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工作队

Work Team

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The common practice of deploying ‘work teams’ (*gongzuodui* or *gongzuozu*) to troubleshoot unexpected crises, implement developmental priorities, propagate official ideology, and monitor and discipline cadre corruption—among other purposes—is a defining feature of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) governance. Perhaps because work teams straddle the boundary between formal and informal institutions, however, they have received scant analytical attention. Although work teams figure prominently in narratives of almost all the major mass campaigns of the Mao era—Land Reform, Thought Reform, Anti-rightist, Four Cleans, Cultural Revolution, and so on—their continued importance in the post-Mao era has seldom been emphasised. And even for the Mao period we lack a clear understanding of when, why, and how such units were differentially deployed. Yet, arguably it is this mechanism more than any other that exemplifies China’s uniquely dexterous brand of authoritarian governance from its revolutionary days through to the present.¹

Putting the Mass Line into Practice

Work teams are ad hoc units that are appointed and directed by higher-level Party and government organs to advance a specific mission and, following a stint of intensive training, are dispatched to lower levels of the political system for a limited period of time to carry out their assignment by means of mass mobilisation (see Li’s essay in the present volume). Work teams are regarded as a key instrument for practicing the ‘mass line’—Mao Zedong’s injunction to involve ordinary people in the articulation and implementation of Party policy (see Lin Chun’s essay in the present volume). The membership of these task forces, typically comprised of half a dozen or fewer people (but occasionally as small as a single individual or as large as a hundred or more), is designed to cut across normal bureaucratic and geographical lines. Work team

members are supposed to be outsiders to the places where they operate, are usually drawn from a variety of different organisations, and generally possess a wide range of experiences and skills. In most cases they include a substantial representation of Party members from various official agencies along with a significant number of intellectuals (*zhishifenzi*, usually university students and professors) as well as grassroots activists (*jijifenzi*). After undergoing a training programme (often lasting several weeks or more), which includes the study of new policy documents, sharing of experiences from other work teams, and familiarisation with the problems and particulars of the place to which they will be sent, work team members decamp to a village, factory, university, or other targeted site of operation. One of their first onsite activities is to convene a mass meeting to introduce their centrally mandated assignment and to identify potential local activists to help achieve their mission.

Some of the most popular novels of the early People's Republic of China (PRC), such as Ding Ling's *The Sun Shines over the Sangkan River* (1954) and Zhou Libo's *The Hurricane* (1955), were based on the novelists' own experiences as members of a land reform work team.² Our most detailed and dramatic English-language eyewitness accounts of the Chinese Revolution, William Hinton's *Fanshen* (1966) and Isabel and David Crook's *Ten Mile Inn* (1979), were also drawn from the authors' personal participation in work teams.³

These first-hand accounts by Chinese and foreigners alike suggest that work team members find their service to be a memorable—sometimes even transformative—experience. Diaries, memoirs, novels, and other writings and interviews of former team members generally describe their stint in a village, school, or factory as an eye-opening adventure that enhanced understanding and empathy for the problems of ordinary people, increased appreciation of central policy goals, and heightened their sense of political engagement and efficacy. With so many of China's leading officials and intellectuals having participated in multiple work teams over the years, the positive contribution to regime loyalty and legitimacy would seem to be considerable.

But work teams are more than a means of generating support among the political and intellectual elites. The contributions of work teams to PRC governance are manifold. In addition to promoting a particular higher-level agenda, and enlisting grassroots participation in advancing it, the teams provide a direct (albeit temporary) channel of communication between state and society. Ordinary people gain awareness of state priorities and propaganda while upper-level officials in turn glean information and insight into the concerns of citizens at the grassroots. As outside emissaries who report directly to higher government and Party agencies, thereby bypassing local cadres, the work teams also act as a powerful check on grassroots officials. Often they are authorised not only to monitor, but also to reprimand local cadres. They therefore play a major role in Party rectification and anti-corruption campaigns as well as in initiatives to further economic and development objectives (see Mertha's essay in the present volume).

Historical Origins

First deployed on a massive scale in conjunction with the Land Reform Campaign of 1947–53, work teams have precedents that can be traced at least as far back as the 1920s, when the CCP—under the aegis of the First United Front with the Nationalist

Party (*guomindang*, hereafter GMD) and in response to the encouragement of Soviet advisors—first began to develop a systematic strategy for rural mobilisation. At the Peasant Movement Training Institute (PMTI) in Guangzhou, established in the summer of 1923 as an official GMD entity reporting to its Peasant Bureau, early communist organisers such as Peng Pai and Mao Zedong instructed and assigned fellow revolutionaries in a manner that anticipated the later formation of work teams.⁴ After receiving several months of intensive classroom and infield training, successful PMTI graduates would be sent back to their native places as ‘special emissaries’ (*tepaiyuan*) whose mission was to incite the local peasants to revolutionary action. They were responsible for instigating much of the violence of the Red Terror that accompanied the joint CCP-GMD Northern Expedition of 1926–27.

These special emissaries prefigured the later practice of work teams in that they were selected and directed by an official agency—namely the GMD’s Peasant Bureau—to carry out a specific, centrally designated mass mobilisation effort. They were expected to spend at least six hours a day in their assigned villages, conducting investigations, and undertaking propaganda and organisation work. They were required to submit weekly reports to the Peasant Bureau and to return to the bureau’s headquarters in Guangzhou after each deployment to await instructions for the next assignment. The special emissaries differed from later work teams, however, in that they were for the most part single-person operations conducted by an ‘insider’ who had been chosen precisely because of his or her personal connections to the target sites.

The use of special emissaries was somewhat reminiscent of the ancient practice of imperial commissioners (*qinchai dachen*), in which the Chinese emperor might deputise a trusted official to handle a pressing matter in the provinces by exercising ad hoc powers that trumped those of the regular bureaucracy. However, the proximate origins of special emissaries more likely stemmed from Russian than Chinese roots. The Guangzhou PMTI had been founded on the suggestion of Mikhail Borodin and his fellow *sovetsniki* (Soviet agents in China) who also lectured at the Institute on Russian revolutionary practices of agitation and propaganda.⁵ At the same time, hundreds of left-leaning Chinese were being trained at the Sun Yat-sen University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow. In short, there were multiple conduits for the transmission of Soviet mobilisation techniques to China. Among the most important Bolshevik methods was the use of so-called ‘plenipotentiaries,’ agent provocateurs who had played a key role in both the Revolution of 1917 and the Civil War that followed in its wake. In the Soviet Union, individual plenipotentiaries—augmented by mobile groups from the Youth League and Trade Union such as Komsomol brigades, 25,000ers, shock brigades, and the like—would again be deployed a decade later to carry out a brutal campaign of collectivisation and dekulakisation in the countryside.

Transformation

Whatever their origins, Chinese work teams underwent significant change over the course of Mao’s revolution and its aftermath. During the 1930s, ‘armed work teams’ (*wuzhuang gongzuodui*) were dispatched from communist headquarters in Jiangxi and Yan’an to conduct grain confiscation and recruit soldiers for the Red Army. In the Land Reform of the late 1940s and early 1950s, work teams orchestrated the emotional

'speak bitterness' struggles that preceded the liquidation of millions of landlords and rich peasants (see Javed's essay in the present volume). They also spearheaded attacks against alleged counterrevolutionaries in the Suppression of Counterrevolutionaries (1950) and Three and Five Antis (1951–52) Campaigns. The violence of these early PRC campaigns was reminiscent of the ruthlessness with which collectivisation had been conducted in the Soviet Union, where plenipotentiaries were known for drunkenness, beatings, and a litany of other bad behaviours.⁶ Precisely because of their callous and uncontrolled conduct, however, plenipotentiaries and other mobile units were phased out of Soviet governance practice in the 1950s, in favour of adhering to regular bureaucratic procedures.⁷ In this same period, especially following the Sino-Soviet rift, the PRC further expanded and systematised its own use of work teams. Chinese work teams, in stark contrast to their Soviet counterparts, were subject to increasingly stringent training regimens designed to teach them how to stir up mass enthusiasm and engagement without allowing locales to descend into unbridled disorder.

In the early years of the PRC, work teams were not only used for directing violence against designated 'class enemies.' They also successfully promoted a wide range of developmental efforts: public health initiatives such as small pox and schistosomiasis eradication, literacy campaigns, irrigation and flood control, and so forth. During the Four Cleans Campaign of the early 1960s, more than 3.5 million work team members were dispatched to villages across China to curb rural cadre corruption in the aftermath of the disastrous Great Leap Forward. In this period, virtually all upperclassmen at Chinese universities were mobilised to participate in Four Cleans teams. After undergoing a rigorous training programme, team members were sent to local sites to 'squat on a point' (*dundian*) while practicing the 'three together' (*santong*) of living, eating, and working with the local residents.⁸ Even today, the Four Cleans teams are still remembered fondly by many elderly villagers for having acted as disciplined and empathetic ambassadors of Party central. By pointing the finger of blame for the terrible Great Leap Famine at 'corrupt' grassroots officials, work teams helped to convince ordinary villagers that the root cause of their suffering rested with the malfeasance of their own local leaders, rather than with Chairman Mao or the CCP. Thanks in part to the earnest efforts of dedicated Four Cleans team members, the PRC proved able to weather one of the worst famines in world history.

The prominent role of work teams in the Four Cleans, operating under the aegis of then President Liu Shaoqi, became grounds for criticism a few years later during the Cultural Revolution. Work teams played a central part in the often violent 'two-line struggle' between 'left-wing' and 'right-wing' factions that afflicted schools, universities, factories, and other state agencies at the outset of the Cultural Revolution. The introduction in 1968 of Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams, composed primarily of workers and soldiers, appeared for a time to have ended the practice of pragmatic Party-sponsored work teams in favour of a new ideological entity under the direct control of Mao and the military. Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams promptly demobilised the unruly student Red Guards and helped to restore social order.

In the early post-Mao period, Deng Xiaoping declared an end to mass campaigns, implying that—much as in the later years of the Soviet Union—ad hoc mobile units would no longer be used to supersede regular bureaucratic procedures in implementing

Party policy. In reality, however, work teams did not disappear from Chinese governance practice; they continued to play a key role in promoting a wide range of Party initiatives in post-Mao China. Family Planning Work Teams, Three Represents Work Teams, and New Socialist Countryside Work Teams, among others, served as critical conduits of policy implementation for Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao respectively. Under Xi Jinping, the deployment of work teams has been further expanded. Precision Poverty Alleviation Work Teams fan out across the countryside to deliver material and financial relief to impoverished villages while repeated rounds of Discipline Inspection Teams descend upon university campuses and government agencies to ferret out corruption and ideological impurity. In conducting their centrally mandated operations, work teams continue to circumvent the formal bureaucracy in favour of enlisting ordinary people to assist in advancing the Party's agenda. Although feared by local officials, work teams are generally welcomed by the populace at large as an effective means of checking grassroots governance abuses. The practice is surely not unrelated to the many public opinion surveys which reveal an extraordinary level of trust and support among ordinary Chinese for the central (as opposed to local) Party leadership.

Achievements and Adaptation

Scholars of Soviet and Central European communism such as Valerie Bunce have pointed to flaws in the institutional design of those political systems as a prime explanation for their collapse.⁹ In terms of formal political institutions, however, the contemporary PRC does not differ appreciably from the former Soviet Union and its client states. Like them, it is a generic communist party-state complete with a central committee, politburo, people's congresses, and so forth. Why then has the PRC not only survived, but even thrived? How has the CCP continued to govern with a flair for flexibility and responsiveness that eluded the European communist party-states?

In terms of governance, one of the most salient differences between the PRC and its erstwhile European counterparts is the CCP's effective deployment of well-trained work teams, capable of successfully communicating both top-down policies and bottom-up priorities. The teams allow the central leadership to cut through bureaucratic red tape and to establish direct contact with the people. The result is to accelerate the speed and spread of policy implementation while at the same time amplifying the centre's awareness of grassroots preferences. The Party is thus better able to calibrate its policies to match popular proclivities. And ordinary people, in turn, feel an unusually close connection with the central authorities that redounds to the legitimacy and longevity of the communist regime.

A practice imported from the Russian Revolution, yet much modified by Mao and his comrades over the course of the Chinese Revolution and its aftermath, work teams remain today one of the most important weapons in the CCP's governance arsenal. Their strategic and flexible application help explain the CCP's surprising ability to elude the fate that befell most formerly communist states, whose extinction is often attributed to their rigid and unresponsive political institutions. If, as Robert Putnam argues, vigorous civic engagement is what 'makes democracy work' by involving ordinary citizens in public life, then perhaps robust work teams are what 'make (Chinese)

communism work' by incorporating the masses into the Party's itinerary.¹⁰ Just as we debate whether American civil society is strong enough to withstand the formidable challenges that currently beset liberal democracy, so we may ponder whether the continued deployment of work teams will prove sufficient to sustain an otherwise ossified communist party-state. Whatever the future may hold, one cannot deny the contributions of Maoist-style ad hoc governance to the survival and success of the CCP over a century of surprising achievement and adaptation.

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