

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Shouldering the Burden: The Communist Party's Deepening Penetration into Village China

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Abstract

Under Xi Jinping, the Communist Party of China has systematically centralized decision-making power over a wide range of policy areas while strengthening the organizational capacity of Party institutions to implement the Party's agenda. The Party has expanded its presence and influence across government agencies, private enterprise and non-profit organizations. The final frontier for Party control lies in the countryside, where villages have enjoyed relative autonomy and civic organizational status since decollectivization in the early 1980s. This article explains how the Party has systematically deepened its penetration into China's villages by empowering village-level Party branches and Party agents to take control of village affairs. The policies have sought to turn village committees into party-state implementation agencies, but messy realities on the ground raise questions about the efficacy of the measures for policy implementation and formal Party control. Drawing on interviews with villagers, village leaders and township officials in several rural Chinese counties in western and eastern parts of China, alongside Party documents and Chinese-language academic journal articles, this article examines the Party's strategy for taking greater control of China's 600,000 plus villages and presents observations about the impacts and consequences of the recent centralization initiatives for rural governance in China.

摘要

在习近平的领导下, 中国共产党系统地决策权集中并广泛地运用到各个政策领域, 同时加强了党内机构实施、执行党的纲领。党扩大了其在政府机构、私营企业和非营利组织中的存在和影响力。党控制的最后阵地是农村, 自20世纪80年代初非集体化以来, 农村集体一直享有相对的自治权和民间组织地位。本文解释了党如何通过授权村级党支部和党代表来控制村务, 如何系统地加深对中国农村的渗透。这些政策试图将村委会变成党和国家的执行机构, 但各农村当地混乱、复杂的实地情况致使人们对这些措施在实施过程和党的正式控制效果方面产生了怀疑。本文通过对中国东西部多个农村县的村民、村干部和乡镇官员的走访, 以及党的文件和中文学术期刊文章, 探讨了党对中国60多万个村庄加强控制的战略, 并提出了对近期中央集权举措对中国农村治理的影响和后果的观察

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party; Party building; rural governance; village cadres; village democracy; village leaders

关键词: 中国共产党; 党建; 乡村治理; 村干部; 乡村民主; 村主任

During the week of 24–28 April 2023, the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party organized its first nationwide training programme for China's village leaders. Offered via video link to village Party secretaries and village leaders (*cun zhuren* 村主任), the training sessions were held in 3,568 sub-classrooms across the country and included Central Party School video presentations and offline seminars focused on Party building for the purpose of rural revitalization and making

China a strong agricultural country (*nongye qiangguo* 农业强国). It was the first time in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that the Central Party School had directly conducted training for village leaders, signalling a shift in the Party's role in village affairs. The training covered five main topics: "developing and strengthening the village-level collective economy," "Party-building leading rural governance," "doing in-depth and detailed mass work," "strengthening the village Party organization into a solid fortress" and "building a beautiful Red village." In a Xinhua news report covering the training, Kong Qingfan 孔庆范, secretary of the general Party branch and director of the village committee of Tongfa village 同发村, Qing'an county 庆安县, Heilongjiang, was quoted as saying that he "believes that the village Party secretary must truly become the 'leading goose' of rural revitalization, and the grassroots Party organizations must truly become the 'backbone' of the people, shouldering their mission and responsibility in line with the [Party's] original spirit" (*chuxin* 初心).¹

It is now Party policy in China for the two positions of village Party secretary (*cunweishuji* 村委书记) and village leader (*cunzhuren* 村主任) to be held by the same person. This policy, one of several recent interventions in village governance aimed at reasserting Party control of rural affairs and centralizing authority, has been implemented at the expense of village self-government, which had been the bedrock principle of village organization since decollectivization in the 1980s.

This study examines the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) efforts to reassert its authority in the countryside, where villagers have been accustomed to managing their own affairs since decollectivization in the early 1980s. It argues that during the Xi Jinping 习近平 era, and particularly during Xi's second and third terms, the Party has sought to bring village administration under direct party-state control for the first time since the collective era by empowering the village Party branch and the village Party secretary and by strengthening mechanisms of upward accountability. At the same time, this study finds that the effects of the governance changes have been mixed. Although the village Party secretary is now formally in charge of all village affairs, preliminary findings suggest that the Party's village penetration programme has been compromised by messy realities on the ground. The paper begins by outlining the Party's rationale and approach to reasserting its authority in the countryside, drawing on Party documents and Chinese scholarly literature. It then discusses the Party's various strategies for reasserting control in villages and presents preliminary observations on the consequences for the Party and for rural governance. The analysis draws on 31 interviews conducted in 2019 and 2023 in Yunnan province, one of China's poorer provinces, and a further 11 interviews carried out in 2024 in Zhejiang province, which is one of China's wealthiest provinces and is hailed as a model of village development.² Respondents included village leaders, former village leaders, villagers, local government officials and businesspeople.

The Political Logic of Bringing the Party Back

When the Party came to power in 1949, it sought to penetrate deep into China's rural communities to carry out land reform, smash traditional hierarchies and create a new social and economic order. The Party controlled the rural masses through collectivization, which removed household autonomy over agricultural production.³ The economic policies failed, and collective agriculture was abandoned in the early 1980s following Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 death in 1976. Land was then divided up among village households under the "household responsibility system," which enabled farmers

1 "Nuli dang hao xiangcun zhenxing 'lingtou yan'" (Strive to be the "leader" of rural revitalization). *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 2023, www.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2023-05/16/c_1310719123.htm.

2 "Zhonggong zhongyan guowuyuan guanyu xuexi yunyong 'qiangcun shifan, wan cun zhengzhi' gongcheng jingyan youli youxiao tuijin xiangcun quanmian zhenxing de yijian" (Opinions of the CCP Central Committee and State Council on learning and applying the experience of the "Thousand villages demonstration and ten thousand villages improvement" project to powerfully and effectively promote comprehensive revitalization in rural areas). [www.gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202402/content_6929934.htm), 3 February 2024, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202402/content_6929934.htm.

3 Unger 2002.

to sell above-quota produce on open markets.⁴ The evolving rural economic system required new forms of coordination and decision making in the village. Villages began experimenting with direct elections for village leadership.⁵ As elections spread throughout the country, candidates did not need to be a Party member or hail from a “good” class background.

Although some within the Party protested the democratic opening and loss of Party control, most Party leaders considered village self-government and open elections to be a solution to post-collective organizational weakness and a means of recruiting the most qualified candidates to lead the village during the transition to a market-oriented economy.⁶ As Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang observed, it was believed that a “measure of mass participation ... would generate support for the Party’s revolutionary mission.”⁷ Yet, direct elections also generated problems for the Party. First, elections endowed village leaders with a legitimacy not bestowed by the Party. To the frustration of township and county governments, village leaders tended to be more downwardly than upwardly accountable. They were thus prone to resisting state directives when it suited their interests and the perceived interests of the village.⁸

During the 1990s and 2000s, the Party sought to “fix” village governance by ensuring electoral procedures produced “better” candidates. Efforts focused on the quality of electoral administration, including candidate selection, the preservation of ballot secrecy and transparency in vote counting. This was largely achieved by mobilizing large numbers of officials from township and county governments to monitor each stage of the election process. Prior to 2012 when Xi Jinping took power, the Party carried out its village election work under the auspices of “strengthening village democracy.” A 2005 White Paper on China’s Democratic Political Construction had declared that “expanding grassroots democracy is the inevitable trend and important foundation for perfecting and developing socialist democratic politics with Chinese characteristics.”⁹ But following Xi’s appointment as Communist Party general secretary, the Party’s discourse and actions towards village governance shifted. Rhetoric about strengthened village democracy gave way to calls for stronger Party leadership of the village, mirroring the Party’s efforts to expand its influence more broadly across China’s state institutions and society.¹⁰ Indeed, a key focus of the Xi administration has been to strengthen Party organization and Party influence throughout state administration, business and civic organizations as part of an overall centralization agenda. For Xi, a strong and influential Party organization is essential not only for regime survival but also for achieving the Party’s centennial goals – as articulated by Xi Jinping. The first goal was for China to become moderately prosperous by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP. The second goal is for China to become an advanced economy and global power by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. The Party’s core mission is to lead the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation – a task that only the Party can fulfil.

A key component of the first centennial goal – arguably its key performance indicator – would be the elimination of rural poverty. And the Party was duly mobilized to this end. On 29 December 2012, just weeks after his appointment as CCP general secretary, Xi declared during an inspection tour of Hubei province that “If rural areas are to develop and farmers to get rich, the key lies in the [Party] branches.”¹¹ The Xi administration launched its targeted poverty-elimination campaign in 2014.¹² The goal was to lift 70 million people out of extreme poverty (defined as per capita income of less than 4,000 yuan per year) at the rate of one million people per month.¹³ It was during the implementation of

4 Lin 1988.

5 O’Brien and Li 2009.

6 Shi 1999; Thurston 1998; Xu and Liu 2006.

7 O’Brien and Li 2009, 469.

8 Chen 2007.

9 State Council 2005.

10 Dirks and Fu 2023.

11 Xi 2023.

12 Zhou, Haoyue, and Zhang 2023.

13 China’s official poverty line is defined as 2,300 yuan (US\$350) per capita per annum at 2011 prices (4,000 yuan in 2023).

this campaign that the Party began to conspicuously reassert its authority in the village by mobilizing work teams and dispatching other Party functionaries to lead efforts at the village level.¹⁴ An estimated 1.6 trillion yuan (US\$246 billion) of state funds and 9.2 trillion yuan (US\$1.28 trillion) in loans were invested over eight years, at the end of which victory was declared.¹⁵ At a February 2021 sitting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Xi announced the end of extreme poverty in China and the achievement of his first centennial goal.¹⁶

Following the formal end of the targeted poverty campaign, the Xi administration rebadged its investments in the countryside as “rural revitalization.” Although the rural revitalization agenda was first promulgated in 2017, it only became the Party's flagship rural policy in 2021, when abject poverty was officially eliminated.¹⁷ In February of that year, the Poverty Alleviation and Development Office was renamed the National Administration for Rural Revitalization. Rural revitalization is an ambitious policy agenda designed to boost agricultural production, improve rural livelihoods and ensure food security through improved technologies, farm consolidation and mechanization. It is closely aligned with Xi's second centennial goal, which includes a vision of China as an agricultural superpower.¹⁸

As with other major Xi-era policy initiatives, only the Party organization is trusted to deliver the desired results. The Strategic Plan for Rural Revitalization 2018–2022, released in September 2018, identified grassroots-level Party building as “the major focus” of rural revitalization and called for turning “rural Party organizations into solid fortresses for publicizing the Party's positions, implementing the Party's decisions, leading grassroots governance, uniting and mobilizing the masses, and promoting reform and development.”¹⁹ Since 2018, the Party has moved with remarkable speed to deepen its penetration into village China through a combination of political campaigns, the mass mobilization of Party members, and the introduction of new legal and administrative requirements, each of which are discussed below.

The Party Leads the Village

In Xi's second term, Party officials developed a new set of rural work regulations designed to strengthen the Party's control over rural affairs and village-level organization. The 2019 “Regulations on the rural work of the Communist Party of China” established a clear leadership system for rural work, providing a framework for central coordination, provincial responsibility and city/county/township implementation.²⁰ The regulations underscore a major push to revitalize and empower Party organizations in the village. Party building at the rural grassroots involves: (i) formalizing the Party branch or Party committee's organizational structure; (ii) empowering and encouraging Party leaders and members to be more involved in village affairs; (iii) providing Party branches with more resources to carry out their tasks; (iv) building facilities for Party meetings and activities; (v) organizing study sessions; and (vi) fostering a sense of collective mission and responsibility through activities such as “thematic Party days” (*zhuti dangri huodong* 主题党日活动), which are designed to promote Party values and ideology and to assert the Party's moral and functional

14 Zhou, Haoyue, and Zhang 2023.

15 “Xi Jinping: zai quanguo tuopin gongjian zongjie biao Zhang dahui Shang de Jianghua” (Xi Jinping: speech at the National Poverty Alleviation Summary and Commendation Conference). *Xinhua wang*, 25 February 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2021-02/25/c_1127140240.htm. Accessed 7 March 2025.

16 “How China lifts 100 million people out of poverty: a mission of a century.” *Xinhua net*, 25 February 2021, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/25/c_139767595.htm. Accessed 31 October 2024.

17 Hillman 2024b.

18 The full text of Central Document No. 1 2023 can be found at <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/chn221130.pdf>. Accessed 7 March 2025.

19 Ch. 8, Art. 25, of the Strategic Plan. See www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-09/26/c_1123487123.htm.

20 “Zhongguo gongchandang nongcun jiceng zuzhi gongzuo tiaoli” (The CCP's rural grassroots organizational work regulations), 2019, www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-01/10/content_5356764.htm.

leadership of the village community. In the words of Jiangnan University's Ya Zhou, the goal is to "transform the Party's organizational superiority into a powerful driving force for promoting rural economic and social development."²¹

The Party is further empowering village Party branches by funding office construction, including representative offices in natural villages and villager small groups where Party meetings and other gatherings can take place. In one ethnic Hui hamlet I visited in 2023, a new Party building had been constructed next to the mosque. These facilities are designed to be a locus for Party activities and a symbol of the Party's renewed prominence in village affairs. Party offices serve as a hub for the mobilization of Party members and the masses. They offer a venue for meetings where Party members and invited villagers can study Xi Jinping's speeches, important policies, and such concepts as the "spirit of the 20th Party Congress," a key focus during the first half of 2023. Another routine mobilization activity is the thematic Party day, which, according to Party regulations, must be held once per month. Thematic Party days combine policy study sessions with activities such as visits to local enterprises, village clean-ups and reviews of "red- and black-listed" ("red-listed" denotes approval) individuals and entities (*hongheibang* 红黑榜).²² Township Party committees sometimes coordinate village Party branches in a township-wide thematic Party day. During my visit to Yunnan in June 2023, one township had recently organized a thematic Party day on water management, which involved hundreds of Party members removing branches, rubbish and dead animals from the local river. The purpose of such activities is to cultivate an esprit de corps among members and to demonstrate the relevance of the Party at the village level.²³ The Party has worked to buttress its standing and legitimacy in the village to smooth the way for the transfer of power to its local agents. According to one villager I interviewed in central Yunnan province, "the Party wants to show us that everything about the Party is good."²⁴

Village Party branch members are evaluated twice annually for their contributions to Party work, which includes their participation in meetings and activities. In one village I visited in southern Zhejiang province, evaluation results were posted on the wall of the meeting room in the village office. Self-evaluations were worth 10 per cent and peer evaluations were worth 20 per cent, with a further 70 per cent of points awarded by the Party secretary for overall performance (*zonghe biao-xian* 综合表现). One of the 27 members had failed to meet the minimum performance requirements and had received a warning. Posted on the same meeting room wall were documents outlining the responsibilities and commitments of the Party secretary and village leaders, including the responsibility to "actively complete all tasks assigned by superiors."²⁵ The newly enforced upward accountability from village (Party) leaders to township and county governments indicates a partial fusion of village administration with township administration. This centralizing process is reinforced by developments in digital governance, which give township governments real-time access to and oversight of village finances.

CCP Penetration into the Village

The expansion of Party control in village China has involved enhancing the organizational capabilities of village-level Party organizations. To strengthen village Party organizations, the Xi administration has mobilized Party members from Party and government agencies as well as from other public institutions, such as state-owned enterprises (SOEs), banks and universities, to undertake a variety of initiatives in rural areas. In line with this, the deployment of live-in-the-village cadres (*zhucun ganbu*

21 Zhou, Ya 2017, 23.

22 On the blacklisting of village leaders, see Hillman 2024a.

23 For a more detailed account of Party thematic days, see Mittelstaedt 2021.

24 Interview, Yunnan province, December 2023.

25 Village visit undertaken in May 2024.

驻村干部) – i.e. township and county officials stationed in villages for several months and up to two or more years – has been expanded.

Some live-in-the-village cadres serve as part of work teams appointed to oversee specific policy tasks. The Party has long used work teams to achieve rapid policy implementation and to serve as the Party's "missionaries."²⁶ It first sent work teams to the countryside during the land reforms of the 1940s and 1950s and continued to utilize them over the subsequent decades. These teams, which typically consist of party-state officials from all levels of government, are deployed to propagate and implement new policies, deal with social conflicts and strengthen grassroots Party organization. In the targeted poverty alleviation campaign of 2013–2020, a total of three million Party and government personnel were appointed to work teams. Their task was to help villagers find solutions to economic problems, mobilize resources and promote the Party's role as a service provider. The use of such work teams has continued under the Party's rural revitalization programme. According to the National Rural Revitalization Commission, in June 2023 there were 563,000 work team personnel deployed across the countryside.²⁷

Work team members are billeted in village households where they are supposed to engage closely with the masses, communicate Party values and demonstrate the Party's concern for villagers' well-being. This approach reflects a longstanding Party tradition of attempting to bridge the cultural divide between the educated urban classes and the peasantry by ensuring that "sent down" functionaries live, eat and work alongside villagers, a practice known as *santong* 三同, or the "three together."²⁸ Contemporary work teams are also expected to help villagers access knowledge and resources. In 2022–2023, for example, one Yunnan university was responsible for improving the economic welfare of four villages, to which it dispatched ten staff members to live for periods of up to two years. Typically, younger and unmarried employees undertake the assignments in the expectation that they will have better prospects of promotion upon their return.²⁹

Under the rural revitalization agenda, work teams are specifically tasked with prioritizing the strengthening of grassroots Party organizations as a foundation for rural revitalization.³⁰ To further support Party building in the countryside, the Party has mobilized hundreds of thousands of "first secretaries" (*diyī shūjī* 第一书记). Their role is to advise on the organization of village Party branches and the implementation of Party policies, and to strengthen the leadership of village Party branches. The "first secretary" programme was scaled up during the targeted poverty alleviation campaign and has continued through the transition to rural revitalization.³¹ According to the National Rural Revitalization Commission, in 2023 more than 400,000 first secretaries were to be appointed across 26 provinces to more than half of China's estimated 600,000 administrative villages.³²

Unlike village Party secretaries, who are typically long-term residents in the communities, first secretaries are appointed from outside the village. They are supposed to transform the village Party organization into a more responsive agent of Party supervision and control. According to one first secretary, "The primary responsibility of a village first secretary is to train the Party secretary of the village, bringing experience as well as social and material resources to develop the village. Village Party secretaries are obliged to improve their management capability under the guidance of the first secretary."³³ County Party committees are tasked with recruiting suitable candidates, under the guidance of the "Opinions on the continuous selection of first secretaries and working teams in key villages,"

26 Perry 2021.

27 National Rural Revitalization Authority 2023.

28 Perry 2021.

29 Interview with Yunnan University academic, Kunming, June 2023.

30 "Yi gao zhi liang dangjian yinling xiangcun zhenxing (zhilizhe shuo)" (Leading rural revitalization with high quality Party building (says governor)). *Renmin wang*, 23 March 2023, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0327/c117092-32651528.html>.

31 Personal communication, villager small group Party secretary, 10 December 2023.

32 National Rural Revitalization Authority 2023.

33 Personal communication with a first secretary in a west China province. See also Tao and Li 2016.

a policy document issued in May 2021 by the Party Central Committee.³⁴ The basic conditions for the selection of the first secretary and work team members are as follows: good political quality; a determination to implement the Party's theories, lines, principles and policies; a love of rural work; a strong working ability; the willingness to take responsibility; an ability to do mass work; a pioneering and innovative spirit; a strong sense of responsibility; a solid work style; courage in the face of hardship; a willingness to give; and the physical ability to perform routine duties. The first secretary must be a Party member with more than one year of Party experience and more than two years of work experience.³⁵

In some parts of the countryside, the Party has recruited former soldiers to undertake the duties of first secretary. In Yunnan, Peng Zhong 彭忠, a former soldier from Dali city 大理, was appointed as the first secretary of Xin Zhuang village 新庄村. In a media report about his more than three years in the role, he was credited with creating "a good atmosphere in which the masses follow the Party members and the Party members follow the organization in an all-round way."³⁶ The Party centre encourages its local organizations to consider veterans, who can be relied upon for their discipline and obedience, when recruiting for first secretaries and village Party secretaries. The positions provide a source of income and social status for veterans, who in recent years have often engaged as a group in organized protests over welfare conditions and limited employment prospects following military service.³⁷

The massive importation of work teams and first secretaries is an unprecedented penetration by the party-state into village life in the post-Mao period. A January 2023 essay in the *People's Tribune* (*Renmin luntan* 人民论坛), a magazine published by the Party's *People's Daily* newspaper, observed: "State cadres are the personal expression of institutional power, and cadres stationed in villages can be understood as the entry of the state system into villages ... future rural governance and rural order will be more influenced by state power and state policies."³⁸

While the scale of the Party's penetration into the Chinese countryside is unprecedented in the post-Mao period, the effects have been mixed. In several places I visited as part of this study, as well as in reports from respondents working in other parts of the countryside, it can be seen that the Party's intentions have been compromised by the messy realities on the ground. The first problem has been the impact and effectiveness of the individuals mobilized to carry out the construction of the Party's grassroots organization in the villages. I met several Party functionaries, including first secretaries, as well as many other people who interacted with them. In both wealthier Zhejiang province and poorer Yunnan province, the impact of the Party's "missionaries" depended greatly on their individual capabilities and, specifically, their ability to bring material benefits to the village to which they were assigned.

According to interviews with staff from an agricultural extension agency that worked closely with villagers and village leaders across south-west China, first secretaries often did not understand the rural communities they were assigned to and were not always competent at communicating with ordinary people. However, they would quickly gain authority if they could mobilize resources for the village, usually in the form of grants or loans.³⁹ According to the former head of the agency, "If a first secretary comes from a government department with money, such as [from] the National Development and Reform Commission (*guojia fazhan he gaige weiyuanhui*

34 Tao and Li 2016.

35 "Zhonggong zhongyang bangong ting yinfa 'Guanyu xiang zhongdian xiangcun chixu xuanpai zhu cun di yi shuji he gongzuo dui de yijian'" (CCP Central Committee issued its "Opinions on the continuous selection of first secretaries and working teams in key villages"). *Xinhua wang*, 11 May 2021, www.xinhuanet.com/2021-05/11/c_1127433592.htm.

36 "Yunnan Dali: jianshou zhu cun de di yi shuji 'zuimei tuiyi junren' Peng Zhong" (Dali, Yunnan: Peng Zhong, the village first secretary and the "most lovely retired soldier"). *Zhongguo wang*, 10 January 2022, http://zw.china.com.cn/2022-01/10/content_77981021.html.

37 Yang 2022.

38 Gui 2023.

39 Personal communication, 6 December 2023.

国家发展和改革委员会), villagers will welcome him.”⁴⁰ I observed this myself during visits to several villages and in communications with government officials and village leaders in 2023 and 2024. In one village I visited in December 2023, the first secretary was a retired policeman who was originally from the village, and villagers reported that he helped people to solve problems in their dealings with administrative and law enforcement agencies. A government official in a central Yunnan county provided further corroborating evidence. He told me that although a key part of the job of first secretary is to communicate Party policies, people only pay attention to them if they can help the village obtain funds. I heard similar reports from village leaders and first secretaries in southern Zhejiang province during fieldwork in May 2024. One first secretary, who was several months into his post, had been sent from the county organization department (the Party’s HR department), which had no funds. He therefore had to lean on his contacts across Party and government agencies to find whatever resources he could.

In other interviews with township and county officials and with academics whose university had seconded them to village-based projects, I learned that Party functionaries, including first secretaries, work team members and live-in-the-village cadres, were often assigned to the jobs not because of their skills but rather because they were superfluous personnel in the higher-level departments from which they were seconded. According to a retired official from a Yunnan provincial agricultural research agency, “of course, government agencies will not send their best people for these jobs; they will send the people they don’t need, who are not necessarily people with the best abilities.”⁴¹ In many other cases, young, single personnel were dispatched to fill the quotas because the impact on their personal lives was less than for older personnel with families; however, inexperienced junior personnel typically lack experience and have little knowledge of farming and rural affairs.

Individual capabilities and connections also shaped the nature of the interactions of first secretaries and other sent-down cadres with village leaders. And the nature of the relationships they were able to build determined the level of their influence. Those who had authority could wield more influence, while those without were more likely to perform perfunctory duties, such as attending meetings, disseminating information and preparing reports, with little substantive impact on village politics. Such performative behaviour is referred to as “formalism” (*xingshi zhuyi* 形式主义) in Chinese political discourse, a phenomenon that has come to be widely discussed in Chinese policy and academic circles in recent years. Formalism is variously described as “going through the motions,” “box-ticking,” “emphasizing form over substance” and conducting “catwalk-style” inspections.⁴² The prevalence of such formalism was apparent to many villagers I spoke with. One villager shared with me his impression of the work of live-in-the-village cadres: “they stay at the village office and come out to take photos.”⁴³

Party Control versus Village Democracy

Even though the impact of mobilized Party functionaries has been mixed, the Party under Xi has been undeterred in pushing for its representatives to lead everything, including the village. The most consequential mechanism the Party has introduced to reassert its power at the village level has been its policy of “two burdens on one shoulder pole” (*liangge danzi yijiantiao* 两个担子一肩挑) (one-shoulder pole policy hereafter). Under this policy, the positions of village Party secretary and village leader (*cun zhuren*), the latter of which is directly elected by villagers, must be merged. The village Party secretary is required to simultaneously serve as the village leader. Although the reverse process

⁴⁰ Personal communication, 6 December 2023.

⁴¹ Personal communication, 24 November 2024.

⁴² Wen and Li 2019.

⁴³ Personal communication, 25 November 2024.

could have been undertaken – i.e. directly elected village leaders could have been invited to join the Party – one former village leader believed that “this was a trust issue for the Party.”⁴⁴

The one-shoulder pole policy was first trialled during the latter years of the Jiang Zemin 江泽民 administration (1989–2002). At that time, however, it was not scaled up or enforced, nor were there clear guidelines on how it should be implemented. Xi Jinping revived the policy, setting a nationwide target for joint appointments in 50 per cent of China’s administrative villages by 2022 – a target that was greatly exceeded.⁴⁵ Rural work guidelines issued in 2019 also clarified the policy and added the additional requirement that village Party secretaries should take direct control of village collective enterprises, which include commonly owned assets such as buildings, factories, processing plants and mills, etc.⁴⁶ Central Document No. 1 of 2019 also called for “comprehensive implementation” of the policy, which, while not carrying the force of law, made clear the central leadership’s expectations.⁴⁷ According to a statement released by the Ministry of Agriculture, by the middle of 2022, village Party secretaries had assumed control of village collective enterprises in 92.7 per cent of China’s villages.⁴⁸

Township governments have been made responsible for ensuring that village Party secretaries become the village leaders. This has created a challenge for township officials, who are also required by law to oversee the direct elections of village leaders every five years and must now intervene in this electoral process to ensure that villagers elect the Party secretary. In some cases, this has been engineered by affirming the Party secretary as the only eligible candidate. In other cases, the village Party secretary might compete against a dummy candidate, who may have been promised favours in return for accepting the role.

Ensuring that village elections produce the “correct” result requires significant investments of time and resources on the part of township officials, who must begin by ensuring the village Party branch elects a secretary acceptable to the wider village community. The officials must then consult village elites and canvass villagers to ensure there is no opposition to the Party secretary during the election.⁴⁹ In one county that I visited, villagers reported that township officials pleaded with them to vote, saying that otherwise they would lose face and be punished. Some villages said they feared that they would lose access to government grants and projects if they did not follow the township government’s directions. Leaders of villager small groups (*cunmin xiaozu* 村民小组), which are smaller clusters of households within the larger administrative village (*xingzhengcun* 行政村), were also mobilized to ensure that their communities voted in accordance with the township government’s recommendations. One villager small group leader told me that even though there was more than one candidate, “there was no real choice”; if the election did not achieve the desired result, it would cause problems for everyone, and they would have to redo it.⁵⁰

When I asked a township Party Secretary whether the elections were now a waste of time and resources since the result was pre-ordained, he answered that elections helped to shore up the legitimacy of the Party secretary/village leader and now served as a show of support rather than

44 Interview, southern Zhejiang, May 2024.

45 “Zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan yinfa ‘Xiangcun zhenxing zhanlüe guihua (2018–2022 nian)’” (The Central Committee of the CCP and State Council issued the “Strategic plan for rural revitalization (2018– 2022)”). *Xinhua wang*, 26 September 2018, www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-09/26/c_1123487123.htm.

46 “Zhonggong zhongyang yinfa ‘Zhongguo gongchandang nongcun jiceng zuzhi gongzuo tiaoli’” (The Central Committee of the CCP issued the “Regulations on rural grassroots Party organizations”). *www.gov.cn*, 10 January 2019, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202203/content_3635364.htm.

47 The full text of Central Document No. 1 2019 can be found at <http://www.moa.gov.cn/ztzl/jj2019zyyhjw/2019zyyhjw/>. For a more detailed discussion of the related policy documents, see Deng 2022.

48 “Dui shisan jie quanguo renda wu ci huiyi di 0789 hao jianyi de dafu zhaiyao” (Summary of reply to recommendation 0798 of the 5th session of the 13th NPC). Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, 28 July 2022, http://www.moa.gov.cn/govpublic/zcggs/202209/t20220930_6412373.htm.

49 On the CCP’s mobilization of rural elites, see Zhao 2025.

50 Personal communication, 11 December 2023.

as a genuine vote.⁵¹ Even though the result of the village elections is now a foregone conclusion, the Organic Law on Village Elections of 1998, revised 2018, requires that village elections continue to be held every five years.⁵² In interviews in southern Zhejiang, where elections were last carried out in 2020 and were scheduled to be held again in 2025, township officials confirmed that they were required to organize village elections to comply with the procedures stipulated by the Organic Law, which includes an initial nomination process and maintaining ballot secrecy. In reality, the elections have become little more than a demonstration of fealty to the Party.

As head of the village and village collective enterprises, the Party secretary is now formally the single most important decision maker in the village. This Xi-era change represents a radical break from previous decades of practice. In the past, village Party secretaries often held considerable sway over village affairs, but this authority was often buttressed as much from kinship networks and social connections as it was from the formal Party position. Before the recent changes, the formal role of the Party secretary was limited to Party affairs and communication of Party policies. Village affairs, including economic affairs, were primarily the domain of the directly elected village leader, who was often not a Party member.

The changes have placed new pressures on village Party secretaries, who are now responsible for the overall leadership of the village and collective enterprises. In Zhejiang province, I interviewed several Party Secretaries who expressed both surprise and frustration at the additional burdens placed upon them and the relatively small remuneration. They received between 50,000 and 70,000 yuan a year in compensation, but, as one noted, they did not receive any other benefits such as social insurance and had to pay for their own medical bills (in contrast to township government officials, for whom such expenses are covered).⁵³ When I asked one of the Party secretaries whether he would consider serving a second term, he responded that it would “depend on the circumstances.” Another said that the township would struggle to find people willing to do the job if the one-shoulder pole policy continued. When I quizzed a township Party secretary on this point, he suggested that the challenge was to mobilize the deputies (deputy village leader and deputy Party Secretary) to shoulder more of the responsibilities. He also countered that there would always be candidates willing to stand as village Party secretary because of the status and influence that accompanied the position.⁵⁴

The last observation that candidates would always be attracted to the position for its status and influence underscores the possibility that candidates are motivated out of self-interest rather than out of dedication to public office. This suggests that the Party’s confidence in the superior quality of its Party functionaries at the grassroots and its ability to ensure their loyal obedience might be misplaced. Throughout the history of the PRC, there has been a well-documented tendency by village clan and kin-based groups to take advantage of shifting political winds for their own interests.⁵⁵ Even though village Party secretaries do not enjoy the benefits and privileges of party-state officials, they can nevertheless win favours and benefits in return for their cooperation. And, as the Party’s influence continues to expand in all areas of policy and governance, as well as economic institutions and social organizations, its cadres are increasingly becoming a privileged group.⁵⁶ The village Party branch, which elects the Party secretary, has become the locus of formal power. As a Yunnan villager reflected, “one-shoulder pole will be great for people who have good relations with the Party secretary because all decisions go through the Party secretary.”⁵⁷

Although changes to the formal governance arrangements are clear, the impacts of the changes on village politics are varied and depend on local circumstances. I visited one Yunnan village in

51 Interview, southern Zhejiang, May 2024.

52 Zhao 2024.

53 Interview, Zhejiang province, May 2025.

54 Ibid.

55 Chan, Unger and Madsen 1992.

56 Fitzgerald 2022.

57 Personal communication, 3 December 2024.

December 2023 where the one-shoulder pole policy had yet to be implemented. In some ethnic minority regions, roll out was slow because the Party often struggled to find suitable candidates for the post of village Party secretary. During fieldwork, I visited some Tibetan and Hui villages where the village Party secretary was often Han Chinese and appointed from outside the village. Externally appointed village secretaries could not be easily shoehorned into the position of village leader because they would not be accepted by villagers. Following a common practice in Tibetan areas, in one Tibetan village in north-west Yunnan, the Han village Party secretary lived in the county seat and only travelled to the village when required to conduct a meeting or make announcements. In such places, an official told me, the Party was working to cultivate a new generation of Party leaders from within the village, but it would take time.

In another ethnic minority Yunnan village where the one-shoulder pole policy had yet to be implemented, the externally appointed Han Chinese Party secretary had moved to assert his authority in the village where, unlike in the Tibetan village above, *putonghua* 普通话 was the lingua franca. The Party secretary had taken over all major decision making, including on economic projects and rural construction. Resources such as project funding that had once flowed through the hands of the elected village leader now flowed through the Party secretary. The directly elected village leader told me that his material conditions had improved – he now earned a salary of 5,000 yuan per month, a rise of several times the previous subsidy provided to village leaders in the region – but he now worked under much stricter conditions.⁵⁸ He was required to attend the village office during work hours unless he had work-related business outside the office. But he was clearly disempowered in comparison to the externally appointed Party secretary. A villager informed me that the village leader was often not invited to important meetings chaired by the village Party secretary.⁵⁹ A similar pattern was apparent in two other villages where the villagers confirmed to me the shift towards Party control. In these villages, the positions of Party secretary and village leader were still occupied by different people, but as one villager told me: “the Party secretary used to only do propaganda (*gao xuanchuan* 搞宣传); now he is responsible for everything (*shenma dou guan* 什么都管).”⁶⁰

In 2020, the Party introduced a further measure to cement its top-down control of village leaders. They were added to the list of officials subject to sanctions in accordance with the Law on Administrative Discipline for Public Agents (2020).⁶¹ If village leaders are sanctioned, county and township authorities must withhold or reduce their salaries and bonuses.⁶² Juan Wang and Yu Mou argue that this measure effectively classifies village leaders as “public agents” (*gongzhi ren yuan* 公职人员), a move which they describe as a “paradigm shift” in the Party’s disciplining of village cadres.⁶³ Such rules increasingly blur the boundary between the lowest level of state administration and the village collective, challenging the principle of village self-government enshrined in the PRC Constitution.⁶⁴ Indeed, it appears that the formal changes to rural governance represent an attempt to turn the village administration, which, according to the law, is an autonomous civic organization, into a state implementation agency.

The working relationships I observed among village Party secretaries and township officials also pointed to a blurring of the boundaries between local government and village administration, but not necessarily in ways that ensure top-down control. In one county that I visited in southern Zhejiang in May 2024, village Party secretaries’ salaries were paid only at the end of the year, allowing local state

58 Interview with village leader, April 2023.

59 Interviews with villagers conducted in April 2023. Owing to the sensitivity of the subject matter, the names and locations of the Yunnan villages are not identified in this paper.

60 Interview, April 2023.

61 Zhonghua renmin gonghe guo gongzhi ren yuan zhengwu chufen fa (PRC Law on the Administrative Discipline of Public Officials). www.gov.cn, 20 June 2020, www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-06/20/content_5520868.htm.

62 Ibid., Art. 22.

63 Wang and Mou 2021.

64 According to Art. 111 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, village communities (as represented by their committees) are self-governing mass organizations.

officials to adjust payments according to their performance in annual evaluations. But, given the relatively small salary, the lack of other benefits and the absence of any opportunity for career progression, it is far from certain that township officials can effectively use remuneration and bonuses as tools of formal control. It was more often the case that township officials depended on village Party secretaries to meet their own increasingly onerous performance targets, and this was facilitated by building relationships through banqueting, playing games such as mahjong and cards, and exchanging favours such as preferential access to projects and funding and helping relatives find employment.

When Party secretaries cooperated with township officials to help them meet policy targets, many appeared to do so because of personal ties or in the expectation that favours would one day be reciprocated. Indeed, through discussions with village leaders and township officials, I became aware of the degree of mutual backscratching that took place when it came to meeting performance targets and coping with evaluations conducted by higher levels. A recent requirement for townships to expand the number of village-level collective enterprises offers a particularly illuminating example. For the township to meet its target, several collective enterprises had to be conjured out of thin air – a process that required the cooperation and swapping of favours of multiple parties, including local enterprises. Collaborating in countermeasures (*duice* 对策) galvanizes the informal ties that Xi's Party-centric centralization agenda has sought to eliminate. The central Party leadership frequently criticizes such behaviour, which falls under the broad rubric of formalism, but local officials are long accustomed to counteracting unworkable and unreasonable policy demands and to protecting themselves by investing in trusted, personal relationships. It is not clear that the shift in authority to village Party secretaries will alter such longstanding dynamics.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The Communist Party has now transferred control of village affairs to the village Party secretary, who now concurrently serves as village leader and chief authority in the village in nearly all provinces. Village Party secretaries are now appointed, remunerated, evaluated and disciplined by township and county governments, suggesting at least a partial merger of township and village administration that challenges the legal status of the village as self-governing. Since 2018, the Party has moved decisively to reassert Party authority in China's nearly 700,000 administrative villages. The moves are in keeping with the overall trend to centralize decision making and strengthen the Party's grassroots organization to drive the Party's agenda, which Xi's government calls the rural revitalization agenda. Direct Party control is seen as the only viable solution to the country's political and policy challenges.

It is too early to assess the full consequences of the Party's restructuring of village governance and it is not yet known whether new Party-sanctioned village leaders will succeed where popularly elected village leaders apparently have failed. It is unclear how the new arrangements will be shielded from the much-despised influence of clan and patronage networks, since rural grassroots Party secretaries have been captured by such interests in the past.⁶⁶ Limited opportunities for village Party secretaries to advance their careers beyond the village dampens motivation for compliance with state directives, especially in the face of contrary village-level public opinion, even under the threat of sanctions.

Another consequence of the Party's re-taking control of village administration is the loss of its ability to shift blame for policy failures. Henceforth, the Party alone will be held accountable for village affairs, including village economic growth, services, social order and the success of ambitious rural revitalization programmes. Rural revitalization looms as a much bigger challenge than poverty alleviation, which only aimed to increase the lowest rural incomes to above the official poverty line of 4,000 yuan (US\$550) per year. This threshold is very low and the tens of millions of rural poor who now sit just above the line are at risk of falling below it again, as the Party's own documentation

65 One recent study has even suggested that the "one-shoulder pole" and other mechanisms for strengthening Party control at the grassroots are serving to reinforce collusion among township and village leaders. See Ruan and Wang 2023.

66 Hillman 2023; 2014.

highlights. The Xi administration has doubled-down on its promises to improve rural livelihoods; however, there is still challenging work to be done to elevate rural incomes to a level that can be considered moderately prosperous.⁶⁷ Rural revitalization, which is to be achieved through agricultural modernization, new agribusiness and tourism, will need to harness local creativity, innovation and investment. Rigid control could be an impediment to the dynamism necessary for such change. Rural China “took off” the first time around in the 1980s when the Party pulled back from village affairs and allowed rural communities to make their own decisions and govern their own local resources.⁶⁸

The large-scale redeployment of party-state personnel to strengthen Party organizations at the grassroots is also expensive and unsustainable. Millions of salaried officials have been dispatched to the villages to contribute to development projects and other Party programmes at a time when China is facing economic headwinds and local government finances are under extreme pressure.⁶⁹ The Party demands that all public institutions and local governments, no matter how cash-strapped and mired in debt, contribute to the cause. Presumably, the efforts will be scaled back as the capacity of village Party branches and village Party secretaries improves; however, capacity building of this nature takes years and more likely decades. It is unclear at what point village administration will be considered sufficiently absorbed into the state system to no longer need further state penetration in the form of various live-in-the-village Party functionaries.

Villager reactions to the return to prominence of Party functionaries are mixed: some villagers are dismissive of Party representatives who know little about their village and the problems they face; others are indifferent. Much depends on whether the Party functionary can bring material benefits to the community, which is understandable, but it raises the question of whether village Party secretaries will be more successful than their directly elected predecessors at delivering material livelihood improvements. The new regulations requiring the village Party Secretary to assume the role of village leader have rendered village elections meaningless. Yet my conversations with villagers in both poorer and richer parts of the countryside suggest that there has been little resistance to the Party’s power grab, with most villagers expressing interest in leadership performance rather than the appointment process. Recent studies suggest that villagers are ambivalent about the abrupt end to competitive elections, a finding which suggests that the changes have had little direct impact on the things that matter to them.⁴⁰ But the Party has taken away the power of villagers’ votes, which could become a source of discontent if Party-appointed leaders fail to meet villagers’ expectations of improved livelihoods.

Although the canvassing of villagers’ views on potential candidates by township officials provides some opportunity for feedback and input into the selection process, only Party branch members decide who is allowed to lead the village. There is a risk that Party branch members will become a new elite in village China – an exclusive club that makes decisions over land use, collective assets and enterprises. Such an elite group could come into conflict with non-Party power centres in the village, such as the heads of clans and wealthy business owners, or it could become compromised by them. It is too early to assess the consequences of the Party’s deepened penetration into village-level politics, but varying degrees of contention, grievance and pushback are likely to emerge in the wake of a prolonged economic downturn or in response to unpopular policies.

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⁶⁷ Rozelle and Hell 2020.

⁶⁸ Oi 1999.

⁶⁹ Wong 2025; Oi, Luo and Xu 2025.

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