

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Evolution of Grassroots Governance in China: Home Visits by Work Teams in Xinjiang

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Abstract

This article analyses the *fanghuiju* 访惠聚 campaign as a core component of grassroots governance in Xinjiang. It traces its evolution from Mao-era mobilization practices to a systematized mechanism of authoritarian control in the Xi Jinping era. Moving beyond institutional and security-centric frameworks, the study situates *fanghuiju* as a regionally initiated, localized adaptation by the Xinjiang government and grassroots cadres that blends revolutionary traditions in China with contemporary innovations in surveillance, personalized datafication and ideological governance. Drawing on state media, policy documents and extensive analysis of work team literature, this paper argues that *fanghuiju* work teams represent a localized fusion of Maoist mobilization and Xi-era high-tech governance. They function as tools for grassroots surveillance, political indoctrination and socio-economic restructuring, marking a shift from episodic campaigns to permanent, embedded governance that blends top-down control with bottom-up engagement.

摘要

本文将新疆“访惠聚”驻村工作队运动置于基层治理的核心位置，考察其如何从毛泽东时期的群众动员实践，演变为习近平时代制度化的威权治理机制。与仅从制度或安全视角的研究不同，本文强调“访惠聚”乃新疆党委和基层干部在本地情境中发端、因地制宜的治理创新：它将中国革命传统与当代数字监控、个体数据化和意识形态管理结合起来。通过对官方媒体报道、政策文件及大量工作队文献的梳理，文章指出，“访惠聚”工作队是毛式动员与新时代高技术治理在地方层面的融合体——既承担基层监控、政治灌输，也推动社会经济重组，标志着中国治理模式从间歇性的运动式管理，迈向长期嵌入、上下一体的常态化治理。

Keywords: campaigns; Chinese Communist Party; grassroots governance; work teams; Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

关键词: 运动; 中国共产党; 基层治理; 工作队; 新疆维吾尔自治区

In March 2014, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) launched the first wave of cadre work teams under the “Visit, benefit, gather” (*fanghuiju* 访惠聚) campaign in southern Xinjiang.¹ Mandated with petitioning the masses, improving livelihoods and winning hearts, these teams represent the continued significance of a well-established governance approach in modern China. Cadre work teams have been a key tool for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) governance, originating in Soviet-era practices and further developed during Mao Zedong’s 毛泽东 campaigns.² Comprising

1 SCIO 2020; Xinhua 2020.

2 Perry 2021; 2024.

urban officials, work teams were sent to rural areas to implement policy through rapid mobilization, compressed timelines and the deliberate bypassing of routine bureaucratic channels.³ Leveraging a combination of formal and informal channels, work teams deployed to carry out campaigns were responsible for pinpointing pressing social issues, gathering public feedback and rallying non-state stakeholders, including activists, community groups and special interest organizations, to tackle a wide range of challenges, from education and employment to other critical social challenges.⁴

In the early 20th century, the Chinese state solidified its grip on rural areas by merging its authority with that of local leaders and grassroots organizations.⁵ Mao Zedong played a pivotal role in the 1930s and 1940s, rallying public support for the CCP and eliminating rival factions through revolutionary campaigns. After the CCP took power in 1949, it leveraged wartime mobilization strategies to shape the country's development, governance and state-building efforts. Relying on work teams in mass campaigns, Maoist politics focused on transforming the population, oscillating between Party rectification and widespread political mobilization of rural "people's communes."⁶

With the reform and opening policy under Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, work teams adopted a more decentralized model. Scholars noted a decline in the Party's capacity for mass mobilization⁷ and a rise in new forms of "rural self-governance" and "grassroots democracy."⁸ In the Xi Jinping 习近平 era, however, work teams deployed in state-led campaigns, from anti-corruption to poverty alleviation, have re-emerged with renewed vigour.

In the XUAR, village work teams function as key intermediaries between the state and local communities when carrying out such campaigns, with the goal of advancing the CCP's agenda of Sinicization, instilling socialist values and extending political control and shaping everyday life. While Mao championed high-intensity participation built on ideological zeal, Xi has introduced more systematic, data-oriented techniques, which lend new complexities in grassroots governance and avenues for experimentation in social control.⁹ Campaigns in the XUAR integrate surveillance technologies, including big data analytics and biometric monitoring, enhancing both the scale and precision of work teams' oversight of grassroots communities. Work teams are deployed not only for propaganda and economic initiatives but also for continuous supervision of households and villages, ensuring that there are no blind spots in the party-state's objectives of stability and social restructuring.¹⁰

Existing research on grassroots governance in Xinjiang has primarily concentrated on policing,¹¹ securitization and the scale of the internment camp system.¹² Attention to the *fanghuiju* campaign has largely focused on its role as a coercive mechanism for poverty alleviation and labour transfer.¹³ Yet the evolution and mechanisms of the *fanghuiju* campaign as a core component of grassroots governance in the XUAR remain underexplored. By spotlighting the *fanghuiju* as an important campaign run by the XUAR CCP committee and regional government since 2014, this study illuminates its function as a powerful – and evolving – tool of authoritarian governance in contemporary China. Drawing on state media, policy documents and extensive analysis of work team literature, this paper argues that *fanghuiju* work teams represent a localized fusion of Maoist mobilization and Xi-era high-tech governance. They serve as instruments for grassroots surveillance, political indoctrination and

3 Strauss 2020, 22, 25.

4 Perry 2024.

5 Duara 1988, 5, 75.

6 White 1990; Perry 2011.

7 Pei 2008, 182.

8 Perry 2011; 2021; 2024.

9 Kam and Clarke 2021.

10 For the XUAR's comprehensive surveillance within re-education centres, see Clarke 2022.

11 Zenz and Leibold 2020.

12 Byler 2022b; Zenz 2023b.

13 Zenz 2023a.

socio-economic restructuring, marking a shift from episodic campaigns to permanent, embedded governance that blends top-down control with bottom-up engagement.

This paper contends that Xi's campaign-style interventions in Xinjiang intensify the traditional style of Maoist mass mobilization by deploying agile work teams – a distinct modality for effectively quelling entrenched grassroots contradictions. As a localized policy adaptation, *fanghuiju* reflects a shift in campaign-style governance, signified by regional improvisation and grassroots implementation of Beijing's ideological goals (articulated through Party forums, united front work directives and national security policy) in everyday mechanisms of control. By embedding work teams in rural households, the XUAR's *fanghuiju* campaign facilitates the party-state's systematic transformation of cultural identities by reinforcing Sinicization in mundane spaces and everyday practices.

This paper makes three broader conceptual contributions. First, Xi Jinping's administration has reaffirmed the enduring role of campaign-style governance, challenging predictions of declining CCP mobilization in the post-reform era. Work teams in contemporary campaigns reveal a dual character, combining charismatic Party leadership with an increasingly localized and professionalized bureaucracy to reinforce political loyalty while ensuring efficient point-to-surface policy execution.¹⁴

Second, while much scholarship on Xinjiang emphasizes “terror capitalism”¹⁵ or state-backed securitized narratives and practices,¹⁶ this study highlights *fanghuiju* as a mechanism of localized political control with vertical and horizontal dimensions, namely, top-down discipline and bottom-up implementation alongside the integration of technology with ideologically motivated human-centred interventions. *Fanghuiju* campaigns have reconfigured the party-state's relations with society and increased the salience of work team cadres as grassroots party-state agents in the XUAR.

Third, beyond the institutional centralization of power by Xi and its effects in the XUAR,¹⁷ the study underscores the deep institutional embeddedness of *fanghuiju* work teams as an important and evolving fixture in rural governance. This institutional embeddedness reflects what Peter Evans terms “embeddedness,” whereby lower-level agents of the party-state form intimate linkages with the grassroots towards the goal of poverty alleviation and ideological transformation. As Evans has noted, embeddedness provides “sources of intelligence and channels of implementation” that strengthen the state's governing capacity.¹⁸ In Xinjiang, the enmeshment of *fanghuiju* work cadres at the village level creates a vast internal security network. This network links the party-state's ideological vision with targeted grassroots interventions and performance assessments that compel cadres in village work teams to achieve campaign goals. *Fanghuiju* work teams not only implement state policies but also reshape the economic, social, cultural and political spaces at the grassroots level by actively participating in the everyday practices of villagers in the XUAR. This interplay between historical statecraft and contemporary governance strategies reveals the importance of observing governance and state-building efforts at the grassroots level, which extend well beyond institutions, and at the localized level in the XUAR.

This article proceeds as follows. First, the paper traces the historical development of CCP work teams from the revolutionary period to the present. It then situates the *fanghuiju* campaign within this broader tradition, examining how Mao-era practices have been reconfigured for contemporary governance. The third section analyses the campaign's institutional evolution in the context of XUAR governance. The fourth section explores how *fanghuiju* operates on the ground, highlighting key local adaptations in the XUAR. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the implications of *fanghuiju*

14 Deng and Ma 2017; Ding 2018.

15 Byler 2022a; 2022b.

16 Zenz and Leibold 2020; Roberts 2020; Hayes 2022; Zenz 2023a; 2023b.

17 Zhao and Leibold 2020; Zhou 2022.

18 Evans 1995, 59.

for authoritarian governance in China's frontier regions and considers its broader significance for understanding campaigns as a key function of grassroots governance.

The Evolution of Work Teams in China: From Revolutionary Vanguard to Embedded Governance

The CCP has long relied on mobile “work teams” (*gongzuo dui* 工作队) in grassroots governance.¹⁹ These ad hoc units, dispatched by higher authorities for limited periods, are tasked with executing specific missions through mass mobilization.²⁰ Over time, CCP work teams have been transformed from revolutionary vanguards²¹ into instruments of embedded governance,²² with their roles, structure and ideological focus adapting to suit the Party's shifting objectives across historical periods.

During the Long March (1934–1935), communist units on the move doubled as political missionaries, spreading revolutionary ideology among remote villages even as they fled Nationalist encirclement.²³ Surviving cadres regrouped at the Yan'an 延安 base after 1935 and refined the “mass line” approach: small groups of organizers would live among peasants, learn about local grievances and mobilize villagers to support objectives.²⁴ These proto-work teams blended ideological exhortation with practical assistance, laying the groundwork for later campaigns.²⁵ By the late 1930s and 1940s, as CCP control expanded during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), teams of Party activists fanned out to “speak bitterness” with oppressed peasants and implement experimental land redistributions, serving both to politicize the masses and to identify targets for class-based struggle.²⁶ Mao Zedong encouraged this practice, famously urging that the people's army be “turned into a work team” when not fighting, so that soldiers could help to organize and politicize the masses.²⁷ Forged in warfare and rural struggle, the early forms of work teams emerged during this period as vital conduits between Party leaders and peasants.²⁸ In its embryonic years, the CCP developed a model of embedded mobilizers: itinerant yet enmeshed agents who catalysed social revolution at the village level.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), work teams became the spearheads of sweeping social transformation in the countryside. During land reform in the late 1940s to the early 1950s, dedicated Party work teams were sent village-to-village to dismantle the old feudal order.²⁹ Composed of politically reliable Party cadres, land reform work teams were dispatched to rural villages where they conducted detailed household surveys and reclassified villagers into rigid class categories, including “landlord,” “rich peasant,” “middle peasant” and “poor peasant.” This process laid the ideological and logistical foundation for confiscating property and initiating class-based struggle in the name of social justice.³⁰

Landlords and other “class enemies” were publicly denounced and, in many cases, executed with the work teams' approval. By 1953, the teams had helped to redistribute land to hundreds of millions of peasants, while breaking the back of the landlord class. However, their top-down methods also

19 Perry 2021; 2024.

20 Ibid.

21 McAdams 2017.

22 For embedded dominance during COVID-19, see Kam 2024.

23 Averill 2006, 45.

24 Teiwes and Sun 1996, 15–18.

25 Averill 2006, 45.

26 Wou 1994, 111.

27 Schram 1969, 2.

28 Bianco 2001.

29 Dikötter 2013, 65.

30 Oi 1989, 25–28.

sometimes misfired, as even relatively well-off middle peasants were miscategorized. Party directives sought to temper excesses, instructing cadres to maintain peasant enthusiasm but minimize violence. Work teams also engaged in political education to irradicate “feudal” mindsets by teaching villagers Maoist principles and the new socialist morality. In short, the 1950s land reform teams combined administrative control with intense ideological mobilization.

A decade later, as corruption crept into grassroots governance, Mao reactivated the work team model under the Socialist Education movement. The “Four cleanups” campaign (1963–1966) dispatched waves of work teams into villages and urban districts to root out cadre malfeasance and rekindle class struggle. These teams, comprising college students and officers from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), were sent to rural communes to investigate local officials. Acting as roving disciplinary inspectors, they audited accounts, exposed bourgeois lifestyles and rallied peasants to criticize corrupt or lax authorities. In practice, many work teams pursued their mandate with zealous intensity, leading to fresh waves of denunciation meetings and persecution. By the time the “Four cleanups” had concluded, thousands of officials had been persecuted and millions denounced.

In 1966, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution to purge the Party of “revisionists.” Initially, Party work teams were again dispatched to schools and workplaces to restore order and guide the movement. However, Mao soon denounced them as obstructionist and accused them of protecting the Party bureaucracy. In July 1966, Mao ordered their withdrawal and the dismantling of bureaucratic control and unleashed the radical Red Guards. This reversal signalled a de-legitimation of the work team model. Ironically, once the chaos had peaked, Mao again turned to organized teams – this time in the form of PLA units and propaganda squads – to restore stability.

The late 1960s in China saw a radical campaign to relocate urban educated youth to rural areas as part of the Cultural Revolution’s social engineering. In 1968, Mao declared that “it is very necessary for the educated youth to go to the countryside and undergo re-education by poor peasants,” launching what would become known as the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside movement (*shangshan xiaxiang yundong* 上山下乡运动).³¹ Between 1968 and 1978, approximately 17 million urban educated youth (*zhishi qingnian* 知识青年) were sent to remote villages and border regions to live and work as peasants.³² These sent-down youths were assigned to people’s communes, production brigades and production teams in the countryside, where they were expected to labour alongside local villagers and be “re-educated” through hard work and peasant life. During the movement, rural work teams, and specifically production brigades and commune-level organizations, managed and interacted with the sent-down urban youth according to a three-tier hierarchy: the people’s commune (at the township level), production brigades (villages or groups of villages) and production teams (small village groups). Local work teams played a vital role in driving the movement but were often overwhelmed and underprepared. While some tried to support the youth, others saw them as burdens or tools of political convenience, which contributed to the widespread hardship and long-term disillusionment among the sent-down generation.³³

By the early 1970s, the concept of work teams was met with ambivalence. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP moved to rebuild a regular Party administration. Excesses committed by work teams were officially repudiated, and many wronged individuals were rehabilitated. Nonetheless, the mechanism whereby higher levels deployed temporary task forces survived and was quietly reactivated in the late 1970s to assist in rehabilitation efforts and to re-establish Party authority in localities where governance had collapsed.

31 “Liangjiahe: where Xi Jinping’s poverty alleviation inspiration began.” CGTN, 21 February 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-02-21/Liangjiahe-Where-Xi-Jinping-s-poverty-alleviation-inspiration-began-Y1PFjarqnu/index.html>. Accessed 30 March 2025.

32 Bernstein 1977.

33 Honig and Zhao 2019.

The post-Mao reform era brought a developmental focus and some relaxation of ideological control, yet the CCP continued to rely on work teams for campaign-style governance. Following the commune era, work teams shifted from limited involvement in economic reform to active roles in policy enforcement, such as during the “one-child” policy.³⁴ Over time, they became more technocratic and ideological. They were used for tasks such as promoting development in minority regions, restoring political loyalty post-1989 and subtly steering village elections to maintain Party control.

Under Xi Jinping, the work team model was dramatically expanded under the “Targeted poverty alleviation” (*jingzhun fupin* 精准扶贫) campaign.³⁵ Launched in 2013, this strategy aimed to eradicate extreme rural poverty by 2020 through precise, case-by-case interventions. Millions of cadres were dispatched to impoverished villages as resident work teams.³⁶ Over the span of about eight years, the “Targeted poverty alleviation” campaign saw 255,000 work teams and 3 million cadres sent down to villages. Cadres from these poverty alleviation work teams provided one-to-one assistance to impoverished farmers.³⁷

Xi also revived and expanded the role of first secretaries (*diyishuji* 第一书记) as external appointees tasked with strengthening village Party leadership. Serving as Party “missionaries,” first secretaries work in proximity to work teams to accelerate policy implementation.³⁸ Initially tasked with poverty alleviation and social service delivery in Xinjiang, first secretaries increasingly became enforcers of securitized governance under the rubric of “stability maintenance.” Many cadres deployed to Xinjiang prior to the full implementation of *fanghuiju* were later investigated or prosecuted as “two-faced” officials, accused of either corruption or displaying sympathy towards the very Uyghur communities they were meant to monitor. This purge underscores how the work team structure not only enabled vertical supervision over local society but also imposed top-down political pressure on the implementing agents themselves, enforcing ideological conformity within the Party apparatus while projecting coercive power into minority regions.³⁹

By 2015, every officially designated poor village had a work team and an appointed first secretary stationed within it, with roles varying across regions.⁴⁰ After 2020, work teams were institutionalized as a permanent feature of rural governance under the “five plan” on rural revitalization.⁴¹ In 2023, over 400,000 first secretaries and their teams were despatched across 26 provinces.⁴² For instance, in Z Village in western Hunan, they helped to develop local cooperatives and tourism, contributing to tangible improvements in income and governance.⁴³ Millions of cadres selected from Party and state organs, state-owned enterprises and public institutions were mobilized to advance the Party’s rural revitalization agenda.⁴⁴ Work teams embedded within villages identified household needs and coordinated resources for development projects in impoverished areas to prevent relapses into poverty while also serving as political educators. Emphasizing gratitude to the Party and moral uplift, they reinforced CCP legitimacy through a blend of administrative intervention and mass-line ethos.⁴⁵

34 The enforcement of the “one-child” policy saw the formation of special work teams to carry out sterilizations and enforce compliance.

35 Xie, Yang and Liu 2019; SCIO 2021; State Council 2021; Hillman 2023.

36 SCIO 2021.

37 “Profile: With popular mandate, Xi Jinping spearheads new drive to modernize China.” *Qiushi*, 15 March 2023, http://en.qstheory.cn/2023-03/15/c_869255.htm. Accessed 30 March 2025.

38 Perry 2021.

39 I would like to thank a reviewer for making this point.

40 “Nanjiang xiaocun kaichu 36 dui shiliuhua” (36 pairs of “pomegranate flowers” bloom in a small village in southern Xinjiang). *Xinjiang ribao*, 24 September 2021, <http://xj.people.com.cn/n2/2021/0924/c186332-34928444.html>. Accessed 8 July 2025.

41 State Council 2018.

42 Hillman 2023.

43 Huang and Li 2022.

44 State Council 2021.

45 Sorace 2017.

Functioning as both mentors and monitors, work team cadres trained local cadres while deepening Party oversight, reflecting a re-centralization of rural governance unseen since the collective era.

Since the mid-2010s, tens of thousands of work teams have been sent to Uyghur and Kazakh villages and neighbourhoods. These teams monitor daily life, enforce secular routines and conduct political indoctrination, blending social service with surveillance. In Y Village, Baren Township, Yecheng County, Kashgar District 巴仁乡叶城县喀什地区, for example, a university-led team conducted door-to-door investigations, which resulted in the internment of a significant portion of the adult population. The work team stayed to manage the aftermath, organizing farm work and delivering political education.⁴⁶ These teams mix aid with coercion – providing services while enforcing control, collecting data and reshaping identities – a strategy that has been formalized under *fanghuiju* after decades of evolution from ad hoc mobilization efforts.

CCP work teams have evolved from revolutionary squads into a sophisticated apparatus of embedded rule. Across different eras, they have functioned as ideological mobilizers, administrative controllers, political educators and agents of social transformation. Their composition has changed, but their purpose endures: to serve the people on the Party's terms and to remake the people in the Party's image. From Maoist land reform to Xi-era rural revitalization, work teams continue to knit together state power and local society through their presence, persuasion and politicized service.

Fanghuiju in Xinjiang: Continuity and Transformation in Embedded Governance

The *fanghuiju* campaign, launched in 2014 by the Xinjiang government, represents a contemporary reconfiguration of the CCP's long-standing reliance on embedded work teams to assert control over local society. Short for "visit the people, benefit the people, and gather the people's hearts," *fanghuiju* deploys Party cadres to live and work in rural and urban communities, particularly among Uyghur and Kazakh populations, with the explicit aim of reinforcing political loyalty, promoting ideological conformity and ensuring social stability.⁴⁷ Although framed as a developmental and community service initiative, *fanghuiju* constitutes a deeply political project of surveillance, assimilation and securitization. Its logic of governance bears strong historical parallels to Mao-era mass campaigns, even as it departs from those earlier models in scale, duration and technological sophistication.

The organizational structure of *fanghuiju* is rooted in the CCP's historical use of mobile work teams as instruments of grassroots transformation. Much like the work teams deployed during land reform, collectivization and the Socialist Education movement, the enmeshment of *fanghuiju* cadres directly in local communities to implement regional directives is evident in their home visits, mediation of disputes, supervision of grassroots Party branches and responsibility to act as moral and political exemplars. Work teams fulfil multiple roles: they deliver public services, facilitate economic programmes, enforce behavioural norms and provide ideological education.⁴⁸ The emphasis on face-to-face engagement, their on-site presence and persuasion tactics echoes Maoist methods of affective governance,⁴⁹ particularly the reliance on emotional labour and performative rituals to secure popular consent. The *fanghuiju* teams' role in propaganda references Mao Zedong's "mass line" in its emphasis on educating the public to internalize and implement Party policies at the grassroots level.⁵⁰

Yet while *fanghuiju* draws upon the repertoire of Maoist political campaigns, it also reflects a significant evolution in the CCP's governance strategy. Where Mao-era work teams were typically

46 Xinjiang University 2020.

47 Deng and Ma 2017.

48 Xinjiang University 2020.

49 Perry 2002.

50 Newman and Zhang 2021.

mobilized for short-term, crisis-driven interventions, which were often oriented towards radical socio-economic restructuring through class struggle, *fanghuiju* has been institutionalized as a durable mechanism of long-term control.⁵¹ Rather than catalysing mass mobilization from below, it imposes continuous political supervision from above. Party cadres embedded in communities under *fanghuiju* do not depart once their task is complete; they are rotated, reassigned and embedded anew, forming a quasi-permanent presence.⁵²

Another key point of divergence lies in the target and rationale of intervention. While earlier campaigns focused on class enemies and sought to restructure agrarian relations, *fanghuiju* operates within an explicitly ethnicized framework.⁵³ Its primary objective is both economic redistribution⁵⁴ and cultural and ideological assimilation.⁵⁵ In Xinjiang, the campaign is directed overwhelmingly at non-Han ethnic groups, particularly Uyghurs and Kazakhs, whom the party-state deems vulnerable to “extremism” and “separatism.”⁵⁶ Work teams are embedded in villages and households to deliver development resources but also to conduct surveillance, enforce patriotic rituals and monitor religious practices.⁵⁷ In this sense, *fanghuiju* reflects the Sinicization of ethnic governance, in which cadres serve as agents of both developmental assistance and cultural re-engineering.

The technologies that underpin *fanghuiju* also mark a qualitative shift in governance practices. Whereas Maoist work teams relied on human observation, word-of-mouth reporting and manual data collection, *fanghuiju* operates within an infrastructure of digital authoritarianism.⁵⁸ Cadres operate not only as physical agents of the state presence but also as integral nodes within a broader datafied surveillance regime. Through routine home visits, they collect biometric and household data and assess ideological conformity via standardized checklists, and then input this information into centralized databases, where algorithmic risk assessments – augmented by predictive policing tools, facial recognition and geolocation tracking – enable a multilayered system of human-technological monitoring.⁵⁹

51 “Xi Jinping: jianchi yifa zhi jiang tuanjie wen jiang changqi jian jiang tuanjie ge zu renmin jianshe shehuizhuyi Xinjiang” (Xi Jinping: adhere to the rule of law, unite and stabilize Xinjiang, build Xinjiang for a long time, and unite all ethnic groups to build a socialist Xinjiang). *Renmin ribao*, 30 May 2014, <http://web.archive.org/web/20140603172650/http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0530/c64094-25083518.html>. Accessed 8 July 2025; “You Quan zai Xinjiang diaoyan: qiangdiao nuli, shixian shehui wending he changqi anping” (You Quan emphasized during his investigation in Xinjiang that efforts should be made to achieve social stability and long-term peace). *Renmin ribao*, 14 October 2018, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2018/1014/c1001-30339345.html>. Accessed 13 September 2024.

52 “Xinjiang weiwu’er zizhiqu zhaokai ‘fanghuiju’ zongjie biao Zhang dongyuan songxing dahui Zhang Chunxian fabiao jianghua” (Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region held a “visit, benefit and gathering” summary, mobilization and send-off meeting: Zhang Chunxian delivered a speech). *Renmin ribao*, 25 February 2016, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0225/c64094-28149778.html>. Accessed 12 September 2024; “Xinjiang dangwei changwei (kuoda) huiyi yanjiu bushu zhashi zuohao ‘fanghuiju’ zhu cun gongzuo Chen Quanguo zhuchi” (The Standing Committee of the Xinjiang Party Committee studied and arranged the “visiting, benefiting and gathering” work in the village, presided over by Chen Quanguo). *Renmin ribao*, 18 November 2016, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1118/c117005-28879718.html>. Accessed 12 September 2024; “Xinjiang juxing ‘fanghuiju’ zhucun gongzuo zongjie biao Zhang ji dongyuan songxing huiyi, Chen Quanguo jianghua” (Xinjiang held a meeting to summarize and commend the work of “visiting, benefiting and gathering” in the village, with Chen Quanguo’s speech). *Renmin ribao*, 26 February 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0226/c117005-29108421.html>. Accessed 13 September 2024.

53 *Xinjiang ribao*, 24 September 2021; “Zhe ge jiaqi gongzuodui yu cunmin gongtong du guo” (Work team and villagers spend the holiday together). *Tianshan wang*, 4 May 2024, https://www.ts.cn/xwzx/shxw/202405/t20240504_20766178.shtml. Accessed 8 July 2025.

54 “Xinjiang zhucun di yi shishu he gongzuodui: yongxin, yongqing, yongli ban shiqing” (Xinjiang’s first secretaries and work teams: serving the people with dedication and care). *Renmin wang – Xinjiang*, 17 August 2021, <http://xj.people.com.cn/n2/2021/0817/c394722-34871653.html>. Accessed 8 July 2025; *Tianshan wang*, 4 May 2024.

55 *Xinjiang ribao*, 24 September 2021.

56 Deng and Ma 2017.

57 *Tianshan wang*, 4 May 2024.

58 Xinjiang Autonomous Region Information Center 2017.

59 Ibid.

This fusion of pre-emptive human-centred mobilization and technological oversight stands in contrast to the reactive nature of Maoist campaigns, which often responded to perceived crises;⁶⁰ *fanghuiju* instead aims to prevent disorder by fusing surveillance and discipline into the fabric of daily life.⁶¹ Through sustained engagement – with events such as ideological lectures and communal flag-raising ceremonies – cadres seek to reshape both public conduct and private belief,⁶² aligning emotional loyalty with political obedience by fusing affective governance with securitized administration.

At the local level, *fanghuiju* has had uneven yet profound effects, as the ubiquitous presence of cadres in everyday communal life, ranging from religious and educational events to private ceremonies, has increasingly blurred the line between public service provision and political indoctrination.⁶³ While some teams have successfully delivered material assistance such as employment training, agricultural support and welfare benefits, their core mandate remains ideological. Cadres are expected to root out “incorrect thinking,” report signs of religious deviation and promote Mandarin education and Han cultural norms.⁶⁴ In schools, they supervise curriculum content and student behaviour;⁶⁵ in mosques, they ensure sermons align with state doctrine;⁶⁶ in homes, they evaluate familial loyalty through structured questionnaires and informal observation.⁶⁷ First developed in the 1960s as a Maoist tool for grassroots control, the *fengqiao* 枫桥 model has been revived under Xi as a strategy of preventive governance, using surveillance, early intervention and pre-emptive discipline to forestall dissent.⁶⁸ In the XUAR, preventive repression combines localized surveillance, ideological work and conflict mediation⁶⁹ in an approach adapted through *fanghuiju* to promote ethnic unity and stability within a securitized framework.⁷⁰

One particularly illustrative feature of *fanghuiju* is the widespread implementation of the “Pair up and become family” programme, through which Han Chinese cadres are assigned Uyghur and Kazakh “relatives” and encouraged to stay in their homes for extended periods. These embedded relationships, often portrayed as gestures of ethnic unity, serve to intensify surveillance and foster assimilation. The programme echoes the Maoist practice of “eating, living and labouring together” (*santong* 三同) with the masses,⁷¹ but it is recast within a securitized and racialized framework. Han regions in Xinjiang are treated as citizen zones, while Uyghurs are ruled as subjects through securitized, delegated and surveillant authority.⁷² The fear of terrorism has normalized *fanghuiju* teams’ participation in Xinjiang’s coercive governance, whether through surveillance, detention referrals or ideological transformation.⁷³

60 Perry 2002.

61 Zenz and Leibold 2020; Kam and Clarke 2021.

62 Brady 2008.

63 “Zumureti Wubuli kanwang weiwen zizhiq rendangchangweihui jiguan zhu cun gongzuo dui” (Zumrat Wubuli visits and offers condolences to the Regional People’s Congress Standing Committee’s village work team). *Xinjiang rendang wang*, 5 May 2023, <https://www.xjpcsc.gov.cn/article/c6ff2843284f449a81b8de7022162572>. Accessed 7 July 2025; “Zizhiq rendangchangweihui jiguan zhu cun gongzuodui juban ‘qu jiduanhua’ zhuti zhishi jingsai ji minzu tuan jie yijia qin lianyi huodong” (The Regional People’s Congress Standing Committee’s village work team held a “de-extremization” themed knowledge competition and ethnic unity “one family” friendship event). *Xinjiang rendang wang*, 23 August 2023, <https://www.xjpcsc.gov.cn/article/b2ae23c78f804c0e8056183dbb8f5165>. Accessed 8 July 2025.

64 China Islamic Association 2022.

65 Xinjiang Agricultural University 2024.

66 China Islamic Association 2022.

67 Xinhua 2020.

68 Wang and Mou 2021.

69 Greitens, Lee and Yazici 2020.

70 Perry 2011.

71 Perry 2021, 76.

72 Mamdani 1996; 2020.

73 I would like to thank a reviewer for making this point.

The bureaucratic permanence of the *fanghuiju* apparatus reinforces its strategic function. Cadres are selected through Party vetting procedures, trained in political communication and counterterrorism protocols, and assessed on performance metrics linked to ideological outcomes. Their tenure is supported by formal institutional backing, including salaries, housing stipends and security infrastructure. This material investment ensures the continuity and resilience of the campaign, even as it expands its scope. What began as a regional initiative has been increasingly integrated into the national discourse on “social stability” and “ethnic unity,” positioning Xinjiang as both a testing ground and model for future governance in other peripheral regions.⁷⁴

Importantly, *fanghuiju* also reveals the CCP’s evolving conception of mass work. While the Maoist tradition celebrated mass participation and revolutionary spontaneity, the current model privileges elite coordination, surveillance and calibrated persuasion. The Party no longer seeks to unleash the masses but to pacify and shape them through embedded authority and strategic engagement. Cadres are not revolutionaries, but technocrats of control, armed with smartphones, data dashboards and performance benchmarks.⁷⁵ The ideological fervour of the past has given way to a logic of risk management,⁷⁶ in which political stability is produced not through mass mobilization but through individualized monitoring⁷⁷ and bureaucratic saturation.⁷⁸

Thus, *fanghuiju* may be understood as a modernized extension of the Maoist work team model, retaining its organizational logic while recalibrating its methods and objectives. It reflects continuity in the CCP’s reliance on embedded, face-to-face governance, but introduces new modalities of power suited to the challenges of contemporary authoritarian rule. In Xinjiang, this has resulted in a system that is at once intimate and expansive: intimate in its penetration of private life, and expansive in its institutional reach. Homes, schools, mosques and marketplaces are not only spaces of daily life but also arenas of state-making, where work teams embody the fusion of ideological education, social service and coercive surveillance.

The *fanghuiju* campaign in the XUAR represents a decisive turn in the evolution of CCP work team governance. It preserves the Party’s tradition of grassroots penetration while embedding it in a high-tech, ethnically targeted and ideologically saturated apparatus of rule. Through this fusion of legacy tactics and modern tools, the *fanghuiju* represents a system of totalizing embedded governance in the XUAR.⁷⁹

The Emergence of *Fanghuiju* as a Regionally Initiated Campaign in the XUAR’s Governance

When first launched in 2014, *fanghuiju* was to serve as a short-term stability initiative. Yet following the Second Central Xinjiang Work Forum that same year, the campaign took on a new strategic significance.⁸⁰ The *fanghuiju* campaign’s evolution reflects a deeper transformation in the governance of Xinjiang under Xi Jinping, one marked by a shift from development-led strategies to securitized, ideologically driven social management. This was evident in Xi Jinping’s directive to pursue “social stability and enduring peace” (*chang zhi jiu an* 长治久安), which signalled a reorientation away from earlier frameworks that had prioritized economic growth, infrastructure investment and labour mobility. Regional implementation of central directives was evidenced in the XUAR government’s turn away from former Party secretary Zhang Chunxian’s 张春贤 development-first paradigm⁸¹ and

74 Xinhua 2023.

75 Xinhua 2020.

76 Greitens, Lee and Yazici 2020.

77 Xinhua 2020.

78 Xinhua 2023.

79 Zhu, Tan and Qin 2020.

80 *Renmin ribao*, 30 May 2014.

81 “Zizhiqu juxing ‘fanghuiju’ huadong” (The autonomous region held a commendation and mobilization meeting for “visiting, benefiting and gathering”). *Renmin ribao*, 16 January 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0116/c70731-26398844.html>. Accessed 30 March 2025.

towards Chen Quanguo's 陈全国 grid-style security architecture. Chen also laid the institutional foundations for embedding *fanghuiju* as a central pillar of long-term governance.

Under Chen's leadership, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) aligned closely with the XUAR government through joint work mechanisms.⁸² This coordination was especially pronounced in areas where XPCC farms bordered Uyghur villages, where XPCC teams would participate actively in *fanghuiju* campaigns. Historically an economic collective and militia, the XPCC extended its activities into minority areas, conducting household visits, managing registries, mediating disputes and promoting CCP ideology. These grassroots engagements enabled the XPCC to gather detailed household data and flag "risky" individuals for public security agencies.⁸³

This regionally initiated campaign in the XUAR's governance coincided with broader structural changes in the CCP's management of ethnic and religious affairs. The United Front Work Department (UFWD), which historically was responsible for co-opting non-Party actors and managing ethnic relations, expanded its mandate after 2015 to include religious oversight and diaspora engagement. Through institutional consolidation – most notably, the absorption of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission and the establishment of a dedicated Xinjiang Bureau – the UFWD assumed a more prominent ideological role. Key figures such as Hu Lianhe 胡联合 helped to reframe ethnic policy around securitization, promoting frameworks such as the "De-extremification" regulation that legitimized mass re-education and surveillance.

Despite this alignment, the UFWD did not initiate or operationally direct the *fanghuiju* campaign. Rather, it was the Xinjiang CCP Committee and regional government that launched the initiative in response to specific governance challenges following unrest in 2009 and 2013. At the regional level, the UFWD's role in *fanghuiju* has been primarily symbolic, participating in cadre deployments and contributing to ideological framing. Its function has been to mediate national objectives, especially around ethnic unity, Sinicization and ideological loyalty, rather than to manage the day-to-day implementation of the campaign. The operational leadership of *fanghuiju* has remained within Xinjiang's administrative and security apparatus, reflecting its grounding in localized risk management and territorial control.

Campaign activities, such as political education, bilingual schooling, the secularization of religious life and the widely publicized *jieqin* 结亲 ("making pairs, becoming family") programme,⁸⁴ reflect core UFWD principles, particularly the construction of a "common Chinese national identity." These practices combine everyday surveillance with affective governance, aiming to fuse personal bonds with political discipline. They advance a model of ethnic governance that is relational, immersive and transformative.⁸⁵

Exemplifying how local authorities have operationalized central Party objectives through embedded, bureaucratically sustained intervention, *fanghuiju* is not merely a campaign but a method of governing difference through presence. While regionally initiated, *fanghuiju* embodies a broader model of Chinese governance in frontier regions, one that fuses bottom-up administrative saturation with top-down ideological alignment, producing a system oriented not just towards order but also towards the political and cultural remaking of local society.

82 "Rang bingtuan geng qiangda Xinjiang geng wending" (Make the corps stronger and Xinjiang more stable). *Renmin wang*, 7 May 2014, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0507/c1001-24983973.html>. Accessed 30 March 2025.

83 Interview with Bingtuan from Wujiahui County, Xinjiang, 2019.

84 "Xinjiang weiwu'er zizhiq shenru zhishi chijiu kaizhan 'fanghuiju' huodong" (XUAR carried out the "visit, benefit and gathering" activity in an in-depth, down-to-earth and sustained manner). *Xinjiang ribao*, 30 September 2016, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-09/30/content_5114010.htm. Accessed 8 July 2025.

85 *Tianshan wang*, 4 May 2024.

Embedded Authoritarianism in Practice: Local Adaptations in Xinjiang's *Fanghuiju* Campaign

Scholars have extensively documented how *fanghuiju* work teams are pivotal to Xinjiang's current surveillance and re-education system,⁸⁶ serving as a central mechanism in a coercive social engineering project with profound human rights implications.⁸⁷ However, the evolution and adaptation of *fanghuiju* in its present iteration also reveals a localized and adaptive practice comprising top-down ideological mandates by the central government and bottom-up interventions by cadres in work teams sent down by the Xinjiang CCP Committee and XUAR government.

The *fanghuiju* campaign in Xinjiang has evolved in scale and scope, illustrating how work team governance has shifted from an episodic mobilization of work cadres into an institutionalized mechanism of embedded authoritarianism.⁸⁸ Originally launched in 2014 to reinforce Party–society integration in rural communities, the campaign has expanded dramatically, aligning with Xi Jinping's broader strategy of “social stability and enduring peace.” Over time, *fanghuiju* has transformed from a mobilization effort into a systematized governance model that integrates political indoctrination, surveillance and development. These dynamics reflect a shift from the developmentalist policies of Zhang Chunxian to the securitized grid governance under Chen Quanguo, with cadres deployed not only to provide public services but also to monitor ideological conformity.⁸⁹ Under Ma Xingrui 马兴瑞, the campaign has been adapted to align more closely with China's overall innovation-driven development strategy, prioritizing science, education, talent development and scientific cooperation.⁹⁰ Ma has also emphasized a “scientific and precise” approach to counterterrorism and stability measures, with a focus on enhancing social governance at the grassroots level.⁹¹ Such measures fall in line with Xi Jinping's call for “high-quality economic development” at the Third Central Xinjiang Work Forum in 2020.⁹²

Eight visits, three ties and five identifications

This transformation hinges on the personalization of state power at the grassroots. The campaign's embedded cadres live among Uyghur and Kazakh populations, carrying out tasks ranging from routine inspections and household visits to ideological instruction and data collection. The integration of security, administration and propaganda has created a totalizing presence in everyday village life. Programmes such as “eight visits,” “three inseparable ties” and “five identifications” formalize social and ideological control.⁹³

The “eight visits” framework mandates regular visits to high-priority groups (for example, impoverished families, religious leaders and those vulnerable to extremist influences).⁹⁴ The “three inseparable ties” (among Han and minority populations) and “five identifications” (embracing the motherland, the Chinese nation, culture, the Party and socialism) guide the campaign's ideological

86 Grose 2019.

87 Zenz 2023a.

88 See “Guiding opinions on the selection of outstanding cadres to serve as first secretaries in villages (communities)” (2017); “Notice on strengthening the workforce for the ‘visiting, benefiting, and uniting the people’ village-based cadre teams” (2017); “Opinions on continuing the ‘visiting, benefiting, and uniting the people’ village-based work” (2018).

89 *Renmin ribao*, 25 February 2016; *Renmin ribao*, 18 November 2016; *Renmin ribao*, 26 February 2017.

90 “Ma Xingrui zhuchi zhaokao zizhi qu dangwei keji weiyuanhui di yi huiyi qiangdiao” (Ma Xingrui presided over the first meeting of the Science and Technology Committee of the Autonomous Region Party Committee). *Renmin ribao*, 27 July 2024, <https://xj.people.com.cn/n2/2024/0727/c186332-40925374.html>. Accessed 8 July 2025.

91 “Ma Xingrui zai Hetian diqu diaoyan” (Ma Xingrui's investigation tour of Hetian prefecture). *Tianshan wang*, 31 March 2024, https://www.ts.cn/xwzx/szxw/202403/t20240331_20100859.shtml. Accessed 8 July 2025.

92 Xinhua 2020.

93 Zhu, Tan and Qin 2020.

94 Another framework in the XUAR is the “eight tasks,” which emphasizes the role of work teams in maintaining social stability, strengthening grassroots organizations, conducting effective public work, implementing public benefit policies, broadening avenues for wealth, promoting poverty alleviation, addressing public issues and expanding Party membership.

aims.⁹⁵ A three-tier classification system designates individuals as high-, medium- or low-risk, with “assistance” or monitoring targeted at high-risk groups. Cadres observe religious practices, verify mosque attendance and keep track of attendances at flag-raising ceremonies. Former residents have reported strict oversight over travel and social interactions, noting that they had to report any plans to visit relatives and that work cadres regularly inspected mosque activities for compliance with state regulations.

One individual, one file

The campaign also reflects a broader trend in party-state governance: the fusion of welfare provision with technologically infused securitized, coercive oversight. The initial focus of “one household, one file” (*yihu yidang* 一户一档) was on collecting and managing data at the household level. Information was gathered about each household, including demographic details, economic status and other relevant data. The aim was to understand household dynamics, identify household needs and provide targeted support. The evolution to “one person, one file” (*yi ren yi dang* 一人一档) signified a shift to collecting individual-level data. The aim is for cadres to gather and maintain detailed information on every individual to enable targeted and personalized support in service delivery at the grassroots level.

Work teams’ responsibilities include implementing infrastructure and poverty alleviation programmes, keeping track of villagers’ health status,⁹⁶ helping them and their families to resolve household difficulties, including formulating training plans for unemployed household members to gain employment,⁹⁷ and instructing them on Party laws.⁹⁸ In addition, cadres must also monitor religious practices, collect biometric data and verify political loyalty.

These efforts are linked with the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), which synthesizes local intelligence with digital surveillance inputs. *Fanghuiju* teams are tasked with keeping detailed dossiers and standardizing paper documentation into digital systems. The IJOP was launched in 2016 by China Electronics Technology Corporation, the parent of Hikvision, the world’s largest surveillance-camera firm, which is active in 170 countries and a leading Xinjiang surveillance contractor.⁹⁹ The platform integrates surveillance inputs, from facial recognition to grassroots intelligence, enabling real-time monitoring. Meanwhile, “three-in-one” and “ten-family joint defence” systems augment the campaign’s reach by enlisting local groups to report “suspicious” activities.

Conclusion

This study traces the evolution of *fanghuiju* from its origins in Mao-era campaigns through to its localization in the Xi era. It highlights the campaign’s crucial role in grassroots governance, surveillance and ideological control in the XUAR. *Fanghuiju* exemplifies a grassroots model of campaign-style governance in the XUAR that has been adapted and transformed over time, particularly following the July 2009 Urumqi riots and during the intensified “Strike hard” campaign against separatism and religious extremism. Merging Maoist practices of mass mobilization with contemporary tools of digital surveillance and administrative permanence, the campaign reveals how grassroots work teams, once used for land reform or ideological education in China, have been re-engineered to function as permanent fixtures of a security-oriented state apparatus in the XUAR.

⁹⁵ Zhu, Tan and Qin 2020; Deng and Ma 2017.

⁹⁶ “Fanghuiju: zizhiq jingxinwei – zuohao zhucun gongzuodui de jianqiang houdun” (Fanghuiju: The Autonomous Region Economic and Information Commission serves as a strong backing for the village work teams). *Tianshan wang*, 2 April 2018, https://www.ts.cn/xwzx/szxw/201804/t20180402_6008314.shtml. Accessed 8 July 2025.

⁹⁷ *Xinjiang ribao*, 24 September 2021.

⁹⁸ Wu and Zhang 2020.

⁹⁹ I would like to thank a reviewer for making this point.

This model fuses grassroots surveillance and continuous efforts to reconfigure Uyghur and Kazakh communities around a Han-centric vision of national identity.

On one level, *fanghuiju* demonstrates the CCP's enduring reliance on extraordinary interventions to achieve political and developmental goals, particularly in restive or ethnically diverse regions. On another, it underscores the transformation of campaign governance from episodic mass movements into enduring, institutionalized systems of control. Village work teams serve as conduits for both state benevolence and coercion, embedding ideological instruction within everyday life, while also monitoring and reordering communities at the grassroots.

Comparison with work team practices elsewhere in China underscores regional variation. For example, village teams in provinces like Hubei exemplify a more developmentalist model, emphasizing community engagement and capacity-building, which is in sharp contrast to the rotational, heavily securitized deployments in the XUAR. The regional divergence between work teams in other parts of mainland and the XUAR reveals the complex and distinctive local and governance conditions in the XUAR, and the elasticity of the work team institution which, now enmeshed, has become localized in the XUAR's socio-political context.

The XPCC's deepening integration with local governance has aligned it with the Xinjiang CCP Committee and regional government's *fanghuiju* campaigns, which leverage its unique hybrid capacities as a military force, business enterprise and civil authority. The XPCC's continued existence and involvement in grassroots governance underscore how China's governance in the XUAR has been *exceptional* in a way that distinctly sets Xinjiang work teams apart from those operating in other parts of the country.

Fanghuiju exemplifies the enmeshment of the CCP's ideological and administrative authority through localized governance mechanisms. By merging developmental goals with high-intensity surveillance, work teams transform village life into a site of continuous political oversight. After the 2025 meeting of the Autonomous Regional Party Committee reaffirmed the centrality of *fanghuiju* to Xinjiang's governance model, we can anticipate an increased involvement of work teams in the XUAR as lower-level agents of the party-state.¹⁰⁰ Framed as a vehicle for promoting integrated development, combating corruption and maintaining social stability, the campaign is positioned as indispensable for achieving "national rejuvenation" in ethnic minority regions. The growing emphasis on cadre discipline, increased security spending and cultural integration reinforces the programme's long-term goal of political consolidation and sustained ethnic assimilation. These campaigns position work teams as grassroots extensions of the party-state, operating at the lowest level of governance.

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¹⁰⁰ XUAR Government 2025.

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