Intermediary Political Bodies of the Party-state

A Sociology of Mass and Grassroots Organisations in Contemporary China

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While research on political processes in China tends to focus more often on elite politics or on contention and social movements, this special issue of *China Perspectives* offers a different angle on the Chinese political system by studying the role and work of mass organisations (*qunzhong tuanti zuzhi* 群众团体组织) and of "grassroots autonomous organisations for the masses" (*jiceng qunzhongxing zizhi zuzhi* 基层群众性自治组织) as intermediary political bodies in early twenty-first century China.

"Do good deeds for the masses, let the masses better handle their affairs" (*wei qunzhong zuo hao shi, rang qunzhong hao ban shi* 为群众做好事，让群众好办事).

This slogan printed on a sign at the entrance of a residents' committee office (see cover photo) summarises the ambiguous role of these organisations, combining meanings of "authority and benevolence" (Leung and Nann 1995). Being at the same time under the supervision of the Party-state and in direct contact with ordinary citizens as their constituents, they are essential yet often overlooked organisational bridges, and ambivalent actors shaping Chinese politics at the grassroots.

Organised along geographical or corporatist lines, these organisations – neither NGOs nor public administrations – are extensions of the Party-state operating as mediators. Intermediation takes many forms, from policymaking and service provision to social control. Firmly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with Party cadres and Party branches at critical positions, Chinese mass organisations are structured according to the principle of "democratic centralism," which means they have a strongly centralised and hierarchically organised structure (Townsend 1967). At the same time, they also produce "peripheral power" (Rowell 2002) as they are densely established at the grassroots to allow for their role of political mobilisation and interests articulation, with branches where the targeted social category can be found in numbers. Besides, these organisations are in charge of a growing range of welfare services, expanding their reach beyond their primary function as "transmission belts" between the Party-state and their constituencies.

In twenty-first century China, these relay-organisations evolve in multiple social and political contexts, but their status and political identity show common features. While they are part of the Party-state governance apparatus and engage in direct interactions with the "masses," they are not formally Party or state departments. This special feature of *China Perspectives* sheds light on the politics of mass and grassroots organisations. Through the notion of intermediary political bodies, it studies *how* these organisations work in an authoritarian context.

Mass and grassroots organisations: Political intermediaries from Mao's to Xi's era

The notion of intermediary political bodies refers to key organisations or institutions used to mediate interests between the citizens and their leaders. Each given political regime assigns different roles to different intermediary bodies. While such political organisations play a crucial role in democratic regimes in the form of political parties, trade unions, or Parliaments, [2] they have different institutional structures and functions in authoritarian contexts. Inspired by the Soviet model, mass and grassroots organisations were introduced in China during the civil war, and for some in the 1950s under the Maoist regime, and spread quickly to enrol the Chinese population (Chao 1954). Following a totalitarian ambition of radical transformation of society, Chinese political life under Maoism was characterised by campaigns of mass mobilisation of the population and by the principle of "class struggle." Mass and grassroots organisations, in articulation with the *hukou* system of household registration, the *danwei* system of life-employment (Leung 1994), the *dang'an* system of "personal dossiers" (Yang 2011), and other policing strategies, established an ambition of total control over society under the Maoist regime.

At the time, the "mass line" was the core of the political system supporting the CCP, on theoretical as well as on practical levels. Indeed, the Maoist regime used "corporatist sectoral agencies such as industrial unions and peasant associations (...) as 'transmission belts' (or what in China is called the 'mass line'), providing a two-way channel between the Party centre and the assigned constituencies" (Unger and Chan 1995: 37). Social control was particularly strong, relying on loyal "activists" (*jiji fenzi* 积极分子) in charge of building social networks of surveillance and part of the "organisational mechanisms for mobilisation, recruitment, rectification and 'study'; a great political engine of social penetration and manipulation" (Solomon 1969: 94). The efficiency of such organisations depended not only on their members serving as informants – "the eyes and ears of the state" – but also on

their prestige as "model workers" (Li 2015: 62-5) and on their personalised networks with ordinary citizens (Whyte and Parish 1984: 337-39). Under the Maoist regime, these organisations did not limit themselves to monitoring and mobilising society; they also provided a space for their constituents to articulate their interests and did on occasions distance themselves from top-down "mass line" principles (Thornton 2011: 238). But the "activist state" and "the making of the total subject" led to a massification of symbolic and physical violence, terror, institutional collapse, and social fragmentation, reaching a climax during the Cultural Revolution (Chevrier 2018: 42-51).

From 1978 onward, the Party-state took a turn by putting an end to the "class struggle" principle, and reform and opening up reshaped the "post-revolutionary" political context. As Patricia Thornton explains, following the "erosion" of the Party's former system of collective institutions during the reform era and the Party's "reinvention of itself from a revolutionary to a ruling party," the CCP "retooled its mission and mode of operation," especially the mass organisations under its control (Thornton 2011: 239). These organisations remained active and followed the turn towards a pacification of society illustrated by the "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) principle, adopted in October 2006, stating:

> The work should be intensified in the grass-roots, the characteristics of the Party's work concerning the masses should be earnestly studied, and great effort should be made on the work concerning the masses. Party committees at various levels should always maintain flesh-and-blood relations with the masses and train a large number of professionals who are good at dealing with social issues. [3]

Contemporary mass and grassroots organisations in the reform-era manage, aggregate, and represent the interests of given social groups and communities in a dynamic yet constrained construction supervised by the Party, evolving from "social stability" to "governance" (Steinhardt and Zhao 2015). These intermediary political bodies can be organised into two types. [4]

Firstly, following the principle of "bridging" (*qiaoliang* 桥梁), mass organisations aim to advocate and protect the interests of given constituencies: workers are represented by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (*Zhonghua quanguo zonggonghui* 中华全国总工会), youth by the Communist Youth League (*Zhongguo gongchanzhuyi qingniantuan* 中国共产主义青年团), and women by the All-China Women's Federation (*Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui* 中华全国妇女联合会). United Front (*Tongyi zhanxian* 统一战线) organisations, such as the patriotic religious or the democratic parties, aim at linking the Party with groups that are less "politically advanced" but should still be rallied to the Party's cause (Jourda 2012). These different political "circles" are represented by the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (*Zhongguo zhengzhi xieshanghui quanguo weiyuanhui* 中国政治协商会全国委员会, *quanguo zhengxie* 全国政协), studied by Rebekka Å. Sagild and Anna L. Ahlers in this issue.

The second type of organisations focuses on given territories. They are the grassroots autonomous organisations for the masses (*jiceng qunzhongxing zizhi zuzhi* 基层群众性自治组织): villagers' committees (*cunmin weiyuanhui* 村民委员会) in rural China (see, among others, O'Brien and Li 2000) and residents' committees (*jumin weiyuanhui* 居民委员会) in urban China (see, among others, Read 2012).

Mass and grassroots organisations followed the profound transformation of Chinese society since the reforms of the late 1970s, bringing new challenges to their monopoly as intermediation bodies, but also new missions. To mention only a few examples, the implementation of the one-child policy in 1979 mobilised such intermediary organisations on the ground to promote birth control face-to-face with the population. Moreover, the All-China Women's Federation reinvented its legitimacy after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Howell 2000) by developing new forms of "women's work" (*funü gongzuo* 妇女工作), as Zhou Yunyun's article in this issue shows. Urban residents' committees were reactivated after the 1989 Tiananmen repression and became increasingly important in local surveillance after the 1999 crackdown on the Falun Gong 法轮功 movement in Beijing as well as during the SARS crisis (Thornton 2009). The end of the *danwei* system reconfigured urban governance (Bray 2005), social service provision, and labour relations. The new political economy of labour based on low-cost migrant workers challenged the traditional role of official trade unions, as Chloé Froissart, Liu Yan, and Meng Quan show in this issue, giving rise to a wave of labour NGOs defending the rights of migrant workers up until 2015 (Froissart 2006, 2011; Franceschini and Lin 2019).

The end of the *danwei* system also resulted in a growing need for social assistance to "vulnerable groups" (*ruoshi qunti* 弱势群体), and contributed to the rise of "community" residents' committees (*shequ jumin weiyuanhui* 社区居民委员会) and new forms of grassroots social work (Leung 1994). At the same time, the housing reform in cities transformed the governance of the residential space, and new actors – homeowners' committees, real-estate developers, and management companies – emerged next to residents' committees (see, among others, Merle 2014; see also Beibei Tang's article in this issue). The 2008 Beijing Olympics and the Sichuan earthquake extended the volunteering system as a new field of action for the Communist Youth League and urban residents' committees (see Jérôme Doyon and Emmanuel Jourda's article in this issue). Mass and grassroots organisations thus reconfigured and reinvented their role as intermediary political bodies following the changing politics of the Party-state and the changing social landscape.

To our knowledge, this is the first time a special issue has been dedicated to these bodies as a political object, with six articles focusing respectively on one organisation in today's China. Through qualitative in-depth research methods our contributors study the political transformations of these organisations in the post-Mao era, especially in the early twenty-first century, from Hu Jintao's slogan of building a "harmonious society" up to recent reforms under Xi Jinping. The reform of mass organisations launched in 2015 exemplifies these changes. The reform officially aims at "de-bureaucratising" these organisations (*qujiguanhua* 去机关化) so as to make them closer to the "masses," but also to strengthen Party control. The Party is defined as their "political, theoretical, and organisational leader" (*zhengzhi lingdao, sixiang lingdao, zuzhi lingdao* 政治领导, 思想领导, 组织领导). [5] As the articles in this issue highlight, this translates into different outcomes depending on the organisation. Diverging trends seem to emerge, for instance, between the Communist Youth League, studied by Jérôme Doyon, whose central apparatus has been weakened by the reform, and the Federation of Trade

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3. "Communique of the Sixth Plenum of the 16th CPC Central Committee," 11 October 2006, http://www.gov.cn/english/2006-10/11/content_410436.htm (accessed on 17 May 2019).

4. While each organisation presents specific features and evolves according to specific contexts, we only focus on the ones studied by the guest editors and authors in this issue.

5. "中共中央关于加强和改进党的群团工作的意见" (Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang he gaijin dang de quntuan gongzuo de yijian, Opinion of the Central Committee of the CCP on reinforcing and improving the Party's mass organisation work), *Xinhua*, 9 July 2015, http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2015/07-09/7395852.shtml (accessed on 20 May 2019).

Unions, which has been strengthened at the grassroots to limit the influence of labour NGOs (see Chloé Froissart, Liu Yan, and Meng Quan's article).

Ambiguities of conceptualisation: Beyond the state-society paradigm

Existing studies on state-society relations in post-Mao China tend to overlook the ambivalence and multiple roles of intermediary organisations. While the ambiguity of "dependent autonomy" (Lu 2008) has been noted, most studies focus either on the structural framework of state-NGO relations under the concept of state corporatism (Unger and Chan 1995), on Chinese governmentality (see, among others, Bray 2005; Jeffreys 2009), or on the agency angle of dynamic development of social organisations as part of a Chinese-style "civil society" (see, among others, Saich 2000; Li 2008; Unger 2008; Howell 2012; Hildebrandt 2013; Teets 2013; Chan 2013; Hsu and Hazmath 2014) or "associational revolution" (Wang and He 2010). The dynamics of "NGOs" are studied in detail without showing the complex role of mass and grassroots organisations, which are often in charge of supervising them, as Jérôme Doyon and Emmanuel Jourda show in this issue.

Studies on new governance experiments have turned their attention towards intermediary organisations, but this field of study remains quite segmented. Each organisation is studied as part of a specific governance system such as labour, feminist movements, or rural democracy. In the last two decades, for example, village elections have become a primary research object (see, among many others, O'Brien and Li 2000). At the same time, urban residents' committees are increasingly studied using qualitative methods (see, among others, Read 2012; Bray 2006; Heberer and Göbel 2011; Tomba 2014). However, the only publications looking jointly at these organisations remain in the field of rural-urban grassroots organisations without including other mass organisations (Benewick, Tong, and Howell 2004; Perry and Goldman 2007; Read and Pekkanen 2009; Chevrier, Roux, and Xiao-Planès 2010; Read 2012). Scholarly research has not yet focused on mass and grassroots organisations as a fully transversal object of research in contemporary Chinese studies, East Asian studies, or post-communist studies.

While existing research on intermediary organisations is useful to understand the structures, actors, and changing power dynamics on both ends of the model, these political intermediaries tend to be overlooked: mass and grassroots organisations are ambivalent, officially at the margins of the official structure, but working under the leadership and for the interest of the Party-state. At the same time, they interact daily with citizens' and non-state organisations without being fully part of the civic sphere of the *minjian* 民间, as they are rightly perceived by constituents as "part of the system" (*tizhinei* 体制内). Due to their "in-betweenness" – close to official Party-state institutions, close to social organisations, and close to the local population – they are often studied in two ways: either as mere extensions of the state or as state-sponsored social organisations.

A cross-sectorial study of the power practices of these intermediary organisations brings perspectives and concepts in comparative politics – intermediation – to understand their current political and social functions, as well as challenges in the early twenty-first century. Following a previous special issue of *China Perspectives* on the interactions between state actors and ordinary citizens (Thireau 2013), we intend to analyse interactions at the level of these intermediary political bodies in contemporary China. Beyond how these intermediary organisations "negotiate" the state (Saich 2000), this special feature highlights the physical presence of these organisations in policymaking or in face-to-face interactions, studying not only discourses, but also the everyday presence on the ground of their workers and cadres.

The politics of intermediation

In contemporary China, intermediary organisations carry multiple tasks of representing, mediating, translating, and assisting the Party-state and the population, by working as a political middleman in some cases, or as a frontline mediator in others. However, what role do these organisations have, when they often claim they "have no power" (*meiyou quanli* 没有权力)? As Jérôme Doyon's article in this issue shows, most Communist Youth League cadres mention their "lack of power and funds," and yet the organisation keeps attracting members. Urban residents' committee employees often compare themselves to "civil servants" (*gongwuyuan* 公务员) and policemen in complaining about their own lack of authority. They also stress how dependent on the Party they are: "If we could be independent (*duli* 独立) and work only for the residents, it would be easier." [6] This tension is at the core of the organisations' everyday work experience. However, beyond the idea of declining or marginal organisations, they are mediators working to keep open a space of articulation and keep active their "public" of constituents.

First, mass organisations evolve in a top-down political hierarchy as the Party-state's assistants who must translate, balance, and "harmonise" (*xietiao* 协调) the interests of their constituents. They work "next to" and "under" the Party-state, "for" the state, and they speak "in the name of" social groups. The first article of the special issue, by Rebekka Å. Sagild and Anna L. Ahlers on the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), shows well how the representatives translate or interpret political messages coming from the constituency they are supposed to represent into the policy-making process. This is in line with previous works on religious organisations, which are a key constituent of the CPPCC, and have underscored their role as "translators" of official political discourses in coherence with contemporary religious interpretations (see, among others, Palmer 2009; Doyon 2014; Chang 2018).

Second, these organisations operate as frontline workers who implement state policies and provide services to their constituencies, as well as "mediate" conflicts (*tiaojie* 调解) from below, a mission that has existed since the 1950s. As Michael Lipsky (2010: 13-25) explains, an essential part of the grassroots work in administration is composed of discretionary power: in China, although mass and grassroots organisations have no decisional power, they have a relative autonomy. Far from the vision of cold, systematic, and static "face work," the unclear institutional identity of such intermediary organisations creates a flexible work environment that can facilitate the employees' legitimisation towards their constituents. These organisations' embeddedness in social worlds and contexts, their knowledge of local affairs, and their role of mediator, are crucial elements of their everyday experience. In this perspective, the third article in this issue by Chloé Froissart, Liu Yan, and Meng Quan shows how the Federation of Trade Unions tries to partially reinvent how it mediates relationships between workers and employers through experiments, for instance in the field of wage negotiation, contracts, or in strengthening social ties. In the case of grassroots organisations, the agents working in urban residents' committees give much attention to improving their "door-to-door" (*xia hu* 下户) techniques and

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6. Interview by Judith Audin with the director of a residents' committee, Beijing, 1 October 2015.

"popular" styles (dressing casually, speaking in the local dialect, playing popular games, etc.) when carrying out administrative work in the neighbourhoods, because face-to-face contact is necessary to be accepted by the "ordinary people" (*laobaixing* 老百姓) (Audin 2015). The last article of this issue by Beibei Tang describes the role of grassroots organisations in the production of "intermediary" governance emerging in "hybrid" spaces of rural-to-urban communities, and explains how both residents' and villagers' committees can innovate to adapt to local situations. These organisations hence show a certain level of flexibility at the grassroots level and are often used as adjustment variables at the cornerstone of "experiments" (Derleth and Koldyk 2004).

Incomplete civil servants in para-administrations

Existing research on mass and grassroots organisations overlooks the impact of the bureaucratisation process on their cadres and workers. Indeed, a significant amount of ideological, administrative, and social work is now carried out through these intermediaries by paid staff, who stand between the population and the Party-state as street-level bureaucrats. This process of "participative bureaucratisation" (Audin 2015) is a way to "revitalise" organisations that have become rather unattractive in recent decades (Read 2000), but it also challenges the organisations' legitimacy towards local populations, as staff tend to be recruited outside of local communities, and workers are not always accepted by their constituents (See Tang's article in this issue). Existing studies tend to overlook how members of such organisations experience forms of "moral dilemma" similar to frontline subaltern agents in other contexts (Thireau 2013: 5). In the second article of this special issue, Zhou Yunyun shows how local Women's Federation cadres have to deal with pressure from their superiors, from the constituents they meet in face-to-face interactions, and also from themselves as they try to "do the right thing" for women's rights. Despite limited resources, they are expected to deal with a wide array of professional tasks in many different fields (such as conducting social research, providing social welfare, healthcare services, and legal consultancy, coordinating local administration, and mediating conflict…).

The subaltern ethos in intermediary organisations, between "cadre" (*ganbu* 干部) and "staff" (*gongzuorenyuan* 工作人员), is reinforced by a condition of "incomplete civil servant" (Massicard 2015). The ambiguous status of mass and grassroots "self-governed" organisations allowed the upper-level administration, confronted by a growing workload, to progressively turn the staff of such organisations into subaltern workers under a particular political economy of labour. These members often stand in an undefined position, under a new condition of "low-cost" staff, to cite Jérôme Doyon's article in this issue. They mostly work for a modest wage and a low social status. Zhou Yunyun's article in this issue shows how local Women Federation cadres have to deal with a large amount of stressful work, but without any career prospects to be promoted either within the WF system or into Party-state institutions, reinforced by official critiques of "low-quality cadres." [7] Paradoxically, although the organisation's mission is centred on "women's work" and "women's liberation," the undervaluation of its work is an emblematic example of how gender inequalities are being reproduced within China's political sphere. In other organisations such as the residents' committees, most of the staffing is also composed of women, reproducing a gendered division of labour within the Chinese administration system (Audin 2012). The staff of most mass and grassroots organisations are thus

subjected to a hidden form of labour exploitation: as peripheral political auxiliaries of the Party-state, they form an underclass of workers in para-administrations.

From social control to social welfare

Finally, a characteristic of all intermediary political bodies is their traditional intervention in the field of social assistance, and their redeployment in the field of social welfare. After the end of the planned economy and the ideal-type of the *danwei* micro-labour and welfare system, mass and grassroots organisations absorbed a growing number of newly emerged social issues (Wong and Poon 2005). Mao's slogan of "Serving the people" (*wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务) took renewed meaning in the emerging third sector of "social service" (*shehui fuwu* 社会服务) provision (see, among others, Leung 1994, 1995; Leung and Xiao 2016). The new social missions of these organisations go beyond an automatic "welfarist incorporation" (Howell 2015): in their everyday work practices, they shape the production of social assistance. Since the 2000s, when the principle of a "people-centred" approach (*yi ren wei ben* 以人为本) was stressed by the Hu-Wen administration, "social issues" (*shehui wenti* 社会问题) have increasingly attracted the Party-state's attention as a way to maintain "social stability" (*shehui wending* 社会稳定). Many employees in intermediary organisations have thus put forward their involvement in the "care" sector, providing assistance, but also organising events and services for "vulnerable groups" (*ruoshi qunti* 弱势群体) (see for instance Leung and Xiao 2016).

Moreover, Chinese mass and grassroots organisations contribute to the redefinition and reconfiguration of the "collective" in the post-reform era and the introduction of neoliberal norms. From socialist surveillance to the reform era's social work, the management of social networks takes the form of a new art of mobilising "volunteers" (*zhiyuanzhe* 志愿者). The articles by Jérôme Doyon and Emmanuel Jourda in this issue unveil the complex network of organisations gravitating around the Communist Youth League, which supervise volunteering activities in China and abroad, suggesting a humanitarian strategy of legitimation. Local volunteers also constitute essential actors in the everyday work of mass and grassroots organisations, especially students and retirees (Audin 2017).

To conclude, this joint research on Chinese intermediary political bodies unveils key elements – intermediation, incomplete bureaucratisation, and welfare provision – of these organisations, which contribute to state-formation in China and the expansion of Party authority without officially being part of the Party-state. They act "next to" or "under" the Party-state, and are directly in contact with the population. Focusing on these organisations is all the timelier as their mediation work, as well as the associational sphere, have been subject to major changes under Xi Jinping. Looking at the Party-state through its margins, this special issue hopes to initiate a scientific dialogue on the resilience of intermediary political bodies in communist or post-communist countries more broadly, for instance in Vietnam (Gibert and Segard 2015) or Cuba (Colomer 2000).

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7. To cite Xi Jinping's 2015 reform, for instance, "the cadres in mass organisations must further improve their capacities and their quality" (*quntuan ganbu nengli suzhi xuyao jin yi bu tigao* 群团干部能力素质需要进一步提高). See "中共中央关于加强和改进党的群团工作的意见" (*Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang he gaijin dang de quntuan gongzuo de yijian*, Opinion of the Central committee of the CCP on reinforcing and improving the Party's mass organisation work), *Xinhua*, 9 July 2015, http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2015/07-09/7395852.shtml (accessed on 20 May 2019).

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