

**Organizational Emperorship, the Nomenklatura System, and the Modern Party-State:  
Exploring the Mechanisms of the Chinese Communist Party's Enduring Control over  
Government of the Contemporary China**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present article outlines and analyzes the institutional and governance mechanisms currently applied by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the context of ensuring the continuity and pervasiveness of its rule over the contemporary Chinese state and society. Based on the theoretical concepts of the Leninist party-state and organizational emperorship, it has been shown how a variety of such mechanisms have been empirically traceable across various levels of government in the contemporary China. In so doing, the article presents evidence as to the combination of the traditional Leninist party-state mechanisms with more nuanced forms of organizational emperorship on the part of the CCP. Furthermore, the author elaborates a conceptual framework for understanding the interrelationship between different levers of power available to the CCP in the contemporary context of the Chinese party-state, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of the subject matter.

**KEYWORDS:** China, Communism, Chinese Communist Party, party-state

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**Introduction.** The question of the specific mechanisms of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) control over the levers of government in China appears to have been one of the crucial aspects of the contemporary research into complexities of Chinese politics and government. As noted by Y. Zheng [1], the role of the CCP in the contemporary Chinese system of government may be most adequately captured by the concept of organizational emperors, i.e., as that of a paramount political organization the power whereof may not be effectively or procedurally challenged, and which is able to control all other administrative and/or representative powers as mere conduits of its political power. Given the author's use of the discourse of imperial power, it may then be held that the authority exercised by the CCP would at the same time be grounded in personalization (reflecting individual political leaders' capacity) and institutionalization (representing the Party's ability to dominate and dispose of all legitimate political institutions in the contemporary mainland China;) [1]. Consequently, the present article will seek to explore how the CCP's paramount power may be embedded, sustained, and projected in respect of its institutional, rather than personal dimension, which in turn requires [1] a focus on specific mechanisms of the Party's control throughout the hierarchy of national and local government.

This aim will define the following structure of the present article. The first section will briefly present the relevant theoretical perspectives on the problem of party control over government in party-state / totalitarian political regimes, thus serving as a necessary background to further findings and discussion. Subsequently, drawing from the theoretical aspects thus raised, the article will focus on specific mechanisms of control on the part of the CCP over national government, with a view to developing a preliminary model of those mechanisms' relative significance. The third section of the article's main body will further address the aspects of the CCP's control mechanisms exercised in respect of local government in China, which may further be incorporated into the model in question. Thus the concluding section will summarize the findings arrived at in the aforementioned main body sections whilst providing potential suggestions for further research directions.

**Literature Review.** The problem of the party's control over the government in one-party regimes which are commonly referred to as 'the party-state' and/or 'the totalitarian state' would preoccupy the researchers dealing with the political repercussions of Leninism for a long time. As noted by S. Koleva [2], the Communist party-state would be characterized by a pivotal role of the party as the actual driver of the state and the society's development guided by its supreme right to define the limits to and conduct any public socio-political activities within the scope of the revolutionary ideology the party would represent. In that sense, purely administrative agencies of government, or 'state machinery' (as per Lenin himself; cf. [3]), would hence be regarded as subordinate to the party as the driving force of the process of socialist construction, which was indeed assumed to usher in a society without class antagonisms, and hence without the state / government (the withering away of the state concept; [4]). This internal contradiction of the Communist state's underlying paradigm must thus be borne in mind in the context of any discussion of the party-state as a theoretical and operative concept.

Proceeding from those broader philosophical considerations, one should now address the generic topic of mechanisms of party control over government / state apparatus that would be observable in Leninist party-state regimes. The most basic form of such control would be effected via the mechanism of institutional linkage between respective party bodies and organs of government, whereby a party cell

or committee would be entrusted with executing the function of coordination between the party's overarching political line and the specific agency's functional activities [5]. The dominant role of party cells within governmental agencies would mean that the latter would be permeated by the party as a mass organisation defining the state's political life. Such institutional linkage would hence contribute to overseeing that the ruling party's political line and ideological principles be implemented across the variety of governmental bodies and agencies, making the latter an effective instrument at the party's disposal [5]. Furthermore, the legal monopoly of the dominant party on legitimate political activities would be at times enshrined in the constitutional norms (e.g., in the 1977 Soviet Constitution; Article 6, whereupon it was stipulated that "the Communist Party, armed with Marxism-Leninism, determines the general perspectives of the development of the society and the course of the domestic and foreign policy"). In so doing, the party could be legally elevated above the 'regular' apparatus of government, with the latter thus legally obligated to act upon the decisions of the party's congresses and standing bodies in the context of their own administrative / governmental proceedings.

Further, Leninist parties would have been known to exercise personnel control over all the appointments throughout the various levels of the hierarchy of government while exerting clear dominance in regard of the electoral process, whether one may deal with national or local elections (e.g., [6] [7]). The institution of the so-called nomenklatura system would imply that the progression of individuals along their careers in national government would have to be granted upon the consent of the party's respective body (usually its central committee), even though such consent might be couched in terms of 'recommendations' (see [8]). Hence the so-called development of cadres for principal bodies of government, whether central ministries or other such administrative agencies, would be thoroughly controlled by the party's hierarchy. In effect, in most cases, the party's leaders would at the same time be chief officials in national government, invoking the concept of dual roles for the party's leadership as top government officials ( [9], p. 648)). Therefore, possible discrepancies between separate party and government bureaucracies would be levelled down due to the party leaders personally presiding over key bodies of administrative government. Similarly, party secretaries would perform similar role at the level of regional and in many cases even local authorities.

Thus, based on this theoretical overview not being exactly specific to China's case, one may see that the mechanisms of control over national and local government historically utilized by Leninist party-states are likely to enable the latter to wield their authority in a comprehensive and uncontested manner throughout various aspects of executing powers of government. Hence, the case study of the CCP will now serve to demonstrate the viability of the aforementioned model and showcase the comparative importance of its various elements.

**Methodology.** Given a formally constitutional nature of the government system of the People's Republic of China, the question of the CCP's constitutional role with regard to national government should be posed first. The constitutional documents of the PRC as issued and amended between 1954 and 1982 (four separate constitutions with multiple amendments) would accord the principal role in respect of formal operations of government to popularly elected institutions; however, in effect, the CCP would stand above such bodies due to its status as the leader of "a broad people's democratic united and joint front, composed of all democratic classes, democratic parties and groups and popular organizations, and

led by the Communist Party of China” (Preamble to the 1982 Constitution of the PRC, cited in [10], p. 214]. Thus, even though such formulation would appear to be less imperative than the one applied in the 1977 Constitution of the USSR to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, it would nonetheless attribute to the CCP a functional role of “mobilizing and rallying the whole people” (Preamble), thereby implying that the party as the vehicle of the all-Chinese mass movement would be superior to formal agencies of government. At the same time, unlike in the Soviet system, the CCP has been relatively separated from direct governmental work since the times of Deng Xiaoping, who would insist on the need for the State Council and other governmental bodies to exercise their functions without directives from the Central Committee and other party bodies whilst continuing to be guided by the latter’s political leadership (the notion of separation between the party and the government; [11, p. 254]. Consequently, in both constitutional and theoretical terms, the relationship between the CCP and national government would be conceived of as involving political guidance / leadership rather than direct policy oversight (once again, as opposed to the Soviet constitutional system), though in practice, such distinctions may effectively blur.

**Results.** The emphasis on the guiding role of the CCP that is implicitly rather than explicitly embedded in the PRC’s constitutional system would then give rise to several specific mechanisms of such guidance (and hence control) over key policy areas in the system of national government. Y. Zheng [11] would place emphasis on four such mechanisms, namely (1) the nomenklatura system, as embodied in the provisions related to the “Party’s management of cadres” (*dangguan ganbu*); (2) central leading small groups (LSGs); (3) the ‘systems’ (*xitong*) oversight of specific functional areas of government by the respective party committees at their appropriate levels of competence; and (4) Party groups (*dangzhu*) within each governmental agency. In addition, the researcher would single out a separate mechanism of the CCP’s control over the judiciary, as embodied in the institutions of the Central Political and Legal Committee (CPLC) and the Central Discipline Inspection Committee (CDIC; [11]p. 268). In so doing, the variety of elaborate mechanisms of the CCP’s control would apparently transcend its supposedly political guidance-oriented role as asserted by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. Therefore, it would be necessary to examine the specificity of each controlling mechanism in due detail.

To begin with, the *dangguan ganbu* / *nomenklatura* system constitutes one of the foundations of the Party’s control over appointments, promotions and dismissals in both Party and non-Party offices and positions throughout the PRC. The contemporary system of the management of cadres is coterminous with the aforementioned principle of ensuring the Party’s control over the government by making sure that the Party’s leaders would at the same time be top officials of the state: thus, both inner and outer cabinet members of the State Council, the PRC’s top government body, are at the same time high-ranking members of the Central Committee of CCP [12]. As for non-Party positions that the relevant committees of the CCP are in charge of supervising, here the ‘one-level-down’ approach is practiced, e.g. the Political Bureau of the Central Committee is in charge of political appointments above vice-ministerial level, ranging from the Chairman of the PRC to state counsellors, which is carried out via selecting the list of the candidates and forwarding it to the National People’s Congress for approval / confirmation [11, p. 256].

The Central Committee's Organization Department is in charge of compiling the list of the political and administrative cadres to be approved and supervised by the respective Party's bodies, which would basically involve three 'trees', i.e. (1) cadre positions to be filled in and overseen by the Central Committee; (2) positions falling within the competence of regional Party's committees but due to be reported to the Central Committee for ultimate authorization; and (3) 'cadre reserve' positions at regional and local levels [13] Examples of the first category include members of the State Council, state-owned banks and enterprises' corporate management under the authority of the State Council, diplomats and overseas representatives in international organizations, as well as the judiciary and the procuratorate [14] whereas the second category covers such functional positions at local and regional levels as deputy positions in local judiciary and procuratorate bodies, directors of local units and offices of state banks and the People's Insurance Corporation of China, but also such key provincial positions as governors, deputy governors, mayors, and deputy mayors [11; 14]. In that sense, the nomenklatura system would enable the CCP's headquarters to assert its control over appointments, promotions, and dismissals across all major levels of governmental authority in China.

In turn, the CLSG system would refer to CCP Central Committee Political Bureau's involvement in ad hoc and inter-departmental processes of decision-making at the top level of national government. The rationale behind this institutional mechanism is that recommendations issued by LSGs would supposedly streamline the process of bureaucratic coordination by providing the Political Bureau's guidance on essential aspects of public policy likely to require extensive coordination on supra-ministerial level, included but not limited to such issues as foreign affairs, Taiwan affairs, Hong Kong-Macao affairs, economy and finance, propaganda and ideology, national security, and politics and law [15]. In so doing, the top leadership of the CCP would perform the consensus-building function, thus standing above and mitigating potential inter-departmental disputes at the level of national government. The reforms of the Party and the government undertaken by Xi Jinping after 2013 would be marked by an unprecedented proliferation of CLSGs as 8 new CLSGs would have been created after the 18th CCP Congress in November 2012, including a powerful LSG on Comprehensively Deepening Reform as chaired by Xi Jinping himself [16]. The comparative assessment of the fields of competence of CLSGs as opposed to LSGs overseen by the State Council would demonstrate that the former are generally concentrated in the fields of external affairs and security as well as domestic politics, while the latter predominate in respect of socio-economic issues (Figure 1). Hence, it may be assumed that the Political Bureau's guidance / 'recommendations' would be most strongly felt exactly in these areas of the state's policy. As noted by Y. Zheng [11, p. 261], "in some cases, the policy-making body will simply adopt a CLSG's recommendation with little or even no modification". Hence the coordinating / consensus-building role of the Political Bureau would display its superiority over central bodies of the government.

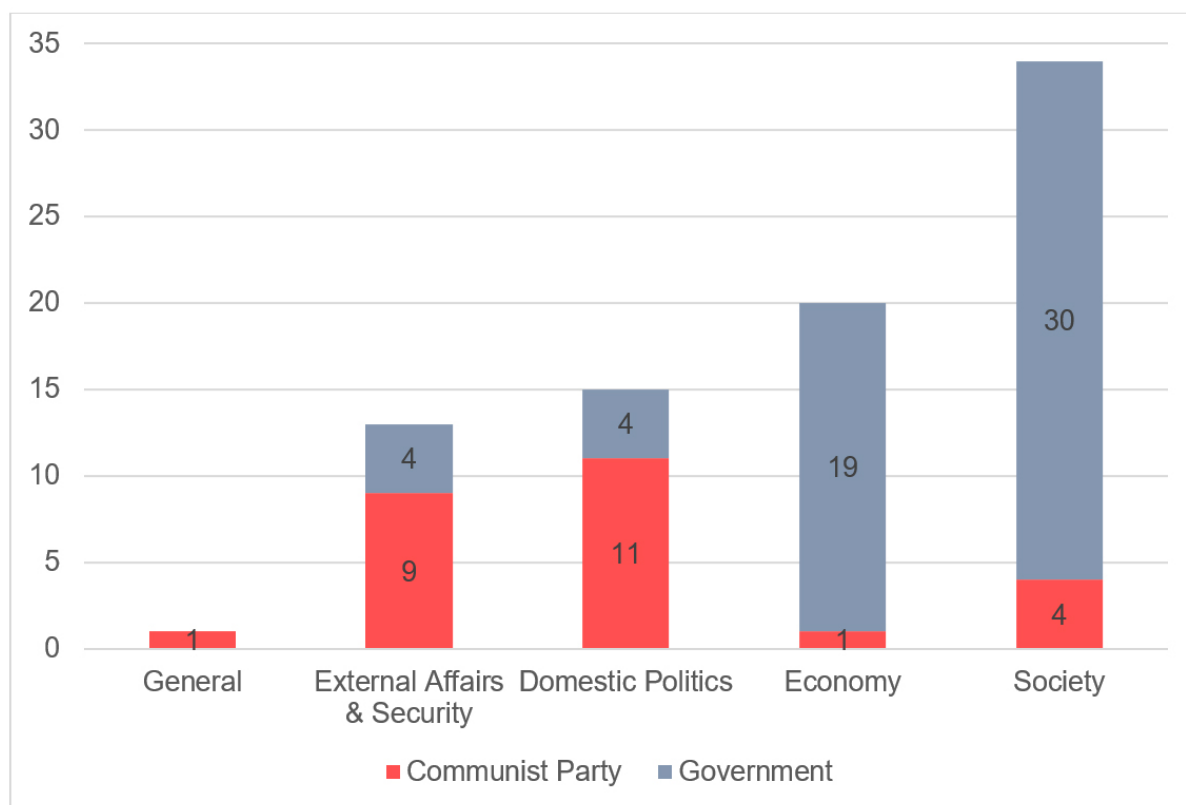


Figure 1: Distribution of CLSGs versus State Council-led LSGs, by sphere of competence [16].

For their part, the *xitong* system would make the coordinating role of the Party's organs more explicit by anchoring it in a permanent oversight of specific functional areas of government. The Party Affairs and Organizational Affairs *xitong* may be seen as occupying uppermost stature in this respect, as they would be in charge of overseeing the Party's general work and the nomenklatura system, respectively [11, p. 219–220]. The Political and Legal Affairs *xitong* would secure the Party's control over public security organs at both national and local levels by implementing the so-called dual leadership system under which both a territorial party committee and a hierarchically superior public security organ would oversee the lower-ranking organ's activities [17], p. 224]. Thus, the Ministry of Public Security would be effectively controlled by the Political Bureau itself. Similarly, the Finance and Economics *xitong* would represent the Party's controlling function with regard to national economic development, with both the Ministry of Commerce and the State Development Reform Commission falling under the purview of its respective Central Committee's sections, namely the Finance and Economics Leadership LSG / the Finance and Economics Commission [17], p. 228]. Such arrangements would further demonstrate the relevance of CLSGs as mentioned above in terms of their capacity to supervise the national government agencies in their respective sectors.

Finally, the *dangzhu* groups would enforce the Party's control over the governmental bureaucracy within each individual governmental agency. It is significant that these groups, also known as 'core groups' are not elected by CCP members active in the relevant agency / department but are rather appointed by a Party committee of the next upper level of the CCP's hierarchy [11, p. 265]. In so doing, the control of higher-ranking Party bodies over core groups would be maintained, in spite of the rhetorical

separation of the Party from the government [8]. The effective function of the core groups would concern overseeing such key activities of the governmental agency in question as “policy-making, policy implementation and personnel appointment” [11, p. 266], hence ensuring the Party’s control over its key decisions. In those rare cases when a non-Party member would be appointed to hold a senior position in the national government of the PRC (e.g., Wan Gang as the Minister of Science and Technology in 2007; [18]), the Party’s core group would effectively supervise their decisions in regard of policymaking. Hence, the institution of the Party’s core groups should provide further lever for the CCP to use to ensure that the national government’s bureaucracy is to follow the Party’s line.

While the institution of the nomenklatura system would already by default provide the CCP’s leadership with an effective mechanism of control over local authorities such as mayoralities, procuratorates, or governorships (see above), further elements of the Party’s control would be employed at local level of China’s government as well. In the first place, given that village and township elections are the only form of contested elections within China’s political system [19], the CCP would in effect rely on that mechanism for alleviating the bureaucratic capacity-associated problems that might arise in the context of immediate micro-management of the local administration [20]. It should be noted that village and township-level local Party committees would still retain substantive powers over the affairs of local administration, with Party secretaries retaining power of concurrent signature with village chairmen in some cases whilst wielding the power of unilateral signature in some affairs of village administration [20]. In that sense, in spite of the Westerners’ initial enthusiasm about contested village and township elections in China [19] it would still have to be noted that local Party committees are likely to further qualify the powers of elected village and township councils in their own favor.

On the other hand, the CCP’s headquarters is able to exercise the powers of oversight across the levels of provincial administration by applying the procedures of so-called cadre exchange system as enabled by the aforementioned practice of reporting new cadres’ appointment to the Central Committee [11]. The latter would imply that cadres coming from different localities are regularly exchanged from one comparable bureaucratic position to another, so that the degree to which they may engage in local power politics and resist the headquarters’ directives based on the influence of local vested interests may be diminished [21]. In doing so, the Party would further utilize disciplinary authorities as exercised by the aforementioned CPLC and CDIP to carry out regular disciplinary checks with a view to culling the local cadres suspected of corruption and other forms of misdemeanor [1]. In that sense, the control over local administration would be enforced just as consequentially as over the central one.

**Discussion.** Bearing in mind the aforementioned, one may conclude that the mechanisms utilized by the CCP to implement its control over the agencies of national government in China would be broadly in line with the theoretical assumptions as to the Leninist party-state’s mode of activities in this regard as presented in the theoretical background section of this article. The ranking of the mechanisms covered above may enable one to infer that the following hierarchy may be established as to their relative importance.



Figure 2. A preliminary model of the CCP's mechanisms of control over the government (created by the author)

Hence, it may be assumed that the CCP's power is derived primarily from its ability to master and implement the nomenklatura system providing for the Party's control over both Party and non-Party cadres, which is further expressed and cemented in the form of GLSGs and *dangzhu* groups both within and across the bureaucratic agencies in question. Finally, the *xitong* system is likewise derivative of the *nomenklatura* one as it enables the Central Committee's oversight and control over the governmental bodies it would itself staff. In that sense, the ability of the CCP to control the Chinese state may be expected to be retained as long as the Party would be able to enforce the nomenklatura system across different levels of the government so that ensuring the coherence of the Party's hierarchy would be a must for the leadership of the CCP, as the case may be.

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