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**A New Model of Control? Party  
Penetration of Civil Society Organizations in  
Contemporary China**

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# **A New Model of Control?**

## **Party Penetration of Civil Society Organizations in Contemporary China**

Kai Zhou

**Abstract:** The Chinese authoritarian regime has developed an array of sophisticated mechanisms to mitigate the societal challenges arising from civil society organizations (CSOs). In recent years, a party-building campaign in CSOs initiated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is noteworthy. Why does the CCP accelerate the establishment of party organizations within CSOs? Is it a new control model towards Chinese civil society? What factors could account for this “bringing the party back in” movement? Drawing upon archival studies and intensive fieldwork in Mainland China, this article provides an exploratory examination of main features of this campaign and argues that establishing party units within CSOs is not only an instrumental means that facilitates the Party’s direct control towards social sector, but also attributes to profound changes within the Party itself, namely the rise of Mao-style leadership, the revival of campaign-style governance and lessons from handling contentious challenges. These factors contribute to an “authoritarian retraction” scenario that deeply shapes the trajectory of party-building movement and further influences the dynamics of state-society relations under the Chinese authoritarian regime.

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## 1. Introduction

With greater social space created by the reform and opening-up, civic associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private foundations are becoming daily phenomenon in the Chinese society. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs of P.R. China, the total number of registered social organizations has skyrocketed from 354,000 in 2006 to 702,559 in 2016, which comprises 336,000 civic associations, 361,000 NGOs and 5,559 private foundations.<sup>1</sup> These social organizations serve as important vehicles in promoting civil engagement by covering a wide range of issues, such as social charities, community services, environment protection, legal consultation, cultural heritage, sports and entertainment, *etc.* Despite the swift growth in number and rapid expansion of scope, nevertheless, whether social organizations under the Chinese authoritarianism context could be viewed as civil society organizations (CSOs) remains a legitimate question.

Civil society is one of the most controversial concepts without unanimity among scholars. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville suggests that active associations are the defining characteristic of American civil society.<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Putnam *et al.* further point out that the dense “networks of civic engagement” fostered by “civil associations” of all kinds represents a role model of civil society in which attributes the superior effectiveness of northern Italy’s good governance.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Schmitter Philippe argues that the existence of intermediary organizations is

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Civil Affairs of China, *2006 Statistics on the Development of Social Services; 2016 statistics on the Development of Social Services*. <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/tjgb/>, accessed October 24, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer. The Library of America, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, 1994.

necessary but insufficient evidence for a functioning civil society. As he proposed, civil society shall be “a set or system of self-organized intermediary groups” that rest on four norms: namely dual autonomy (i.e. relative independence of both state and market), capability for collective action, non-usurpation for political power and voluntary in nature.<sup>4</sup> Larry Diamond concurs that civil society means “the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the minimal requirement of civil society is not just a mélange of different associational groups that exist in any given country, but concerns the autonomy, civility, and voluntarism of these associations.

From a normative perspective, social organizations in China might not fully qualify what civil society requests. To be sure, Chinese social organizations do not enjoy completely autonomous status and could not check and balance the power of a mighty authoritarian state. In China, social organizations must affiliate with state and government apparatus if they want to register and operate legally under the Chinese laws. Any civic groups or NGOs that refuse to do so will be labeled as illegal organizations. Hence, it is true that these social organizations may possess non-independent status and tend not to challenge state power directly compared to their counterparts in democratic societies. Nevertheless, these registered social organizations do share a considerable degree of common features of CSOs in terms of stimulating civic engagement, assisting collective actions, as well as advocating public policies.

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<sup>4</sup> Philippe C Schmitter, “Some Propositions about Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy.” *Research Memoranda (Political Science Series)* 10(1993): 4.

<sup>5</sup> Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p.221.

First, in spite of state control, civic groups and intermediate organizations are capable to form sustained and collective social activities in which are relatively independent of the state, the market, and the family. For example, many civil organizations and grassroots groups organized all sorts of voluntary services and community activities in urban and rural areas that illustrate the possibility of operational autonomy of Chinese civic groups.<sup>6</sup> In other words, social organizations at least encompass “social activity that arises in a space that exists *outside the state, but in some kind of relationship to it*” (Emphasis in the original).<sup>7</sup>

Second, social organizations retain great potential to balance the power of the state under certain circumstances. Despite strict regulations on associational life in China, it by no means suggests that social organizations are completely puppets of the state. As a matter of fact, China’s rising social organizations have also demonstrated the possibility to contest state power through institutional and non-institutional channels. For instances, on one hand, various civic groups and NGOs actively express their concerns and opinions by participating in public hearing, town hall meetings, and political consultations; on the other hand, hobby and interest groups could easily turn to powerful organizational networks in mobilizing and organizing ordinary citizens to launch contentious challenges towards the state.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Johnson, “Environmentalism and NIMBYism in China: Promoting A Rules-based Approach to Public Participation.” *Environmental Politics* 19.3 (2010): 430-448.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Pharr, “Conclusion: Targeting by an Activist State: Japan as a Civil Society Model,” in Frank J. Schwartz and Susan J. Pharr, eds. *The State of Civil Society in Japan*. Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.319.

<sup>8</sup> Xiaojun Yan and Kai Zhou, “Fighting the Prairie Fire: Why do Local Party-States in China Respond to Contentious Challengers Differently?.” *China: An International Journal* 15.4 (2017): 43-68.

Third, grassroots social organizations play an indispensable role in advocating public interests and influencing policy-making process. Intermediate associations and civic groups are bridging the gap between the grassroots and the state with great concerns with common good and a variety of social issues. In recent years, many professional NGOs advocated important social issues and drew wide attention from general public and the governments, such as health care for migrant workers, education in rural areas, air pollution reduction, *etc.* As Tony Saich suggested, the growth of all sorts of associations in the reform era shapes “an increased organizational sphere and social space in which to operate and to represent social interests, and to convey those interests into the policy-making process.”<sup>9</sup>

From service delivery to political participation, social organizations in China inevitably involve citizens “*acting collectively in a public sphere* to express their interests, passions, preferences, and ideas, to exchange information, to achieve collective goals, to make demands on the state, to improve the structure and functioning of the state, and to hold state officials accountable”(Emphasis in the original).<sup>10</sup> With these features in mind, Chinese social organizations may be not ideal CSOs from a normative perspective but indeed offer a rich analytical opportunity of studying state-society relations under authoritarian context.

Facing the rapid growth of CSOs in China, the Chinese authoritarian regime has also developed an array of sophisticated mechanisms to mitigate such societal challenges. Generally, the Party-state engages and navigates the development of CSOs by

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<sup>9</sup> Tony Saich, “Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China.” *The China Quarterly* 161 (2000): 124.

<sup>10</sup> Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p.221.

introducing legal rules, tightening registration procedures, restricting financing from abroad, as well as relying on government-led mass organizations. In contrast with these conventional control mechanisms, the latest party-building campaign in CSOs initiated by the CCP is noteworthy — more and more social organizations are ordered to set up party units inside their organizations. Why does the CCP pursue the establishment of party organizations within CSOs? Is it a new model of control mechanism towards Chinese civil society? What is rationale behind this “bringing the party back in” movement? Drawing upon archival studies and intensive fieldwork in Mainland China,<sup>11</sup> this article provides an exploratory examination of main features of this campaign and argues that establishing party units inside CSOs is not only an instrumental means that facilitates the Party’s direct control towards social sector, but also attributes to profound changes within the Party itself, namely the rise of Mao-style leadership, the revival of campaign-style governance and lessons from handling contentious challenges. These factors indicate an “authoritarian retraction” that deeply shapes the trajectory of party-building movement and further influences the dynamics of state-society relations under the Chinese authoritarian regime.

## **2. Corporatism and CSOs in China**

Existing theories has long been indicated that civil society is a key driving force either in democratization and regime changes, or fostering social capital in consolidating democracy. According to Modernization theories, economic development brings in rising middle classes and CSOs in which lead to increasing demands on various forms

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<sup>11</sup> Fieldwork was conducted at a provincial-level city (S city) located in located in the Yangtze river delta of China. For details, see section 4 “Party Building Campaign inside CSOs at S City”.

of political participation, checks and balances of political power, and the process of democratization.<sup>12</sup> Once democratic systems are established, civil society continuously assists the democratic consolidation in a number of ways, such as representing societal interests, stimulating political participation, monitoring and restraining the exercise of power, disseminating democratic principles and norms, facilitating civic education, as well as training future political leaders. Thus, CSOs are commonly regarded as a key variable that introduces regime changes and consolidates newly established democratic systems.

To authoritarian regimes, containment and repression of CSOs are hardly news.<sup>13</sup> From direct regulation on registration to indirect control (co-optation or collaboration), from legal restriction on financing aboard to harassment of social activists, authoritarian regimes vigorously engage with societal challengers in order to diminish any threats from civil society. Among these control maneuvers, corporatism has attracted much scholarly attention. As Schmitter suggested, corporatism is a “system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of singular, compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.”<sup>14</sup> Put it simply, corporatism refers to an

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<sup>12</sup> It is not always the case. Civil society might bring oppositional or even antidemocratic outcomes. See Sheri Berman, “Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic.” *World politics* 49.3 (1997): 401-429. For modernization theories, see Barrington Moore, “Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship.” Boston: Beacon, 1966.

<sup>13</sup> Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, “Myths and Realities of Civil Society.” *Journal of Democracy* 25.1 (2014): 46-58.

<sup>14</sup> Philippe C. Schmitter, “Still the Century of Corporatism?” *The Review of politics* 36.1 (1974): 93-94.

institutional order in which compulsory organizations under guidance of the state enjoy a monopoly upon social affairs. It is an advanced form of state capture featured by state-sponsored, state-licensed, state-organized, and state-controlled interest associations, which are with episodes in which the state mobilizes civil society for its own goals.<sup>15</sup>

In the Chinese case, the relations between the state and civil society are certainly not a zero-sum game. Apparently, the Party-state cannot rely on suppression dealing with all societal challengers. Although the ruling party was antagonistic and repressive towards rising social forces that might be threatening its dominant role (such as Falun Gong), however, corporatist strategies tend to apply under most circumstances. A series of control mechanisms that the Party-state employs to manage and restrict the development of CSOs have long been identified. First of all, legal regulations are widely used as a convenient means ranging from registration procedures to fundraising, from permitted activities to international collaboration. For instance, China recently introduced a new law tightening up registration and imposing restrictions on receiving donation from abroad.<sup>16</sup> Second, the CCP also depends on mass organizations as an informal vehicle to influence grassroots CSOs. Mass organizations in China are a pattern of political organization and principal agencies of the state *per se*, such as trade unions, Communist Youth League, Women's Federation, which may fall under the broader category of government-organized NGOS (GONGOs). These mass organizations serve as hub-type agencies connecting

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<sup>15</sup> Howard J. Wiarda, *Civil Society: The American Model and Third World Development*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2003, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Holly Snape and Tony Saich, *et al.*, "How are NGOs in China Faring under the New Law?" *ChinaFile*, <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/how-are-ngos-china-faring-under-new-law>, accessed December 2, 2017.

and covering homogenous social organizations that share similar interests and work agenda.<sup>17</sup> Third, the Party-state also tends to co-opt CSOs by offering partnership opportunities and material incentives. The Chinese state has realized that CSOs could be partners in delivering various public services to citizens in which significantly reduce the burden of the ruling party itself. By inviting CSOs to participate in public-private partnership (PPP) and grassroots governance, the CCP actually fosters a *quasi* patron-client relationship between the state and social organizations, which deeply compromises the functioning of CSOs as challengers to the state power.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Party-state has been effectively exercising these control approaches to navigate rising social sector in China, however, the Party's direct penetration of CSOs deserves more scholarly attention. Unlike previously state control tactics, the party itself this time is marching to the forefront of state-society interactions. In recently years, the CCP and its local branches proactively engage with all kinds of CSOs to make efforts in establishing party units within their organizations. Numerous party units have been implanted into grassroots civic associations, local NGOs and private foundations.

### **3. The Increasing Party Penetration of CSOs in China**

The ruling party is accelerating its presence directly within various CSOs in China today. By “party units”, it refers to a formal organization of the CCP at grassroots level, which generally varies from party committees (more than 100 party members),

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<sup>17</sup> A. Doak Barnett, “Mass Political Organizations in Communist China.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 277.1 (1951): 76.

<sup>18</sup> See Ma Kai, “Four Types of Social Organizations Can Register with Civil Affairs Agents Directly.” *Xinhua News Agency*, 10 March 2013.

general party branches (50-100 party members), party branches (3-50 party members), and party groups (3 party members).<sup>19</sup> This rule was primarily applied to government agencies, state-owned enterprises, public-funded universities, residential communities, rural villages and the military forces. However, the latest development is that all NGOs, foundations, civil associations in China regardless domestic or foreign ones have to set up party units so long three or more party members are employed. As shown in Figure 1, the total number of CSOs with party units has increased dramatically from 12,000 in 2008 to 289,000 in 2016, while the ratio (CSOs with party units/CSOs ratio) is also skyrocketed from 3% to 41%.

[Figure 1 is here]

Moreover, the CCP spares no efforts to institutionalize this practice. As Table 1 indicates, the first directive of establishing party units in social organizations can be traced back to 1998 in which the Central Organization Department (COD) of CCP and Ministry of Civil Affairs jointly issued a document titled “Notice Concerning the Problems of Building Party Organizations in Social Groups”. It was the very first time that the Party explicitly expresses its concerns over party building in social sector. In the year of 2000, the COD further emphasized that the establishment of party organizations in social groups should “eliminate blank spots, expand comprehensive coverage, increase effectiveness.”<sup>20</sup> In addition, the 16<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP revised the Party Constitution in 2002 and introduced a new Article 29, Chapter

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<sup>19</sup> See the Website of the CCP, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0818/c117092-28646759.html>, accessed November 11, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> See “Notice Concerning Opinions on the Work of Strengthening Party Organizations established in Social Groups.” *News of the Communist Party of China*, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/71380/71382/71383/4844923.html>, accessed December 2, 2017.

5, demanding that social organization should set up party organizations so long they have three party members as employees.

[Table 1 is here]

In spite of these efforts, party building within CSOs fell into a scenario that “policy is one thing while implementation is another”. During Hu Jintao administration (From 2003 to 2012), maintaining social stability apparently overrode any other tasks. As Hu himself explained, “stability is our overriding task...If there is no stability, then nothing can be done, and whatever achievements we have made will be lost.”<sup>21</sup>

During Hu administration, issues related to income gap between rich and poor, illegal land transaction, back-pay for migrant workers, environment protections, food and drug safety, and abuse power of local cadres became main triggers of countless social protests. Facing such increased and urgent social tension, party building initiative within CSOs was conveniently sidelined and seriously left behind by street-level bureaucracies.

Since Xi Jinping came into power at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012, party building in CSOs was brought back to top agenda. For instance, in the year of 2015, two important documents regarding party building in CSOs were issued. On May 29, the Central Committee of the CCP announced new guidelines on developing the Party organization work titled “Temporary Regulations on the Work of the Chinese Communist Party Committee”, stressing the Party shall play the “core leadership role” in China and is entitled to expand its presence in any economic, social, and

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<sup>21</sup> Shi Jiangtao, “President Hu Jintao’s Legacy Seen as One of Stability but Stagnation.” *South China Morning Post*, 7 September 2012.

cultural organizations. On September 28, the General Official of the Central Committee of CCP circulated a follow-up message — “Opinions on Strengthening the Party Building Work of Social Organizations (Trial)” in which underlines the importance of implanting party units within CSOs whenever and wherever possible with detailed instructions. At 19<sup>th</sup> Party congress held in October 2017, the CCP revised its Party Constitution again to incorporate new directives on the role of party units in social organizations (Article 33, Chapter 5) — The basic function of party units inside CSOs is to propagate and implement the Party’s political guideline and policies, lead and educate party members and other employees, and facilitate the development of social organizations.<sup>22</sup>

Why is the CCP so urgent to establish party units inside CSOs in recent years? Existing studies provide insightful perspectives to understand this issue. For instance, Dickson and Saich suggest that it is nothing surprise for a Leninist Party like the CCP. It shows path dependence in terms of how the CCP penetrates the society.<sup>23</sup> “The CCP has been actively recruiting members of these groups and building Party organizations in them in order to monitor their activities. This too is a long-standing Party tradition.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, Zhang Han, Yan Xiaojun and Huang Jie argue that party building in private sectors represents the organizational adaptation of the ruling party to the changing society in order to strengthen authoritarian resilience.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See the newly revised Party Constitution of the CCP, *Xinhua News Agency*, [http://www.china.com.cn/19da/2017-10/28/content\\_41809100.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/19da/2017-10/28/content_41809100.htm), accessed December 2, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Tony Saich, “Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China.” *The China Quarterly* 161 (2000): 124-141.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival*. Oxford University Press, 2016, p.161.

<sup>25</sup> Zhang Han, “Party Building in Urban Business Districts: Organizational Adaptation of the Chinese Communist Party.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24.94 (2015): 644-664. Yan

Moreover, Patricia M. Thornton examines the expansion of party units in social organization and suggests that it could be viewed as the emergence of Party-organized non-governmental organizations (PONGOs), sponsored and supported by local Party committees, which further advances the presence and popularity of the Party in urban life.<sup>26</sup>

Existing literature provides plausible explanations for this ongoing party-building campaign in CSOs. To some extent, these theories can be categorized into a control-mechanism approach — path dependence, authoritarian resilience, and new type of CSOs all emphasize how the ruling party deliberately tightens up control over social sectors. Nevertheless, these theories hardly account for the acceleration of party penetration into CSOs in recent years and inadequately clarify hidden factors behind this “bring the Party back in” trend in contemporary China. This article argues that party-building campaign in CSOs goes beyond conventional understanding of state control mechanisms, but attributes to a profound shift within the Party-state itself — from authoritarian resilience to “authoritarian retraction” in which authoritarian regimes restore and return to orthodox and rigid solutions to social changes instead of institutional learning and adaptation for a changing world. In other words, this general trend of party building is not purely to fulfill instrumental goals of controlling CSOs, but closely associated with shifting political environment that reshapes every aspects of Chinese society.

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Xiaojun and Huang Jie, “Navigating Unknown Waters: The Chinese Communist Party’s New Presence in the Private Sector.” *The China Review* 17.2 (2017): 37-73.

<sup>26</sup> Patricia M. Thornton, “The New Life of the Party: Party-Building and Social Engineering in Greater S City Area.” *The China Journal* 68 (2012): 58-78. Patricia M. Thornton, “The Advance of the Party: Transformation or Takeover of Urban Grassroots Society?” *The China Quarterly* 213 (2013): 1-18.

#### **4. Party-Building Campaign inside CSOs at S City**

Fieldwork for this research was conducted in two districts (District Y and District M) located in northeastern and southwestern S City from March 10 to July 10 in 2017. In total 27 interviews were arranged during the fieldwork and two piles of internal documents on party building work of S city were acquired from the Social Work Committee of the CCP Municipal Committee in S city. Interviewees include party cadres, local officials, and directors of CSOs as well as ordinary party members, who have been participating in this party building campaign. In addition, this research is supplemented by party documents, newspapers, journals, official publications and other secondary sources.

##### **a. Historical Development**

Generally, party building inside CSOs has experienced three major periods in S city: namely, the period of community-based party building (*shequ dangjian* 社区党建), the period of special committee party building (*dakou dangwei dangjian* 大口党委党建), and the period of territorialized party building (*quyuhua dangjian* 区域化党建).

1) *Community-based Party Building* (1990s). Since the beginning of reform era, S city embraced rapid economic growth and social development. The emergence of private entrepreneurs and professionals largely contested the CCP's previous model of workplace-based party building (*danwei dangjian* 单位党建). In order to expand its organizational penetration in new social groups of urban areas, the party committee of CCP in S city transformed workplace-based party building model into community-based party building model — urban residential communities started to build or

rebuild party units to strengthen party control over economic and human resources within residential boundaries. Under such circumstance, party building in professional associations, civic groups, and hobby clubs was basically merged into community-based party building. It must be noted that, the main focus of community-based party building is primarily on residential communities rather than social organizations at this time period.

2) *Special Committee Party Building* (2000s). As social organizations continued to grow, community-based party building could not satisfy the Party's demand for better control and effective management of CSOs. In 2003, the Municipal Committee of CCP in S city set up a designated party apparatus titled *Social Work Committee* (SWC) in charge of providing guidance and leadership for party-building work in social organizations.<sup>27</sup> The SWC is under directly command of Municipal Committee of CCP in S city with dedicated mission to strengthen party building in social sector and coordinate with local party committees in different districts of S city. The advantage of this approach is to reinforce a vertical chain of command in party building and integrate all relevant horizontal state agencies to accomplish “comprehensive coverage” of all CSOs.

3) *Territorialized Party building* (2010s). In S city, residential communities, social organizations, and business districts are often geographically overlapped and encompassed — in fact, many of them nestled in the same administrative area. Territorialized party building represents an instrumental intention to combine the

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<sup>27</sup> Qian Bei, “Gongqingtuan shehui gongzuo weiyuanhui zuori chengli” (Communist Youth League of S City Established A Social Work Committee), *Wenhuibao* (Wenweipo), 30 April 2016.

existing vertical and horizontal party building agencies into a coherent network. By “territorialized”, it means that party-building work is no longer based on residential communities, or special organizations, but concentrates on larger territories/spaces within urban areas. In S city, street-level (*jiedao*) party committees become pivotal points connecting the *Social Work Committee* and other party committees from workplaces, residential communities, CSOs, business districts within the same geographic areas.<sup>28</sup> According to Kenneth Lieberthal, the Chinese Party-state features vertical bureaucratic organizations that link the central to local states commonly referred to as “lines” (*tiao*) and horizontal bodies commanding actions within given geographic areas called “pieces” (*kuai*). There are always tensions between *tiao/kuai* administrative structures known as “fragmented authoritarianism.”<sup>29</sup> To some extent, territorialized party building attempts to reduce fragmentation by integrating vertical and horizontal resources with convergence at the street level to better cope with real difficulties on the ground.

## **b. Features of Party-Building Campaign**

1) “*Comprehensive Coverage*”. Establishing party units in CSOs follows a so-called “mandatory principle” (*yingjian bijian* 应建必建). For any CSOs that have three or more party members as employees, establishing party units within the organization is absolutely non-negotiable. For those that hire less than three party members, party-building instructors will be dispatched to help developing new party members from existing employees, or liaison with other CSOs who share similar problems to set up a joint party branch. The ultimate goal is to make sure each social organization put

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<sup>28</sup> The street-level Party committees are above Party committees of residential communities but subordinate to party committees of Districts.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China, From Revolution through Reform*, Norton, W.W, & Company Inc., 2004, pp. 186-188.

party building on its top agenda. Up to 2017, among 14,000 social organizations in S city, around 67% of CSOs already had party units inside their organizations.<sup>30</sup>

2) *Service-oriented Party Building*. To expand its presence within social sector, the Party has deliberately encouraged service-oriented party building logic. Party units inside CSOs tend to hide its political ambitions but openly commit themselves to serve all members of organizations. For instance, party units actively organize and sponsor a series of activities to entertain employees in CSOs, such as dance classes, tourist outing, movie nights, sports and game competitions, and even speed dating for singles. As Dickson commented, “Party building today is less about ideological indoctrination and more about practical issues of management and branding. In that sense, party building is more paternalistic than political.”<sup>31</sup> This service-oriented party building model is associated with two primary purposes: First, it could largely reduce resistance from the manage team of CSOs and gain support of party members as well as other employees; second, it is a realistic solution to increase party units’ presence since they have limited power to directly intervene daily operation of CSOs.

3) *Coercive Strategies and Co-optation*. The Party has introduced several measures to force or induce CSOs accepting party units within their organizations. First, social organizations shall collect and report information on party affiliation of their employees when applying for registration. After registration, CSOs are requested to

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<sup>30</sup> Social Work Committee of the CCP Committee in S city, “S shi shehui zuzhi dangjian jingyan shuli”(Summary on S city’s Experiences of Party Building in Social Organizations), the website of S City Academy, <http://www.shanghaiacademy.org/index.php?c=article&id=1341>, accessed December 02, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival*. Oxford University Press, 2016, p.159.

support party-building work and respect party members' political ideology. As an official suggested, "I don't worry that social organizations refuse to cooperate, we will find a way to reject their registration application."<sup>32</sup> Second, party building has become one of key criteria for CSOs to pass annual inspection, grant prestigious awards, or join public-private partnership with governments.<sup>33</sup> If CSOs fail to fulfill the obligation to establish party units or resist party-building work in any forms, severe consequences may arrive ranging from receiving warnings to being terminated. Besides coercion, directors and managers of CSOs are frequently invited by *Social Work Committee* in S city to sit in executive training programs at prestigious Chinese universities or join escorted tours to Chinese famous scenery. These programs are widely welcome due to free of charge and being regarded as a great opportunity for networking. Undoubtedly, it is also convenient and crucial chance to co-opt leaders of CSOs and solicit their collaboration for party-building work.

4) *Resources Mobilization*. In recent years, S city invested tremendous economic and human resources in party-building work within CSOs. There are already more than 230 Party Member Service Centers (*dangyuan fuwu zhongxin*) and 216 recreation centers at the street-level available spreading different areas of S city, which provide shared spaces and common rooms for party units in tens of thousands of CSOs to organize and hold a variety of activities.<sup>34</sup> In terms of financial support, all party membership dues paid by social organizations are fully refunded back to party

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<sup>32</sup> An interview with a deputy director of Social Work Committee of the CCP Committee in S city on May 15, 2017 (Interview2017051501).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Social Work Committee of the CCP Committee in S city, "S shi shehui zuzhi dangjian jingyan shuli"(Summary on S city's Experiences of Party Building in Social Organizations), the website of S City Academy, <http://www.shanghaiacademy.org/index.php?c=article&id=1341>, accessed December 02, 2017.

units of CSOs at their disposal. In addition, each party unit in CSOs will receive extra funding from higher level of party branches — the minimum compensation is 200 RMB (\$ 30) per member per year. For newly established party units, a start-up funding will be granted at maximum 50,000 RMB (\$ 7500) in the first year.<sup>35</sup> Last but not least, party secretaries in CSOs will receive 200 RMB (\$ 30) per month as transportation allowance and communications subsidies in which reward their dedication for fulfilling party-building duties.<sup>36</sup>

## **5. Rationale behind Party-Building in CSOs**

In this section, three profound changes within the ruling Party itself will be examined: namely, the rise of Mao-style leadership, the revival of campaign-style governance and lessons from handling contentious challenges. This article argues that these factors lead to a changing political environment that prioritizes the role of the Party and causes the acceleration of Party build in CSOs.

### **a. The Rise of Mao-style Leadership**

The rapid expansion of party units in CSOs is closely related to the new leadership of the CCP under Xi Jinping. Since the reform and opening-up in 1980s, it is widely recognized that the CCP gradually withdrew its dominance in many aspects, such as non-state sectors, grassroots governance, public services provision, *etc.*, which left out certain spaces for societal forces. However, under Xi Jinping administration, the role of the party is elevated and emphasized as a more unified, cohesive, and disciplined instrument. The central leadership plans to draw upon the Party's presence in all

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<sup>35</sup> Hu Zu, “S shi zhualao zhuashi shehui zuzhi dangjian” (S City Tightens Grips on Party Building in Social Organizations), *Zhongguo zuzhi renshibao* (The China Organization Personnel Newspaper), 24 November 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Unlike their counterparts in state apparatus, party secretaries in CSOs are part-time.

walks of life as an organizational base to integrate and merge the state and society as a whole. The acceleration of party building in CSOs is not only a trial of new control methods towards social sectors, but also a strategic move ensuring the party's penetration and guidance on every aspect of the Chinese society.

This reversal can be traced by examining the rhetoric changes in the People's Daily (*renmin ribao*), the official Party "mouthpiece" and state-run media. As shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3, the phrases of "The Party leads everything" (*dang lingdao yiqie*) and "The separation of powers between the party and the government" (*dangzheng fenkai*) usually represent two different views on the role of CCP within power structure of the Party-state. In Mao's era, the ruling party enjoyed absolute authority in all aspects of life labeled as a typical totalitarian regime. The term "the Party leads everything" was mentioned 77 times in relevant articles or editorials of the People's Daily in Mao's era. However, this phrase nearly disappeared in People's Daily when Deng Xiaoping became the prominent leader. Deng emphasized more on the importance of checking and balancing the power of the party. Following Deng's directives, this term was also not a buzzword either in Jiang Zemin's era or Hu Jintao administration. Nevertheless, since Xi took the office, this expression has already been brought up 39 times by the People's daily during his first term (2013-2017).

[Figure 2 and Figure 3 are here]

By contrast, the proposition of "The separation of powers between the party and the government" has decreased sharply from 153 times in Deng's era to 0 in Xi's era. Deng endorsed separation of powers as a reflection on Mao's absolute power and

disastrous Cultural Revolution. For example, Deng openly opposed over-concentration of power in Party committees, “Now that we are engaged in the extremely difficult and complicated task of socialist construction, over-concentration of power is becoming more and more incompatible with the development of our socialist cause.”<sup>37</sup> In 1982, the 12<sup>th</sup> Party Congress deleted the phrase “the Party leads everything” out of its working report and the Party Constitution. From then on, “leadership by the Party means mainly political, ideological and organizational leadership.”<sup>38</sup> In other word, the Party began to retreat from direct leadership in many aspects of social life.

Unfortunately, the situation has been fundamentally reversed after the latest reshuffle of the central leadership. Xi explicitly stated in 19<sup>th</sup> Party congress that “Party, government, military, civilian and academic, or east, west, south, north and center, the Party leads everything.”<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the new amendment of the Party Constitution added the statement that “the party leads everything and everywhere” in its general programme, which officially declared the return of Mao-style party control. All in all, the new leadership of the CCP places the ruling party itself in the front line to directly steer and manage all dimensions of Chinese society including CSOs. In Xi Jinping’s “New Era” (*xinshidai*), “The Party leads everything” is not just rhetoric but indicates real changes. Therefore, the fast expansion of party building in CSOs is no surprise under such Mao-style leadership.

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<sup>37</sup> Deng Xiaoping, “On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership.”(August 18, 1980), *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* Vol. 2, <https://dengxiaopingworks.wordpress.com/2013/02/25/on-the-reform-of-the-system-of-party-and-state-leadership/>, accessed December 02, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Wang Guixiu, “Lun shehuizhuyi gaige de shehuibenwei quxiang”(Arguments on Society-centered Socialist Reform), *Zhanlue yu guanli* (Strategy and Management), 24 May 2007. <http://www.cssm.org.cn/view.php?id=14476>, accessed November 11, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Christian Shepherd, “China's neo-Maoists welcome Xi's new era, but say he is not the new Mao.” *Reuters*, 27 October 2017.

## **b. The Revival of Campaign-Style Governance**

It is broadly acknowledged that one of Chinese Communist Revolutionary legacies is campaign-style governance. By “campaign-style governance”, it refers to the ruling party mobilizes state apparatus and the masses in a form of mass campaigns to take on specific task as the only priority in a given time period by breaking the routine operations and imposing enormous pressure to reach targeted goals. As Elizabeth J. Perry points out, “Even in the post-Mao era, the legacy of mass mobilization continues to exert a powerful influence over the attitudes and actions of Chinese state authorities and ordinary citizens alike.”<sup>40</sup> To some extent, the acceleration of the Party building in CSOs is unsurprisingly associated with the revival of “campaign-style governance” in China today.

“Campaign-style governance” originates from the CCP’s successful experiences of coping with challenges from brutal military struggle and tough communist revolution against the Kuomintang (KMT) in 1940s. After the foundation of new regime, political mass mobilization and campaign-style governance continuously played a vital role in facilitating regime consolidation and nation building. It is estimated that there were more than 70 large-scale mass campaigns nationwide from 1949 to 1978, including Three-anti and Five-anti Campaigns (*sanfan wufan yundong*), Great Leap Forward (*dayuejin*), “Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture” Campaign (*nongye xuedazai*), Cultural Revolution, etc.<sup>41</sup> These political campaigns not only became an

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<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, “Moving the Masses: Emotion Work in the Chinese Revolution.” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 7.2 (2002): 121.

<sup>41</sup> Zhou Xiaohong, “1951-1958: Zhongguo nongye jitihua de dongli”(Driving Force of Chinese Agricultural Collectivization Movement 1951-1958), *Zhongguo yanjiu* (China Studies) 1 (2005).

important part of political life in post-1949 period, but also shaped path dependence of every level of state agencies relying on mass campaigns to achieve political agenda and developmental goals.

Admittedly, the “campaign-style governance” causes serious problems toward the Party-state and Chinese society. For instance, frequent mass mobilizations lead to violation of the rule of law and individual rights, the malfunction of existing bureaucratic system, constant social disorder, *etc.* Therefore, political movements and mass campaigns are barely seen in the landscape of Chinese politics in reform era. The Party state made great efforts to institutionalize its behaviors and introduce “the rule of law” from the central to the grassroots level.<sup>42</sup> “Campaign-style governance” tends to apply only to the necessity of handling crisis (e.g., the 2008 Sichuan earthquake) or assisting big events (e.g., Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo). Ironically, although the CCP claims that mass mobilizations has been replaced by bureaucratic management and no longer existed. However, the Party actually falls into the paradox of campaign-style governance — many policies that aim to bring steady changes and gradual progress are actually implemented by top-down mobilization and mass campaign on the ground. For instance, China’s “2020 Poverty Alleviation Plan” or “World-Class Universities Project” embraces a considerable degree of campaign-style governance in implementation—all relevant state agencies utilize all resources at disposal to work on it around the clock.

The revival of campaign-style governance indicates enormous pressure of the CCP brought by performance-based legitimacy when confronting increasing economic,

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<sup>42</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience.” *Journal of Democracy* 14.1 (2003): 6-17.

political, and cultural demands from Chinese society. In post-Mao era, the legitimacy of the Party-state have shifted from ideology-based to performance-based, in which economic success and social development rather than communist ideology approve and uphold the CCP's ruling status over the past forty years.<sup>43</sup> To safeguard the performance-based legitimacy, campaign-style governance serves as an efficient weapon to achieve planned objectives and yield expecting results in a short period of time. The acceleration of party building inside CSOs actually consists with the logic of campaign-style governance. Social organizations in China have been growing dramatically over past decades and present undeniable features of civil society. A huge and still-growing social sector can be viewed as a potential challenger to the ruling party. Apparently, introducing party units inside CSOs can be a rather important yet difficult mission since these intermediate organizations are relatively independent from the state. Therefore, to satisfy the Party's pressing need, it is foreseeable that the CCP chooses to rely on campaign-style mobilization to address party building-work inside CSOs in short period of time.

### **c. Lessons from Handling Contentious Challenges**

Establishing party units in CSOs could be strategic response to lessons and prior experiences from handling social unrest in last two decades. Contentious collective actions including protests, petitions, demonstrations, and even large-scale riots — increased significantly from 8,700 in 1993 to over 180,000 in 2010.<sup>44</sup> Participants in

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<sup>43</sup> Dingxin Zhao, "The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Ancient and Contemporary China." *Comparative Economic & Social Systems* 53.3 (2012): 416-433; Gunter Schubert, "One-Party Rule and the Question of Legitimacy in Contemporary China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 17.54 (2008): 191-204.

<sup>44</sup> Jae Ho Chung, Hongyi Lai, and Ming Xia, "Mounting Challengers to Governance in China: Surveying Collective Protestors, Religious Sects and Criminal Organizations", *China Journal*, July 2006, p.1; also see Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society:*

these collective actions included: aggrieved peasants rebelling against unjust local levies imposed in the countryside; irate villagers whose lands have been illegally sold or misappropriated; disgruntled former employees laid-off from state-owned enterprises (SOEs); frustrated migrant workers who have been shuffled around China's disparate Special Economic Zones; and helpless retirees who are depending upon delayed government pensions promises, *etc.* With the skyrocketing number of social protests in China, the ruling party has also learned lessons in terms of dealing with contentious challengers over the years.

On one hand, CSOs in China played a crucial role in mobilizing and coordinating collective actions. Surely there are few CSOs openly advocating political rights or challenge the rule of CCP in China today. Nevertheless, in many influential cases, hobby clubs or recreational groups can be easily transformed into issue-based interest groups and become organizational muscles for ordinary citizens to launch contentious challenges toward the state. For instance, in the Dongyang Protest (2005) in Zhejiang Province, the Society of Senior Citizens (*laonian xiehui*) served as a pivot role in information communication and resources mobilization for local residents to make claims upon the removal of chemical plants in their neighborhood.<sup>45</sup> In many "Not In My Backyard" movements, such as the Shanghai Anti-maglev Train Protest (2008), and the Dalian Anti-PX Protest (2011) in Liaoning Province, hobby groups of local communities such as badminton associations, table tennis clubs, dance teams, *etc.*, actively organized and coordinated peaceful demonstrations.

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*Change, Conflict and Resistance*, Third edition, Rutledge Curzon Press, 2010, p.26 ; Tom Orlik, "Unrest on Rise as China Booms", *Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2011

<sup>45</sup> Yanhua Deng and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters." *The China Quarterly* 215 (2013): 533-552.

On the other hand, the Party gradually realizes that CSOs are actually indispensable agencies that mediate the state and the grassroots. Aggrieved participants of collective actions can be irrational and violent when confronting targeted state apparatus. There are lots of anger-venting incidents (*xiefen shijian*) occurred in last two decades — participants of collective actions had no clear demands, but expressed accumulated rage against bad governance.<sup>46</sup> Facing such type of riot-like protests, the Party-state often needs intermediate organizations to help collecting information on protesters' claims, conducting “thought work” (*si xiang jiao yu*) upon participants, and defusing tension on the scene. For instance, in the Xiamen Anti-PX Protest (2007) in Fujian Province, a local NGO named Green Cross (*lvshizi*) assisted municipal officials to pacify angry citizens and address their concerns.<sup>47</sup> Without the involvement and intervention of CSOs, local authorities are more likely to perceive high level of threat to social order arising from collective actions in which results in the termination of popular protests by state violence.<sup>48</sup>

In sum, the Chinese leadership has persistently stressed the critical importance of preserving social stability as part of its overall efforts to keep a grip on power amidst the centennial waves of democratization and a challenging international and domestic political environment. After decades long trial-and-error, the Party comprehends that CSOs are not enemy of the regimes but potential allies in stability maintenance. The

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<sup>46</sup> Yu Jianrong, “Dangqian woguo quntixing shijian de zhuyao leixing jiqi jiben tezheng” (Major types and basic characteristics of mass incidents in contemporary china), *Zhongguo zhengfa daxue xuebao* (Journal of China University of Political Science and Law) 14.6 (2009): 114-120.

<sup>47</sup> For the details of this story, see Zeng Fanxu and Jiang Zhigao, “Xiamen shimin yu PX de PK zhan”(A Battle between Xiamen Citizen and the PX Project), *Nanfang renwu zhouban* (Southern People Weekly), 28 December 2007. <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2007-12-28/173414624557.shtml>, accessed November 11, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Xiaojun Yan and Kai Zhou, “Fighting the Prairie Fire: Why do Local Party-States in China Respond to Contentious Challengers Differently?” *China: An International Journal* 15.4 (2017): 43-68.

real question is how to ensure CSOs in the line with the Party. The easiest solution is directly setting up party units within CSOs that creates substantial advantage of the Party to effectively conduct daily surveillance, policy persuasion, ideology indoctrination, and disciplinary punishment upon social organizations. By deployment of party units within CSOs, the ruling party lays foundation to foster more cooperative CSOs to monitor civic activities and demobilize contentious challenges in reality.

## **Conclusion**

Directly establishing party units has become a “New Normal” (*xinchangtai*) in China today. The Party is heading into activities and territories that are normally handled by government agencies and social sector. Drawing upon intensive fieldwork and archival studies in S city, this article examines historical development and main features of party-building movement in CSOs. Contrary to conventional control-mechanism approach, this article proposes a more structural perspective to understand this “bringing the Party back in” trend. Party building in CSOs is not only a new way of state control towards rising social forces in China, but essentially related to profound changes within the Party itself. The rise of Mao-style leadership, the revival of campaign-style governance and lessons drawn from handling contentious challenges contribute to a changing political environment in which prioritizing the role of the Party, accelerating party penetration in CSOs, and highlighting the necessity of merging social sector in a “big Party, small government, big society” scenario.

More importantly, this article argues that party building within CSOs is not only an instrumental means of tightening control over social sector in China, but reflects a fundamental change from “authoritarian resilience” to “authoritarian retraction”. In past several decades, “authoritarian resilience” is the dominant framework to explain the survival of Chinese authoritarianism — “The party has demonstrated remarkable tactical sophistication, a knack for adaptation, and a capacity for asserting control.”<sup>49</sup> The word “adaptation” indicates the CCP’s strengths and capacity to endure and overcome adversity by introducing new institutions, exercising policy adjustments, timely responding to public opinions and learning from outside world.<sup>50</sup> However, this article suggests that “bring the Party back in” implies a tendency of “authoritarian retraction”, meaning that authoritarian regimes choose to retreat from relatively open-minded ruling style to more conservative and orthodox model. The ruling party is restoring and returning to its traditional and rigid solutions to a changing society, which profoundly reshapes every aspects of Chinese society.

It must be noted, this article by no means suggests that CSOs in China agrees the party-building campaign without a fight. As a matter of fact, there are a series of counterstrategies invented by grassroots CSOs to mitigate and resist the Party’s penetration, such as imposing heavy workload for party-building instructors, insisting no party-related activities in official hours, and excluding party secretaries from the management team, *etc.* Moreover, Chinese social organizations also are taking advantage of party units inside their organizations to negotiate permissions for greater

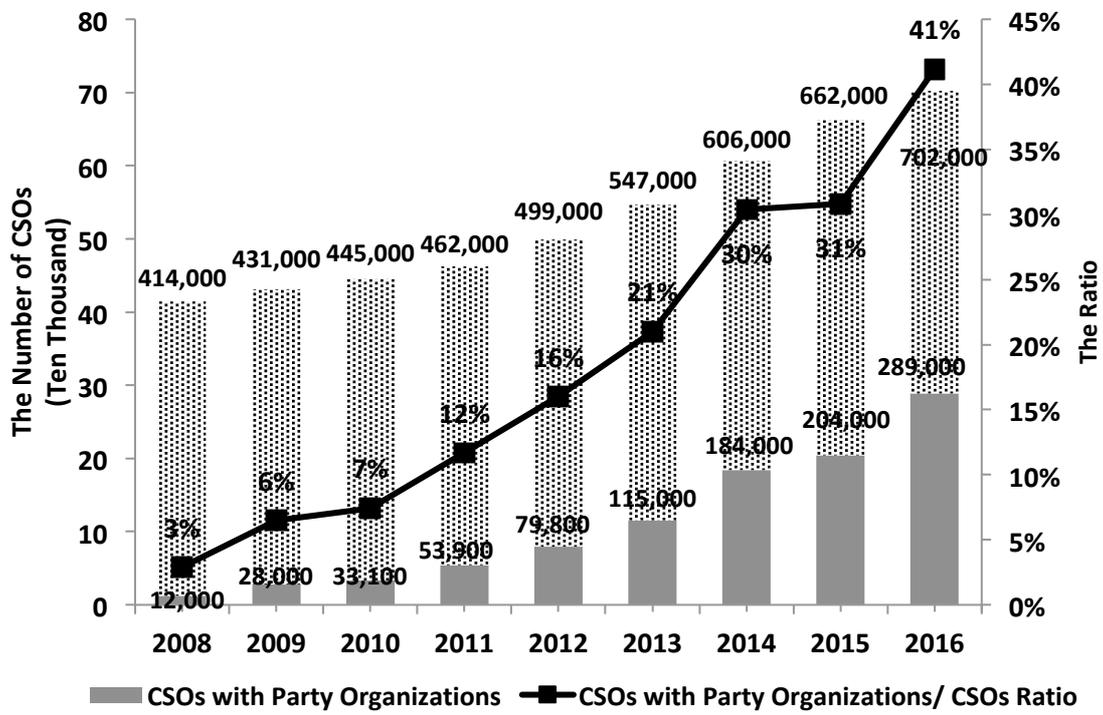
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<sup>49</sup> Minxin Pei, “Is CCP Rule Fragile or Resilient?” *Journal of Democracy* 23.1 (2012): 28.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, “Authoritarian resilience.” *Journal of Democracy* 14.1 (2003): 6-17. Cheng Li, “The end of the CCP's resilient authoritarianism? A tripartite assessment of shifting power in China.” *The China Quarterly* 211 (2012): 595-623. Wenfang Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

spaces and tolerance for public events and activities. Nevertheless, given the scope of this article, the limited goal here is to shed light on dynamics and rationale behind this ongoing party-building campaign, which might open interesting new lines of enquiry for future studies of state-society relations in China's robust party-based authoritarian regime.

**Figure 1 Party Building in Civil Society Organizations**

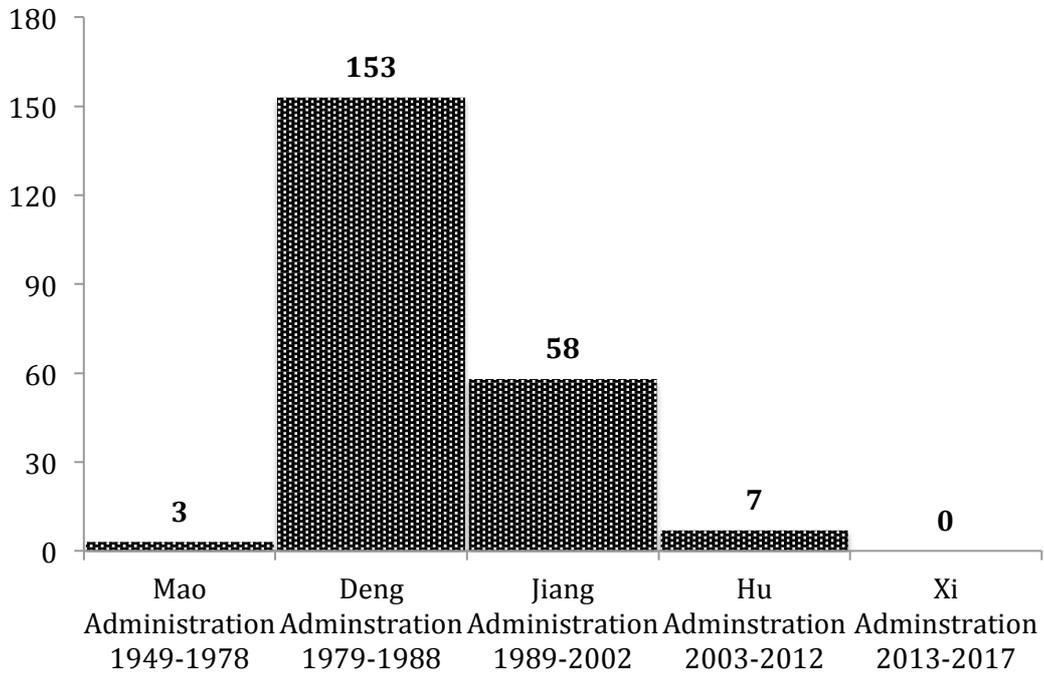


**SOURCE:** All data are acquired from annual reports issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, China, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/tjgb/>, accessed October 10, 2017.

**Table 1 New Directives on Party Building in CSOs**

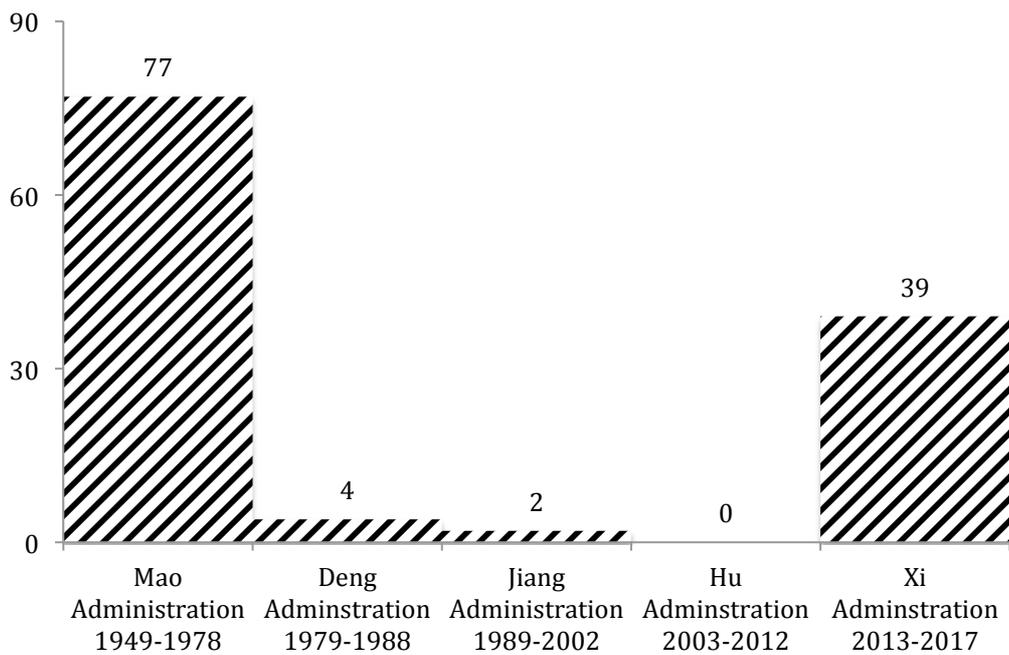
<b>Time</b>	<b>Key Actor</b>	<b>Document Name</b>	<b>Key Information</b>
02/16/1988	The Central Organization Department of CCP & Ministry of Civil Affairs	Notice Concerning the Problems of Building Party Organizations in Social Groups	It is the first notice on problems related to the establishment of party organizations in social organizations.
07/21/2000	The Central Organization Department of CCP	Notice concerning opinion on the work of strengthening Party organizations established in social groups	“Eliminate blank spots, expand comprehensive coverage, increase effectiveness”
11/14/2002	The 16 <sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPC	Revised Constitution of the Communist Party of China (Chapter 5, Article 29)	Social organizations who have at least 3 party members should set up a party organization
05/29/2015	The Central Committee of the CCP	Temporary Regulations on the Work of the Chinese Communist Party Committee	It stipulates comprehensive instruction to establish party organizations
09/28/2015	The General Office of the CCP Central Committee	Opinions on Strengthening the Party Building Work of Social Organizations (Trial)	It calls for the establishment of NGO Party Groups whenever and wherever possible
10/24/2017	The 19 <sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the CCP	Revised Constitution of the Communist Party of China (Chapter 5, Article 33)	It elaborates on the missions of Party organizations in social organizations

**Figure 2 Appearance of “The separation of powers between the party and the government” in People’s Daily**



SOURCE: the author’s database.

**Figure 3 Appearance of “The Party leads everything” in People’s Daily**



SOURCE: the author’s database.