

## Party-Building through Ideological Campaigns under Xi Jinping

### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the increasing reliance on ideological campaigns by the Chinese Communist Party under Xi Jinping as part of an unfolding party-building project. Analyzing five campaigns conducted from 2013 to 2021, the study shows that they aimed to re-establish the linkage between the party center and party members, reinforce society's connection to the party center, and crowd out competing narratives both inside the party and outside it. The article highlights the evolution of ideological campaigns in three phases, emphasizing how they developed from focusing on party members' social environment toward positioning the party center and Xi Jinping at its core as the source of values and norms for party members and societal actors. The development of the party's ideological campaigns under Xi Jinping thus has significant implications for the party's model of governance, both internally and externally.

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese Communist Party; party-building, ideology; campaigns, governance

RESPONDING TO THE PARTY'S PERCEIVED SEPARATION from the people, the 18th Party Congress of November 2012 announced the launch of the Mass Line Education and Practice campaign for 2013. Ending in 2014, it was immediately followed in 2015 by the Three Stricts, Three Steadies campaign aimed at high-level cadres. In 2016, the Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming movement to study Xi Jinping's speeches and central directives to become an "adequate party member" broadened this program to the entire party. The 19th

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Party Congress of autumn 2017 again announced the launch of the Do Not Forget the Original Aspiration, Keep the Founding Mission Firmly in Mind campaign to understand the party's history and mission. Kicked off in May 2019, it concluded in early January 2020. Finally, yet another campaign to study party history was launched in summer 2021, in the lead-up to the 100th anniversary of the party's founding. Under Xi Jinping, ideological campaigns proliferated, reversing the decline of ideology in the 1990s and 2000s (Dickson 2014; Holbig 2013; Lieberthal 1995, 190). Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin only conducted one campaign each. During his ten years in office, Hu Jintao accelerated the pace, but even he only started two campaigns, to study Jiang's Three Represents and his own "scientific development outlook." By contrast, under Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) conducted five top-down intra-party campaigns, each aimed at rectification and marked by a clear start and finish. Why does the party rely so much on ideological campaigns?

The literature provides some answers. In his study of Jiang Zemin's Three Stresses campaign, Andrew Mertha (2017) argued that it sought to "temper" individuals and "make them more submissive to the larger political goals of the Party centre." Suisheng Zhao (2016) agrees, showing that ideological campaigns also play an important role in producing legitimacy. This chimes well with Zhengxu Wang's (2018, 330) claim that education campaigns ensure that the leader's "brand of ideological formulation is transmitted to every single party member, and the whole party is unified under his flag." Scholars have provided some answers as to how campaigns work in this fashion. Analyzing official newspapers from 2000 to 2004, Victor Shih (2008) in his pioneering study finds that Jiang Zemin's protégés are more likely to parrot his signature ideology of Three Represents. Leaders can therefore use ideological campaigns to monitor loyalty. Jinghan Zeng (2016) provides another explanation: analyzing patron–client relationships among different factions in campaigns under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, he finds that ideological campaigns recruit new protégés rather than monitoring loyalty. Though there are differences in approach, the literature focuses rather heavily on the individual leader and centralization of power.

The CCP's reliance on ideological campaigns has been a significant feature of its governance. This was especially so during the Mao era, when they were understood as "aimed at changing thinking, and cultural and educational standards, correcting erroneous thoughts...raising each person's general political consciousness, and opposing anti-socialist forces" (Cell 1977, 8). However,

a greater role for ideology under Xi Jinping alone cannot explain the intensification of such campaigns since 2012. Ling Li (2019) notes that there has been a shift from a mass line policy to political discipline, which has been part of Xi's overarching campaign to consolidate power. According to Li, the party's ability to conduct campaigns and make people comply signals its strength and transfers this authority to its top leader. This contrasts with the view of Macabe Keliher and Hsinchao Wu (2016), who argue that Xi's ongoing campaigns are part of a broader party-building project. In other words, campaigns serve institutional purposes that go beyond immediate aims of power consolidation. By strengthening the party's institutions, Xi is creating a sustainable system of governance that can withstand internal and external pressures. The prevailing literature suggests that messaging and shifting objectives of campaigns matter beyond narratives and signaling and centralization.

This article argues that ideological campaigns under Xi Jinping's leadership serve as critical party-building tools, aiming to re-establish the linkage between the party center and its members and reinforce society's connection to the party and its center. Through these campaigns and the changes in messaging they entail, the CCP aims to crowd out competing narratives, both within the party and in broader society, to maintain its authority and influence. This did not happen overnight but can be divided into three phases. In the first phase, from 2013 on, the focus was on the party's relationship with the people, reflecting Hu Jintao's continued influence. Xi Jinping broke with this during the second phase, which started in 2015 and sought to tighten party members' connections to the center and define appropriate behavior. The third phase aimed to shape the broader social environment by promoting party values, displacing alternative narratives, and fostering stronger ties between society and the party. It culminated in the 2021 party history campaign, which marked the first time an internal ideological campaign extended its reach beyond the party and into society. As the party continues to employ ideological campaigns, the implications for the future of the CCP and its relationship with society are significant. The CCP is likely to further strengthen its institutional structures, tighten control over its members, and position itself as the source of social values and norms. In doing so, the party seeks to create a sustainable system of governance that can withstand internal and external pressures, shaping China's future in line with its vision and goals. In the following sections, I outline the theoretical framework that explains this shift and analyze the campaigns in detail.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Charismatic authority, according to Max Weber (2012), is a type of authority that relies on the personal charisma of the leader. In contrast to traditional or legal-rational authority, which are based on custom and law, respectively, charismatic authority is based on the personal qualities of the leader, such as their personality, skills, or talents. According to Weber, charisma is especially important for “expansive political movements in their early stages” (370), mobilizing people to enact change. Despite its potential for inspiring loyalty, charismatic authority is not sustainable in the long run. As Weber notes, in later stages when movements become institutionalized, charisma gives way “to the forces of everyday routine” (370). Because charismatic authority is very much opposed to administration and routine, the movement loses its ability to tap into the sources of charisma. Weber notes that “charismatic authority is specifically irrational in the sense of being foreign to all rules” (361). The challenge is to maintain this sense of purpose and energy over the long term, without succumbing to the forces of routine and bureaucracy. He calls this “charisma of office,” wherein an organizational apparatus embodies charismatic authority. This process is what Eisenstadt (Weber’s editor) calls the transferring of charisma “from the unique personality or the unstructured group to orderly institutional reality” (Weber 1968, xxviii). Political scientist Xueguang Zhou (2022) agrees. As he notes, in traditional China, “Confucian values and the piety-based social order played such a role” (94). After the People’s Republic of China was founded, the CCP inherited this role, both updating it and locating it “in the organizational apparatus of the CCP.”

While Weber does not say how institutions can be imbued with charisma, Eisenstadt provides some elaborations. He notes that social situations “in which the appeal to the charismatic becomes especially articulated” include rites of passage and rituals, but also the communication of symbols and messages (Weber 1968, xxvii). Participating in these events therefore disrupts existing social and cultural orders. This is the case with ideological campaigns that disrupt prevailing routines. Messages and symbols then “give meaning to their [people’s] experiences in terms of some fundamental cosmic, social, or political order” and “prescribe the proper norms of behavior” while relating the “individual to collective identification” (xxviii). Likewise, during ideological campaigns, the type of content is important for understanding how the individual is to position themselves with respect to the party, its leadership,

and society. This also means that there are multiple centers of charismatic authority, including societal, political, economic, cultural, and religious centers, with which campaign messages are in continuous conflict. As Zhou (2022, 95) argues, the “routinization of charisma not only requires a stable organizational basis but also needs to be built at the societal center of values and norms.”

Thus, ideological campaigns intended as party-building mechanisms attempt to imbue the party (and Xi Jinping at its core) with charismatic authority while also establishing it as the center, which provides an alternative to challenges of “pluralism and liberalism in the public arena” (Zhou 2022, 95) and within the party. Competing narratives include Western democratic ideals, including the perceived threats of “constitutional democracy,” “universal values,” and “historical nihilism” (Central Committee 2013). By positioning the party as the source of norms and values, ideological campaigns aim to counteract these alternative narratives and assert the party’s dominance over the political, social, and cultural landscape in China. The increasing frequency of ideological campaigns under Xi Jinping therefore is about establishing the party as the center of norms and values, reinforcing rank-and-file members’ links to it, and crowding out competing narratives both within the party and in broader society.

The following sections of this article explore the methods of ideological campaigns, focusing on creating links between the party center and its leading cadres and rank-and-file members, reinforcing party members’ connections to the center by altering the messaging, and emphasizing the center’s role as the primary source of values and norms to overcome opposing narratives within the party and in society as a whole. The Mass Line Education and Practice campaign emphasized the importance of serving the people and addressing corruption, while the Three Stricts, Three Steadies campaign focused on strict self-discipline, adherence to party principles, and implementation of policies. The Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming campaign encouraged the study of Xi Jinping’s speeches and central directives, aiming to instill loyalty and devotion to the party’s goals and positioning the party center as party members’ sole source of norms and values. The last two campaigns focused on building a social environment conducive to the party’s norms, policies, and rules and situating the party center and Xi Jinping at its core as the dominant source of societal norms and values.

## PHASE 1: HU JINTAO'S LAST CAMPAIGN

### Mass Line Education and Practice

Outlined in Hu Jintao's 18th Party Congress report, the Mass Line Education and Practice campaign (群众路线教育实践活动) aimed at forging a closer relationship between party members and the people. Its main goals were to educate party cadres on the proper mass viewpoint and working style, address related issues, promote honesty, and change the thinking and working styles of party members and cadres to strengthen the party's charismatic authority and reduce the gap between the party and the people. Marking the start of the campaign, Xi Jinping (2013) argued that if the party failed it would lose the people and face extinction. Rectifying the relationship between party members and the people, the campaign was therefore construed as a wake-up call for the entire party to construct a good working style by putting theory into practice, linking up with the people, engaging in criticism and self-criticism, working hard, and being pragmatic.

These aims expose the campaign's ambiguous direction: party members' appropriate behavior was based on their own societal understanding rather than the party center's precepts. The purpose of the new mechanisms was to repair this relationship through norms, institutions, and concrete actions. Hence, the split in focus between party members and other people was exacerbated by a gap between theoretical and practical aspects. The campaign's two stages, of June 2013 and January 2014, translated this enormous task into practice. The first stage focused on theoretical study and education for party members and cadres, while the second stage aimed at implementing practical actions to address the people's concerns and issues.

The campaign's normative impact focused on education. Its first phase involved over a million party organizations and 17 million party members, and its language aimed to build the party's charismatic authority by aligning its values with those of the people. Rhetoric such as "for the people," "pragmatism," and "honesty" meant listening to people's opinions, linking theory and practice, and showing reverence for the party's constitution and being incorruptible (respectively). Thus, this phase comprised studying, exposing problems and engaging in criticism and self-criticism, and rectification (Peng, Wang, and Ni 2013, 224–25). The focus of study was to inculcate political ideas, deepen research abilities, and exchange opinions with the people and with other cadres. Practically, this also included examining the 18th Party

Congress's report, the 2013 Decision of the Third Plenum, the "spirit of Xi Jinping's speeches," the party's history and tradition, "party spirit," "work style," and discipline. Materials were vague, and localities often prepared their own. For example, the city of Wuwei (in Gansu Province) compiled textbooks of typical cases on how to link up with the people and purchased 3,000 copies of them (Government Procurement Network 2014). Party cadres also had to undergo special education on the party's mass line viewpoint.

Institutional techniques made up the second aspect of the campaign. Problems were to be exposed, and criticism and self-criticism launched, with the involvement of the people. Listening to opinions combined methods of "face to face" and "back to back," "individual conversations," and "collective discussions" (Peng, Wang, and Ni 2013, 16). The focus was exposing work problems and analyzing them in self-examination reports, followed by rounds of criticism and self-criticism during "democratic life meetings" based on mass opinions. Another component was rectification. This consisted of drawing up a rectification plan to combat problems, its implementation, and the accompanying normalization of institutions and mechanisms. The official manual noted that the masses need to be inserted into the entire process of the campaign (Li and Yuan 2014, 26). The campaign required extensive public participation, with cadres expected to accept supervision from the masses and face punishment for noncompliance (Peng, Wang, and Ni 2013, 16). Mechanisms aimed to institutionalize the party's charismatic authority by creating channels for communication and feedback between the party and the people.

The third component of the campaign consisted of practical actions (during its second stage) that expanded the campaign's scope to include 3.3 million grass-roots party organizations and 68 million party members. Reportedly, this phase reduced the number of circulated party and government documents by 15%, led to a 35% reduction in meetings, saved 3.373 billion yuan by cutting official receptions, vehicles, and overseas trips, halted 519 unnecessary construction projects, liquidated 1.7 million square meters of unused office space, and shrank the number of publicly used cars by 22,457 (*People's Net* 2014). It also focused on issues such as passivity, local counter-measures against higher decisions, and the levying of arbitrary fees or fines (Peng, Wang, and Ni 2013, 14–15). Finally, it aimed at education, social security, healthcare, and housing, as well as the construction of channels for people to voice their grievances. Service-style party-building at the grass roots

led to the construction of 490,000 service centers from June 2013 to September 2014 (*People's Net* 2014). Overall, until the end of 2014, publicly available procurement data only show 9.4 million yuan being spent, suggesting that either existing infrastructure was repurposed or tenders were not made public. However, these practical accomplishments were the result of a short-term focus rather than newly formed mechanisms or institutions.

The campaign, ultimately, can be seen as more of a signaling exercise (Huang 2015; Mertha 2017) than a transformative force for lasting change and as reflecting Hu Jintao's vision of the party's relationship with society and the people rather than Xi Jinping's priorities. It primarily emphasized individual behavior and normative principles, with a focus on grass-roots institutional improvements and practical rectification, rather than addressing the structural context in which party members operate. The fragmentation between the aims of the first and second phases led to inconsistencies, with higher levels engaging in theoretical study while grass-roots organizations focused on implementing practical measures. This created a divide between the grass-roots and provincial levels, as well as divergent approaches to the campaign, and contributed to the campaign's ambiguous nature, rendering it ineffective at reinforcing party members' connections with the party center, strengthening society's ties to the center, or positioning the party as the dominant source of norms and values. Although the mechanisms created during the campaign encouraged mass participation and opinion exchange, they did not result in the establishment of lasting institutions, leaving its long-term impact uncertain. In contrast, during the later (2019) Do Not Forget the Original Aspiration, Keep the Founding Mission Firmly in Mind campaign, the party center—with Xi Jinping at its core—was already positioned as the source of norms and values for party members, enabling it to increasingly shape and transform society.

## PHASE 2: POSITIONING THE PARTY AS PARTY MEMBERS' NORMATIVE SOURCE

The second phase of ideological campaigns, and the first ideological campaigns planned under Xi Jinping, sought to shift the focus from the masses to the party center, thereby positioning the party and Xi Jinping as party members' source of normative values, strengthening their linkage with each other, and eliminating alternative narratives. This phase involved two campaigns:



2015's Three Stricts, Three Steadies and 2016's Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming. Both aimed to strengthen party members' connections to the center by defining appropriate behavior and emphasizing the importance of intra-party rules, policy, and Xi Jinping's speeches and instructions. In doing so, they contributed to building a more unified party with common ideas, ideology, and goals, ultimately culminating in the 19th Party Congress and the codification of Xi Jinping's ruling ideology.

### Three Stricts, Three Steadies

The Three Stricts, Three Steadies specialized education (“三严三实”专题教育) campaign was the first campaign effectively planned under Xi Jinping, reflecting his policy priorities and reinforcing the party's and Xi's charismatic authority. Lasting from April to December 2015, it focused on leading cadres above the county level and required minimal additional infrastructure or expenditure. Rather, it leveraged existing organizations, introducing the study of intra-party rules and escalating the study of Xi Jinping's speeches to grasp central policy. This decisively shifted cadres' focus from the people to the party, its organization, and its leadership.

The campaign was different in three major ways. First, it focused on the individual cadre, aiming to rectify various issues within the party—bureaucracy, formalism, hedonism, and extravagance, among others (Xi 2015). The “three stricts” were “cultivating one's moral character,” “using power,” and “disciplining the self.” They could not be separated from the “three steadies,” or being steady in “planning matters,” “starting undertakings,” and “conducting oneself.” A manual noted that the “three stricts” and “three steadies” were complementary, with their inculcation leading to both right behavior and the correct attitude toward the people (Wu 2015, 3). Thus, rectification of the cadre's own behavior toward the party was prioritized, reinforcing the charismatic authority of the party center and Xi Jinping and its normative claims over individual cadres.

Second, the campaign shifted normative aims from the people toward the party and de-emphasized concrete practical objectives. This ultimately tied cadres to Xi Jinping's new policy direction using two major parts: a newly published corpus of texts and speeches detailing individual norms and central policies, and an emerging body of intra-party rules complementing the party's constitution. Thus, the publication of *The Governance of China*,

which includes a selection of Xi Jinping's speeches from October 2012 until June 2014, coincided with the latter part of the campaign. More broadly, the corpus of Xi Jinping's speeches had been continuously growing. By the end of 2015, the number of speeches and texts published under his name reached 315, compared with only 79 by the end of 2013. Their study was linked to models: the cases of corrupt "tigers" prosecuted (Zhou Yongkang, Bo Xilai, Xu Caihou, and Ling Jihua) and models for good behavior. Thus the campaign was aimed at linking cadres directly to Xi Jinping, the center, and its policies.

Apart from policy, another study focus was intra-party rules. Starting in 2015, a drafting frenzy overhauled the foundational rules on the party's organization. The second half of 2015 saw the promulgation of 13 of these, such as the updated Disciplinary Punishment Regulations, Cadre Education and Training Work Regulations, and the first-ever Integrity and Self-Discipline Norms, introducing a new dimension to education. Before 2015, the study of intra-party rules mainly focused on the party's abstract constitution. Its elaboration in detailed rules opened a new field for study that had not existed before and focused on the party center. For example, a party committee in a health and family planning department in Hebei studied the new rules, while imploring members to "keep in mind the party's purpose" (Ningjin County Health Bureau 2015). Rules codified the CCP's organization and the party member's relationship to it, facilitating closer alignment with the party organization and the center, and reinforcing its charismatic authority.

Routinization was the campaign's third major focus. Politburo Standing Committee member and propaganda czar Liu Yunshan (2015) noted that the campaign was not a one-time event. Rather, cadres should master the characteristics of routine learning. The previous campaign's methods were solidified, and study, criticism and self-criticism, and rectification formed an integral part of the campaign. Four ways were envisioned: first, classes led by party secretaries outlining the consequences of misbehavior. Second, classes on current affairs and one class each on "strictly cultivating one's moral character," "strictly disciplining the self," and "strictly using power" had to be conducted. Further, they were also formally integrated into the Three Meetings, One Class scheme, which included meetings of the party branch members, the branch committee, the small group, and a study class. Topical discussions were combined with centralized group study and democratic life meetings that included representatives from the people. Fourth, year-end thematic democratic life meetings were designed to deepen the

understanding of problems, providing a platform for party cadres to exchange views, engage in criticism and self-criticism, and focus on practical rectification. The campaign therefore built on existing mechanisms and was supported by an evolving normative and disciplinary intra-party rules framework that linked cadres to the center.

The thrust toward routinization and the shifting content had two major consequences. First, the campaign shifted the focus from the relationship between party members and the people to individual cadres and their relationship with the party. Rather than emphasizing broad principles, education focused on the party organization, its workings, the center, and its top leader, Xi Jinping. Cadres were to align themselves with the party and its center. The campaign also introduced uniform standards into the education of cadres to foster homogeneity in both thought and action and shrink the distance between cadres and the center. It also signified a shift of ultimate accountability wherein the good cadre is characterized by their relationship with the center rather than with the people. Second, the inclusion of ongoing policy issues and events in the campaign transformed education. Rather than focusing on a particular aim, it set a dynamic framework of acceptable action which included studying evolving policies and continuously re-imagining one's place within the party and its wider structure. The party's organization was prioritized over the individual, who was embedded in the emerging normative and disciplinary rules framework. With its focus on norms, the tentative embrace of routinization, and the party organization, the Three Stricts, Three Steadies campaign not only marked a major break with the Mass Line Education and Practice campaign but also played a significant role in consolidating the party's control over its members, routinizing the bestowal of charismatic authority on the center and Xi Jinping.

### **Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming**

In February 2016, the Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming study campaign (“两学一做”学习教育) was launched during a meeting with the Politburo Standing Committee, building on the principles established by Three Stricts, Three Steadies. The earlier campaign had set the stage by introducing the study of intra-party rules and Xi Jinping's speeches; the new campaign further developed these concepts by emphasizing the importance of thoroughly studying the party's constitution, intra-party rules, and the

spirit of Xi Jinping's important speeches for all party members. Xi Jinping warned that organizational erosion at the local level was the main contributor to the Soviet collapse, and the new campaign aimed to rectify this issue at a fundamental level by expanding Three Stricts, Three Steadies to all party members and thereby further expanding Xi Jinping's charismatic authority. By focusing on the internalization and externalization of the learned materials, the campaign sought to reinforce the party's norms and values, marginalize alternative perspectives, and ensure the dominance of the party's ideology in the minds of its members.

Formally institutionalized in February 2017, the Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming campaign heeded Liu Yunshan's warning about routine learning: the campaign institutionalized and built on the normative parts of Three Stricts, Three Steadies, thereby providing a channel for reinforcing the relationship between party center and individual cadres and consolidating its position as the source of party members' norms and values. But the campaign also had a practical starting point, as evident from its name. The "three stricts" and "three steadies" were indicative of what a cadre "should" be. Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming made this explicit: individuals studying the party constitution and intra-party rules, and the spirit of Xi Jinping's important speeches, "become" party members (Writing Group 2016, 4). In contrast, Three Stricts, Three Steadies had focused on the behavior and ethics of party officials, without directly emphasizing the study of party rules or Xi Jinping's speeches. Hence, the new campaign had a greater focus on the study of rules, norms, and policy and attached greater importance to party members' relationship with the party organization, the center, and Xi Jinping in particular.

The campaign defined "becoming" as the externalization of learned materials, reinforcing the party's norms and values as the central guiding principles and marginalizing alternative perspectives. According to the manual, the Disciplinary Punishment Regulations and Integrity and Self-Discipline Norms delineate the "adequacy" of the party member by defining the "bottom line" and setting a "high standard" (Writing Group 2016, 271). The aim of the party member's cultivation is then to internalize the rules and consciously use them self-study, self-training, and self-reform, ensuring that the party's ideology and values dominate their thinking and behavior, leaving less room for competing narratives (Writing Group 2016, 42). Indeed, the campaigns coincided with another frenzy of intra-party rules promulgation in the

second half of 2016, when rules were promulgated on the Three Meetings, One Class, democratic life meetings, democratic review, and other matters. Furthermore, they were extended to the entire party and became an everyday routine within the party organization, and in October 2016 they were formally incorporated into the Various Norms of Intra-Party Political Life in the New Situation. Intra-party rules therefore established a standard for organizational and individual behavior. To complement this, the study of Xi's speeches provides party members with the center's policy orientation by setting out the party's historical mission and a set of methods for daily work (Writing Group 2016, 157–59). To act in concert with the center thus meant to internalize Xi's speeches and operate accordingly, both building and reinforcing his charismatic leadership at the core of the party.

By 2016, learning materials, including thematic booklets of Xi's speeches and his *The Governance of China*, which summarized these speeches, were already available as essential readings. This was ostensibly done to produce a party that is united in both thinking and action to further the party's policies, effectively crowding out alternative viewpoints and establishing the party's narrative as the central source of norms and values. Integrating and streamlining education was encouraged. The development of online platforms also gained traction. The organization department of Anshun (in Guizhou Province) spent 900,000 yuan on building various study platforms (Government Procurement Network 2016). The campaign therefore established a framework to regulate and shape organizational and individual behavior and turn individuals into centrally guided active and autonomous party members, a departure from the Three Stricts, Three Steadies campaign, which was more focused on setting expectations for ethical behavior among officials.

Consequently, party members were encouraged to impose their learned values onto their social environment. As the Handbook notes, party members must put the party's creed and spirit first (Writing Group 2016, 22). Depending on their working place, the methods can vary. For example, artists ought to enter social life and construct art and literature that serves the people. Party members in social organizations ought to ensure that their organization acts according to law by reviewing the party-state's laws, regulations, and policies, and should use technology and scientific management methods. They should also reduce the organization's waste and costs and protect everyone's legitimate rights and interests (301–02). Party members in service occupations ought to link up with the people by internalizing “serving the people,”

studying political theory, and strengthening moral cultivation. More importantly, the campaign encouraged party members to take a leading position within their organization, exerting their influence in terms of aligning it with both party norms and the leadership's objectives. By doing so, they contribute to the party's efforts to shape society according to its values, as well as reinforcing the charismatic authority of its leader, Xi Jinping.

The second phase of ideological campaigns shifted the focus: appropriate behavior toward the people was rooted in the party's norms, policies, and rules, rather than a party member's own societal understanding. Party members were integrated within the organization and connected to its center and leader, Xi Jinping, before applying this understanding to their daily activities. Both Three Stricts, Three Steadies and Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming sought to unite members with the center and establish the party as the source of norms and values. At the same time, due to his designation as the "core" in 2016, Xi Jinping and the party center became increasingly difficult to separate. The conflation both further solidified Xi Jinping's position within the party and reinforced party members' links to him, ensuring that decisions and behaviors at the local level were at least normatively unified and aligned with the party center. This laid the groundwork for the successful implementation of the third phase of ideological campaigns by enhancing discipline and ideological adherence among party members, enabling them to foster a social environment that aligned with the party's values, norms, policies, and rules. In contrast to the 2013 Mass Line Education and Practice campaign, the party now started to act on the people, with members' loyalty to the organization and leader forming the basis for action. Individual party members were responsible for guiding their environment, a challenging task given the gap between party norms and everyday life, as well as the existence of competing narratives. The next phase of campaigns would address this issue.

### **PHASE 3: POSITIONING THE PARTY AS SOCIETY'S NORMATIVE SOURCE**

#### **Do Not Forget the Original Aspiration, Keep the Founding Mission Firmly in Mind**

Phase three of the ideological campaigns under Xi Jinping marks a further step in the party's efforts to re-establish its linkages with its members,

reinforce society's connection to the center, and crowd out competing narratives in the party and society. This phase focuses on building a social environment conducive to the party's norms, policies, and rules. It inverted the Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming campaign, which aimed at inculcating party members, who subsequently became everyday autonomous activists. Instead, the phase focused on building a social environment. While the Do Not Forget the Original Aspiration, Keep the Founding Mission Firmly in Mind specialized education campaign (“不忘初心、牢记使命”主题教育活动) lasted only seven months, from May 2019 to January 2020, it was preceded by several years of norm diffusion, propagating the party's message to both party cadres and society. Thus when the campaign was launched, party members and society were already familiar with its values and slogans.

Norm diffusion began in 2016, when Xi Jinping introduced the slogan “Do not forget the original aspiration,” which emphasized remembering the party's journey, past, and founding purpose. This slogan connects the party's development to its history and values, strengthening the party–society relationship by providing context for current policies and actions, while crowding out competing narratives. The slogan became a song and was extensively promoted within and outside the party. The song was first performed in 2016, at the 80th anniversary of the Red Army's Long March, and later included in the 2017 Spring Festival Gala. During this time, the slogan was already integrated into party-building. Publicly available procurement data show over 15 million yuan being spent on propagating the slogan prior to the 19th Party Congress. A critical aspect of the campaign is therefore the period leading up to it, which created a normative environment wherein the slogan became ubiquitous, reinforcing society's connection to the center by promoting the party's norms, policies, and rules as the dominant narrative. This indicates a development of the campaign style, wherein its fundamental part is not its implementation but the prior creation of a favorable social environment to produce social awareness and rebuilding what Chen Feng (1998) early on called the party's “normative authority.”

The 19th Party Congress took the slogan as its main theme and formally announced the campaign. The campaign aimed to “arm” the party with “socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era,” Xi Jinping's signature ideology, fostering a unified worldview and values that strengthen loyalty to the party center. Ostensibly, this would resolve issues of “worldview, outlook

on life, and values.” However, the campaign was not launched shortly after the Congress—as with the 2013 Mass Line Education and Practice campaign, which commenced only a few months after the 18th Party Congress—but over 18 months later. Here, the slogan was used to socialize the entire party and create a normative environment, as it became a staple of officials’ speeches and policy documents. Local governments and party organizations spent around 70 million yuan on preparations such as posters, study materials, infrastructure, and propaganda films, giving substance to the slogan. When the campaign was finally launched, in May 2019, its basic tenets were therefore already well publicized in the party and society.

In his kick-off speech, Xi Jinping (2019) pursued three aims. First, he established the utopian aims of the campaign. Xi defined the “original aspiration” and “founding mission” as seeking “happiness for the Chinese people and rejuvenation for the Chinese nation.” His charismatic authority was instrumental in setting these utopian aims, as he positioned himself as the leader capable of guiding the party and the nation toward these objectives. Second, he assigned homework to the party. On the one hand, the campaign was about studying the latest iteration of the CCP’s leadership philosophy—Xi’s own “Thought.” Xi argued that there was “a big gap in theoretical study compared with the requirements of the Party Central Committee.” The campaign was meant to “stabilize the rudder of thought.” This requirement was linked to rectifying bad working styles and improving discipline within the party to resolve “impure ideas, politics, organization, and style.” Ideological and organizational adherence were therefore critical. On the other hand, the campaign meant to focus on the masses and develop the practical imposition of party values from the Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming campaign. Xi claimed that “some party members and cadres do not serve the people realistically, conscientiously, or diligently, and are divorced from the masses” and argued that they should understand that the CCP “has no special interests other than the interests of the people.” Understanding values and the party’s history therefore would transform cadres. Xi Jinping called for stronger ideological and organizational adherence, emphasizing the importance of loyalty to the party center and its leader and reinforcing the party’s and his charismatic authority.

Third, Xi pointed to the complex external environment, arguing that “the closer we are to the goal, the more we need our comrades to enhance their confidence and strength, maintain their sense of distress, enhance their spirit



of struggle, and calmly deal with various risks and challenges.” The campaign was to meant enhance cohesion among the cadre corps and unite them to turn the blueprint of the 19th Party Congress “into reality.” Xi Jinping’s position and status and his conflation with the party center played a crucial role in unifying the cadre corps and enhancing cohesion, as he positioned himself as the leader capable of navigating the challenges and risks faced by the party. Accepting Xi’s leadership and the party as the source of norms and values was the precondition already established during the previous campaign phase.

The campaign’s framing had three consequences, all contributing to re-establishing member linkages, reinforcing society’s connection to the center, and crowding out competing narratives. First, policies were no longer isolated but situated in a clearly defined historical context and explicitly geared toward the aim of national rejuvenation, which strengthened the party–society relationship by providing a historical context for the Party’s current policies and actions, making it harder for competing narratives to gain traction. In a typical example, a District Sanitation Bureau in Hainan pledged to use the “results of study” to improve the rural living environment and further the “toilet revolution”—mirroring the CCP’s historical focus on rural areas (Xiuying District Sanitation Bureau 2019). Toilets were transformed into ideological objects, with local governments organizing events around this new framing. The Organization Department in Wuzhou held a knowledge competition for 420,000 yuan (Government Procurement Network 2019). Until the campaign’s formal end in January 2020, 85.3 million yuan were spent under its banner. The leadership was satisfied: several months before its conclusion the Central Committee’s Fourth Plenum already called for the campaign’s institutionalization. Competitions, exhibitions, and the invoking of the campaign as part of everyday work put cadres in the service of national rejuvenation.

The second consequence was balancing between Xi and party history. Studying the party’s history and founding values deepened members’ connection to the party center by providing a unified worldview and values; campaign materials included a study outline of Xi Jinping’s thought and a compendium of his speeches. Similarly, while cadres were asked to review Xi Jinping’s recent speeches, they also were to obtain a broad understanding of “party history” and the “history of contemporary China.” A study manual for the campaign includes four QR codes for the party constitution, party rules and discipline, the 19th Party Congress report, and party history

(Writing Group 2019). As pronouncements in late August and early September suggest, the campaign was about fostering “love” for the party and the country. While the campaign did not change study mechanisms, it changed their content. Intra-party rules, Xi’s speeches, and policies were framed through a historical lens as both starting point and culmination.

The third consequence was reinforcing party members’ connection to the center and promoting the party center’s norms, policies, and rules as the dominant narrative. In his concluding speech in January 2020, Xi Jinping used combative language, arguing that if party members forgot the party’s founding mission, the party would “change its nature and color, losing the people and the future.” Many party members and cadres, he lamented, “did not attach importance to theoretical study.” Rather, they “muddled along” and were “arrogant, extravagant, and corrupt.” The antidote was lifelong education, benchmarking oneself with models, the Central Committee’s requirements, and party rules. Xi’s framing of a party in ideological peril, widespread corruption, and organizational weakness justifies his call for individual and institutional measures. On the personal level, cadres must be assessed on how they deal with crises. On the organizational level, Xi called for improving organizational routines to form long-term mechanisms. Thus, even though the party had made progress since 2012, Xi claimed that it still suffered “from an imperfect system” and must continue building institutions for “compliance and enforcement.” Xi’s call for continued institution-building meant that investment continued afterward. Until August 2022, 108.7 million yuan were spent, bringing the total since 2016 to 263.4 million yuan—by far the most extensive and long-lasting campaign under Xi Jinping.

The campaign differed in three ways from previous campaigns. First, it was the first campaign to make extensive use of the party’s history to justify current trends and link them to utopian aims. Earlier campaigns had focused on rectifying individual behavior and strengthening connections to the party center; this campaign used the party’s history to justify current trends and centralize the party organization and ideology. Second, while the campaign’s focus was the party’s organization and its history, Xi Jinping’s “Thought” and Xi Jinping himself became the natural culmination of Chinese modern history, conveying inevitability, irreplaceability, and mission. Third, and most important, the campaign was a prolonged norm diffusion process that mirrored the party’s position within society. In contrast to a traditional campaign, this was a holistic attempt to create an environment supporting the

party's aims and policies. Thus it combined two separate ways of changing social behavior: slow and protracted inculcation through constant exposure and its intensive reinforcement during the campaign, effectively crowding out competing narratives; and further establishing the party as the center of norms and values in society. The final campaign to study party history, in the lead-up to the CCP's 100th founding anniversary, further shifted this campaign type toward society.

### Party History Study and Education

At the end of February 2021, Xi Jinping launched the Party History Study and Education campaign (党史学习教育). In contrast to the previous campaign, which focused on leading cadres, this campaign involved the entire party. Previous and existing themes were further developed, and Xi (2021) reiterated the idea of the party's decline. He referenced party organizations, arguing that they were "easy to break from the inside" and that the party risked "internal deterioration and discoloration," which would lead to a loss of support from the people. Despite the focus on politics in previous years, faith within the party had "not yet been transformed from external demands to internal initiative." The aim of this new campaign was to restore faith in the party by transforming people's subjective view of the world, leading to greater internal vitality, centralization, and ultimately national rejuvenation. The immediate aim of "planting the feelings of loving the party, patriotism, and socialism" in people's hearts was unchanged.

To achieve this lofty aim, four books were published. First, a new version of the *Short History of the Chinese Communist Party*. Second, excerpts on party history by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao. Third, a separate book on party history under Xi Jinping's own name, complementing the views of previous leaders. This personal connection to the party's history, along with the inclusion of his thoughts, serves to bolster his charismatic authority, connecting history to the present and the future. As one party event in Xinjiang put it, the study of party history "reveals the laws of social movement in contemporary China" and therefore helps party members understand current "national conditions" (Qinghe County Public Sector Office 2021). Fourth, a new version of Xi Jinping's thoughts was published in late February. Presented in a questions-and-answers format, they are the "designated learning material for the whole party to carry out party history

learning and education,” and party schools and colleges are to include it in their training syllabi (Communist Party Member Network 2021). The campaign also involved organizing propaganda troupes and making use of “red tourism” resources. While conducted nominally within the party and aimed at re-establishing the linkage between the party center and its members by engaging them in a collective learning process and fostering a deeper connection to the party’s history and values, it was also geared toward society.

This was the first time under Xi Jinping that a campaign started within the party was extended to society, including non-party organizations and the broader society, and deploying cultural infrastructure and resources for campaign aims. Society was to be engulfed with the study of the CCP’s history, of contemporary China, reform and opening-up, and China’s era of socialist development, reinforcing society’s connection to the center by engaging a wider audience in understanding the party’s historical significance and contemporary relevance. Xi called for the party to “promote the study and education of party history and go deep into the masses, grass-roots units, and the hearts of the people.” Artistic works such as films and dramas should also be crafted to memorialize party history, and the party should “make full use” of the internet.

In the following months, the campaign expanded further to the population. An official notice put forward eight activities: public reading sessions; public lectures on party history; immersive events on the party’s revolutionary culture; ceremonial activities honoring martyrs; learning from socialist heroes and models; recounting “red family traditions”; national defense education; and mass cultural activities, such as art exhibitions and knowledge contests (General Office 2021). The Beijing Propaganda Department budgeted 5 million yuan for party history knowledge quizzes and for live broadcasts, so “party members, the masses, and students” could “cultivate the feeling of loving the party” (Government Procurement Network 2021). Openly available procurement data show that from March 2021 to August 2022, authorities spent over 120 million yuan on campaign-related expenses. The conflation of culture and ideology was aptly summarized in the Third History Resolution of late 2021, which described Xi Jinping’s thought as embodying “the best of the Chinese culture and ethos” for the first time.

Like the previous campaign, in March 2022 the Party History Study and Education campaign was institutionalized, further positioning and strengthening the party center and Xi Jinping as the source of values and norms for

society. Its study materials were to be inserted into the everyday education of cadres and party members at all levels, and government departments were ordered to consolidate its achievements throughout China (State Council 2022). This marked a change from the original meaning of the CCP's ideological campaigns, which were to occur solely within the party. Both ideologically and organizationally, the Party History Study and Education campaign continued to embed party values in society.

The campaign is an outgrowth of the general direction of ideological campaigns since the second phase, in 2015. Since then, campaigns have focused on the party's internal construction, while encouraging its members to propagate party values in their everyday lives. The earlier campaigns, in 2014–15 and 2016, were aimed at ideological and organizational construction and focused more on loyalty to the party and its ideals. At the same time, education had become holistic, incorporating not only the learning of texts, speeches, and intra-party rules but also being part of the everyday organizational life within party branches. In this framework, campaigns since the 19th Party Congress could steer the individual cadre and party member toward different aims, focusing on loyalty to the party as an organization and entity and constructing a broader political culture within and outside of the party. Central to this political culture is the charismatic authority of Xi Jinping, whose "Thought" and leadership are emphasized throughout the campaign, further solidifying his position and influence in both the party and society.

## CONCLUSION

The evolution of the CCP's ideological campaigns since 2013 demonstrates a clear shift from an initial focus on internal party reform to a broader strategy aimed at influencing and transforming society. The initial phase was characterized by the Mass Line Education and Practice campaign, which focused on individual misconduct and the party's relationship with the people. The second phase saw a shift toward organizational construction and loyalty to the party, culminating in the institutionalization of the Two Lines of Study, One Way of Becoming campaign. Finally, the third phase expanded the scope of the campaigns to non-party entities and aimed at embedding party values in society. The 2021 party history campaign signifies a major turning point in this evolution, as it marked the first time a campaign was extended beyond party members to encompass non-party organizations and the wider

public, effectively engaging society in understanding and embracing the party's values and historical significance. Previous campaigns laid a solid foundation for the CCP to expand its normative authority, reinforcing the party's central role in shaping social behavior, values, and beliefs. These campaigns have played a crucial role in consolidating the party's structure and fostering a normative claim over social actors through a holistic approach, re-establishing the linkage between the party center and its members, reinforcing society's connection to the center, and crowding out competing narratives. Central to these campaigns is the charismatic authority of Xi Jinping, which has been consistently emphasized, further solidifying his position and influence within both the party and society, as Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority suggests.

Despite the successful implementation of ideological campaigns under Xi Jinping, it is important to acknowledge the challenges and limitations they may face. For instance, the extensive focus on Xi Jinping and the party center's charismatic authority might lead to internal dissent within the party, as factions or individuals may resist the centralization of power. Moreover, the continuous emphasis on the party's values and the positioning of the party center as the main source of norms and values might ultimately hinder China's development and the party's self-professed focus on innovation and global competitiveness. Also, the effectiveness of these campaigns could be undermined by the negative effects of overexposure to propaganda, leading to cynicism or resistance among the population. While this article only looked at ideological campaigns as tools of party-building, people's responses to them are a fruitful venue for further research.

The findings have significant implications for the CCP's model of governance within and outside the party. First, there is a stark contrast between Hu Jintao's vision of a two-way relationship between the party and the people and Xi Jinping's unidirectional approach to shaping the environment. Second, the space for differences within the party has been substantially narrowed since 2015, building up party members and cadres as repositories of good values and practices. Third, the party employs a holistic mechanism to impose its values, using culture, education, law, and economics to establish a normative claim over social actors.

Fourth, the theoretical literature suggests that effective normative control opens up the space for decentralization that "will be feasible without undue loss of control" (Selznick 1957, 113). While Xi Jinping's installation of allies in

the Politburo at the 20th Party Congress might be an opening for giving local cadres more space, based on current research the outlook for more individual agency at the local level is bleak (Heffer and Schubert 2023). Fifth, the party's hold over society depends on the strength of its enforcement mechanisms. The Mass Line Education and Practice campaign fell short in this regard, but later campaigns rectified this issue, extending to the entire country. In line with Eisenstadt's insights on the routinization of charisma, the CCP's values, reinforced by Xi Jinping's charismatic authority, are used to shape and reorder society, demonstrating the resurgence of the vanguard and its enduring influence. By positioning the party as the source of norms and values, the ideological campaigns aim to counteract alternative narratives and assert the party's dominance over the political, social, and cultural landscape in China.

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