

PART I

AUTOCRATIC GRASSROOTS POLITICS

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Excerpt  
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## 1

## Introduction: Party-Based Authoritarianism in China

Political parties are pivotal institutions, in democratic and authoritarian contexts alike. Almost all seventy-one nondemocracies, in 2015 governing 44 percent of the world population, have parties. In most of these countries at least one party is tightly controlled by the ruling clique, such as United Russia, the United Malays National Organization, and Turkey's Justice and Development Party.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to other autocratic arrangements, such as military dictatorship and personalistic rule, party-based authoritarianism has proven itself effective in governing modernizing societies and mitigating democratization pressures.<sup>2</sup> But how do parties contribute to effective authoritarian rule? And what are the origins of effective regime parties? The first question calls for a study of contemporary autocratic governance. The second question takes us back to history. The literature provides answers to both questions, but incomplete ones. The case of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which is the focus of this book, promises to change the way we think about the functions and origins of effective authoritarian regime parties.

This book demonstrates that an authoritarian regime party can provide the organizational infrastructure that allows a state to project authority throughout its realm. By implication, the book explains why authoritarian regimes are usually more effective in some parts of their territories than in others: The uneven presence of rank-and-file party members makes an important difference for policy implementation on the ground. The CCP's rank and file empowers the state at the local level, precisely because the overwhelming majority of party members is not in bureaucratic positions, but works outside the government. Chapter 2 develops a new theory of authoritarian regime parties, after which the following two chapters test

the theory's observable implications for subnational variation in contemporary state-building outcomes, and describe causal mechanisms. To do so, Chapter 3 analyzes the particularly challenging enforcement of the one-child policy, and Chapter 4 turns to the universally relevant state-building task of collecting taxes.

The next two chapters turn to the historical origins of local party strength, arguable found in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1939–1945). Chapter 5 shows that Japanese occupation shielded the Communists from persecution by the incumbent Nationalist government and allowed the party to recruit members behind enemy lines, shaping membership patterns at the time of the Communist takeover in 1949. As Chapter 6 demonstrates, early party membership patterns persisted and shape the party's geographic base even today. The last two chapters bridge the temporal gap between the wartime experience and the post-Mao party era by turning to two important episodes in the history of the People's Republic: The Great Leap Forward with its catastrophic famine (1958–1961) in Chapter 7 and the height of the Cultural Revolution turmoil (1967–1969) in Chapter 8. These cases are important, because they caution us that the party has not always and under all circumstances functioned as a faithful implementer of central policies. Yet even under these rather exceptional historical conditions, party membership patterns shaped variation in local policy outcomes.

The remainder of this introduction is organized as follows. After an overview of the argument, I describe the research process that has led to this book. Next, the empirical portion of the introduction provides impressionistic evidence on the functions of the party as a screening, disciplining, and mobilization device. Rank-and-file party members are at the center of this description. Moving from the micro level of the party to the macro level, the chapter then suggests that a map of party membership density captures crucial aspects of governance in the People's Republic. In addition, geographic membership patterns allow analysis of historical continuities and study of the persistence of historical legacies in a parsimonious way. The introduction ends with an overview of the nine chapters. Overall, this introductory portrait of the CCP provides the intuition for a new approach to regime parties, which is the main contribution of this book.

#### 1.1 THE GRASSROOTS ORIGINS OF EFFECTIVE AUTHORITARIAN RULE

The CCP is an exceptionally important political institution of the 20th and 21st centuries on many counts. It has dominated the world's most

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populous country since 1949. Its leaders are shaping global politics and its organizational branches are present worldwide, some flourishing in the open, others proliferating covertly. The party's decisions may continue to affect peoples' lives around the globe well into the future. Under the auspices of the party, the People's Republic governs a territory that is roughly equal to the United States, but whose diverse population is five times larger. It has maintained effective rule, while many other countries in the world, and much smaller ones, struggle with anarchy and violence. The emergence of a modern and functional Chinese state in the mid-twentieth century was certainly not a foregone conclusion, if we think of the widespread violence in the nineteenth century and the five tumultuous decades in the twentieth century between the Boxer Uprising in 1900 and the Civil War ending in 1949. This book argues that in addition to existing explanations pointing to the role of the party in mediating elite conflict, the party's presence at the grassroots level of society must be at the center of explanations for the effectiveness of the Chinese state. The party's rank and file allow the state to penetrate local society; its local branches are capillaries that enable the microcirculation of information. Across policy areas, the rank and file of the single party are key to explaining the lasting effectiveness of the regime.

Uncovering the sources of Chinese state strength is important, first and foremost to understand how 20 percent of the world population is governed today. At the same time the country is not as irrelevant for comparative studies as some analysts have us believe, by putting China into a residual classification category comprising the "almost disappeared" species of "unambiguously nondemocratic regime[s]."<sup>3</sup> Like the majority of authoritarian countries today, China is a party-based authoritarian regime.<sup>4</sup> The existence of a regime party is an important characteristic of the regime, since strong parties have been identified as a crucial ingredient for authoritarian regime survival.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is not clear how parties bolster authoritarian regimes, nor how some parties have grown stronger than others. These questions have taken on new urgency now that ideologies have lost some of their force and an instrumental logic has taken center stage. The case of China and the CCP can illuminate the functions and origins of regime parties. To be sure, compared to other regime parties, the CCP may be a particularly sophisticated organization. And yet, notwithstanding differences in the degree of the party's effectiveness, the ways in which party members are deployed in the service of the regime are comparable across nondemocratic regimes. The Chinese case allows investigation of the organizational principles and the causal mechanisms by which party members empower the state. Therefore the case of China

promises to shine a bright light on the functioning of party-based authoritarianism regimes.

This book goes beyond the conventional wisdom in the literature on authoritarian regimes, according to which regime parties function as patronage-distribution devices, facilitate political deals at the elite level, and serve as democratic concessions.<sup>6</sup> Moving from the elite to the grassroots level, the book sees the CCP as a sharp authoritarian tool to penetrate the vast and uneven spatial expanse of China's realm. Effective regime parties help rulers elicit accurate information about society beyond the centers of power. I found ample qualitative evidence that the CCP fulfills such a role. For example, an internal paper by the Department of Public Security highlights the unique value of information from local party cells – as opposed to information from the local government apparatus – for suppressing local protests.<sup>7</sup> For systematic evidence, we can take advantage of the fact that the CCP is unevenly present throughout its territory. Using a definition explained in Section 1.4.1, China's "red provinces" with high party membership density look very different from "pink provinces" where the party is less present:

- In red areas, local governments were more effective at monitoring the implementation of the one-child policy. While bureaucrats tend to be able to achieve the goal of reducing the number of births, it is much harder to avoid the severe side effect of gender-selective abortions, which is more successfully achieved in red localities.
- In red areas, local governments extract more taxes. Party members help local governments overcome asymmetric information problems that plague other tax systems at the grassroots level. They also coerce and convince fellow citizens to pay their dues – even if at the same time party members themselves have the privilege of being more lightly taxed.

In short, the book analyzes the party's role in the information architecture of the authoritarian state, with implications for state capacity and ultimately for regime durability as well.

The differences between "red provinces" and "pink provinces" were at least as tangible during the first decades of the People's Republic as they are now. However, probing the limits of the straightforward argument that the party functions as faithful implementer of central policy, one finds cases when the presence of many party members on the ground did not help to advance the central leadership's policy agenda.

- In the decade after the Communist takeover, some local leaders were still locally connected, deeply committed, and independently thinking revolutionaries. They realized the danger inherent in Mao's Great Leap policies and were willing to drag their feet. Although such leaders were a minority, one would typically find them in areas with the most combatant party members, namely the places most violently contested between the CCP and the Japanese Imperial Army. This small minority of remnant revolutionaries resisted communization policies and alleviated the famine, but this minority of the most committed could not prevent the death of tens of millions of Chinese.
- Party members were also not enthusiastic when their own privileges were at stake during the great turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. When Mao Zedong called on citizens to attack the institutions of the party state, formal party hierarchies ceased to function. Rather than promoting the turmoil, party membership networks contained it. Even when joining in the fray, party members acted in a way that facilitated a quick return of order.

Refining the simple party-as-implementer hypothesis, in these two historical instances the party appears, from the perspective of central leaders, as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, strong party networks slowed down policy implementation, but with the benefit of hindsight we know that it actually helped to achieve larger state-building goals: Great Leap Forward policies happened to be a devastating scheme, so that episodes of resistance now make the party seem like a self-corrective device. Similarly, the party's role in the Cultural Revolution suggests that the institution is self-protective, and thereby ultimately advances the party state's resilience.

Moving back the causal chain, as indicated by the arrows in Figure 1.1, the next goal is to find out why the party is so much more present in some areas of its realm than in others. While the party was founded in 1921, it was only under China's partial occupation by the Japanese army from 1937 to 1945 that party organizers were able to set up a lasting, local structure. Japanese occupation jump-started the party by giving the Communist Party respite from government persecution and by letting it mobilize citizens on patriotic (or xenophobic) anti-Japanese grounds. As my analysis shows, areas formerly occupied by Japan even today tend to remain the party state's power base. Japan's intrusion into the East Asian mainland was a critical juncture in modern Chinese history.

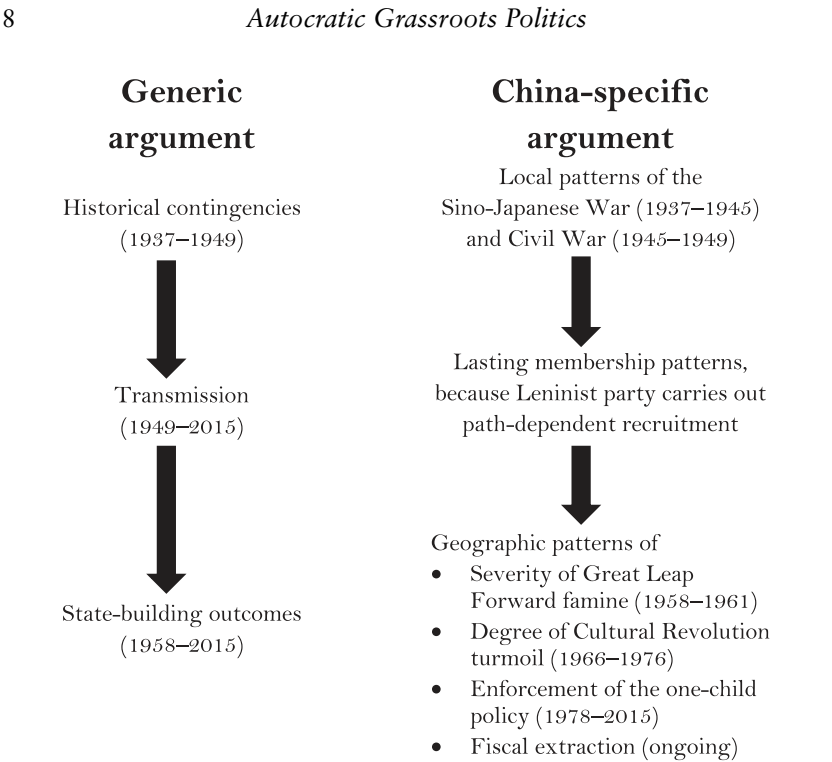


FIGURE 1.1 Outline of the argument: history, transmission, contemporary effects

Why can the party not turn all of China from pink to red? In other words, why do formerly Japanese-occupied areas still tend to be red? The overlap can be only very partially explained by Japanese occupiers and CCP leaders sharing similar strategic interests in governing certain localities. More importantly, path-dependent continuities result in regional patterns of CCP membership that reflect contingencies of the Sino-Japanese War from seven decades ago. Since Japan occupied only some parts of the Chinese territory, we can isolate the lasting effect of the Sino-Japanese War on membership patterns today.

Yet one cannot point to historical continuities after the critical juncture of Japanese occupation without at the same time noticing a gradual evolution away from these initial patterns. Following Kathleen Thelen’s call to take slow-moving process as seriously as critical junctures, the analysis scrutinizes the evolution of party membership patterns over time.<sup>8</sup> To do so, this book applies formal models of economic growth and convergence to the dynamics of local party membership, pointing to the time periods when membership patterns took new shape and assessing the overall



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“half-life of history”: how long it takes for the initial differences in party penetration to be cut in half. The result shows that the effect of Japanese occupation on party strength disappears over time, but only at a very slow rate. The methodological approach, albeit developed with the example of the CCP in mind, could be applied to all membership-based organizations, as well as other evolutionary processes of political convergence.

The book also argues that different types of recruits self-selected into party membership during this period, depending on the locality where they joined the party. Members recruited in the party’s safe havens tended to be more opportunistic than members recruited in dangerous proximity to the Japanese occupiers. To identify safe havens and embattled areas, the book uses fine-grained information from maps and reports, found in Japanese archives, as well as in party organization histories. My claim is that one decade after the Japanese occupiers had left, the more opportunistic recruits readily complied with Mao’s communization policies, even as their disastrous consequences became increasingly clear. While overall the CCP failed to stop the Great Leap Famine, in the areas which had experienced the most intense anti-Japanese struggle, local CCP leaders attempted to resist the central policy and thereby dampened its impact. With the aid of fine-grained mortality statistics, I find fewer famine deaths in formerly embattled areas, even after controlling for socio-economic differences.

There are multiple reasons why early party membership patterns persist (see Chapter 6). One important reason is that apparently the Organization Department does not place a priority on evening out the organizational reach of the party. Strategically, it might be advantageous to recruit precisely in the places where the party is most present already, because it is least costly to gather information about new members. In other words, party organizers have good reason to go after the low-hanging fruit first. In addition, there might be certain beliefs and governance techniques inherited from the imperial past, which continue to inform Chinese statecraft. Imperial era techniques, perfected over centuries, remain uniquely suited for a central authority to govern a large and diverse continent in an autocratic fashion and therefore contribute to regime resilience. Whereas other states see uniform control and nationwide standardization as top priorities, China’s administrators are unusual in making conscious and explicit choices of how to deploy power resources and enforce authority selectively. For instance, 300 years ago the Chinese imperial court used a standardized coding system to assess governance challenges in its territory and deploy state resources accordingly. While imperial-era

governance techniques certainly shape the assumptions that underlie strategic choices today, they are outside the scope of this book.<sup>9</sup>

## 1.2 FROM FIELD OBSERVATIONS TO A THEORY OF THE PARTY

This book has its empirical roots in China's second-tier cities and hinterland counties. First inspecting politics on-site, talking to elites and citizens, I extensively used the investigative mode of political science before turning to the tools of statistical inference and to the formal logic of models. Moving between localities, whether as a field researcher or a business person, one is bound to encounter the uneven reach of the Chinese state.<sup>10</sup> When I first visited the four counties in Shandong that served as my initial research sites, I was struck by how each of these local governments had its own interpretation of a policy called *New Socialist Countryside Construction* 社會主義新農村建設. Since this policy created visible outcomes, including brick-and-mortar structures, the differences caught the eye. In one county, the government was content to experiment with garbage collection and provide the villagers with fresh paint – choosing a dark-yellowish color, apparently in an attempt to maximize its lifetime. In another county, driven by an ambitious, prefectural party secretary parachuted in from Beijing, the government took a more activist stance, deployed Great Leap Forward rhetoric reminiscent of Maoist times, bulldozed villages, and asked villagers to buy newly built apartments, whose price was not affordable to most locals and whose location and layout had obvious disadvantages. Yet another county had employed researchers from the urban planning department of one of China's leading universities to conduct surveys and select villages, whose villagers would most welcome – or least oppose – resettlement programs.<sup>11</sup> Finally, another county avoided implementation altogether, setting up one fake construction site to show to upper-level cadres (and one foreign Ph.D. student) eager to see *New Socialist Countryside Construction*. Although this particular policy was too multifaceted to be easily amenable to comparison,<sup>12</sup> it motivated the question of what makes the state strong, maybe even strong-armed, in some places, but more soft-spoken in others. Researching this question let me discover the role of the party.

Nothing in the political science literature had prepared me to look for an answer related to party organization at the grassroots. The party used to be of utmost interest to social scientists in the 1960s and 1970s, but is receiving little social scientific interest today.<sup>13</sup> Informed by Lily Tsai's work,<sup>14</sup> I expected local society to play a decisive role in shaping local state–society relations, with homegrown societal organizations