

Party Building as Institutional Bricolage: Asserting Authority at the Business Frontier

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Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is expanding its organizational infrastructure in the private sector, revealing the dynamics of CCP-style institutional change. Party building follows a distinct version of adaptive governance. Hesitant to rely on innovative tools alone, organizers productively tinker with traditional and disparate elements. Grassroots Party organs, sanctified by their venerable history, are redeployed – initially for modest purposes that fall short of their original revolutionary potential. The Party's surge in private-sector firms was triggered by technocrats overhauling Leninist systems to reconnect to Party members; the search for a broader mission came later. To empower CCP organs in companies, organizers use tactical precedents ranging from incentives to negotiations around Party financing, and membership discipline. Combining tactics from different eras, overseas Party building deploys old organizational arrangements to new ends, whereas digitization gives time-worn procedures a second life. The inclination for institutional bricolage is a deeply rooted hallmark of innovation in Chinese statecraft.

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party; Party building; institutional change; adaptive governance; historical legacies; state–business relations

One hundred years of Party history both haunt and inspire the organizers who are engineering institutional change in the Party. Chinese historiography gives the institutions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) a good share of the credit for the Communist victory of 1949, emphasizing the power of organizing much more than classic Marxist theory would. As enshrined in the preamble of the Party Constitution, the inherited Party institutions embody the wisdom of several generations of leaders. Or, in the words of Franz Schurmann, “The one great organizational product of the Chinese Revolution has been the [...] party.”¹ Thereby sanctified, the established institutions limit the permissible space for innovation. At the same time, Party history serves organizers as an abundant source of inspiration, providing tried and tested templates for asserting authority.

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¹ Schurmann 1968, xlviii.

The perplexing combination of rigidity and resourcefulness deserves exploration because it has contributed to the Party's longevity, and because it is now transforming Chinese businesses.

To characterize the Organization Department's distinct response to emerging challenges, this article proposes the concept of *institutional bricolage*. It is defined as a deliberate, piecemeal and continuous activity of remodelling an organization, drawing resourcefully on a toolbox of seemingly incompatible devices, including brand-new practices alongside ostensibly outmoded and temporarily neglected ones. Those engaging in bricolage sense the urgency of reform, but also reverence for solutions of the past. Thus defined, bricolage shares with policy experimentation the lack of commitment to a grand design; however, it is more sceptical of radically new techniques. Taken out of their original context, devices from different historical eras can be compatible beyond expectation, since adherence to an institutional tradition fosters practical complementarities. Bricolage leads to strong forms of path dependence, characterized by a tendency to revert back to recipes found in the organization's history. The concept contributes to theories of institutional change.

This article also intervenes in debates about the CCP, complementing the vibrant scholarship on the Party's ideological innovation and its co-optation of rising capitalist elites.² The article turns to Party organization and investigates the penetration, or infiltration, of firms from board rooms down to factory floors, with the help of classic Party organs – a topic that has received little attention in the English literature.³ What explains the ascendance and evolving nature of Party organs in private companies? For modest technocratic purposes, the Party set up cells in companies and then discovered their vigorous potential to assert authority. The surge in the private sector has gradually gained momentum since the early 2000s, meeting vital challenges to the Party's authority, while upholding core tenets of its organizational principles. Explaining these dynamics has implications for debates on the source of strength for successful parties.

There is a puzzling incongruence between the indifference to China's seemingly esoteric debates on Party building on the one hand, and the concerns that Party building inspires among business leaders on the other. Few observers follow the voluminous research from China's Schools of Marxism Studies, in fields like the Sinicization of Marxism (*makesi zhuyi Zhongguohua* 马克思主义中国化) or Party doctrine and Party building (*dang de xueshuo yu dang de jianshe* 党的学说与党的建设) and published in journals such as the Organization Department's own *Reference for Party Building Research* (*Dangjian yanjiu neican* 党建研究内参). This epistemic community is shielded from the outside world less by secrecy – although there is some – than by their jargon-heavy writing built on

² Dickson 2003; Tsai 2007; Shambaugh 2008; McGregor 2010; Tsai 2013; Wang, Yuhua 2016; Naughton 2017.

³ Thornton 2012; Yan and Huang 2017; Blanchette 2019.

assumptions that are not widely shared by other scholarly communities in China, let alone overseas. This article draws on this literature, along with primary material such as member handbooks, Party yearbooks, internet sources and key metrics of the Organization Department.⁴ In contrast to the relative neglect of these debates, the activities resulting from them make international news headlines. The rise of Party activities in their firms alarms foreign businesses.⁵ Companies grapple with demands to promote Xi Jinping Thought 习近平思想 and reserve seats on their boards for managers with Party membership,⁶ hoping for profitable ties to the CCP while recognizing the risks of this uneven partnership.⁷ Since Party building is a wider trend, insights from the business frontier are relevant for other Party-building frontiers, such as the non-profit sector, religious associations, urban neighbourhoods, ethnic minorities and educational institutions as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan. Ostensibly esoteric debates on the Sinicization of Leninist organizations have gained practical relevance.

The article begins by explaining how the concept of institutional bricolage contributes to debates about the CCP, and about institutional change. After tracing the origins of the surge, when the emerging Party cells in private firms were institutions in search of a proper function, the article identifies the temporal dynamics, characterized by slow penetration rather than campaign-style wave tactics. The next three sections deal with the repertoire for penetrating firms, tactics to deal with competing loyalties and the use of funding issues to assert authority. The final two sections focus on two other striking instances of institutional bricolage, fusing the old with the new: the Party's expansion in business operations abroad deploys tried-and-tested institutions to radically more ambitious ends, whereas the use of cutting-edge technology helps to sustain established procedures. The conclusion suggests that a propensity for institutional bricolage might be deeply rooted in Chinese traditions of governance. Party cells are not vestigial organs of the past, but revolutionary institutions revived for present purposes.

Institutional Bricolage and Path Dependence with Reversion

Political science has high stakes in the study of the CCP's evolution. The case speaks to theories of institutional change which help to illuminate a central puzzle in the study of authoritarian parties: how do effective parties arise? While the historical origins of a party are important, some parties make much more of their heritage than others.⁸ The CCP stands out for nimbly responding to challenges, while upholding and even reviving venerable practices of the past. David

⁴ The online supplement offers printouts of websites cited, time-series data of Party membership, and codebooks.

⁵ German Chamber of Commerce 2017; Martina 2017.

⁶ Interview with an industry leader, Berlin, 2019.

⁷ Schaeffer 2018.

⁸ Levitsky and Way 2012; Koss 2018.

Shambaugh points to a central paradox: living with outmoded institutions of a Leninist-Maoist pedigree, the Party musters enough innovative energy to adapt them to present challenges.⁹ For instance, Party schools have been redeployed in the service of effective governance.¹⁰ The CCP follows the classic path of institutional evolution, with micro-decisions and incremental change resulting in a framework that shapes business and innovation.¹¹ Early solutions become entrenched as a result of positive feedback loops, since Party organizers had the opportunity to observe their effectiveness and will build on them at the next decision point.¹²

Theories of institutional change clarify the dynamics of the CCP's evolution. Reversely, insights from the CCP can travel back to refine notions of path dependence. A process characterized by institutional bricolage creates an intriguing form of path dependence. Above and beyond the positive feedback on the currently existing set of institutions, bricolage brings back institutional solutions that had been temporarily discarded in the past. Cast-aside solutions come to the minds of organizers, since they are associated with fondly remembered Party history. Institutional memory – in the case of the CCP preserved in carefully edited, voluminous local Party histories – creates nodes that link the present to the past. At important decision points, organizers seek inspiration from looking back to the path they had travelled. The consequences for institutional dynamics are significant. On the one hand, borrowing from abandoned ideas makes decisions along the path more easily reversible. On the other hand, instead of branching off far from the trunk, the institutional path tends to lead back to more familiar terrain. Institutional bricolage creates path dependence with reversion to initial solutions.

A central feature of the Chinese party-state is adaptive governance. While drawing on time-honoured techniques, such as guerrilla policy style, leaders have eagerly embraced innovation through a process of policy experimentation.¹³ Adaptive governance is a guidepost for the study of Chinese politics. Innovation in Party organs deserves separate attention or else we miss distinct dynamics in an area that touches the most sensitive nerves of the party-state: the grand process of Party building (*dangde jianshe weida gongcheng* 党的建设伟大工程), to use Mao's coinage still in use today.¹⁴ The reluctance to implement adjustments to Party institutions is owing to reverence for the wisdom of earlier generations of leaders and for an institution that has succeeded in acquiring and maintaining power, as well as to a sense that changes of procedure could trigger unforeseen

⁹ Shambaugh 2008.

¹⁰ Pieke 2009.

¹¹ North 1990, Ch. 11.

¹² Pierson 2011, Ch. 1.

¹³ Heilmann and Perry 2011.

¹⁴ The term has gained greater currency since Xi Jinping's report to the 19th Party Congress, on 18 October 2017. Already, since the mid-1990s, the adjective "new" is added – so it now is the "new grand process."

and unmanageable consequences. When it comes to Party organization and its sanctified operating procedures, one simply cannot expect the same outcome-oriented pragmatism that characterizes, say, public service provision or infrastructure management. Innovation of the Party's organizational procedures has come into scholars' view through the lenses of the nomenklatura system, promotion patterns and cadre incentives.¹⁵ The admission of company owners into the CCP has also received the attention it deserves, while only a few scholars have pointed to the related and consequential trend of the CCP reinforcing its presence at the grassroots level of firms.¹⁶ This initiative parallels the Party's advance in civil society at about the same time, triggering debates about the relationship between state, society and citizens.¹⁷ One of the few explorations of Party-building initiatives in the private sector breaks new ground by identifying distinct practices to "infiltrate" private firms, demonstrating the CCP's new presence and inviting further research.¹⁸ Studying Party building in NGOs and in companies will also lead to a better understanding of similar strategies to strengthen the Party's authority in other domains.

The Origins of Firm Penetration

Institutional bricolage comes with unintended features because the solutions that are revived had originally been designed for different contexts. The initially limited ambition of establishing Party organs in private firms did not match the organ's historical potential to wage revolution in hostile environments. As this section will show, the technocratic-bureaucratic necessity of keeping track of Party members provided the initial impetus for Party-building innovation. The power potential that could be deployed through this new infrastructure was an unintended feature which only later turned out to serve the leadership well, when Xi Jinping decided to take "firm control" over the economy.¹⁹

The initial impulse for reform along the business frontier came from the Organization Department, whose portfolio encompasses Party building and whose bureaucrats usually engage in shrewd manoeuvring, not radical experimentation.²⁰ In the late 1990s, one critical issue on the agenda of the department was the vast number of floating Party members (*liudong dangyuan* 流动党员) no longer tied to their work units. By pocketing their Party membership handbook and losing touch with their Party cell, floating members made the department's standard operating procedures untenable. A focus was Shenzhen, where in 1999 an astounding 14 per cent of CCP members, or 20,000 individuals, had no interaction with the Party.²¹ Creating units such that these individuals could once

15 Compare Landry, Lü and Duan 2018.

16 Holbig 2002.

17 Thornton 2012; 2013.

18 Yan and Huang 2017.

19 Leutert 2018.

20 For a history of the department, with attention to its work ethos, see Xu 2018.

21 Tao 2003, 92.

again participate in regular Party activities (*zuzhi shenghuo*组织生活) was the primary concern of Party organizers at the time. As in most parties around the world, organizers could have assigned members to geographically defined Party organs, and some community Party cells did welcome migrants. Yet the CCP's traditional focus on the work unit prevailed: Party cells, once invented to wage revolution, were set up in private companies to properly administer Party members.

Since the disappearance of private firms in the 1950s, the first private firm to establish not just a Party cell but a fully-fledged Party committee is said to be Huawei in April 2000.²² According to an organizer involved in the decision-making process, the Party committee's origin was an investigation by Shenzhen's Organization Department in 1996, which uncovered the existence of an irregular and outsized Party cell at Huawei.²³ Organizers took four years to set up a Party committee. It was a major innovation, since the Party was moving out of its comfort zone into the world of shrewd, successful and self-confident global entrepreneurs, where its authority would be challenged. Precedents of the revolutionary era and experiences with Party committees in autonomously governed villages facilitated the decision. The ambitions were modest, with a vague awareness of the organs' potential to shore up Party authority and a conviction that the organizational hierarchy, which had won the revolution, needed to remain intact. A central metric for success remains the number of Party members who, organizationally speaking, found a home (*zhaodao le jia* 找到了家) through newly established Party organs.²⁴

Such limited ambition left the new Party organs with the primary mission to incorporate new members and tick off boxes with routine activities. Since the central authorities already had levers to govern the economy, Party cells in private companies started out as institutions in search of befitting functions, with annual reports describing Party building almost as an end in itself.²⁵ Mission statements are laundry lists. According to the Party Constitution, private sector cells should promote the Party line, help companies abide by the law, lead trade unions and youth league branches in the firm, and generally support harmony by looking after everyone's interests.²⁶ Member handbooks contain instructions such as to "propagate the implementation of the Party's and the state's principle policies, guide and supervise companies' compliance with government laws and regulations, the legality of the companies' operations and payment of taxes according to the rules."²⁷ Tax bureaus and environmental offices are in contact with new Party cells, apparently expecting benefits from working with Party organs.²⁸

²² Zhangliao 2018, 121. Possibly excluding committees inherited through privatization. It certainly was one of the earliest instances and a pathbreaking event.

²³ Zhangliao 2018, 120–22.

²⁴ Liang 2008, 238.

²⁵ CCP Shandong 2002–2018.

²⁶ Constitution of the CCP, version adopted by the 19th Party Congress of 2017, Art. 33, third clause.

²⁷ CCP Organization Department 2001, 97–98. Author's translation.

²⁸ CCP Hebei 2007, 12.

As Party cells turn out to be effective for purposes like tax collection,²⁹ new items appear on their agendas, such as overcoming the divide between Jiangsu's affluent south and its underdeveloped north.³⁰ Ad-hoc tasks are gradually evolving into a vision of the Party cells' mission.

The task to “promote the healthy development” of the host firm is enshrined in the Party Constitution and reflects a shared interest of company owners and local governments. If firms recognize the benefits of hosting a Party cell, Party building is easier.³¹ Hence, the rhetoric of service-oriented Party organs (*fuwuxing dang-zuzhi* 服务型党组织) highlights the positive incentives for working with the Party. Party-building model companies offer verbose testimony to the benefits of hosting the Party, such as this report from Heze affirming, with a poetic touch, that: “Party-building and company growth [are] the two wheels of a chariot, the two wings of a bird,” and stating that “Party building is a growth engine ... Strong Party building means a strong company and strong growth.”³² Do Party cells simply throw in their weight with the managers? Even before Xi called for remembering the Party’s original aspiration, organizers have built Party cells with an eye on conflicts with the management, routinely referring to them as battle fortresses (*zhandou baolei* 战斗堡垒), as if facing a hostile environment.

To think about the future evolution of these Party organs, it is useful to distinguish between normal versus crisis modes.³³ Party cells help in emergencies such as the coronavirus outbreak. After the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) collected donations from Party cells in companies. Another initiative saw a company-based Party committee organize relief for migrant workers hit by the economic crisis of the same year.³⁴ Member handbooks call on Party members to stand ready for such ad-hoc assignments. During normal times, Party cells are harnessed for everyday governance, commonly receiving their mandate from private industry committees in the Administration for Market Regulation (*shichang jiandu guanli ju* 市场监督管理局). These committees exist down to the county level and govern the cells either directly or via general Party cells in townships. The committees are Party organs reporting to the local standing committee and to the private industry committee at the next higher level. They share the staff, vision and tasks of the Administration for Market Supervision, which, thanks to the Party cells, is in the loop on issues in board rooms and on factory floors. For now, Party organs are punching below their weight, slowly discovering the power inherent to a potent revolutionary institution that once had been designed to overthrow a social order.

29 Koss 2018, sections 4.2 and 4.4.

30 CCP Jiangsu 2007, 7.

31 Many do, including foreign companies. See Martina 2017.

32 CCP Shandong 2015, 674–75.

33 Heilmann 2018, 200–06.

34 CCP Shandong 2009: see earthquake relief at 118; migrant relief at 762.

Sweeping into the Private Sector

Low-profile initiatives to recover linkages between the Party and its members soon gained political salience with Jiang Zemin's 江泽民 rethinking of the Party's relationship to the private sector. As one expects with institutional bricolage, this move came after comprehensive deliberation: the Organization Department engaged in consultation, with an extraordinary average of over 40 conferences per year over the 2000–2003 period.³⁵ The critical juncture was passed when, in 2002, the 16th Party Congress endorsed Jiang's invitation for capitalists to join the Party, and changed the Party Constitution, more explicitly formulating an obligation to establish Party organs in private companies and, for the first time, defining their responsibilities. As Heike Holbig points out, admitting entrepreneurs and building up a grassroots presence were closely linked initiatives.³⁶ Conservative Party organizers could see the emerging Party cells as a counterbalance to the entrepreneurs' increasing status, taking cues from the Organization Department's grand project of 1997. While letting market forces lead state banks, the Department created specialized Party organs to secure the CCP's ultimate control of capital resources.³⁷ In contrast to the company owner's voluntary membership, the formation of a Party cell in a company does not require the owner's consent. The penetration of companies works at all levels, from the owners to the workers. In 2011, among all 43,321 managers officially reported by Chinese listed companies, 21 per cent were Party members.³⁸ In 2003, the Organization Department introduced new metrics, counting company-owning Party members along with the number of Party cells in private firms.³⁹ With a Party Constitutional rule, a clear metric and some precedents, Party organizers were on the move to conquer the private sector.

If it had not been the Organization Department, bureaucrats might have forged ahead in a well-advertised managed campaign, solving the problem within a couple of years. Instead, the Organization Department set to work with steady determination, as reflected in the coverage rates. Whereas in 2003 only a few significant private firms had an embedded Party organization (6 per cent),⁴⁰ by 2010 the coverage rate had risen to 21 per cent, indicating a significant institutional breakthrough.⁴¹ By 2017, 73 per cent of all private firms had a Party

³⁵ Xu 2018, 148.

³⁶ Holbig 2002, 49–52.

³⁷ Dai 2014, 475.

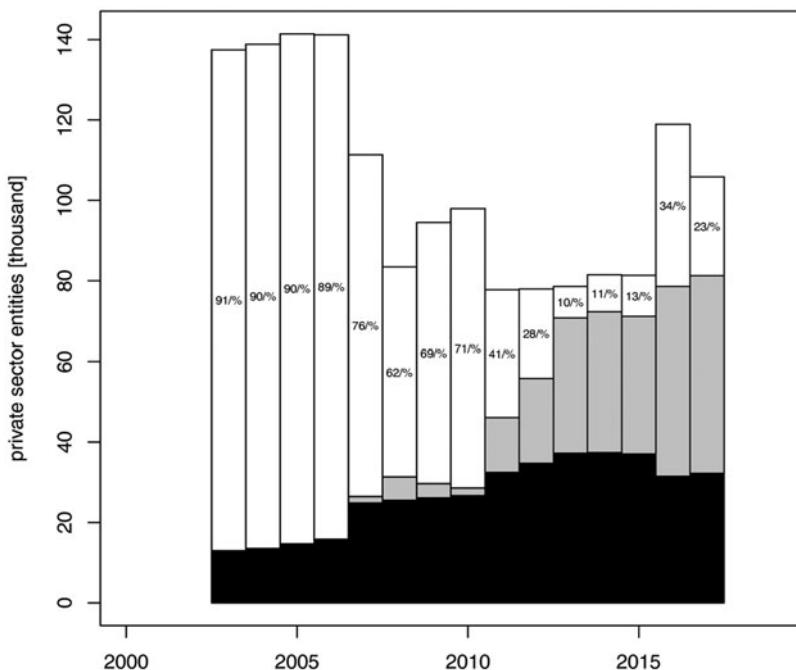
³⁸ Thanks to Yuhua Wang for sharing his data on business executives, explained in Wang, Yuhua 2016.

³⁹ CCP Organization Department 2011, 198, 206.

⁴⁰ The Organization Department distinguishes not-publicly controlled firms (*fei gongyou jingji kongzhi de qiye*) from publicly controlled firms (*gongyou jingji kongzhi*). The bulk of the first category consists of privately controlled firms (*siyou jingji kongzhi*), but also includes two separate subcategories for firms from Hong Kong and Taiwan, versus firms from the rest of the world. State-owned firms and collectively owned firms all belong to the second category. The Organization Department only takes into account firms above a certain size: in 2010, there were 2.6 million entities in a sector that comprises 18 million.

⁴¹ Calculated based on Organization Department 2011, 10, 198, 381–82.

Figure 1: Party Cells in Shandong's Private Sector



Source:

Author's own calculations based on CCP Shandong 2002–2018.

Notes:

The black area represents firms in Shandong's private sector with a Party organ; grey indicates firms with a joint Party cell; white is the percentage of firms without a Party cell or connection.

organ.⁴² Given potential inaccuracies of the denominator, coverage rates must be taken with a grain of salt, but absolute numbers reflect unequivocal trends. Between 2003 and 2018, the number of private companies with an embedded Party organization grew more than tenfold, to almost 1.6 million in 2018. It took the CCP less than two decades to build up a tight network.

Local data from Shandong provide additional insight (see Figure 1). Provincial trends conform with national trends of steady penetration: in 2003, only 9 per cent of all private firms had an embedded Party organ; that number rose to 29 per cent in 2010 and 77 per cent in 2017. The provincial data also reveal the central importance of a new form of organizing. In addition to a steady increase in firms with their own embedded Party organ (shown in black), joint Party cells that cover more than one firm (shown in grey) were essential to boost penetration and will be discussed in the next section. What started as a technocratic initiative to keep track of Party members resulted in a formidable infrastructure.

⁴² The absolute number is from the end of 2018 (“2018 nian Zhongguo gongchandang dangnei tongji gongbao” (Bulletin of CCP statistics for 2018). cpc.people.com.cn, 1 July 2019); the relative number is from the end of 2017 (“2017 nian Zhongguo gongchandang dangnei tongji gongbao” (Bulletin of CCP statistics for 2017). Xinhuanet, 30 June 2018).

A Repertoire of Penetration Techniques

In contrast to the official message, Party organizers need to overcome hesitation and resistance by the owners. With the ethos of a revolutionary Party, organizers are ready to employ strong-arm tactics, not mincing their words to describe the procedures for implanting Party organs in the 360 private companies targeted in one prefecture of Hebei. Only nine owners took a proactive stance; in all other cases persuasion was needed. Firms without a Party presence were denied government approvals, such as new firms not receiving the necessary registrations.⁴³ In their dealings with private companies, organizers drew on a decade's worth of experience penetrating foreign companies. Whereas by 2003 most CCP cells in domestic private companies were simply the result of privatizing state-owned firms, the creation of almost 5,000 Party cells in foreign-invested companies had sharpened the tools that could later be deployed for domestic Party building.⁴⁴ In the case of a recalcitrant Japanese firm in Dalian, Party organizers ultimately prevailed by planting members, dispatched to seek employment.⁴⁵

As Xiaojun Yan and Jie Huang describe in an analysis of penetration efforts in Anhui, the repertoire involves targeted incentives, such as concurrent Party appointments for managers and better services for companies, along with the creation of specialized and highly empowered agencies.⁴⁶ Intriguingly, the authors introduce the practice of appointing officials as Party-building instructors (*dangjian gongzuo zhidaoyuan* 党建工作指导员), reminiscent of the Mao-era approach of intervening at the grassroots by dispatching work teams. Also in Hunan, such instructors play an important role in penetrating private companies that have been identified as blank spots.⁴⁷ In Shandong, instructors have been dispatched in large numbers at least since 2008. After achieving their initial mission of installing Party organs, in a case of mission drift they were entrusted with an open-ended task to strengthen the Party organs' authority. In 2017, the 34,967 instructors of Shandong dealt with 83,409 private firms – 79 per cent of all private firms.⁴⁸ Party-building instructors have emerged as a new institution with a revolutionary pedigree.

Another prominent instance of institutional innovation is joint Party cells (*lianhe dangzhibu* 联合党支部), which in Shandong cover about half of the targeted companies. Jiaxing Mansion, a commercial building in Shanghai, is said to have established China's first joint Party cell in 1999. Redefining the building as a work unit, 18 Party members working for companies in Jiaxing Mansion set up not only a Party branch but also a joint trade union, a joint youth league

⁴³ CCP Hebei 2007, 12.

⁴⁴ CCP Organization Department 2011, 381.

⁴⁵ CCP Dalian 1993, 11.

⁴⁶ Yan and Huang 2017.

⁴⁷ CCP Hunan 2015, 149.

⁴⁸ CCP Shandong 2002–2018, especially 2018, 835.

branch and a book club in an example of bottom-up innovation.⁴⁹ Joint Party cells soon found their way into a position paper by the Organization Department, and became widespread a decade later in the efforts to fully cover the private sector.⁵⁰ They are instrumental to covering the many firms with a short life span, high personnel turnover and few Party members. In addition, they provide leverage over company owners since the Party cell members do not all work for the same employer. The innovation has even caught on overseas, where state-owned companies set up joint Party cells that are open to Party members working for business partners.⁵¹ In this instance of bricolage, the Party has created a hybrid between the work unit-based Party cell and the territorially defined branch that is typical for parties outside of China.

Remedies against Competing Loyalties

Setting up a Party cell is one thing, asserting authority is quite another. To get a foot in the door, the Organization Department emphasizes the Party's interest in company growth, and it tolerates business owners dominating Party organs.⁵² The initial focus is on a formal structure and visible presence, including physical space for meeting rooms, exhibition spaces or member service points in larger office buildings. Self-confident business owners shrug off the possibility that Party cells could weaken company interests, explaining that Party cells serve them well and that Party members are beholden to the company more than they are to the Party. Case studies recite litanies of deficiencies with Party cells in private companies, such as a high turnover of Party members, a lack of ideological conscience, no sense of mission, family loyalties to the company owners overriding Party loyalty, the branch leadership's lack of experience in Party affairs, a subordination under the management as the company's vassal, or simply its marginal existence.⁵³ As the following paragraphs will show, in the spirit of bricolage, Party organizers deploy bureaucratic rules along with classic purge tactics to strengthen Party command lines.

Dealing with companies, the Party encounters the perennial challenge of enforcing loyalty to the Party over loyalty to family clans. Family relations between the business owners and the leaders of the Party organs are recognized as a major structural problem. A study in Shanghai's Jiading district 嘉定区 investigates typical problems of “clanification” (*jiazuohua* 家族化).⁵⁴ One company with 38 employees had four Party members, of whom three were investors, and was headed by a Party secretary who was the elder brother of the principal owner. The Party cell of a construction firm with 60 employees comprised 12 Party

49 Wang, Dan 2008, 26–28.

50 Organization Department 2000.

51 CCP Fujian 2019, 5.

52 In the prefecture of Hebei, discussed above, 65% of the private company cells' Party secretaries are from the top-level management (CCP Hebei 2007, 13).

53 Lü 2017, Ch. 4. This source also leads to other, quite repetitive case studies.

54 CCP Jiading 2003.

members, of whom three belonged to one family and were among the leadership of the cell, with the owner's in-law acting as Party secretary. The report describes how ineffective these Party cells were and ends with suggestions to check for family connections before approving the establishment of a new Party cell. In Wenzhou 温州 and Ningbo 宁波, the Organization Department does not approve Party cells if more than half of its members belong to one family.⁵⁵ The possibility of placing the Party cell outside the firm – to avoid domination by firm-internal networks – is another possibility to ward off “clanification.” Such regulations are constantly upgraded to keep up with attempts to subvert them. Another avenue to enforce loyalty is “seizing the Party secretary,” which means that Party schools train Party secretaries in companies.⁵⁶

In a significant departure from soft enforcement, the Party has disciplined CCP members who did not put the Party's command before competing loyalties to their family and firm. A major campaign from 2015 re-enforced discipline across all categories of members. Complementing the anti-corruption campaign, the initiative purged “disqualified Party members.”⁵⁷ Adding new targets to those already persecuted on corruption charges, the campaign included individuals with incompatible values, notably religious beliefs, and those not sufficiently contributing to Party-sponsored activities and assignments.⁵⁸ In 2015 alone, Hunan province identified 9,092 disqualified Party members, of whom one-third left the Party.⁵⁹ Nationwide, exits from the CCP peaked in 2017, when an estimated 7.5 per 1,000 (or 671,000 members) left; this is far more than in any other year of the post-Mao era.⁶⁰ Party organs in private companies were targeted disproportionately. In 2016, 15 per cent of all Party cells in Shandong's private sector were shut down (see [Figure 1](#) above). This campaign's rigour evokes the Maoist past and sends a strong disciplining signal.

Party Funding against Complacency

By deploying a tried-and-tested institution like a Party cell in a new context, institutional bricolage also encourages the import of a whole set of practices associated with that institution. Party cells need financing, which is about resources as well as authority. Xi Jinping enforced membership fees to tighten discipline and weed out inactive members. Similarly, instead of drawing on

⁵⁵ Lü 2017, 109–111.

⁵⁶ CCP Shandong 2017, 811.

⁵⁷ “Guanyu zuohao chuzhi buhe dangyuan gongzuo de tongzhi” (Notice on how to dispose of unqualified Party members), Organization Department and Central Leading Group of the Mass Line Education Movement, Zhongzufa 2014/21.

⁵⁸ “Guanyu zuohao chuzhi buhe dangyuan gongzuo de shishi fang'an” (Implementation plan for disposing of unqualified Party members). CCP Work Committee for Education, Cangzhou Prefecture, 18 August 2015.

⁵⁹ CCP Hunan 2015, 155.

⁶⁰ Calculated as follows. The net increase in members over the year 2017 was 117,000 (tiny compared to a normal year). With 1.98 million new recruits, there must have been 1.87 million exits. Assuming normal death rates (834,000), and for a conservative estimate even allowing for the normal rate of unaccounted for disappearances (360,000), one arrives at 671,000 Party exits. Data available in the online Appendix.

affluent public coffers alone, Party cells must seek resources from their firms. This is a practice revived from the early Communist movement. A celebrated strike settlement of 1922 committed Anyuan's 安源 mining company to a monthly subsidy for the workers' movement, which was a major source of funding not only for the local workers' club but also for Communist activities nationwide.⁶¹ Prototypes for Party financing combine membership dues, government subsidies and work unit contributions;⁶² cells in the private sector aim for contributions from their companies.

Predictably, if not intentionally, a conflict of interests is generated when Party organs demand resources from a company. This conflict forces Party members out of complacency and socializes them into representing Party interests against company interests. Since the Party is not short of money, the demands can be adjusted to avoid escalation. On the side of the firm, the financial stakes are higher than one might think. In addition to direct payments, discussed below, companies incur costs by providing office space and by permitting employees to attend Party activities during their working hours. Once resources have been raised, Party members decide how to use them, triggering ideas and debates about possible activities, ranging from propaganda campaigns to charitable projects, improving the visibility and self-perception of the Party organ. Having the firm pay dues establishes the legitimate right of the Party to collect contributions. Even in cases where clumsily operating Party cells let entrepreneurs sense a protection racket, dues affirm the Party's authority.

Negotiating finances along with authority is a precarious process. Inexperienced Party members instructed to claim resources may end up begging for money. In the worst case, from the Organization Department's perspective, Party organs feel financially dependent on the firm, and managers develop the sense that they own the Party organs. To prevent begging, CCP organs are instructed to lay claim to company resources through an institutionalized system for financing organizational activities (*dangzuzhi huodong jingfei baozhangtizhi* 党组织活动经费保障体制).⁶³ Failure is widespread. In Weihai prefecture 威海市, an economic powerhouse across the Yellow Sea from Seoul, out of all the Party cells in private firms, 47 per cent receive the entirety (and 32 per cent a large part) of their funding from their firms. Yet the vast majority of firms provide these resources on an ad-hoc basis.⁶⁴

As funding mechanisms become institutionalized, negotiations become less open ended. In 2014, central authorities took a regulation from the state-owned to the private sector, coordinating expectations for financial contributions at 1

61 Perry 2012, 79.

62 For one of the very few highly visible and official explanations of financing practices, see Wang, Mingjie 2004. Actual financing practices must be pieced together from bits and pieces of information.

63 “Guanyu jiaqiang he gaijin feigongyouzhi qiyang dang de jianshe gongzuoz de yijian, shixing” (Opinion on strengthening and reforming Party building in the private sector, experimental), Central Committee Office, Zhong-banfa (2012) 7.

64 Chen 2013.

per cent of the total expenditure on personnel, including non-Party members.⁶⁵ The benchmark turned into a common reference point. The Party committee in a cluster of software companies in Weifang 潍坊, with 16 branches and 126 members, mentions the benchmark and reports company contributions of 1.6 million yuan.⁶⁶ To be sure, many companies deviate from the numerical quota, often as the result of local Party headquarters setting different expectations. For instance, one less prosperous locality established a half per cent rule,⁶⁷ whereas another locality introduced an upper ceiling of 2 per cent.⁶⁸ As funding becomes institutionalized, the Party's battle fortresses will need new, unsettled battle fronts to foster their ethos of combat.

Going Global: Old Institutions Serve New Ambitions

The operations of companies outside of China's national territory, where institutional bricolage harnesses grassroots Party organs to generate new forms of international influence, provide one such form of an unsettled frontier. Party branches celebrate revolutionary traditions to draw inspiration for current challenges. Examples of selfless perseverance, so abundant in the official Party historiographies, resonate with members coping with harsh working environments. For instance, a Party branch in Sudan studied Xi Jinping's frugal life as a sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution, drawing lessons for taking roots in Africa.⁶⁹ Another Party cell on a road project in Africa organized a vanguard troop to advance construction under extraordinarily difficult conditions.⁷⁰ Some activities help the implementation of policies that are in tension with business practices, such as watching a documentary film on anti-corruption efforts.⁷¹ When members struggle to digest experiences abroad, Party identity offers a spiritual anchor. Recognizing historical lineages leading up to the adversities of their own struggles in the fight for national rejuvenation adds sublime meaning to mundane and exhausting tasks.

The CCP's globally emerging organizational infrastructure is the fruit of overseas Party building (*haiwai dangjian* 海外党建). To globalize its presence, the Party piggybacks the success of globally operating Chinese companies.

⁶⁵ Up to this amount, contributions to the Party can be deducted from the company's taxable income. Joint circular issued by Organization Department and Finance Ministry, 5 December 2014, Zutongzi 2014/42

⁶⁶ CCP Shandong 2017, 664.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 812.

⁶⁸ "Guanyu guoyouqiyangzuzhi gongzuo jingfei wenti de tongzhi" (The problem of funding Party work in state-owned companies). Organization Department et al., Zutongzi 2017/38.

⁶⁹ "Sudan diqu dangzhibu zhaokai zhibu dangyuan dahui" (The Party cell of the Sudan region convenes a branch member full meeting). Cwe.cn, 18 October 2018, <http://www.cwe.cn/contents/party-building/6141.html>. Accessed July 2020. See online Appendix.

⁷⁰ Zheng, Xueyuan 2016, 132.

⁷¹ "Ecuador diqu dangzhibu zuzhi guankan guojia jiancha zhuanti pian kaizhan jingshi jiaoyu" (The Party cell of the Ecuador region watches the film *National Supervision* as awareness education). Cwe.cn, 21 January 2020, <http://www.cwe.cn/contents/party-building/9406.html>. Accessed July 2020. See online Appendix.

Whereas in some African and Asian countries Party building is conducted overtly, in other regions central authorities have approved covert operations, preferring one-to-one communications over larger group meetings under the slogan “swift, handy, safe, secret” (*linghuo, shiyong, anquan, baomi* 灵活, 实用, 安全, 保密).⁷² Revolutionary romanticism aside, secrecy is a handicap. As global Party networks mature, organs abroad increasingly look like domestic ones, with work committees dispatched from China maturing into full committees. Whereas until the early 2000s embassies were the unrivalled transmission point for Party instructions, today Party organs are embedded in a matrix structure. The embassy competes with a formal Party chain of command that bypasses it. With the creation of SASAC in 2003, the corresponding system of Party organs was elevated to an elitist sub-system, on a par with the territorially defined provincial Party sub-systems, a privilege that traditionally had only been enjoyed by the railway. SASAC Party organs are not territorially defined and operate both domestically and abroad. For instance, the China National Petroleum Corporation has Party committees based in Sudan, Venezuela, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and Libya, along with Party cells in all other countries with company activities.⁷³

Where state-owned companies move first, private companies follow suit. The embassy in Kenya invited 36 Chinese companies, both state-owned and private ones, to a roundtable discussion on Party building in Kenya.⁷⁴ Given the sensitive nature of extraterritorial Party building, the information is too scarce to assess the scale of overseas Party cells in private companies. But anecdotal evidence suggests that the Party cells in the foreign subsidiaries of private firms are a global phenomenon. A towel manufacturer from Shandong has set up a CCP cell in its US subsidiary on 5th Avenue in New York, advertising the cell’s usefulness:

Party members working there [in New York City] can carry out normal Party activities. Members on business trips or on inspection tours can transmit the Party’s guiding policies along with study materials. Party members deployed abroad can understand in a timely manner developments in their mother country, and can maintain conformity with the Party centre.⁷⁵

The quote reflects that the maintenance of the Party’s link to its members is the primary concern of Party building abroad, repeating the dynamics of the CCP’s domestic push into private companies. After all, the Party Constitution calls for Party cells in work units with at least three Party members, without qualifying the geographic scope. For the firms involved, Party building overseas offers

⁷² The slogan can be traced to Organization Department and SASAC Party Committee 2004. At the time, it applied to all overseas operations.

⁷³ “Qieshi jiaqiang he gaijin jieeng dang de jianshe wei qiyi gaige fazhan dianding jianqiang jishi” (Strengthen and reform Party building at the grassroots to lay a solid foundation for enterprise reform and development). *Sasac.gov.cn*, 29 June 2004, <http://www.sasac.gov.cn/n2588025/n2588124/c3859269/content.html>. Accessed July 2020. See online Appendix.

⁷⁴ “Sun Baohong dashi: zhukun zhongzi qiyi yao hegui jingyng tongshi weihu hefa quanyi” (Ambassador Baohong Sun: Chinese companies in Kenya must operate in compliance with rules while upholding their legitimate interests). *Chinadaily.com.cn*, 8 June 2018, en.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-06/08/content_36354670.htm. Accessed July 2020. See online Appendix.

⁷⁵ CCP Shandong 2009, 651. Author’s translation.

opportunities to prove their loyalty serving the Party. With Beijing harbouring new ambitions for the functions of Party cells, it is dawning on companies competing over subsidies through the Belt and Road Initiative that they could score some points by serving China's public diplomacy, with state-owned companies moving first.⁷⁶ The Party is a cutting-edge globalizer thanks to old-style Party cells.

Digitization: New Technologies Serve Old Institutions

Reversely, thanks to cutting-edge technology, the Party preserves old-style organizing practices. Patching old institutions with new devices, skilful institutional bricolage can lead to surprisingly effective arrangements. The Organization Department merges the organizational repertoire of the Russian Revolution with cutting-edge technologies from Silicon valley and Zhongguancun 中关村. Emerging linguistic coinages highlight how seamlessly Party organizers blend ostensibly incongruent elements, calling for intelligent Party building (*zhihui dangjian* 智慧党建, referring to the use of artificial intelligence), internet-based Party cells (*wangluo dangzhibu* 网络党支部) and Party building in the digital cloud (*dangjianyun* 党建云). This vocabulary, repeated on websites, in speeches and reports, is matched by substantive monetary resources and displays organizers' commitment to digital innovation.⁷⁷ Many of the Party's digital apps are one-to-one translations of existing procedures, faithfully reproducing old content on new platforms – the print version of unattractive tables with membership statistics can now be displayed on a colourful map with shades of red.⁷⁸ Digitization is flexible enough to let organizers continue doing what they have always done, but with added technological sophistication.

Party digitization provides tangible payoffs beyond the playful frill. Even if digitization does not radically alter established procedures, it gives them more bite. Thanks to better information flows, Party organizers can monitor the activities of members and quickly identify Party cells and individual members that are slacking. A strategic document explaining measures to strengthen Party organs in the private sector summarizes the rationale:

In light of the high fluctuation of employees, the large number of young people, and the affinity to the internet that is so characteristic [for private companies and NGOs], we should fully put to use information technology, create “internet Party cells,” cell phone apps, Party building on

⁷⁶ Zhang and Chen 2016, 341.

⁷⁷ There is a market for Party-building software, with firms advertising online. One firm published a list of projects with (unverifiable) budgetary figures. See “Zhihui dangjianyun zuihuo, zhengwuyun kuorong, qianyun xuqiu wangsheng” (Smart Party building cloud is the hottest, strong government demand for cloud expansion and migration). *Mp.weixin.qq.com*, 14 February 2019, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Wkf3G95P7dQPjM8EKBS1Q>. Accessed July 2020. See online Appendix.

⁷⁸ For an example of such a display, see “Fali zhihui dangjian, Dongruan pingtaiyun jiatui dangjian shuju xin chanpin” (To strengthen intelligent Party building, the Dongruan platform pushes out new product “Party-building data vista”). *Zhuanlan.zhihu.com*, 13 June 2018, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/38024495>. Accessed July 2020. See online Appendix.

Weibo and other online platforms, to strengthen the Party organs' openness, agility and effectiveness.⁷⁹

In practice, digitization revolves around tools to provide Party members with online propaganda, to keep track of Party cells' activities and to maintain channels for members' complaints. It is too early to assess the effect on the Party of online tools to track both the consumption and internalization of propaganda (for example, *Xuexi qiangguo* 学习强国), and of the emerging social credit systems, which have been understood as a part of “the most ambitious Orwellian scheme in human history.”⁸⁰ For now, the technologies involved to strengthen the grip of the Party over its own members do not require spectacular big-data driven platforms that fuel visions of digital Leninism.

Domestically, digitization offsets the loss of information control suffered by the Party when citizens abandoned their stable work units. Internationally, digital technologies allow the Party to project its authority globally, harnessing its position in globally expanding companies. Globally operating private companies provide a potent base for the Party to build its organizational infrastructure abroad and project its authority beyond national borders. Quick communication channels enable Party leaders to guide activities abroad without depending on the communication channels of the company. Digital technologies are used routinely to instruct CCP members who serve in subsidiaries around the globe, yet the Party combines videoconferencing with traditional means of communication. The 70-year-old head of Huawei's CCP committee travelled to Malaysia, South Africa and Thailand to meet Party members there.⁸¹ While embracing digital tools, the Party preserves its human touch.

Conclusion

Party innovation has the potential to defy China's dynastic cycle and perpetuate CCP rule, if one were to believe Xi Jinping's assessment celebrating the 70th birthday of the People's Republic.⁸² Studying the revered processes of Party building through a case study of the business frontier brings to light a process of institutional bricolage. Rather than designing institutional innovation following a grand vision, technocrats of the Organization Department redeploy a set of institutions inherited from the 20th century, often explaining their action in sterile jargon. One does not need to agree with Xi's prediction of unending success in order to recognize that the dynamics of institutional change have more than a passing resemblance to the institutional evolution of imperial China. For good

79 “Guanyu jiaqiang feigongyouzhi jingji zuzhi he shehui zuzhi dang de jianshe gongzuo de shishi yijian, shixing” (Opinion on strengthening Party building in the private sector and NGOs, experimental), Hu-bansfa (2016) 22, reprinted in CCP Hunan 2015, 274. Author's translation.

80 Heilmann 2016.

81 Zhangliao 2018, 141.

82 Compare Xi's 1 October 2019 article in *Qiushi* (“Tuijin dang de jianshi xin de weida gongcheng yao yiyanbanzhi” (Promoting the new grand process of Party building must be of one piece), 2 October 2019), and Geremie Barmé's interpretation of it, available as an “event summary” through *fairbank.fas.harvard.edu*.

reason, Zheng Yongnian has called the Party an “organizational emperor.”⁸³ Faithful to originally Leninist institutions reshaped and sanctified by the history of Mao’s revolution, the rigid Organization Department painstakingly tinkers with Party organs, command lines and grassroots tactics to shore up its authority. Obsessive formalism rules daily operations, but it results in tangible authority, including in the private sector.⁸⁴ Imperial governance was similarly tied to long-standing precedent and characterized by bureaucratic formalism, but imperial tinkering was similarly effective at adjusting institutions to new challenges. The Board of Personnel, the kindred spirit of the Organization Department, found ways to identify administrative priorities and selectively reform sanctified deployment procedures.⁸⁵ Institutional bricolage of the imperial era eventually could not muster the strength of fending off European intrusions and the domestic challenges of the 19th century, but it did keep the Qing dynasty afloat for 268 years. Vivienne Shue, noting the “oddly intact transfiguration” of China between the downfall of the Qing to Communist rule, calls on scholars to search for the grammar of Chinese governance.⁸⁶ Institutional bricolage appears as one striking element constituting the grammar of Chinese governance.

Further inquiry may identify other areas characterized by institutional bricolage. Propaganda officials might be similarly keen on innovating while reverting back to Party traditions, because they also adhere to venerated Party traditions. Propaganda tactics also exhibit sharp contrasts between faithful adherence to formal traditions, including choices of vocabulary, versus striking dogmatic flexibility on core socialist tenets.⁸⁷ This resembles the seemingly incompatible trends in organizing, where the CCP fully embraces market forces while clinging to Party cells and other procedures that would feel familiar to Lenin. The results are cutting-edge high-tech firms swiftly operating in global markets while bowing to Party organs that follow organizing principles codified by the vanguard of the Communist movement in the early 20th century. For now, this co-existence appears paradoxical; however, it may well become a familiar sight as the 21st century moves on.

The history of the Chinese revolution, as narrated by the CCP’s Institute of Party History and Literature (Dangshi he wenxian yanjiuyuan 党史和文献研究院) directly under the Central Committee, asserts a salvific history with the Party at the centre. Hence, Party organs – as opposed to government agencies – work with institutional bricolage. Even mundane procedures such as for membership admission, invented one hundred years ago for the purposes of an underground organization, have turned into sacred rituals. Once Party committees are deployed for limited bureaucratic goals, they exceed predictions and achieve unexpected authority, almost as if mythical powers of the revolution

⁸³ Zheng, Yongnian 2010.

⁸⁴ McGregor 2010.

⁸⁵ Koss 2017.

⁸⁶ Shue 2018, 269.

⁸⁷ Naughton 2017.

had been brought back to life. Put differently, CCP organizers pay tribute to their predecessors by re-incorporating temporarily suspended institutional practices, with moderate adjustments, thereby conjuring mythical powers extending from Lenin and Mao.

Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000692>.

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Conflict of interest

None.

Biographical notes

Daniel KOSS is a research scholar and lecturer at Harvard's department of East Asian languages and civilizations. His work focuses on political parties in East Asia, with a focus on local-level politics and the influence of historical legacies. He is the author of *Where the Party Rules: The Rank and File of China's Communist State* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

摘要: 中国共产党正在全面加强其在私营企业的组织建设。从中我们可以了解中共制度变迁的重要动力。党建创新是一种颇具特色的适应性治理。组织部不仅采用最前沿的科技与方法，而且有效地改善、整合了过去的遗产和经验，具有悠久革命历史的基层政党组织得以在私营企业扎根。原先分散在企业内的党员，被技术官僚重新纳入列宁主义政党的组织结构中，由此促成私营企业中党组织数量的激增。在此基础上，组织部门试图进一步深化企业内党组织的角色和使命。为了增强中共机构在公司中的力量，

组织部使用了多种成熟的党建策略，包括对企业做思想工作、施加压力，协商企业对党组织活动经费的保障机制，强化党员的纪律意识。结合不同时代的策略，中共在海外的党建工作中将传统组织方法应用于全球化的新目标。组织部门对看似过时的机构进行了数字化升级改造。可以说，一直以来，制度修补是中国治国之道的特色之一。

关键词：中国共产党；党的建设；制度变迁；适应性治理；历史遗产；政商关系

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