Manufacturing Society: How Party Building Reinforces Stability Maintenance in Grassroots China

Yanling He[1,2] and Zheng Wang[2] (iD)

[1]Peking University, and Renmin University of China, Beijing, China and [2]Renmin University of China, Beijing, China
Corresponding author: Zheng Wang; Email: wzyt94@163.com

Abstract

While China's efforts to maintain social stability by recruiting social elites and establishing Party branches in pre-existing social and market organizations have been thoroughly explored, much less attention has been devoted to how grassroots Party organizations (GRPOs) have proactively incubated society and constructed coherent, interrelated and systematic stability maintenance strategies to identify and eliminate social instability in its early stages and prevent its escalation. Using qualitative data gathered from local areas in China, we uncovered three major strategies used by GRPOs to manufacture society: incubating quasi-bureaucratic organizations, co-opting community elites and embedding Party organizations in market and social organizations. In general, GRPOs manufacture society for three reasons: to revitalize the mobilization capacity of the party-state; to increase the available social resources for grassroots authorities; and to establish an input mechanism for citizens. This study not only provides empirical data on how China's stability maintenance regime works in practice but also calls for a rethinking of the capacity of authoritarian resilience.

摘要

已有研究考察了中国政府通过在业已成立的社会和市场组织中吸纳社会精英、嵌入党组织以维持社会稳定的努力，但鲜有研究关注基层党组织如何前置性的孵化社会和构建一个连贯的、相关联结的和系统的稳定策略，从而在社会不稳定的早期阶段便将其识别和消解，以避免其进一步升级。基于中国多地的定性数据，本研究揭示了基层党组织"制造"社会的三个策略：孵化准行政的社会组织、吸纳社区精英和将党组织嵌入到社会和市场组织中。整体而言，基层党组织有三个动机"制造"社会：重新激活体制的动员能力；补充基层治理资源；建立民情民意的输入机制。本研究不仅为中国维稳体系如何运行提供了实证证据，同时呼吁重新认识中国体制的权威韧性。

Keywords: social stability; Party building; Chinese Communist Party (CCP); grassroots Party organizations; grassroots governance

关键词: 社会稳定; 党建; 中国共产党; 基层党组织; 基层治理

Over the last few decades, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has used a process we term "manufacturing society" to reintegrate private enterprises and the public into informal networks in order to maintain stability at the grassroots. Based on evidence of the CCP's strategy to manufacture society through Party building and proactively eliminate social risks, this study aims to provide new insights into China's authoritarian resilience and state–society relations. On the one hand, this strategy reflects the adaptability and resilience of the CCP in responding to social change. On the other hand, the dominance of the CCP in the construction of the stability maintenance system means that caution is needed with research that regards Chinese citizen participation as a precursor of civil society and democratic change, even though the CCP's manufacturing of society, intentionally or not, provides channels for citizen participation.

The term "manufacturing society" refers to a process, initiated by grassroots Party organizations (GRPOs), of gradually growing social organizations, organizing fragmented community individuals

and then incorporating them into institutionalized associations with the Party.[1] It displays several characteristics: it is constructed by GRPOs and has reactivated party-state resources (for example, Party members and rituals); it prospectively incubates social organizations that identify with the leadership of the CCP and actively cultivates social elites, rather than just employing post remedies such as embedding Party branches in pre-existing social organizations or endowing entrepreneurs with a political identity; it is a set of interrelated, consecutive and coherent strategies, although each step seems to be self-contained; and it constructs a number of quasi-bureaucratic elements, such as a working methodology (*gongzuo fa* 工作法) formed by street bureaucrats in their daily work, quasi-bureaucratic intermediary organizations and civil groups, and quasi-bureaucratic citizens enlisted in street bureaucracy. In the "manufacturing society" model used by the Party, the three mechanisms of incubation, co-optation and embedding function together to enable the party-state to minimize any possible risks and threats to social stability in advance.

Additionally, this study can offer new insights into state–society relations in China. Although the new model has released the potential of citizen participation and afforded opportunities for democratic consultation, the semi-bureaucratic characteristics of this process have delimited the boundary between participation and democracy. Thus, it is necessary to avoid overstating the democratic value of citizen participation in China's transformation.

Grassroots Stability Maintenance and "Social Governance Innovation"

The grassroots, as a direct link between the state and society, occupies a strategic position in China's development and transformation. As Xi Jinping 习近平 has repeatedly mentioned, if grassroots society is unstable, the country will fall into turmoil and disorder (*jichu bulao, didong shanyao* 基础不牢，地动山摇).[2] As the Chinese state is a centralized Leninist party system, social stability is an indispensable endogenous requirement for China's economic development and social transformation.[3] The 18th National Congress of the CCP proposed to strengthen and innovate social governance and maintain social harmony and stability. However, the market-oriented development begun by China created serious social and environmental problems alongside industrialization transformation, as forewarned by Karl Polanyi.[4] The marketization of the labour force, the loosening of the traditional household registration system (*hukou* 户口) and the disintegration of the state-owned unit system of personnel together have increased social mobility. The combination of these social changes and increasing social conflicts has resulted in a variety of social demands and other types of "group events" over the past two decades. According to the "China social public security research report," there were 139,000 mass incidents across the country in 2011, most of which were caused by minor frictions and disputes.[5] By 2017, the range of social disputes covered various fields such as labour disputes, environmental pollution and owners' rights protection, and interweaved online and offline actions. Further, social disputes tend to originate and form mostly at the grassroots. In Beijing, for example, a total of 39,002 cases were mediated by village mediation committees in 2020.[6]

---

1 This term is inspired by Hodgson's (2004) research. Hodgson proposed the term "manufactured civil society" to analyse the role of the British state in the construction of civil society and the impact of this process. We emphasize the role of the Party in manufacturing society in the context of China, but the product is not a civil society but a society that is highly dependent on the party-state.

2 "Xi Jinping: zai jiceng daibiao zuotanhui shang de jianghua" (Speeches at grassroots seminars). *Qstheory.cn*, 17 September 2020, http://www.qstheory.cn/yaowen/2020-09/19/c_1126514819.htm. Accessed June 2022.

3 Xu, Xianglin 2020.

4 Polanyi 2007.

5 Zhang, Mingjun, and Chen 2012.

6 "Shu shuo, 2020 nian shoudu tiaojie gongzuo xiangguan shuju" (Relevant data on mediation work in the capital in 2020). *Sfj.beijing.gov.cn*, 2 February 2021, http://sfj.beijing.gov.cn/sfj/sfdt/ywdt82/flfw93/10937746/index.html. Accessed February 2023.

The Chinese party-state turns to adaptive strategies such as technological innovation and institutional adjustment to curb instability. The technological infrastructure power of the Chinese government has been constantly expanded and strengthened in recent years. Surveillance cameras, big data algorithms and cloud storage are widely deployed through the "sky-net project" (*tianwang gongcheng* 天网工程) in cities and the "snow-crystal project" (*xueliang gongcheng* 雪亮工程) in rural areas.[7] Propaganda and public opinion work conducted using advanced data-gathering and processing techniques are interlocked to maintain stability and prevent organized opposition. In urban communities, the public security department launched a campaign to establish a form of grid-based urban management that combines real-time geographic mapping technology, surveillance cameras and informants to conduct a comprehensive monitoring of key groups that may potentially threaten social security.[8]

Simultaneously, Chinese governments have carried out institutional innovation and governance reform to prevent social instability. For example, at the national level, the Central Committee for the Comprehensive Management of Public Security (*Zhongyang shehui zhian zonghe zhili weiyuan hui* 中央社会治安综合治理委员会) was established in 2014. In terms of specific institutions, Andrew Nathan, for example, points to the impact of various "input institutions" (for example, local elections, letters-and-visits departments, people's congresses, administrative litigation) that "enable citizens to pursue grievances without creating the potential to threaten the regime as a whole."[9] At the lowest level, grid governance (*wanggehua zhili* 网格化治理) has become one of the many new instruments used to maintain social stability.[10] Under the grid governance structure, neighbourhood communities are divided into grids of varying sizes based on their de facto geographical scope and administrative units for intelligence gathering, dispute coordination and real-time reporting.[11] Grid workers (*wangge yuan* 网格员), consisting of active residents, property staff and neighbourhood committee members, are assigned to different grids in the name of collaborative co-governance to resolve neighbourhood disputes and also identify potential risks that may threaten the regime.[12] Similarly, the term "state-enlisted voluntarism" is used to depict how local stability maintenance organizations flexibly enlist citizens and turn them into members of local enforcement teams to maintain grassroots social stability.[13]

Other explanations for the remarkable stability of Chinese society point to the continuing strength of the CCP, especially its ability to recruit, monitor and reward the social elite. In recent years, the CCP has been embracing emerging market and social forces to reassert its legitimacy and dominance in the urban grassroots.[14] Changkun Cai and colleagues observe that the CCP has reframed a "Party-governance structure" within the community, placing Party–mass relations at the core by innovating a "centre–periphery" organizational system and a top-down elite absorption system, although these strategies are carried out in the name of "service delivery taking the lead."[15] For NGOs, the "Party-building absorption of society" describes how the CCP establishes Party branches within NGOs and absorbs social elites into the political system in the form of Party building, thereby minimizing any possible risks and threats to the CCP.[16] At the same time, NGOs are authorized to assist the government in providing public services and facilitating

---

7 Xiao 2019.
8 Creemers 2017.
9 Nathan 2003.
10 Mittelstaedt 2022; Wei et al. 2021; Jiang 2021.
11 Xu, Jianhua, and He 2022.
12 Tang 2020.
13 Yang, Fan, Wang and Zhang 2022.
14 Kan and Ku 2021; Thornton 2013.
15 Cai, Liu and Jiang 2023.
16 Hu, Zeng and Wu 2022.

policy implementation.[17] Allocating different levels of funds to NGOs based on compliance with Party building is also considered an effective strategy for the Party to control NGOs – those NGOs that maintain a high degree of consistency with the Party's political calls and establish Party branches can receive more financial support from the party-state.[18] Similarly, the CCP, through incorporating professional groups and the new socioeconomic elite into its ranks, actively embraces market forces to prevent entrepreneurs from becoming an organized opposition.[19] The Party dispatches Party-building instructors (*dangjian zhidao yuan* 党建指导员, PBIs hereafter) to private enterprises and co-opts social elites by awarding them with Party positions such as deputy of the people's congress (*renda daibiao* 人大代表) or membership of the CPPCC (*zhengxie weiyuan* 政协委员).[20]

However, there are two issues that need further attention and clarification. First, the literature on China's social stability maintenance system focuses on the CCP's strategy for existing social and market entities, such as absorbing elites or deploying Party branches within other organizations to eliminate potential risks; researchers should not, however, overlook the indispensable role of the Party in grassroots governance. Second, while most of these studies focus on one of the CCP's strategies for rebuilding its authority, few discuss the connections between diverse strategies. To this end, the term "manufacturing society by the Party" is intended to emphasize the CCP's initiative in creating, engineering and manufacturing a society, rather than merely reacting to a society that already exists. Meanwhile, the new terminology emphasizes the systematic, coherent and progressive nature of the CCP's diversified strategies to maintain stability. These strategies are intentionally orchestrated by the party-state and are used in a step-by-step and cohesive way rather than as separate elements.

Our analysis is based on the continuous observation of the practice of social governance led by Party building (*dangjian yinling shehui zhili* 党建引领社会治理) in grassroots China since 2012 (the beginning of Xi's administration). Since the 18th National Congress of the CCP, maintaining social stability through Party building has become a form of political correctness that has driven policy diffusion among various jurisdictions. To analyse how Party building has shaped the social stability structure and evaluate its motivations and impact, we conducted sustained field observations in 15 districts and counties and 40 communities in Guangdong, Beijing, Chengdu and Zhejiang.

These cases were chosen for two reasons. First, they are at the forefront of China's economic development, and social disputes arising from the distribution of benefits are more common and acute in such locations than in other, less developed regions. Second, to resolve social contradictions, the selected areas have explored many effective typical experiences in the field of social stability, which have been recognized by the party-state and promoted as benchmarks in other regions. Our empirical data include 40 in-depth interviews, 21 symposia with grassroots cadres and more than 80 government documents. Among the respondents, 20 officials were from the Political and Legal Committee (PLC hereafter), seven from the Civil Affairs Bureau, five from the Social Work Committee (*shehui gongzuo weiyuan hui* 社会工作委员会, SWC hereafter), and the rest were front-line workers in the streets and communities, such as grid workers and floor seniors (*louzhang* 楼长). At each symposium, we asked a series of open-ended questions on the details of grassroots stability maintenance such as what strategies are designed to identify social instability factors, how do they work and how effective are they. Additionally, relevant media reports were reviewed to gain a better understanding of the information relevant to our research questions.

---

17 Mattingly 2019; Su, Ma and Zhang 2022.
18 Wang and Wang 2023.
19 Yan and Huang 2017; Thornton 2012.
20 Dickson 2007.

The Manufacturing of Society by the Party: Three Mechanisms

In the past decade, the CCP has constructed a set of systematic, interrelated and progressive stability maintenance strategies. First, it designs quasi-bureaucratic intermediary organizations to incubate subordinate NGOs and civil groups. It subsequently sorts out citizens and packages and places them into subordinate organizations. Finally, it establishes Party organizations in subordinate organizations to guide them to improve internal rules. Strategies such as incubation, co-optation and embeddedness are identified and adopted in the process.

Incubation: rebuilding the connection with the party-state

Since the promulgation of the "Regulations on the registration and management of social organizations" (*shehui tuanti dengji guanli tiaoli* 社会团体登记管理条例) in 1998, local civil affairs departments have been in charge of the registration and management of NGOs in China. Under this arrangement, the development mode of most NGOs is that local governments directly provide funds, policy guidance and information resources for NGOs through outsourcing. However, the CCP considers outsourcing to be a marketization model in which financial input deviates from the party-state identity. In other words, excessive financial input to NGOs reinforces citizens' preference for marketism rather than the identity of the GRPOs. One official noted, "The purpose of outsourcing is to cultivate 'handholds' (*zhuashou* 抓手) for the GRPOs. However, outsourcing failed to find the correct position of the Party. Although numerous resources were invested in NGOs, the masses attributed this to the market rather than the Party."[21]

The situation changed in 2012 as Guangdong set up an SWC to manage grassroots affairs. The SWC, whose members come from a collection of 42 units such as the organization department, the propaganda department and the PLC, has a dual identity comprising CCP departments and the functional departments of the provincial government. The director of the SWC is generally appointed by the deputy secretary of the local Party committee or the secretary of the PLC to facilitate the high-level integration of grassroots matters associated with social stability. Along similar lines, Chengdu and Zhejiang set up the Urban and Rural Community Development Governance Commission (*chengxiang shequ fazhan zhili weiyuan hui* 城乡社区发展治理委员会) and the Social Construction Commission (*shehui jianshe weiyuan hui* 社会建设委员会) in 2017 and 2021, respectively. Notably, these institutions have two common aspects. One is the high-level coordination. For example, the Party committee department has replaced the civil affairs department to improve unified planning and coordination, resource integration and evaluation of issues related to social construction. Second, in accordance with the principle of responsibility isomorphism, corresponding counterpart departments have been established in subordinate cities, counties and districts to strengthen consistency through different levels.

Instead of the traditional approach taken by civil affairs departments of directly facing society, the SWC founded an informal intermediary organization called the social interest base (*shehui chuangyiyuan* 社会创益园, SIB hereafter) to serve as a buffer between the party-state and grassroots society. The SIB is a semi-official institution with a framework similar to the unified bureaucracies. For example, the SIB, which is largely funded by the superior SWC's financial allocation, must be set up in districts and towns in accordance with the requirements of responsibility isomorphism. Accordingly, the SIB's decision making, expenditure and daily operations are supervised by a management committee composed of members appointed by the SWC. However, the SIB has its own organizational charters and management structure and can recruit members and manage salaries independently in the manner of a social organization. Moreover, there are no administrative affiliations between the different levels of the SIB, although they are assigned similar issues by the SWC (Table 1). A general secretary of the SIB explained:

---

21 Interview with a general secretary of the SIB, Guangdong, 2021.

Table 1. Comparison of Evaluation Indices for the SWC and SIB

	Evaluation index	Elaborations
SWC	- Social observation	- Submission of not less than one social observation report per year
	- Project research and development	- No less than two projects are developed every year
	- Community activities	- Conduct 6–8 activities
	- Incubation of community social organizations	- Number based on specific communities
SIB	- Provide technology for project research and development	- No less than two projects are developed every year
	- Provide resources for the activities of community social organizations	- Conduct 12–15 activities

Source: Authors.

> The SWC and PLC give us [the SIB] extensive autonomy. We are also the *zhuashou* 抓手 of the *gong qing fu* 工青妇 [Labour Union, the Communist Youth League of China and Women's Federation], acting as their eyes and assistants at the grassroots level. However, we do not hold any formal positions (*bianzhi* 编制) or belong to any bureaucracy.[22]

The SIB is both an agent of the SWC and an incubator (*fuhuaqi* 孵化器) for NGOs and civil groups that do not qualify for registration. Moreover, it acts as a channel through which NGOs can convey their demands upward to the SWC. The SIB can nurture social organizations through various means. First, the Party–masses co-construction funds (*dangqun gongjian zijin* 党群共建资金) and Party-building activity funds (*dangjian huodong jingfei* 党建活动经费) are constituted to finance the SIB without the SIB's need for self-financing. This is different from the special funds that come from the Chinese government, as the Party–masses co-construction funds and Party-building activity funds are generally managed by local Party organizations (for example, the SWC) rather than administrative departments, because they are closely related to the political task of Party building. For recipients of financial subsidies, the Party–masses co-construction funds and Party-building activity funds are more supportive, stable and controllable. Moreover, the closer the relationship between the affairs that the SIB are engaged in and the issues that GRPOs are trying to solve, the easier it is to obtain resource support from the latter. To illustrate, Nanhai 南海区, a county-level district in Foshan 佛山市, Guangdong province, drew up a list of the important public issues that most concern the GRPOs, such as public security, rental housing renovation and floating population governance. These issues were then selected as the key projects in 2018 and special funds, ranging from 100,000 yuan to 200,000 yuan, were allocated to support the SIB's incubation of social organizations with an interest in the project areas of concern.

Second, the evaluation indicators of the superior Party committees are intentionally passed down to the SIB by the SWC. In Chengdu and Guangdong, the SWC is evaluated by the superior Party committee on its cultivation of local social organizations, the research and development of social projects and the development of social observation. However, after another process of decomposition and incremental quotas, these evaluation indicators, which were originally designed for the SWC, were transferred to the SIB, which then took over these daily tasks.

Consequently, numerous SIB-supported NGOs and civic groups have emerged in grassroots China in a short time. According to the official report, the number of NGOs in Nanhai reached

---

22   Ibid.

1,831 in 2020, almost triple the number in 2012, with 1,368 and 471 registered and archived, respectively.[23] These organizations share two characteristics. First, the NGOs and civic groups focus on public service provision and civic interest consultation and thus do not pose a threat to the authorities. Second, many of the civic groups, such as the civic assembly hall (*shimin yishiting* 市民议事厅,), a temporary, semi-autonomous group formed by residents to express their demands and interests, have not been registered with the local civil affairs department. Although they are not legally recognized, these groups are tolerated by local authorities.

Co-optation: recruitment of social elites

The CCP uses the co-optation of elites as an effective strategy to maintain its adaptability.[24] As the country undergoes its market-oriented transformation, local Party branches provide private entrepreneurs with political identities such as parliamentary and Party congress memberships with the aim of embracing market forces and reinventing the Party branches.[25] To work alongside this strategy, GRPOs created the mass line (*qunzhong luxian* 群众路线), a guideline which is designed to proactively identify and co-opt potential community elites (*shequ nengren* 社区能人) among the masses.

Community elites are also equated with "community enthusiasts," who are widely distributed in various occupational fields and have richer knowledge, experience, prestige and social capital than ordinary citizens and thus can effectively influence the social behaviour of other community members. As such, community elites are informal executors of central policy, implementing central policy at the lowest level of the community. In China, the township regime is one of the country's most important grassroots political organs and an independent administrative unit, which means that it is difficult for state power to penetrate areas below the township level. For a long time, local governments relied on the semi-administrative residents' committees for stability maintenance in the most basic communities. However, inadequate formal authority and resources drove the residents' committees, as agents of the state, to seek the assistance of community elites to translate the national discourse system into localized narratives to ensure the implementation of national policies at the grassroots level. Therefore, the enlistment and co-optation of community elites directly affect the effectiveness of grassroots governance in China.

GRPOs developed a set of procedures and ingenious techniques to identify and recruit community elites (Figure 1). First, the GRPOs identify the elites and retired Party members of interest through "door-to-door scanning" (*saolou* 扫楼) and then establish corresponding interest groups in line with their interests. The purpose of this step is to identify and reorganize the fragmented community elites. Second, once groups are established, they are allocated Party-building funds and positions (*dangjian zhendi* 党建阵地) for various activities. Frequent community activities encourage relationships to be established between the GRPOs and the core members of the interest groups. Next, these core members are classified, filtered and appointed to leadership positions within informal community social organizations – for example, positions such as floor seniors (*louzhang* 楼长) and grid directors (*wangge zhang* 网格长). Subsequently, voluntary service activities such as public security maintenance are implemented under the guidance of the GRPOs. Third, regular contact mechanisms between community, Party and social organizations are established to co-opt the outstanding talents of organizations as part-time members of community Party organizations. An experienced community cadre described how "door-to-door scanning" works:

> "Door-to-door scanning" is a primitive but pragmatic tactic. We go from door-to-door to collect information about residents with special skills and retired Party members and offer to provide funds and venues for their activities. We also offer them opportunities to "make an

---

23 Organization Department of Nanhai District Party Committee 2020.
24 Dickson 2000.
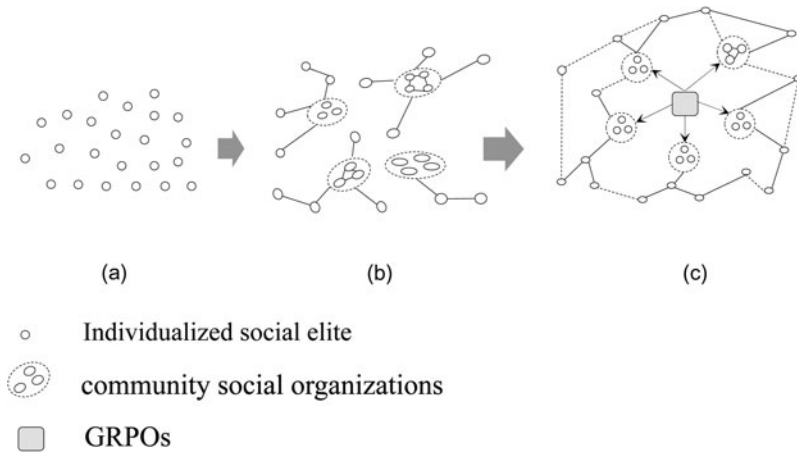25 Yan and Huang 2017.

Figure 1. Co-optation of Social Elites by GRPOs
Source: Authors.

appearance" (*liangxiang* 亮相), such as organizing events on holidays, gradually developing them into volunteers for neighbourhood associations, and finally recruiting key members as community cadres.[26]

Political connections and reciprocity are prerequisites for successful co-optation. Most community elites are retired Party members who remain enthusiastic about serving the Party and have a sense of social responsibility. Moreover, Party membership infers an obligation to respond to the Party's call and implement the Party's decisions at all times. Retired Party members' continued passion for the Party and their self-identification as a Party member motivates them to pledge their loyalty to the Party organization and devote themselves to community service again. Additionally, reciprocity encourages community elites to respond to being co-opted by GRPOs. For example, in Beijing and Guangdong, outstanding community volunteers and social organization managers who actively provide services can be recruited into the local talent pool and become reserve cadres for the town and street regimes. For community elites, being a reserve cadre provides a kind of political capital rooted in institutionalization, which is more reliable than the social capital gained through private relations. This political capital gives the elites the ability to obtain resources, which in turn provide them with social capital.

Ultimately, co-optation is a quasi-bureaucratic strategy developed by GRPOs. To date, no formal legislation has been enacted regarding the co-optation strategy. However, it has been publicized in the form of a working methodology by GRPOs and diffused among different jurisdictions. In Guangdong, the SWC set up a special fund to support community Party organizations and promote their experiences of recruiting social elites to different regions. A government document in Guangdong reveals that community Party organizations participating in thematic summary, sharing and promotion meetings, held by sub-district offices and district, municipal and provincial departments, will receive financial support ranging from 80 to 28,000 yuan.[27] A social worker from Chengdu described the ambitious efforts of Chengdu authorities in promoting similar working methodologies:

---

26 Interview with a director of the Dier community residents' committee, Guangdong, 2020.
27 Guicheng Street Community Management Office 2014.

The Municipal Bureau of Finance has set aside special supporting funds for the promotion of the project. No more than 15 per cent of the total funds are approved for experience promotion and media publicity. Handbooks related to mass work, work tips and elite co-optation are the focus of our experience promotion.[28]

Embeddedness: penetrating society through the Party's network

In 2012 and 2015, the central state promulgated two decrees that reinforced the leadership of the CCP by establishing Party organizations within enterprises and NGOs. According to the latest data released by the Chinese state, Party organizations were established in 1.532 million enterprises and 171,000 NGOs by the end of 2021 – an achievement of nearly full coverage. This initiative has two purposes: to reintegrate the workplace, daily life and politics to strengthen political control and eliminate the potential risks of growing market and social forces; and to strengthen the capacity to mobilize market and social resources to participate in stability maintenance and public service provision.

Since then, a frenetic campaign to build Party organizations has swept across grassroots China. In 2017, Chengdu, Guangdong, Zhejiang and Beijing successively enacted local strategies to strengthen the construction of Party organizations including the "three-year action plan" (*sannian xingdong fang'an* 三年行动方案) and "five actions" (*wu da xingdong* 五大行动). According to these plans, priority tasks are determined and assigned to the corresponding responsible departments. In Guangdong, the "three-level Party-building grid" (*sanji dangjian wangge* 三级党建网格) has been identified as the main task in grassroots Party building. According to this strategy, the community is divided into three grids. The first-level grid is community; the community Party organization is the leader of this grid and coordinates its service supply and stability maintenance affairs. The second-level grid covers residential areas. The Party branch in the residential quarter supervises the education and management of Party members in this grid under the leadership of the community Party organization. The third-level grid is divided up by the community Party organization based on the living places of Party members and residents. The intention is to optimize the parallel relationship between Party members and residents (*hu lianxi* 户联系) and to enhance Party members' supervision of residents. Overall, the purpose of the three-level grid is to establish a vertical-to-bottom (*hengxiang daodi* 横向到底), horizontal edge-to-edge (*zongxiang daobian* 纵向到边) network of Party organizations within public enterprises, public institutions, private enterprises and NGOs. To this end, the organization department of the district committee drew up a list of specific powers (*quanli qingdan* 权力清单) that would be enacted in law to solidify the powers of the GRPOs to make decisions, organize and appoint personnel, and supervise and manage major affairs.

PBIs are popular and widely used to implement the embedding strategy. They are drawn from a variety of sources in different regions. For example, it is common practice in Guangdong to appoint the cadres of local authorities to act as PBIs; however, in Beijing, veterans and corporate retirees are usually recruited to serve as PBIs in the private sector. In 2013, Beijing dispatched 10,107 PBIs to guide the Party-building work in 69,640 private enterprises across the region. This attempt to place PBIs in economic organizations and NGOs was resisted by these organizations at first. Empirical evidence from Guangdong province shows that NGOs with different resource-dependence backgrounds have adopted different coping strategies. For example, NGOs established by and acting as an extended arm of the government tend to unconsciously follow Party-building norms without considering strategic responses. NGOs that rely on government contracting projects have a strong incentive to accept the embedding of Party organizations in order to maintain a steady stream of government funding support. International NGOs that receive funding from private donors tend

---

28 Interview with a social worker, Chengdu, 2020.

to avoid being incorporated into the party-state system by leaving areas of stress. This result is consistent with Lin Nie and Wu Jie's study on the response of Chinese NGOs to Party building.[29]

Therefore, to counter any rising resistance, a shared, unwritten incentive measure was designed by local authorities and gradually became a widely recognized informal institution. Subsequently, those private and social organizations embracing PBIs would be invited to participate in a joint conference on Party building (*dangjian lianxi hui* 党建联席会) that would provide the latest policy trends and decision-making information available to private organizations and NGOs. This would help organization managers formulate development strategies in advance. Additionally, GRPOs also link the implementation of Party-building indicators to the ratings of private enterprises and social organizations. In Chengdu, only NGOs that have established Party organizations can be rated at the three-A level (*sanxing ji shehui zuzhi* 三星级社会组织) at which NGOs receive preferential government project funding. A social organization manager elaborated on this situation:

> Party building is a time-consuming and laborious matter that does not necessarily meet our organizational goals; therefore, we were reluctant initially. However, if you don't do this, your rating won't go up, and you won't have the opportunity to apply for government-funded projects. Conversely, if you have a positive attitude and do well, you can attend internal meetings to get some important information and preferential policies in advance.[30]

Another effective embedding strategy is to place an overwhelming number of Party members in economic organizations and NGOs. One indirect approach is to set the ratio of Party members as the threshold for the founding of civic groups. In Beijing and Guangdong, the customary but not formally legalized practice in some communities is that owners' committees (*yezhu weiyuan hui* 业主委员会) will not be approved unless Party members account for more than 20 per cent of the membership. In communities where owners' committees are identified by local authorities as potentially threatening official rule, the proportion of Party members is increased to 50 per cent, and cross appointments (*jiaocha renzhi* 交叉任职), where cadres of community Party organizations are appointed as directors of the owners' committee, are required.

The other direct approach is for Party members to initiate community social organizations. As mentioned above, most of the community social organizations (for example, the civic assembly hall) do not meet the criteria for registration with the civil affairs authorities because of limited funding and workforce. The most typical community social organizations in Guangdong are the neighbourhood associations (*jiefang hui* 街坊会), which are not legally recognized but tolerated by local authorities. This is a more direct and ingenious embedding strategy. The recruitment of members, the establishment of the charters of association and the improvement of the internal structure of the neighbourhood associations are all conducted under the guidance of the GRPOs. Moreover, most Party members within the community are required to join the neighbourhood associations and assume the major leadership positions, such as the president or secretary-general. When Party members become the main cells, the neighbourhood associations gradually become a subordinate organization of GRPOs and take on quasi-administrative roles, such as helping GRPOs collect residents' private information, recruiting citizens to the volunteer service team and imperceptibly strengthening public support for grassroots authorities. The chairman of a neighbourhood association shared the following:

> Unlike the owners committee, our membership is open to the public. Owners, Party members, tenants, merchants and other citizens of various identities are encouraged and accepted to join the neighbourhood association if they are willing to engage in voluntary service. In short, our

---

29   Nie and Wu 2022.
30   Interview with a social organization manager, Chengdu, 2022.

purpose is to cultivate a "good neighbourhood" (*hao linli* 好邻里) that "listens to the Party, follows the Party, and is grateful to the Party" (*ting dang hua, gen dang zou, gan dang gen* 听党话,跟党走,感党恩). It is the Party-building platform of the community and the frontier position of political education for citizens.[31]

The rigorous performance evaluation provides unfailing impetus for the embedding strategy. After the 18th CCP National Congress, grassroots Party building became the main evaluation indicator for local governments. A list of tasks for Party building in Guangdong in 2018 shows that the development of Party members, the establishment of GRPOs and the effectiveness of Party leadership are used as primary indicators to guide the work of local authorities. Therefore, the establishment of Party organizations in community social organizations such as neighbourhood associations is also a rational choice for grassroots cadres to meet the evaluation targets.

In a sense, the process of "manufacturing society" is consistent with the "graduated controls system" defined by Xiaogang Kang and Heng Han.[32] The difference is that their research focuses on how the party-state allocates degrees of control to existing NGOs, while the three strategies mentioned in this article emphasize how the party-state actively incubates NGOs and then completes the continuous process of co-opting and embedding. Following Kang and Han's research approach, Table 2 presents a simplified version of the "graduated controls system," showing how the party-state allocates the three aforementioned strategies among different NGOs.

Motivations for "Manufacturing Society"

In general, GPROs' motivations for "manufacturing society" include revitalizing the regime's mobilization capability, increasing the available social resources for grassroots authorities and establishing the input mechanism for citizens to express demands.

Strong social mobilization capacity is considered an important factor by the CCP in preventing bureaucratic inertia and maintaining the resilience of the Party.[33] Relying on a disciplined organizational system, the Chinese state implements social mobilization to prevent the decay of grassroots organizations and "ensure the responsiveness of local cadres to higher-level initiatives."[34] However, the party-state's social mobilization capability has been seriously weakened by rapid marketization and the relaxation of the *hukou* system.[35] Notably, two official figures signal the seriousness of the situation. China's Seventh National Census (2020) revealed that the floating population in China had reached 375.82 million, which is an increase of 69.73 per cent from 2010. Moreover, a 2017 report by the United Front Work Department of the CCP Central Committee showed that the overall size of the new social strata (*xin shehui jieceng* 新社会阶层), which encompasses private enterprise employees, social organization employees and freelance workers, was approximately 72 million, 95.5 per cent of whom (about 69 million) were not Party members. The increasing social mobility has dismantled the grassroots organization network that the CCP proudly established after the founding of the People's Republic of China.[36] The old organizational base of state-owned enterprises has collapsed, but GRPOs have been unable to penetrate the emerging private sector in areas such as household farming, private business and individual labour mobility. Consequently, in the years since 2000, the policies and directives of the central government have been unable to penetrate the grassroots because of the drastic social changes, meaning that the centre has lost some of its

31 Interview with a chairman of an NA, Guangdong, 2021.
32 Kang and Han 2008.
33 Perry 2011, 51.
34 White 1990.
35 Yang, Yongjiao, Xu and Wilkinson 2019.
36 Kennedy and Chen 2017.

Table 2. NGO Types and Manufacturing Strategies

Business nature	Funding source	Scale	Strategy
Service	Government	Small NGOs in the community (e.g. NAs)	Incubation, co-optation, embeddedness
Service in sensitive areas/advocacy	Private donations	Large NGOs/cross-regional networks	Co-optation, embeddedness
Political/religious/ethnic	INGOs	National organizations	Embeddedness

Source: Authors.

capacity to mobilize the masses at that level.[37] To regain this mobilization capability, GRPOs have sought to reorganize the different social strata, especially the masses and freelancers active outside of the Party. Various development measures have been put in place to generate new social organizations that will reorganize individualized masses and overcome the obstructions to grassroots decrees caused by the clash between unified decrees and a fragmented society.

By "manufacturing society," GRPOs can also help to supplement the human resources and social funds of local governments and alleviate the pressure on their resources. Following a recent round of institutional reform, the tension between the responsibilities and resources of grassroots governments has grown more serious. The "three definitions" scheme (*san ding fang'an* 三定方案), which was launched in 2020, has made it more difficult for grassroots governments to increase the number of new formal positions. Moreover, the government of some reform-frontier cities has taken back subdistrict offices' authority over investments and the local economy and shifted the core of their function to public management. Faced with increasingly scarce resources, the downward shift (*zhongxin xiayi* 重心下移) is an attempt by the central government to transfer the burden of stability maintenance to the grassroots government. Local government cadres will not be eligible for promotion if they fail to accomplish these tasks effectively under the "one item veto" (*yi piao foujue* 一票否决) system.[38] Consequently, informal but pragmatic expedients are used to provide extra-budgetary resources for grassroots governments.[39] The deputy director of G street office explained:

> Grassroots work is called a "thousand threads tied to one needle" (*shangmian qian tiao xian, xiamian yi gen zhen* 上面千条线，下面一根针). It is difficult to conduct grassroots work effectively if you only rely on government employees rather than fully mobilizing social resources. However, now we can mobilize neighbourhood associations and floor seniors to help carry out things like family planning, which required us to knock door-to-door before, and conduct community activities through self-financing community foundations.[40]

Another aspect of "manufacturing society" is to create an opening through which the masses can channel their demands and complaints into the political system. Such an input system can be used to apprise the state of citizens' concerns and "allow the Chinese to believe that they have some degree of influence on policy decisions and personnel choices at the local level."[41] Indeed, for China's vast and bureaucratically fragmented political system, a policy process that allows far greater

---

37 Pei 2002.
38 Zhou 2010.
39 Zhang, Xiaoming, and Cao 2016.
40 Interview with an official of G street office, Guangdong, 2020.
41 Nathan 2003.

Table 3. Strategies and Elaborations of Manufacturing Society

Strategies	Elaborations	Outcomes
Incubate	(1) Establishing the SWC to lead social affairs (2) Set up semi-bureaucratic agencies (SIB) for incubation (3) Incubating quasi-autonomous civil groups through the SIB	Quasi-administrative organizations
Co-optation	(1) Floor scanning→identify community elites (2) Providing special funds for activities →build personal relationships with community elites (3) Creating contact mechanism → co-opt community elites as part-time cadres	Quasi-administrative rules
Embeddedness	(1) Party building and the assigning of instructors to NGOs and private enterprises (2) Implanting Party members in other organizations	Quasi-administrative organizations
	(3) Initiating community social organizations by Party members	

Source: Authors.

bottom-up input provides an institutional guarantee of CCP adaptability and resilience.[42] Input and deliberation also generate legitimacy, even in the absence of a democratically dispersed empowerment. Thus, it is in the Party's interest to create the conditions for multiple actors to voice their demands – in exchange for their acquiescence to the expansion of the state's governance capacity. Community social organizations such as neighbourhood associations and civic assembly halls provide the Party with an opportunity to monitor grassroots society as regular updates on public opinion are passed back to the SWC in the form of research reports. These organizations also serve as forums for residents to voice their objections and negotiate conflicts of interest. Notably, although the people are empowered to express their opinions, the political elite control the agenda, the issues deliberated, level of organization and forums, ensuring they "limit the citizens' capacities to put issues onto the political agenda."[43]

Overall, the strategy for "manufacturing society" depends on a combination of incubation, co-optation and embeddedness (Table 3). Incubation works to reorganize a fragmented society and transform it into a mobilization force. Co-optation draws community elites into quasi-bureaucratic community social organizations to contain any threat they might pose to the regime and to supplement the grassroots governments' social resources. Finally, the embedding strategy opens up a channel for the grassroots to voice its concerns and provides the Party with bottom-up policy feedback.

Conclusion and Discussion

Maintaining stability in the face of scarce resources remains the institutional ecology of grassroots China. The CCP has launched several new campaigns aimed at maintaining consistency in the behaviour of multiple actors and the Party's expectations. The campaigns focus on strengthening the network of GRPOs while also mobilizing market and social forces to take on the functions transferred down to the lower levels by central government. This study builds on the existing research on the Party's reintegration with the community[44] and the relationship between the Party and society

---

42 Heilmann and Perry 2011, 11.
43 He and Warren 2011.
44 Cai, Liu and Jiang 2023; Kan and Ku 2021; Thornton 2013.

(for example, Party-building absorption of society[45]), but we further emphasize the active role of GRPOs in incubating, manufacturing and cultivating society, and view stability maintenance strategies as an interconnected, systematic and consecutive process.

In summary, this study holds three wider theoretical implications. First, we show that the "manufacturing of society" by the Party constitutes an important and inevitable aspect of authoritarian resilience. As argued at the outset of this article, prior research on maintaining stability and the relationship between the Party and society focuses on how the CCP establishes institutional links with pre-existing social organizations (such as elite recruitment and the establishment of Party branches) to prevent the latter from threatening social stability, while the "manufacturing of society" by the Party emphasizes the CCP's proactive process of incubating social organizations and identifying, grooming and eventually absorbing social elites. It is the systematic, consecutive and coherent nature of the new stability maintenance system that constitutes an important aspect of the CCP's resilience during a period of rapid social change. That is, instead of the existence of a society that is relatively independent of the party-state, which the party-state then strives to absorb into the political system, the party-state actively incubates a society that is highly dependent and compliant with its will. In this sense, by "manufacturing society," the Party aims not only to eliminate the risk of any challenge to its regime emanating from prosperous civil society organizations but also to pass on some of its social stability maintenance tasks to the "manufactured society," such as collecting public information, establishing public archives and mediating community disputes.

Second, our research further illustrates the mechanisms and motivations of this new model. The active role of GRPOs in constructing, creating and manufacturing society is particularly highlighted in this article. At the same time, we identify and generalize the three interrelated, coherent and systematic mechanisms of incubation, co-optation and embedding and examine their motivations and impacts. As we have argued, there is an inherent organic connection between the three mechanisms; separating them and focusing on just one is clearly a partial approach to understanding the resilience of the CCP, although this is what most previous studies have done. Incubation reintegrates a fragmented society and enhances the capacity of the Party to mobilize communities. The co-optation strategy enlists community elites into street agencies to provide extra-budgetary resources for hard-pressed grassroots authorities. Further, embeddedness provides a channel for the input of social demands into the political system.

Third, our research implies the limitations of citizen participation as the precursor of democratic values in China. As we emphasize, quasi-bureaucratic civic groups such as neighbourhood associations provide citizens with the opportunity to offer bottom-up policy feedback. Nevertheless, it is the GRPOs that decide what issues are allowed to be debated or criticized, and to what extent that feedback is passed on. The GRPOs, rather than democracy, frame the boundaries and effectiveness of citizen participation. This cautions against the oversimplification of depicting citizen participation as the advent of civil society, a notion that may overstate or even misjudge the democracy of grassroots China's reform. Instead, this study offers further evidence on Chinese state–society relations, showing that the "manufactured society" aims to enhance the adhesion between citizens and the government to strengthen the CCP's legitimacy and the flexibility of the party-state. This finding resonates with prior research on "state-enlisted voluntarism in China."[46]

The institutionalization process of the "manufactured society" may be a direction for future research. As mentioned above, in the process of incubating society, the CCP has generated a large number of informal elements such as quasi-bureaucratic civic organizations and citizens who are recruited into the grid team and have the status of quasi-public employees. Based on our empirical observations, only those with excellent, proven performance could become part of the formal system. For instance, the community social organizations growing under the cumulative

45 Hu, Zeng and Wu 2022.
46 Yang, Fan, Wang and Zhang 2022.

cultivation of the SIB are allowed to register as legal NGOs. Conversely, most informal elements, such as the floor seniors and grid directors, remain illegal but tolerated by GRPOs. One plausible explanation for this phenomenon is that these elaborate devices can be used flexibly by local authorities only if they remain informal and unconstrained by formal bureaucracy. In this sense, the informality of this process is a deliberate product that caters to the needs of grassroots authorities which must complete the tasks assigned to them by higher-up Party leaders in an environment of resource scarcity.

References

Cai, Changkun, Ying Liu and Weiqi Jiang. 2023. "Bringing the Party back into the community: restructuring grassroots governance in Shenzhen." *The China Quarterly* **254**, 412–428.

Creemers, Rogier. 2017. "Cyber China: upgrading propaganda, public opinion work and social management for the twenty-first century." *Journal of Contemporary China* **26**(103), 85–100.

Dickson, Bruce J. 2000. "Cooptation and corporatism in China: the logic of Party adaptation." *Political Science Quarterly* **115**(4), 517–540.

Dickson, Bruce J. 2007. "Integrating wealth and power in China: the Communist Party's embrace of the private sector." *The China Quarterly* **192**, 827–854.

Guicheng Street Community Management Office. 2014. "Chuangjian shuren shequ jingyan zongjie he fenxiang de zijin fuchi banfa" (Funding support methods for sharing and summarizing experiences of forming community groups). Archival references.

He, Baogang, and Mark E. Warren. 2011. "Authoritarian deliberation: the deliberative turn in Chinese political development." *Perspectives on Politics* **9**(2), 269–289.

Heilmann, Sebastian, and Elizabeth J. Perry. 2011. "Embracing uncertainty: guerrilla policy style and adaptive governance in China." In Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1–29.

Hodgson, Lesley. 2004. "Manufactured civil society: counting the cost." *Critical Social Policy* **24**(2), 139–164.

Hu, Jieren, Peng Zeng and Tong Wu. 2022. "How are 'red social workers' trained? Party-building absorption of society in China." *China Review* **22**(3), 297–323.

Jiang, Jue. 2021. "A question of human rights or human left? The 'people's war against COVID-19' under the 'gridded management' system in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* **31**(136), 491–504.

Kan, Karita, and Hok Bun Ku. 2021. "Serving the people, building the Party: social organizations and Party work in China's urban villages." *The China Journal* **85**(1), 75–95.

Kang, Xiaoguang, and Heng Han. 2008. "Graduated controls : the state–society relationship in contemporary China." *Modern China* **34**(1), 36–55.

Kennedy, John James, and Dan Chen. 2017. "State capacity and cadre mobilization in China: the elasticity of policy implementation." *Journal of Contemporary China* **27**(111), 1–13.

Mattingly, Daniel. 2019. *The Art of Political Control in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mittelstaedt, Jean Christopher. 2022. "The grid management system in contemporary China: grass-roots governance in social surveillance and service provision." *China Information* **36**(1), 3–22.

Nathan, Andrew J. 2003. "China's changing of the guard: authoritarian resilience." *Journal of Democracy* **1**(14), 6–17.

Nie, Lin, and Wu Jie. 2022. "Strategic responses of NGOs to the new Party-building campaign in China." *China Information* **36**(1), 46–67.

Organization Department of Nanhai District Party Committee. 2020. "2020 nian Nanhaiqu jiben qingkuang" (Basic situation in Nanhai district, 2020). Archival references.

Pei, Minxin. 2002. "China's governance crisis." *Foreign Affairs* **81**(5), 96–109.

Perry, Elizabeth J. 2011. "From mass campaigns to managed campaigns: 'constructing a new socialist countryside'." In Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 30–61.

Polanyi, Karl. 2007. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (trans.). Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Publishing House.

Su, Zheng, Shiqi Ma and Changdong Zhang. 2022. "Participation without contestation: NGOs' autonomy and advocacy in China." *The China Quarterly* **251**, 888–912.

Tang, Beibei. 2020. "Grid governance in China's urban middle-class neighbourhoods." *The China Quarterly* **241**, 43–61.

Thornton, Patricia M. 2012. "The new life of the Party: Party-building and social engineering in Greater Shanghai." *The China Journal* **68**, 58–78.

Thornton, Patricia M. 2013. "The advance of the Party: transformation or takeover of urban grassroots society?" *The China Quarterly* **213**, 1–18.

Wang, Huan, and Ying Wang. 2023. "Party-building and government funding: the effect of the Chinese Communist Party on non-governmental organizations." *Journal of Chinese Political Science*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-023-09850-6.

Wei, Yujun, Zhonghua Ye, Meng Cui and Xiaokun Wei. 2021. "COVID-19 prevention and control in China: grid governance." *Journal of Public Health* **43**(1), 76–81.

White, Tyrene. 1990. "Postrevolutionary mobilization in China: the one-child policy reconsidered." *World Politics* **43**(1), 53–76.

Xiao, Qiang. 2019. "The road to digital unfreedom: President Xi's surveillance." *Journal of Democracy* **30**(1), 53–67.

Xu, Jianhua, and Siying He. 2022. "Can grid governance fix the party-state's broken windows? A study of stability maintenance in grassroots China." *The China Quarterly* **251**, 843–865.

Xu, Xianglin. 2020. "Transformation crises and adaptive governance in China: a historical comparative perspective." In Xianglin Xu (eds.), *Social Transformation and State Governance in China*. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 3–32.

Yan, Xiaojun, and Jie Huang. 2017. "Navigating unknown waters: the Chinese Communist Party's new presence in the private sector." *China Review* **17**(2), 37–63.

Yang, Fan, Shizong Wang and Zhihan Zhang. 2022. "State-enlisted voluntarism in China: the role of public security volunteers in social stability maintenance." *The China Quarterly* **249**, 47–67.

Yang, Yongjiao, Yan Xu and Mick Wilkinson. 2019. "Towards effective mobilization of social participation: from an instrumental approach to a value-oriented approach in China." *Policy Studies* **43**(3), 538–557.

Zhang, Mingjun, and Peng Chen. 2012. "2011 nian Zhongguo dianxing quntixing shijian fenxi baogao" (2011 China social public security research report). *Advances in China Public Security* **01**, 3–31.

Zhang, Xiaoming, and Zhenghan Cao. 2016. "From manipulation to integration: the strategic transformation of grassroots control in China." *Journal of Chinese Governance* **1**(2), 284–302.

Zhou, Xueguang. 2010. "The institutional logic of collusion among local governments in China." *Modern China* **36**(1), 47–78.

Yanling HE is a professor in the School of Government, Peking University, and director of the Social Governance Innovation Research Center at Renmin University of China. Her interests encompass grassroots governance, administrative reform and governance theory.

Zheng WANG is a doctoral student in the School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China. He focuses on grassroots governance and bureaucratic behaviour in China.