'People's Republic of China' is closer in spirit to the contemporaneous socialist republics of Eastern Europe, grounding the new regime in the thought-world of the modern nation-state. Yet the unitary status of the PRC does not prevent it from being, to this day, more decentralized *de facto* than the Soviet Union ever was. The USSR's array of 'republics' did not prevent overarching central control in key areas, such as industrial planning and the security services. China's local authorities—provinces, municipalities, prefectures, cities, counties, townships, etc.—enjoy a latitude in policy-making well beyond that of the local jurisdictions of the former Soviet Union.

Mirroring the party, the Chinese state ostensibly embraces the principle of democratic centralism, affirmed in Article 3 of the current PRC Constitution, just as it was in Article 3 of the 1977 USSR Constitution. Formally speaking, state power emanates in its entirety from elected assemblies—namely, the people's congresses (*renda*), patterned on the old Russian soviets and operating at multiple levels, from the townships up to the central apex, the National People's Congress, China's answer to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. It scarcely needs to be added that this is the same truncated version of democratic centralism discussed above: deputies to the people's congresses are chosen by higher party bodies before their formal election.

The structural resemblance between the people's congresses and the soviet system has a straightforward historical explanation: Stalin personally insisted on its desirability in his multiple exchanges with Mao and Liu Shaoqi between 1948 and 1952.[16] Yet the Chinese setup is not

[16] See Hua-yu Li, 'The Political Stalinization of China: The Establishment of One-Party Constitutionalism, 1948–1954', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2001, pp. 28–47.

identical to the Soviet one. For one thing, China has a system of consultative assemblies that parallels its pyramid of people's congresses. Collectively, these assemblies constitute the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. The CPPCC, formerly the Political Consultative Conference, predates the foundation of the PRC; it produced the state's very first constitutional document—the Common Programme of 1949. The NPC took over as the nation's legislature in 1954. In addition, elections to the people's congresses are indirect, from the city or prefecture upwards, whereas the USSR used to hold direct elections to the soviets, up to the Supreme Soviet level.

Today, the NPC has about 3,000 deputies, making it the largest legislative body in the world—twice as big as the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in the 1980s. It convenes only once a year; given its size, this is mostly a ceremonial affair, and its core legislative functions are mainly carried out by a smaller NPC Standing Committee. One of the NPC's main tasks is to vote in the State Council, China's central government, as well as the PRC's president. Similar formal procedures apply at the lower levels of government: the local people's congress at provincial, city, county or township level will vote in the local 'people's government' for that jurisdiction—just as the local soviet would name the executive committee of an *oblast* or *raion* in the former USSR. As a rule, the operative departments of local administrations follow a 'dual subordination' norm: they answer both to their jurisdiction's executive and to their counterpart department or office at the next level up—the relative weight of the horizontal versus vertical power relation varying widely across policy domains and historical periods.

4. TWIN DILEMMAS OF PARTY RULE

In the Stalin-era template that was exported to Eastern Europe and China after World War Two, relations between party and state are asymmetrical, by design: the party directs the state. And yet, the supremacy of a political party over a state apparatus can never be taken for granted. The party's claim to 'lead' a polity—in Chinese *lingdao*, a word ceaselessly invoked in Beijing—does not amount to an effective capacity to do so. It bears emphasizing that the party's own bodies—branches, committees, groups, departments, etc.—can hardly match those of a national state in scale and in resources, whether human or material.

The multi-layered governmental bureaucracy and the sprawl of public institutions represent a formidably complex machine. A self-declared 'leading' party in a Soviet-originated system faces twin organizational pitfalls. On the one hand, it runs a risk of organizational isolation, being cut off from the real sources of power located in the state. This threatens to shrink the party's effective remit, as components of the state slip out of its control. On the other hand, by latching onto the administration too closely, the party runs the opposite risk—of becoming disarticulated across the many subdivisions of the state bureaucracy, losing its operational integrity within the immensity of the national state. In such a scenario, the party maintains a nominal existence but its autonomy and purpose have dissolved; it becomes 'statified'.

If not exactly in these terms, Bolshevik revolutionaries debated these vital organizational stakes in the years following the October Revolution. The party, it seemed, was failing to impose its will upon the former Tsarist apparatus. At the same time, party members dispatched to state offices were being contaminated by their bureaucratic environment, to the point of forgetting the party's proletarian identity and revolutionary calling. Alexandra Kollontai, speaking for the Workers' Opposition, expressed the party-state dilemma in class terms, fearing that 'petty-bourgeois tendencies' would dilute the party's proletarian outlook as a result of party officials' engagement with the soviets and the state apparatus. At the party's 10th Congress in March 1921, another Bolshevik, Vladimir Maksimovski, speaking for the 'Democratic Centralists', took aim at 'departmentalism'—the tendency of party cadres to espouse the interests of the administrative departments to which they had been assigned.[17] The most eloquent critic was Lenin himself. In his report to the 11th Congress, on 27 March 1922, he harangued his comrades:

> You Communists, you workers, you, the politically enlightened section of the proletariat, which undertook to administer the state, must be able to arrange it so that the state, which you have taken into your hands, shall function the way you want it to. Well, we have lived through a year, the state is in our hands; but has it operated the New Economic Policy in the way we wanted in this past year? No . . . The machine refused to obey the hand that guided it. It is like a car that does not go in the direction that the driver wants.[18]

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[17] David Priestland, 'Bolshevik Ideology and the Debate over Party–State Relations, 1918–21', *Revolutionary Russia*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1997, pp. 51–52.
[18] Lenin, 'Political Report of the Central Committee to the Eleventh Congress'.

Lenin painted a dire picture of the Bolsheviks' position in the capital itself:

> If we take Moscow with its 4,700 Communists in responsible positions, and if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing, they are being directed. Something analogous happened here to what we were told in our history lessons when we were children: when one nation conquers another, the conqueror is the victor and the conquered nation is vanquished. This is simple and intelligible to all. But what happens to the culture of these nations? Here things are not so simple. If the conquering nation is the more cultured, it imposes its culture upon the vanquished; but if the opposite is the case, the vanquished nation may impose its culture on the conqueror. Has not something like this happened in the capital of the RSFSR? Have the 4,700 Communists (nearly a whole army division, and all of them the very best) come under the influence of an alien culture?[19]

For all his merciless observations about his comrades' failings, in the months before his death Lenin would be incapable of accurately diagnosing, let alone resolving, the challenges posed by bureaucratic interests in Soviet Russia. His successors, from Stalin to Gorbachev, would face the same problems, albeit under different guises. Indeed, it is part of post-Soviet lore—and historiographical consensus—that with the end of Stalin's reign of terror, the Khrushchev and Brezhnev leaderships accommodated the entrenchment of the bureaucracy as the true fulcrum of a pacified Soviet polity. At the very least, relations between party and state were stamped throughout the post-Stalin decades by what the Bolsheviks had termed 'departmentalism'. Faced with the vast bureaucracy that developed to run the USSR's command economy, the offices of the CPSU Secretariat were in the habit of deferring to the agendas and interests of the sections of the state apparatus they were tasked with overseeing.

5. VECTORS OF PARTY DOMINANCE

These twin pitfalls—isolation from the state, dissolution into the state—have loomed before the CCP since the birth of the People's Republic; it has never been quite certain that 'the car will go in the direction the driver wants'. In trying to ensure that it will, the leadership depends not only on concrete institutional arrangements but also on the careful

[19] Lenin, 'Political Report of the Central Committee to the Eleventh Congress'.

training and management of its cadre. First, organizationally, the party's central and local bodies are so positioned as to be able to exercise leadership at all levels of government. The Central Committee is a generalist entity, intended to provide direction for the central state as a whole. At the same time, it oversees specialized departments and commissions dealing with specific domains or policy 'systems' (*xitong*)—propaganda, foreign relations, the police and judiciary, finance and so on. The same applies at the lower levels of the local party committees, in relation to the state machinery of their jurisdictions. These party bodies are designed to lead the Chinese state from the outside, as it were: their foothold is within the party's own apparatus, not the state's.

Yet it would hardly suffice simply to issue directives from central and local party headquarters. The CCP's ability to direct the state depends also on a second vector, that of the *dangzu*: party bodies implanted within the state itself, operating inside ministries, local administrations, state enterprises, cultural institutions, health facilities and so on, but answerable to the party committee that appointed them; embodying the authority of the party within the state, while providing so many interfaces between the two.[20] This system signals an important contrast between the Soviet and Chinese configurations, for while the CPSU did have 'primary party organizations' within public institutions, their prerogatives were comparatively limited. Their role was above all a supervisory one: exercising a final 'right of control' (*pravo kontrolia*), investigating and reporting instances of mismanagement, not running the institutions themselves. Indeed, for most of its history, the CPSU resolutely condemned party overreach in running public institutions—a phenomenon it called *podmena*, the 'substitution' of the party for the state. Article 42 of the CPSU's 1961 Statutes is explicit: 'Party organizations must not act in place of government, trade union, co-operative or other public organizations of the working people.'[21]

In today's China, the party's configuration within state institutions departs markedly from this Soviet pattern. On the normative plane,

[20] On the *dangzu*, see Zheng Yongnian, *The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor: Culture, Reproduction and Transformation*, London 2009, pp. 111–112; Ling Li, '"Rule of Law" in a Party–State: A Conceptual Interpretive Framework of the Constitutional Reality of China', *Asian Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015 pp. 93–113.

[21] *Rules of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, Soviet Booklet No. 82, London 1961.

there is no equivalent to the critique of substitutionism—indeed, invoking a notion such as *podmena* would be unimaginable in the current state of political discourse in China. Institutionally, the existence of the *dangzu* within state institutions is a key difference.[22] The CCP's division of labour mandates that ordinary party committees and branches within state bodies devote themselves to 'party tasks' (*dangwu*) such as cadre evaluation, discipline enforcement and ideological dissemination, while the *dangzu* exercise leadership over whole organizations. Since the *dangzu* themselves are answerable solely to the party, it follows that major state institutions in the PRC, from central government ministries to state-owned corporations, fall under the direct leadership of the CCP. This implies, for example, that in a ministry, the *dangzu*'s decision-making authority prevails over the minister's.

Cadre training and management is the second key strategy for maintaining party dominance over the state. This pertains to how the party oversees its own human element within the state apparatus—the party members working professionally as state officials, administrators, economic managers and so forth, within public institutions. The CCP reserves the power to train, appoint, rank, transfer, retire or sanction its members across the entire public sector—reflecting the Maoist dictum, 'the party manages the cadres' (*dang guan ganbu*). That all government and enterprise cadres ultimately owe their careers to the party, and not to the state, is essential in bolstering the former's standing while checking the autonomy of the latter.

The appointment system, or 'nomenclature', is the most decisive mechanism of party control in this regard. As with the Soviet *nomenklatura*, this involves a matching exercise between lists of positions (*bianzhi* in Chinese) and lists of individual cadres available for appointment (*mingdan*).[23] In the USSR, a huge number of positions—approximately 300,000

[22] Ling Li describes the typical composition of a *dangzu* ('party-group') as follows: 'As its name suggests, a Party-group is a collective body. Other than the chair, who is usually also the head of the state institution where the Party-group is installed, a Party-group also includes all other Party members who hold executive offices of the same state institution. For example, members of the Party-group of a provincial government typically include the governor, all deputy governors except the deputy who is not a Party member (usually not more than one), the head of the governor's office, and one assistant governor': Li, '"Rule of Law" in a Party–State', pp. 100–1.

[23] For China, see John Burns, 'China's *Nomenklatura* System', *Problems of Communism*, no. 36, September–October 1987, pp. 36–51; Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, 'Cadre and Personnel Management in the CPC', *China: An International Journal*,

in the 1980s—would be managed by the twenty or so departments of the Party Secretariat, each department selecting cadres within its policy domain. This delegation of powers of appointment was referred to as 'horizontal decentralization'. Additionally, lower-level party committees in the Union Republics, *oblast*, and so on, would have their own nomenclatures to fill—amounting to several million positions in total. In China, by contrast, a single department of the Central Committee—the Central Organization Department (COD)—manages appointments to the few thousand top positions, representing the very highest responsibilities in the party, state, SOEs, education and so on (though not the PLA, for which nominations are managed separately by the CMC). Millions more lower-level positions are filled by the COD's local counterparts—that is, the organization departments of provincial, city, county, etc., party committees. At the central level, the COD concentrates appointment powers which were spread out across the various departments of the CPSU's Secretariat—thereby limiting the potential for the 'departmentalism' that characterized the Soviet system.[24]

The CCP is also heavily involved in training its cadres at all levels. Thousands of party schools operate in China, from the Central Party School in Beijing and the national-level Executive Leadership Academies in Shanghai, Jinggangshan and Yan'an, down to county-level party schools. Teaching an array of subjects, from business management to Mao Zedong Thought, they also aim to nurture attachment to the CCP and cultivate 'party spirit' (*dangxing*).[25] Regular training sessions at party schools occur throughout a CCP official's career. Equally important is enforcement of party discipline, headed by the CCDI at the central level and its many lower-level counterparts within local party committees.

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vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, pp. 69–83. On the Soviet *nomenklatura*, see Bohdan Harasymiw, '*Nomenklatura*: The Soviet Communist Party's Leadership Recruitment System', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1969, pp. 493–512.

[24] Highlighting both the CCP nomenclature and the *dangzu* as two key components of the 'gridded Party-state structure', Ling Li names the former 'regimentation' and the latter 'interlocking'. See Li, '"Rule of Law" in a Party–State', pp. 99–102. The COD is among the most important of the CCP Central Committee's departments. It was set up at the same time as the party itself, and one of its earliest heads was Mao Zedong. In the USSR, the Chinese COD's closest equivalent would have been the Orgburo—set up by the Bolsheviks at the 8th Congress in 1919 and abolished in 1952.

[25] See, e.g., Frank Pieke, 'Party Spirit: Producing a Communist Civil Religion in Contemporary China', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2018, pp. 709–29.

Organizationally separate from the police and judiciary, these party disciplinary organs have been the prime movers in the extensive anti-corruption campaign that has taken place under Xi's leadership.

6. CODIFYING A NEW ROLE

These factors—*dangzu*, control over appointments, party training and discipline—are designed to mitigate the twin party-state pitfalls of isolation and statification; to allow the party to penetrate the state, yet retain its own integrity and command structures. Taken together, they suggest a degree of party dominance over the state in excess of that in the post-thaw Soviet Union. At this stage, it may be helpful to examine the USSR–PRC similarities and contrasts historically: how have these parallels and divergences evolved over time? In this regard, it is notable that both the CPSU and the CCP have undertaken, at a few decades' interval, comparable processes of strengthening the party's status by re-codifying its internal organization and formalizing its systemic role.

For the CPSU this drive came in the 1960s and 70s, in reaction to the personalistic and arbitrary ways of Stalin's rule. Although the principle of party leadership over the state had been established by the mid-1920s, the party's own integrity had been undermined by Stalin's individual dictatorship. As we have seen, thirteen years passed without a CPSU Congress between 1939 and 1952, and no plenary sessions of the Central Committee were reported between 1947 and 1952—revealing symptoms of organizational atrophy.[26] It is notable, too, that Stalin's terror campaigns were primarily carried out through the security organs of the state—the OGPU and then the NKVD—and not through the disciplinary organs of the party. In Moshe Lewin's reading, this 'quintessential Stalinist strategy', founded upon the dictator's control over the security services, 'actually deprived the ruling party of its power'.[27]

By contrast, the Khrushchev and—even more so—the Brezhnev eras marked the re-emergence of the CPSU's decision-making bodies, above

[26] Ronald Hill, 'The USSR: Social Change and Party Adaptability', *Comparative Politics*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1985, p. 455.
[27] Moshe Lewin, *Russia/USSR/Russia: The Drive and Drift of a Superstate*, New York 1995, pp. 187–88.

all the Central Committee and Politburo, at the heart of the political system. Party Congresses and Central Committee sessions were convened once again at regular intervals, both Khrushchev and Brezhnev finding it impossible to run the Politburo uncontested, as Stalin had done. Taking stock of this restoration of the CPSU to its rightful place in the polity, the Soviet Constitution of 1977 declared in its Article 6 that the party was the 'leading and guiding force of Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system'. By contrast, the first mention of the CPSU in Stalin's 1936 Constitution occurred only in Article 126.

The PRC went through a similar process after Mao's death. The Cultural Revolution had witnessed heights of organizational dislocation, with many CCP bodies ceasing to function altogether and hybrid 'revolutionary committees' appearing to supplant both party and government at local level. Reacting against this, China's post-Mao leadership, foremost Deng Xiaoping, sought to reinstate the party's authority and to stabilize its workings—very much as the post-Stalin leaders had done for the CPSU. In August 1980, Deng delivered a landmark speech to an enlarged Politburo meeting on 'reforming the system of party and state leadership'. Two issues had to be solved: the problem 'of not separating party and state' and the problem 'of substituting the party for the state'.[28] This had an obvious resonance with the Soviet critique of *podmena*. Implying that boundaries between party and state had been damagingly blurred in Mao's time, Deng called for a better demarcation of the two spheres.

A number of early Reform Era measures followed. In 1980, it was decided to re-establish the Secretariat of the CCP's Central Committee, which had previously been in hiatus—the 9th and 10th Congresses, in 1969 and 1973 respectively, having simply abstained from naming one. A Central Political and Legal Commission was created to consolidate party oversight of the PRC police and judiciary. Two years later, at the 12th Congress in September 1982, the party's Charter was amended, inserting for the first time a section on the *dangzu*. The 12th Congress also abolished the position of Central Committee chairman (*zhuxi*)—created especially for Mao in 1945—and reverted to the more modest, Soviet-derived title of general secretary (*zong shuji*) for its number-one official.

[28] 邓小平 (Deng Xiaoping), 党和国家领导制度的改革 ('Reforming the System of Party and State Leadership'), 18 August 1980. Consulted online at www.reformdata.org.

Deng made clear in his August 1980 speech that 'solving the problem' of substitutionism meant removing a whole set of missions and prerogatives from the CCP's remit:

> From now on, for all matters within the government's competence, it is the State Council and the local governments that will discuss, decide and issue relevant documents. The Central Committee and local committees of the party will no longer send out instructions and take decisions on such matters.[29]

Deng was quick to insist that such reforms would not amount to disarming or weakening the party. In his view, the Central Committee could only become a more cohesive and effective actor if it redefined its leading role in a more targeted way. Under the reformed division of political labour he was advocating, the party would take responsibility—as it always had—for determining the political 'line' (*luxian*), as well as for originating general and specific policies (*fangzhen* and *zhengce*), but would then adopt a supervisory role, making sure they were properly implemented by the relevant state bodies. Although he did not mention the Soviet Union, Deng's prescriptions pointed to a more Soviet-style conception of the CCP's place in the political system. Indeed, by the 1970s, Soviet scholars were describing the CPSU as 'ruling' over the Soviet polity, but not 'governing' it.[30]

Nevertheless, by the mid-80s few major steps had been taken to reduce the breadth of the party's work. This changed in 1987 once Zhao Ziyang became general secretary, replacing Hu Yaobang. Addressing the 13th Congress in October that year, Zhao explicitly advocated the 'separation of party and state' (*dang zheng fenkai*), describing it as 'the key to reforming the political system'. He made clear that 'the separation of party and state means the separation of their functions'; the primary task of party bodies within enterprises and non-government public institutions would henceforward be 'supervision' (*jiandu*). The Congress duly voted to limit the *dangzu*'s role to people's congresses, the CPPCC and mass organizations. At Zhao's behest, several measures were taken to make good on these commitments in the months that followed, including effectively abolishing the *dangzu* in most government bodies, streamlining party

[29] Deng, 'Reforming the System of Party and State Leadership'.
[30] Ronald Hill, 'Party–State Relations and Soviet Political Development', *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1980, p. 154.

departments to reduce their scope, and transferring a batch of appointments from the COD to the State Council.[31]

This reformist drive, however, was thrown into reverse by the Tiananmen events of June 1989, followed by the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself. Zhao was removed as general secretary and the desirability of any 'separation of party and state' vanished from Chinese political discourse. The dissolved *dangzu* were reinstated—the 14th Congress of October 1992 making sure to backtrack on the 1987 amendment to the party Charter. The formal codification of the party's workings and its theoretical demarcation from the state were one thing; diminution of its influence inside the state apparatus was quite another. In the light of the CPSU's demise, Deng's earlier notion of 'separation of party and state' risked denying the party access to essential levers of power. To this day, the CPSU's inability to reassert control over the state apparatus as the Soviet regime floundered is cited by China's leaders as a major cause of the USSR's collapse.[32]

7. 'THE PARTY LEADS ALL'

After the sudden halt to the CCP's tentative retreat from the state apparatus, there were a number of initiatives to reinvigorate party life under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (among these was a drive to set up base-level organizations—though not *dangzu*—in China's fast-expanding private sector). The CCP's push for greater formal consolidation persisted, if at a slower pace. In 1993, for the first time a single individual—Jiang Zemin—came to occupy the three topmost positions in the party (Central Committee general secretary), the army (CMC chairman) and the state

[31] J. P. Burns, 'Strengthening Central CCP Control of Leadership Selection: The 1990 *Nomenklatura*', *China Quarterly*, vol. 138, 1994, pp. 461–63; in Chinese, see 陈红太 (Chen Hongtai), 从党政关系的历史变迁看中国政治体制变革的阶段特征 ('Features of China's Political System across Periods from the Perspective of Relations between Party and Government'), 浙江学刊 (*Zhejiang Journal*), 2003, no. 6, p. 84.

[32] See, e.g., Chen Xi, then at the helm of the COD, writing in the Central Committee's theoretical review: 'An important cause of the CPSU's collapse and of the Soviet Union's disintegration is that the CPSU's leading position was erased from the USSR Constitution and that the party's leadership was abandoned in practice': 陈希 (Chen Xi), 健全党的全面领导制度 ('Improving the Party's Comprehensive System of Leadership'), 求是 (*Seeking Truth*), 2019, no. 22. Chen is alluding to the 1988 amendments to the 1977 Soviet Constitution under Gorbachev.

(PRC president).[33] Jiang's successors, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, would maintain this trinity of offices. Early in Hu's tenure, the CCP sought to ensconce itself further in the political system by redefining its identity as that of a 'governing party', called upon to 'govern scientifically'.[34]

Xi Jinping's accession to the leadership in 2012 markedly intensified the CCP's efforts to formalize its institutions and codify its workings, through a forceful campaign of internal party rule-making.[35] This was prefigured, as early as May 2012, by the issuance of 'Regulations for formulating intra-party rules', leading the following year to the adoption of a 'Five-year plan on central party rules formulation work (2013–2017)'. Since then, dozens of new 'regulations' (*tiaoli*) have been passed within the CCP.[36] This took place just as Xi's anti-corruption campaign was unfolding, bolstering the CCDI and the party's wider disciplinary apparatus in the process. This was no coincidence: party regulations have proliferated just as the organizational means to enforce them have been substantially enhanced.[37] On the symbolic plane, a significant step was taken in 2018, when the NPC voted to rewrite Article 1 of the PRC Constitution, inserting the sentence: 'The Chinese Communist Party's leadership is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.' Prior to this amendment, the party had not been mentioned in the body of the state's constitution, only in its preamble.[38]

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[33] This leadership trinity reproduced a pattern introduced in the Soviet Union for the first time in 1977, when Brezhnev became chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet in addition to his roles as CPSU general secretary and chairman of the Defence Council.

[34] 中共中央 (CCP Central Committee), 关于加强党的执政能力建设的决定 ('Decision on Strengthening the Construction of the Party's Governing Capacity'), 19 September 2004.

[35] Holly Snape and Weinan Wang, 'Finding a Place for the Party: Debunking the "Party–State" and Rethinking the State-Society Relationship in China's One-Party System', *Journal of Chinese Governance*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2020, pp. 477–502.

[36] These include revised disciplinary regulations (in 2015 and 2018), new regulations for 'political-legal work' (in 2019) to tighten party control over the police and judiciary, and, for the first time, regulations codifying the functioning of the *dangzu* (in 2015 and 2019).

[37] See Ling Li, 'Politics of Anti-corruption in China: Paradigm Change of the Party's Disciplinary Regime, 2012–2017', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 28, no. 115, 2019, pp. 47–63.

[38] Formalizing the party's leading authority in Article 1 of the PRC's Constitution also echoed the decision to put the CPSU's leadership role in Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution of 1977.

Beyond the matter of rule-making, the Xi era has also been defined by an agenda of party reinforcement of an entirely different order of magnitude than in the past. Indeed, the current leader has been acting for over a decade now as though he found much wanting in the breadth and the depth of the party's control over the government machinery and other public institutions. While the principle of party dominance over the state was hardly contested in the 1990s and 2000s, under Xi's leadership there has been an unprecedented effort to strengthen its dominance via a constant stream of organizational resolutions and readjustments.[39] Reflecting this new ambition, no year has passed since 2012 without the Central Committee passing resolutions in favour of 'reinforcing the party's leadership' (*jiaqiang dang de lingdao*) in one policy area or other—state enterprises, the judiciary, associations, universities, foreign relations. Simultaneously, the COD and the organization departments of local party committees have increasingly favoured cross appointments, whereby a single cadre assumes both party and state responsibilities at the same time. For instance, county party secretaries have tended to be selected as heads of people's congresses in their localities.[40]

The reordering of party departments and commissions on one side, and of government ministries and commissions on the other, has been a key mechanism for strengthening party dominance over the state. Since 2012, a string of new party commissions has been added to the Central Committee.[41] Another type of institutional reordering involves

[39] For a useful account of the CCP's workings through to the early years of Xi's tenure, see Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership*, Washington DC 2016. This work contains many fine-grained observations on the backgrounds and trajectories of political leaders, yet the 'factional' reading of Chinese politics that it provides tends to play down the significance of organizational transformation, beyond the personal factors that contribute to shaping it.

[40] Brødsgaard, 'China's Communist Party', p. 398. The practice of combining party and state postings is by no means new. Government leaders within local jurisdictions—governors, mayors and so forth—tend to serve as deputy secretaries of the local party committee. Within state-owned corporate groups, the head of the *dangzu* is usually the chairman of the board of directors.

[41] These include, *inter alia*: a Central National Security Commission, in charge of 'comprehensive national security', set up in 2014; a Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, with a broad mandate to manage the internet, created in 2018; a Central Financial Commission, a Central Science and Technology Commission and a Central Social Work Commission (the latter overseeing 'party construction' in associations and the private sector), all three announced in March 2023.

transferring sections of the bureaucracy from State Council ministries and commissions to Central Committee bodies. For instance, the government apparatuses overseeing publishing, the press and cinema were transferred to the CCP's Central Propaganda Department in March 2018, while those in charge of religious affairs, ethnic minority affairs and the Chinese diaspora were moved to the party's Central United Front Work Department. At about the same time, the People's Armed Police, which used to be under the joint leadership of the PLA and of the Ministry of Public Security, was taken out of this dual command structure and put wholly under the PLA's control.[42]

The party's 19th Congress, held in October 2017, marked a high point in the rhetoric of party aggrandizement. In his report to the Congress, Xi made the memorable statement that 'party, government, military affairs, civilian affairs, education—east, west, south, north and centre—the party leads all.' The sentence was then inscribed in the party's Charter.[43] Pronouncements of this kind should be counterposed to what Deng and Zhao had to say in the 1980s about limiting the scope of the party's involvement within the state. In March 2017, Wang Qishan, then head of the CCDI, had explained that 'under the party's leadership, there is only a division of labour between party and government, not a separation.'[44] This rare instance of an explicit characterization of the party-state relationship by a Chinese leader may be read as an intentional rebuke to the views once expressed by Deng and Zhao.

Two years later, in the autumn of 2019, a plenum of the Central Committee called for systematizing the party's authority thus:

> Refine the system of party leadership over people's congresses, the government, the CPPCC, supervisory bodies, the courts, the procuratorates, the armed forces, mass organizations, enterprises, public services,

[42] See respectively: 中共中央 (CCP Central Committee), 深化党和国家机构改革方案 ('Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Organs'), 21 March 2018; Kristin Huang, 'China Brings People's Armed Police under Control of Top Military Chiefs', *South China Morning Post*, 27 December 2017.

[43] The formulation is a paraphrase of Mao, who had told an enlarged work meeting of the Central Committee in 1962: 'Industry, agriculture, commerce, education, army, government, and party: in these seven areas, the party leads all.'

[44] 王岐山：构建党统一领导的反腐败体制 提高执政能力 完善治理体系 ('Wang Qishan: Building an anti-corruption system under the party's unified leadership, increasing governing capacity, improving the governance system'), 新华社 (Xinhua News Agency), 5 March 2017.

> self-governing grassroots organizations, social organizations, etc. Improve the work systems of party committees and *dangzu*. Ensure that the party plays the leading role in organizations of all kinds.[45]

In the same year, the Central Committee published an anthology of texts by Xi entitled *On Adhering to the Party's Leadership over All Work*. Since then, there has been no lessening in official rhetoric about party leadership—the 20th Congress of October 2022 amending the party's Charter to add a whole new paragraph on 'upholding the party's organizational line in the new era.'

8. A NEW DISPENSATION

The politics of the Xi era point to a degree of CCP supremacy over the state unprecedented in the regime's history. Under the general secretary's watch, the Central Committee has endorsed an absolutist conception of the party's role and has matched this with a succession of organizational overhauls intended to continually enhance the party's standing in the political system. This has entailed redressing whatever weaknesses remained in the mechanisms at its disposal to steer the state's vast bureaucracy. Significantly, political norms in Beijing currently ordain that the CCP should not only 'lead' the state from the outside but also from the inside, by way of the *dangzu*—located within the country's most important public institutions and assuming direct leadership over them, on the party's behalf. This conception extends not only to government administrations but also to state enterprises, institutions of learning, public services and associations.

While the CCP began describing itself as a 'governing party' (*zhizheng dang*) under Hu, Xi has insisted that it is not only that. In a January 2018 address to a seminar of high-ranking cadres, he stressed that it is also a 'revolutionary party' (*geming dang*):

> We shouldn't forget that we are Communists, that we are revolutionaries. We shouldn't lose our revolutionary spirit. Some say that our party has

[45] 中共中央 (CCP Central Committee), '关于坚持和完善中国特色社会主义制度 推进国家治理体系和治理能力现代化若干重大问题的决定' ('Decision on some major issues concerning upholding and refining the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and advancing the modernization of the national governance system and governing capacity'), 31 October 2019.

> now transformed from a 'revolutionary party' to a 'governing party'. This statement is inaccurate . . . We are a Marxist governing party, but at the same time we are a Marxist revolutionary party.[46]

To the CCP's organizational reinforcement under Xi, then, corresponds a specific variant of party ideology—one claiming the mantle of leadership by emphatically harking back to the revolutionary heroism of the Mao era, refusing to let itself be assimilated as a mere cog in the apparatus of power. The foregrounding of 'red culture' in speech, and the unprecedented strengthening of the party apparatus in deed, may be seen as two facets of a wider attempt at repoliticizing Chinese society after decades of economic managerialism and post-Cold War 'end of history', inside the PRC as much as in the rest of the world.

This brings to mind an important reflection by Wang Hui, published in these pages in 2006—now a bygone era—in which he contended that the CCP was 'no longer an organization with specific political values, but a mechanism of power':

> As the party, through the process of exercising power, became the subject of the state order, it increasingly changed into a depoliticized apparatus, a bureaucratic machine, and no longer functioned as a stimulant for ideas and practice . . . This implies that the party no longer conforms to its past political role, but becomes a component of the state apparatus. What I want to emphasize here is the change in the party's identity: no longer possessing its own distinctive evaluative standpoint or social goals, it can only have a structural-functionalist relationship to the state apparatus.[47]

It is almost as if China's current leadership were relying on organizational methods, of an extremely hierarchical stamp at that, to respond to what Wang had diagnosed, fundamentally, as a problem of class and of democracy. Counterposed to the CCP's 'statification' in the age of Reform, Wang evoked the 'line struggles' that repeatedly shook the party to its core in previous historical periods. Today, open line struggles are as unwelcome as they ever were. Yet it could also be the case that the

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[46] Excerpted in 习近平 (Xi Jinping), 坚持和发展中国特色社会主义要一以贯之 ('Upholding and Developing Socialism with Chinese Characteristics Demands Coherence'), 求是 (*Seeking Truth*), 2022, no. 18.

[47] Wang Hui, 'Depoliticized Politics, from East to West', NLR 41, Sept–Oct 2006, p. 35.

new dispensation in Beijing is superseding the flattened, technocratic, 'depoliticized politics' (Wang's phrase) of the 1990s and 2000s.

While it is probably too soon to attempt to characterize any further the substance of the CCP's new-found absolutism, what can already be said is that it has no obvious historical precedent. It is not remotely a return to the politics of the Mao period, where 'line struggles' and all the episodic disorder they brought about made sure that party and state never settled in a durable configuration of rule. It is equally distant from the early reformist spirit of Deng, for whom the party would have done well to limit its involvement in the running of the state, if still remaining master of the polity. By implication, the party's aggrandizement under Xi is also leaving behind the ways of the CPSU, with its party committees devoted to 'supervision' and its formal ban on 'substitution'—notions very briefly tried out in 1980s China and then quickly discarded as the nation's leaders watched the USSR fall apart.

The CCP, in its current mould, is drawing selectively on past legacies—from Mao, from Deng, but also indirectly from the Soviet precedent—only to reconstruct a new manner of absolutist, party-centric system. The defining trait of this emerging configuration appears to be a degree of party supremacy over the state unmatched in the prior histories of the Chinese and Soviet regimes. Working from within political coordinates that originated, a century ago, in revolutionary Russia, China's current leaders seem resolved to tread their own path, taking the party-state nexus onto new historical terrain.