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## 群众监督

## Mass Supervision

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**M**ass supervision' (*qunzhong jian du*) was a central pillar of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) mode of governance during the Mao Zedong era. The term referred to practices designed to make individuals in positions of power accountable to those below them. Although it was used in connection with old elites from pre-1949 society, the main target was always the CCP's own cadres. The Party maintained elaborate systems of internal discipline and top-down control, but it found these to be insufficient, and so from its earliest days Party leaders mobilised rank-and-file Party members and 'non-Party masses' to monitor communist cadres, denounce violations of Party policies, and criticise malfeasance and abuses of power.

After taking power, the new regime organised an array of systems to lodge grievances and report official abuses as well as other methods to facilitate continuous monitoring of cadres from below. For the most part, however, mass supervision took place through periodic political campaigns rather than these routine channels. The Mao era was punctuated by a series of mass movements carried out under the rubric of mass supervision, culminating in the Cultural Revolution (see also Thornton's essay in the present volume). It should be emphasised that although these campaigns required the active participation of workers, peasants, and other citizens, the latter did not initiate the campaigns or determine their objectives. Mass supervision was a CCP project designed to meet Party goals.

In this essay, I will first briefly discuss the aims, targets, and forms of mass supervision. I will then provide an overview of the major mass supervision campaigns during the Mao era, before noting enduring practices today. A key focus will be on a fundamental problem entailed in mass supervision efforts—the lack of autonomy of those expected to monitor and criticise the cadres who exercised authority over them—and methods

employed to address this problem. My understanding of how these methods were implemented and my assessment of the results are informed by a ten-year investigation into the evolution of governance practices in Chinese factories.<sup>1</sup>

### *Aims, Targets, and Forms*

Mass supervision was the quintessential element of the CCP's conception of democratic participation. Mao succinctly expressed this in his famous conversation in 1945 with Huang Yanpei, a prominent education reformer. At a meeting with communist leaders at their insurgent headquarters in Yan'an, Huang presented his hosts with a pointed question about the fate of victorious revolutions in China's past:

What I've seen conforms to the saying, 'Things flourish suddenly, but they also degenerate quickly.' At first people pay close attention to everything, they work extremely hard and are willing to go through all kinds of hardships. But later, as the situation improves, this spirit gradually degenerates and over time people develop inertia ... Throughout history, either the government falls into the hands of eunuchs, or reforms fail after a reformer is dismissed, or officials becomes corrupt, but so far no state has been able to escape this cyclical law. Gentlemen of the Communist Party ... I hope you can find a way to escape this law.

Mao replied: 'We have already found a new road to escape this cycle. That new road is democracy. Only when the people are allowed to supervise the government, will the government not dare to become complacent.'<sup>2</sup>

Mao's conception of democracy, shared by other Party leaders, was quite restricted. The CCP insisted on an absolute political monopoly; it did not allow competing political parties and it exercised tight control over all economic and social institutions. Moreover, popular participation was limited largely to the basic levels of society, far from the realm of central policymaking, which took place at higher echelons of the CCP. Within this constricted framework, however, mass supervision was expected to play a critical role, keeping communist cadres on the straight and narrow and compelling them to listen to the concerns of the population they were to govern.

The mechanisms of mass supervision were designed to elicit exposure of a wide variety of proscribed behaviours by communist cadres, including corruption, favouritism and nepotism, inefficiency and waste, privilege-seeking and selfishness, a variety of political offences, and official misconduct prompting citizen grievances. The most important target of mass supervision, however, was bureaucratic work styles (*guanliao zhuyi zuofeng*), which in the CCP's lexicon referred to cadres being isolated from the masses, imposing harsh rules and regulations, managing in an arrogant and autocratic fashion, stifling criticism, complaints, and suggestions from below, and refusing to attend to the concerns of masses or involve them in local governance. Party leaders recognised that the problem of bureaucratism could not be effectively remedied through the Party's systems of top-down control.<sup>3</sup> Such bureaucratic controls were not only ineffective in

curbing bureaucratism, but were counterproductive because they exacerbated cadres' proclivity to turn their gaze up, rather than down; to prevent cadres from becoming aloof from the masses, supervision from below was indispensable.

The CCP made workplaces—rural production brigades and urban work units (see Kevin Lin's essay in the present volume)—the main sites through which it governed the populace and fostered popular participation. These workplaces, therefore, became the principal locations for mass supervision. This was true both of the periodic mass supervision campaigns as well as the everyday mechanisms, which included reporting systems (such as anonymous letter boxes), petition and grievance systems, the election of basic-level leaders, the practice of leaders reporting to mass meetings, the creation of teams of rank-and-file representatives to monitor leadership bodies, and the election of representative congresses to supervise workplace leadership.

Efforts to make mass supervision effective confronted a fundamental problem: urban workers and villagers had little autonomy from the cadres they were expected to supervise. Local cadres enjoyed great power, which was reinforced by the Party's determination to maintain a political monopoly. Party organisations in villages and work units left little room for autonomous activity and, despite official prohibitions, raising criticisms of local cadres often brought retribution. Mao and other Party leaders were acutely aware of this problem and the purpose of organising mass campaigns was to overcome popular reticence by providing official support for raising criticisms. Mao was responsible for initiating all mass supervision campaigns, including major movements in which Party authorities dispatched outside work teams to mobilise villagers or workers to criticise local cadres (see Perry's essay in the present volume). Although outside work teams introduced a degree of autonomy from local Party officials, the Party organisation remained in charge. On two occasions, however, Mao went around the Party organisation to inspire more freewheeling criticism. In the following sections, I will review the various methods of mobilisation employed in mass supervision campaigns and assess the results.

### *Origins and Early Campaigns*

The CCP's practice of mass supervision had both domestic and foreign roots. It was informed by the traditional Chinese system of lodging complaints (*gaozhuang*), in which people were encouraged to report malfeasance by 'corrupt officials' and 'evil gentry' to higher authorities through petitions that ultimately might reach the emperor.<sup>4</sup> It was also informed by Soviet traditions, many of which were borrowed by the CCP, along with the term mass supervision itself.<sup>5</sup> The Party's own practices were developed while it was an insurgent organisation, ensconced for decades in remote rural base areas. In order to maintain support in the villages it governed, Party leaders sought to prevent local cadres from abusing their power by conducting periodic Party rectification campaigns (see Mertha's essay in the present volume). In 1947, they experimented with 'open door' rectification, dispatching Party work teams to organise villagers to criticise shortcomings and transgressions of local Party cadres. In his classic first-hand account, William Hinton described how this campaign was carried out, with each village cadre compelled to face village-wide meetings and 'pass the gate' in order to keep his or her position.<sup>6</sup> Li Fangchun subsequently documented the vast impact of this campaign and

the severe psychological and physical violence to which rural cadres were subjected.<sup>7</sup> Commenting on the campaign, a senior communist leader wrote in his diary that the Party seemed to be ‘waging revolution against itself.’<sup>8</sup>

After the CCP took national power in 1949, the practice of mass supervision was given prominent sanction in the new regime’s first Constitution, adopted in 1954, which declared: ‘All state organs must rely on the masses of the people, keep close contact with the masses, listen to the opinions of the masses, and accept the supervision of the masses.’<sup>9</sup> Starting in the early 1950s, Party leaders launched a series of mass supervision campaigns, the most important of which was the Three Antis Campaign (*sanfan yundong*), directed against leaders of state-owned enterprises and state agencies. Many communist cadres became targets of this campaign, but during these early years their offences were generally construed to be the product of corruption by old elites and the influence of traditional ideas and practices. As these campaigns were an integral part of the effort to consolidate communist power at the expense of old elites, it was also not difficult for central authorities to trust local Party organisations to manage them. For instance, concerns that Party cadres in charge of a particular factory had developed close ties with incumbent factory leaders or had become entrenched in local networks of corruption could readily be dealt with by sending in outside work teams to mobilise workers in the factory to investigate.<sup>10</sup>

This was no longer the case after the socialist transformation was completed in 1956. The Party Rectification Campaign carried out in the spring of the following year exclusively targeted Party cadres, who were by then fully in charge of all institutions. Under these conditions, Mao decided to unleash a more autonomous type of mass supervision that did not entail the tutelage of Party-dispatched work teams. In the 1957 Party Rectification Campaign, the culmination of the Hundred Flowers Campaign launched in 1956, he invited professionals, intellectuals, and students to organise their own meetings and activities to criticise the communist cadres in charge of schools, government agencies, and enterprises. This was a risky move that ended in disaster, as many of those who spoke up did not limit their criticisms to Mao’s intended agenda, but raised more fundamental critiques of the new regime. Communist cadres responded with alarm and indignation, and Mao was compelled to support a harsh backlash, the Anti-rightist Campaign, which condemned hundreds of thousands of those who had spoken up to years of punishment and discrimination.<sup>11</sup>

In the years that followed the debacle of 1957, Mao continued to mobilise criticism of communist cadres, but he retreated to the more conventional work team method. Moreover, in order to avoid the dynamic that emerged in 1957, which pitted old elites against new elites, he never again mobilised popular criticism of communist cadres without at the same time targeting old elites. In subsequent campaigns, although Party cadres were always the main target, old elites were also subjected to attack.

### *The Four Cleans*

In 1962, Mao launched the Four Cleans Campaign—formally known as the Socialist Education Movement—the broadest, deepest, and most protracted effort since the founding of the People’s Republic of China to reign in malfeasance and bureaucratic practices among Party cadres. The Campaign lasted for more than four years and

mobilised huge numbers of workers and peasants. The purpose, Mao declared in the initial guidelines for the mobilisation, was to criticise cadres who had been ‘acting like bureaucrats and overlords divorced from the masses,’ compelling them ‘to directly face the masses and resolve the abnormal relations that have existed between cadres and the masses for many years.’<sup>12</sup>

During the course of the Campaign, Mao’s evaluation of the maladies that afflicted the CCP officialdom became more jaundiced, and in early 1965 he supervised the drafting of a new set of guidelines that identified the main target as ‘those in positions of authority inside the Party who are taking the capitalist road.’<sup>13</sup> Later that year, responding to a report by the leader of a work team assigned to direct the movement in an agricultural machinery factory, Mao elaborated on the ‘capitalist roader’ (*zouzipai*) theme with startling words. ‘The bureaucratic class,’ he wrote, referring to officials of his own Party, ‘is a class sharply opposed to the working class and poor and lower-middle peasants. These leaders who take the capitalist road have become, or are becoming, the capitalists who suck the workers’ blood. How can they sufficiently understand the necessity of socialist revolution? They are the targets of our struggle and the targets of the revolution.’<sup>14</sup>

For Mao, the Four Cleans Campaign became a critical test of the work team method. The revised 1965 guidelines emphasised that ‘cadres must have supervision from above and below, particularly mass supervision’ adding that ‘in the Four Cleans Campaign we must work together with the masses to find effective means of supervision.’<sup>15</sup> As is evident from retrospective ethnographic accounts of the Campaign in factories as well as villages, the Four Cleans work teams were, in fact, very effective in curbing cadre corruption.<sup>16</sup> Because the teams were not under the leadership of local Party committees, they were in a position to organise villagers and factory workers to criticise their superiors, and to undertake harsh, systematic, mass-based investigations of unscrupulous behaviour by local cadres. On the other hand, the top-down nature of the work team method only reinforced the hierarchy of authority and culture of tutelage that underpinned the maladies associated with bureaucratism. As Mao became increasingly preoccupied with the latter, which he saw as fostering the development of a new bureaucratic class of Party officials, he decided to abandon the work team method.

Already in January 1965, Mao issued a sharp critique of the methods employed by the Four Cleans work teams, using language that presaged the radical approach he would take during the Cultural Revolution. ‘When you go to develop a mass movement, when you go to lead a mass struggle, in the midst of the struggle the masses are going to do what they want to do, and then in the course of the struggle they’ll create their own leaders,’ he insisted. ‘In short, you have to rely on the masses; you can’t rely on the work teams. The work teams don’t understand the situation, or in ignorance they become bureaucrats and obstruct the movement.’<sup>17</sup> In a postmortem delivered two years later, he declared that the movement had ‘failed to solve the problem because we did not find a form, a method, to arouse the broad masses to expose our dark aspect openly, in an all-round way and from below.’<sup>18</sup>

### *Rebel-led Mass Supervision*

The Cultural Revolution was in many ways a direct continuation of the Four Cleans Campaign, but it featured a much more radical effort to introduce autonomy into mass supervision. Although Mao allowed Party leaders to once again send in work teams when he launched the movement in the spring of 1966, he immediately commissioned newspaper articles and radio broadcasts that called on the masses to ‘educate themselves and liberate themselves.’ A few weeks later, he demanded the removal of work teams, accusing them of having ‘encircled and suppressed revolutionaries, stifled opinions differing from their own, imposed a white terror, and felt very pleased with themselves.’<sup>19</sup>

Mao subsequently called on students, workers, and peasants to form their own ‘fighting groups’ (*zhandoudui*) to criticise Party officials in their schools, factories, and communes. In factories, this turn of events had a polarising effect, spurring the rise of both ‘rebel’ (*zaofan*) organisations, which directed their fire at the Party organisation and pledged loyalty to no one but Mao, and conservative organisations, which defended the factory Party organisation. This led to fierce factional struggles in workplaces across China.<sup>20</sup>

The stakes of the conflict increased dramatically in January 1967 after Mao called on rebels to ‘seize power’ (*duoquan*). He first endorsed rebel efforts to take control of Shanghai’s newspapers, declaring: ‘The seizure of power at two newspapers is a national question and we should support their rebellion.’ He cautioned, however, that the old leaders of the newspapers should not be discharged: ‘I am not in favour of their dismissal; let them remain at their posts and be supervised by the masses.’<sup>21</sup> He relayed the same message a few days later after rebels, backed by his emissaries, overthrew the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee. ‘Taking over is great, but those who take over should only be in charge of politics (*zhengwu*), not regular administrative functions (*yewu*),’ he instructed. ‘Regular administrative functions should still be taken care of by the original staff. We should only be responsible for supervising them.’<sup>22</sup> The new ‘revolutionary committee’ (*geming weiyuanhui*) structure that Mao eventually endorsed followed this logic: ‘mass representatives’ (*qunzhong daibiao*), who were to be drawn from the ranks of rebel groups and remain at their original posts, were to supervise veteran cadres, who would occupy managerial positions. Despite Mao’s insistence that seizing power should only be a means of reinforcing supervision from below, the ensuing violent factional struggles for power greatly complicated and in many ways eclipsed the original project.

His inflammatory rhetoric notwithstanding, Mao’s goals during the Cultural Revolution were not as radical as many observers (and participants) imagined. He had no intention of fundamentally changing the state structure or overthrowing the CCP; his aim was to shake up the Party organisation and challenge the officious, bureaucratic airs of Party cadres. The methods he introduced, however, were quite radical considering that until then the CCP had insisted on exercising a complete monopoly on political activity. Because the rebels were self-organised and largely independent from the Party

organisation, they were especially capable of breaking down the authority of the local Party hierarchy, and opening up Party cadres to a torrent of criticism from below. The impact was lasting; the authority of Party officials never fully recovered.

The Cultural Revolution, however, ultimately failed to establish an effective long-term model for incorporating autonomy into mass supervision. The autonomy of the rebel groups was compromised in two critical ways. First, they were compelled to operate within very narrow political and ideological constraints and the scope of the issues they were permitted to raise was limited. While they were encouraged to attack cadres' privileges, corruption, and authoritarian and bureaucratic ways, economic demands were off limits. Organisations so constrained could never truly represent the masses of workers and peasants. Second, the rebel organisations were only allowed a momentary existence. Once Mao's blessing was withdrawn, they were compelled to disband and subsequently faced a backlash far harsher than the Anti-rightist Campaign. Mao recognised that effective mass supervision required organisations that were not under Party control, but he was not willing to permit the permanent establishment of autonomous organisations.

### *Remnants of Mass Supervision*

Today, mass supervision continues to be part of the principles formally underpinning the CCP's model of governance, but the practices associated with the slogan have changed in fundamental ways.<sup>23</sup> This has been evident in the ongoing anti-corruption drive launched by Xi Jinping in 2012. The masses have been called upon to participate, but there has been little semblance of the mass movements of the past, when cadres were hauled before mass meetings in every village and factory. Instead, the Campaign has largely been carried out by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, and supervision from below has mainly taken the form of individuals reporting abuses. Moreover, as in all recent campaigns that have targeted cadres, the focus has been on corruption. The main preoccupation of the Mao era—the abuses of power identified as bureaucratism—are of little concern.

The dynamics of mass supervision, however, extend beyond official channels. A wide variety of other avenues for grassroots complaints about cadre behaviour have emerged, including unofficial websites on which citizens vent frustration and anger about cadre corruption and abuse of power. The resulting scandals have become a highlight of Chinese political life. One indication of the extent to which the concept of the mass supervision continues to inspire popular political thinking in China can be found in a manifesto issued by organisers of 'Jasmine' pro-democracy rallies in 2011, which featured as its central demand that the government 'genuinely fight corruption and accept the supervision of the people.'<sup>24</sup> Thus, although the tumultuous mass movements of the Mao era are fading into the past, the idea of mass supervision, rooted in longstanding Chinese traditions and forged into a mainstay of popular participation during the first decades of the communist era, has become an enduring feature of China's political culture.

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