

The State of the Chinese Communist Youth League under Xi Jinping*

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Abstract

This article argues that under Xi Jinping's leadership, Youth League faction (Qingniántuán: 青年团), Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members who came from Communist Youth League (CYL), has been tremendously intervened and restricted by Shanghai faction (Shànghǎituán: 上海团), CCP members who came from local politics. These two factions have taken place in the CCP since Deng's campaign of reform and opening-up. CYL is the Party organization dealing with youth affairs and CCP member recruitment. However, the growing numbers of CYL members and its increasing roles in youth affairs also caused other CCP members, especially those who come from locality to perceive CYL as their threat that the growing CYL would permanently dominate the Party. As Xi Jinping has been supported by Shanghai faction, the current status of CYL has been almost fully controlled by the Party, and the number of CYL member has been forced to reduce. As a result, CCP can still maintain its conservative way of the Party member recruitment and its governance for overall Chinese according to the CCP Constitution.

Key Words: Chinese Communist Party, Shanghai Faction, Communist Youth League, Xi Jinping

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Introduction

The politics within Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after Deng Xiaoping has been described as the rivalry between Shanghai faction (Shànghǎituán: 上海团) and the Communist Youth League faction (Qīngniántuán: 青年团). The former is the group of high-ranked CCP politicians who start their careers from local politics and, then, are promoted to the politics at the national level, while the latter comprises of the leading politicians who have their experience from the Communist Youth League of China (Zhongguó Gòngchánzhuyì Qīngniántuán: 中国共产主义青年团), the Party organization responsible for recruiting Chinese youths from the educational system to become the full Party members after they reach the criteria.

Jiang Zemin was well-known as the head of Shanghai faction, while Hu Yaobang and Hu Jintao were the leaders of the Youth League faction. It is believed that these two factions competed like political parties to dominate the CCP high-ranked positions. Those positions for the rivalry include CCP secretary-general, politburo standing committee, politburo, and the CCP central committee, etc. In each CCP congress, the faction that wins the competition will hold the position of the paramount leader (Zhùigāolíngdǎorén: 最高领导人) of the country (Li, 2016, pp. 13-17).

However, since Xi Jinping was elected as the paramount leader, there have been unprecedented changes to the Communist Youth League (CYL), for example, more promotion of the CCP Young Pioneer, the Party organization that deals with the children younger than the members of CYL, instead of CYL; more intervention of the Party in the League's affairs; and tighter control of CYL membership. It is believed that this is because Xi came from Shanghai faction and might want to oppress his rival to the ground (Parton, 2022). Nevertheless, the evidence and the statistics that are discussed in this article do support this belief. This is because some scholars misinterpret the relationship between the Shanghai faction and the Youth League faction that they are competing for the high-ranked positions within CCP like the political parties competing each other for winning the government (Chen, 2014, pp. 112-118). In this case, the question is how the drastic changes on the CYL during Xi Jinping contribute to the future direction of the relationship between CCP and CYL.

This article argues that under Xi Jinping's leadership, Youth League faction has been tremendously intervened and restricted by Shanghai faction. These two factions have taken place in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since Deng's campaign of reform and opening-up. As CYL deals with youth affairs and CCP member recruitment, the growing numbers of CYL members and its increasing roles in youth affairs also caused other CCP members, especially those who come from locality to perceive CYL as their threat that the growing CYL would permanently dominate the Party. As Xi Jinping has been supported by Shanghai faction, the current status of CYL has been almost fully controlled by the Party, and the number of CYL member has been forced to reduce. As a result, CCP can still maintain its conservative way of the Party member recruitment and its governance for overall Chinese according to the CCP Constitution.

I will begin with the description of how the CCP members are recruited as the division between Shanghai and Youth League faction begin immediately in the recruitment process. Then, the role of CYL in the CCP history will be discussed in order to explain that while CCP relies on CYL to impart Communist ideology to the Chinese youths via the educational system, CCP does not always trust CYL, especially 'during' and 'after' Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. The article will conclude with the update on the current status of CYL under Xi's leadership.

The Recruitment Process of CCP membership

In 2022, there are 98.4 million CCP members, which is 6.9% of the total 1.418 billion Chinese populations ("Number of Chinese Communist Party (CCP)...," 2022), and the number has increased every year. This make the CCP the largest political party in the world. One of the reasons why CCP can attract a large number of Chinese people is that CCP membership can actually benefit their living as well as their career. For the daily life, the CCP member can enjoy many 'political credentials' like cheaper public facilities cost, cheaper rental cost, and higher income. For the career advancement, the CCP membership is considered as another certificate for the applicant when applying for a job. Furthermore, there are also some high-ranked positions in governmental organs, educational institutions and state-owned enterprises that are reserved for only CCP members (Walder, 1995, pp. 322-325). All of these can imply that CCP membership is very popular in Chinese

society, and a large number of Chinese people apply for it every half year. Hence, CCP member recruitment process must be very stringent.

According to the ‘Detailed Rules for the Development of Party Members of the Communist Party of China’ (中国共产党发展党员工作细则) issued by General Office of the CCP Central Committee in 2014, the applicants who want to join the Party, firstly, have to present their party membership application to a party organization of the unit where they work or study, or the Party organization of their place of residence in the case that there is no established Party organization in their work or study unit. After that, the Party will appoint one or two formal party members to be the coordinators in order to inform the applicant about the process of the Party member recruitment as well as to check the applicant’s political consciousness, moral character, performance, and his or her family political background (“Detailed Rules for the Development of Party Members...,” 2014).

Then, the process of recruitment formally begins. The applicant has to participate in the Party’s activities like attending the Party’s classes on Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and the socialism with Chinese characteristics and the Party’s training programs as well as the Party’s social works. Moreover, the applicant must learn about the Party’s line, principles, policies, and the Party’s basic knowledge, education on the Party’s history and fine traditions, work style, the core socialist values, and the Party organizational culture (“Detailed Rules for the Development of Party Members...,” 2014).

The evaluation process takes place every six months by the Party branch committee. Once passed all the evaluation, the applicant will hold the status of ‘the probationary party member’ or ‘Zhuǎnzhèng’ (转正), who will become a full member after completion of 1 year of the probationary period. During this time,

Those who conscientiously perform their Party member obligations and meet the conditions for Party members shall be converted to schedule into full Party members. For those for whom it is necessary to continue tests and assessment and education, the probationary period can be extended once, with the extension period not being less than half a year and, at most, not more than one year. Those who do not fulfill Party member obligations and do not meet the conditions for

Party membership shall have their qualification as a probationary Party member revoked (“Detailed Rules for the Development of Party Members...”, 2014).

In fact, it is extremely hard to get the Party membership status because the actual assessment process starts since how the applicant gets the application form, which is not according to the formal rules. There are at least 3 ways to get it: 1) going directly to the Party organization as stated in the rules, 2) being invited via the Party’s cadre system at the primary level, and 3) being proposed and supported by CYL.

Applying for the Party membership by going directly to the Party organization and asking for the application form by oneself is almost impossible to pass the assessment as there is no reference or recorded profile for the Party except for the extraordinary case that the applicant is a very famous or talented person. The ordinary applicant may be declined several times. It is said that even Xi Jinping himself chose this way for applying for the Party membership. His applications were declined 10 times, until his tenth attempt that he was finally accepted to be the Party member in 1974 (Chen, 2023).

The second way for getting the application form is to be invited to join the Party cadre system. The cadre or ‘gànbù’ (干部) refers to a person who works for the Party but does not gain the Party member status. Generally, the Party organizations at the primary level¹ have their own cadres, and they will recruit a person who has potential in doing his or her work from the organization where there is the Party organization. The Party committee at the primary level will send a party member to approach the targeted person and to ask him or her whether he or she would like to be the Party’s cadre or not. If the targeted person agrees, he or she will get the cadre statue and have to work for the Party in addition to his or her routine work. When the period of party member recruitment comes, some of the cadres will have the opportunity to be invited by the committee of their party organization to fill in the application form. Getting the application form by this way is more possible to achieve the Party member status than the first.

¹ The Party organizations at the primary level compose of 2 types of organization: 1) the local party organizations that are ranked lower than the district level, which include sub-districts, townships, towns, villages, and communities and 2) the Party organizations established in any enterprise, government organ, school, hospital, research institute, social organization, company of the People’s Liberation Army, and any other primary-level work unit. See, National Congress of the Communist Party of China. (2022). **The Constitution of the Communist Party of China (Amendment)**, revised and adopted at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on 23 October 2022.

The third way is to be proposed and supported by CYL since it has the quotas for suggesting CYL members to become the full CCP members when all the criteria of the candidates are met. The first step for this condition is to become the member of CYL. Since the criteria for applying to be the CCP member determines that the applicant must reach the age of 18, the member of CYL must be the youth between the ages of 14 and 28. CYL will recruit the smartest and the most talented students from Chinese educational system in order to persuade them to join CYL as its members.

Once becoming the CYL members, they will have opportunities to strengthen their academic preference via the Party educational training programs and to prepare themselves for pursuing the future career path as the CCP members because CYL organizational structure resembles that of the CCP. They also have to do the social and ideological works with other non-CYL member youths in order to cultivate the Communist ideology in Chinese society as a whole. Therefore, the CYL members must be keen on building both academic and activist capabilities.

Hence, it is quite clear that CYL works with almost all the educational institutions in China, and the huge number of Chinese students participate in CYL as its members. In 2022, there were 73.58 million CYL members, while the number of CCP members are 98.4 million as mentioned earlier. This is where the problem takes place because CYL wants to increase the number of its members as well as the quotas for CYL members to become CCP members, while other CCP members who received their membership from the first and the second way want to limit CYL quotas. As a result, the issues of the control over CYL as well as CYL autonomy became the frictional points within CCP.

The History of CYL: ‘Tuánpài’ (团派) and its Struggle for Autonomy

Although Bolshevik Party established All-Union Leninist Young Communist League or Komsomol in 1918 in order to deal with youth affairs after the revolution, in China, CYL was founded after the May Fourth Movement in 1920 as the Socialist Youth League of China even before the establishment of CCP in July 1921. Yet, CCP issued ‘Resolution on the Question of the Youth Movement’ in 1922 to limit the league’s political autonomy (Doyon, 2023, p.17-19). This illustrates the relationship between these two organizations at the very beginning, and the League finally

became subordinated to the Party. In 1925, the League was renamed to ‘Chinese Communist Youth League.’ Then, the name of the League was changed several times as well as its functions and activities. During the Cultural Revolution, CYL was accused of being revisionist, and was forced to stop its activities in 1966. When the Cultural Revolution ended, the League resumed its activities and played an important role in the Reform and Opening Up policy under Deng Xiaoping.

As Deng’s reform focuses more on the actual capability than fanciful ideology, the task of recruiting the most capable people to work for the Party became a vital core of the reform. This is why CYL had to resume its activities with clearer position and function and had more autonomy from CCP. In 1978, the structure of CYL which resembled that of CCP was set both at the central and local levels. It was in 1982 when the CYL quota system for pursuing CCP membership was introduced, which has set the direction and duties of the League to this day. Moreover, under Deng’s reform, CCP loosened its control over CYL, allowing the latter to enjoy more autonomy to engage with young Chinese people.

During the reform, many CCP members who had had an experience in CYL were promoted to the CCP high-ranked positions. Hu Yaobang, for instance, was one of the leading figures who had been the leader of CYL from 1952 to 1966, and then took the position of the CCP Secretary General from 1982 to 1987. During his term as the second leader after Deng, he promoted the role of intellectuals and youths as the solid foundation of the reform. The rise of Hu also gave birth to the idea of ‘Tuánpài’ (团派), a talented and smart CCP leader who came from CYL, as the promised future of Chinese politics. Consequently, many CYL activities were widely embraced and supported by both CCP and Chinese public. One of the examples at that time was ‘Project Hope’ (Xiwàngōngchéng: 希望工程), which was launched in March 1989 so as to improve the primary education in many poor Chinese regions.

Unfortunately, the death of Hu Yaobang sparked a huge public protest at Tiananmen Square in June 1989, which is the turning point of the relationship between CCP and CYL. After the political crisis, CYL was the one to be blamed for failing to communicate with the youth. Accordingly, many CYL initiatives to engage more with the youth were turned down. Moreover, the League was criticized that it pampered the student movement too much and that it failed to effectively managed

the organization as well as the situation. As a result, the issue of controlling CYL's autonomy came to the forefront once again.

Yet, CYL still struggled to engage more with young Chinese despite the discrimination from CCP. In 1993, for example, the campaign of 'Young Volunteers Operation' was initiated to solicit millions of youth volunteers to help the League to carry on the social works with the aim to reduce poverty, to improve educational standard and to protect the environment. All of these allowed CYL to attract more youth to work for it. Certainly, as the number of the youth joining CYL activities increased, CCP's attitude towards CYL became more concerned and more distrustful. The CCP concerns included growing network of the CYL within CCP members, deviating ideologies of the youth, and reducing effectiveness and quality of CYL members. Because of these, CCP became more restrictive towards CYL affairs and cut lots of CYL budget for its youth activities as well.

The equation between the two was changed again when Hu Jintao, the second 'Tuánpài,' assumed the paramount leader status in 2002. He had been CYL first secretary from 1984 to 1985 before he was appointed to be the Party Secretary General of Guizhou from 1985 to 1988 and of Tibet during 1988 – 1992, where he was very successful in controlling political and racial uprising. His road to the central leadership had already set when Deng Xiaoping was very impressed in Hu's achievement in Tibet and decided that Hu Jintao would be Jiang Zemin's successor.

During Hu's era, CYL gained a lot more autonomy in managing its projects and activities. One clear evidence is the growing number of CYL members from 73.5 million in 2006 to 89.91 million in 2012 ("Number of Communist Youth League of China (CYLC)...," 2022), which exceeded the number of CCP members (85.3 million) in the same year ("Number of Chinese Communist Party Members...," 2022). This was the first time after the Tiananmen incident that CLY gained such a huge autonomy, about which other types of CCP members were concerned whether the growing CYL would take control of the Party. Of course, when Xi Jinping, who was supported by Zeng Qinghong the prominent Shanghai faction leader, succeeded Hu in 2012, the growing influence of CYL became the Party's problem and needed to be managed.

The Status of CYL under Xi Jinping's Leadership

When Xi Jinping became the paramount leader in 2012, there were a lot of problems that he had to manage. He decided to launch anti-corruption campaign, centralize the fragmented local administration, and reform the government. It seems that he aimed to centralize his power first and would leave the League problem to be tackled afterward. Yet, Youth League faction was indirectly targeted by being accused of the act of corruption and disloyal to the nation. Xi also reduced the role of those who came from the League in implementing his policies.

After achieving his campaign for centralization, Xi began to take some direct measures to the League, which included CYL reformation and its population control. The General Office of the CPC Central Committee, on one hand, issued the 'Reform Plan of the Communist Youth League Central Committee' on 2 August 2016 to reassure that CYL was CPP's assistant and reserve army, and was the bridge between CCP and the government to connect with young people. The plan proposed reform measures in four major aspects: the CYL structure, the recruitment, the CYL activities, and the CCP-CYL relationship ("The General Office of the CPC Central Committee issued...", 2016).

The first aspect deals with CYL structure reform. The CYL personnel composition must be improved by increasing the proportion of the grassroots and primary CYL members. The mechanism for CYL meeting must be widened in order to increase the effectiveness of its recommendation and consultation. The function and the organizational structure of CYL also need to be adjusted. For example, CYL central committee should hold the supreme authority in conducting CYL activities. Moreover, informal or secret CYL meeting must be abolished. CYL must also establish a project-based mechanism to allow young people to understand the true history of the League, to participate in the League's social work, to enhance their sense of ownership, and to feel that CYL is their home.

The second aspect is to reform the selection, employment and management of members in the CYL central organs. All types of CYL cadres including full-time, temporary and part-time must be carefully selected according to the required functions of each. The full-time cadre must be strictly recruited and their ages must be qualified. The temporary and part-time cadre selection should be based on work requirement and should not completely correspond to the administrative

level. Moreover, CYL should establish a system for its cadres in order to have the direct contact with other youths. Each full-time or temporary league member must regularly have the network of approximately 100 CYL members in different fields, while a part-time league member should have the network of 10 ordinary young people, and strive to have regular conversation, interactions, offline activities, and face-to-face communication.

The third aspect is to reform the work, activities and grassroots organization building of the innovation group. CYL must implement ideological and political guidance from CCP throughout all its work and activities, thoroughly study and implement the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's series of important speeches, and extensively carry out publicity and education on socialism with Chinese characteristics and Chinese Dream. The plan highlights that it is the political task of young people to listen to the Party and follow the Party. Moreover, the 'Online Communist Youth League' project must be fully implemented, focusing on smart team building and youth participation. 'Online Communist Youth League' that combines working network, contact network, and service network to form 'Internet + Communist Youth League' must also be established in order to deepen the integration of CYL and other youths in both online and offline operations.

The fourth aspect is to increase CCP's support and guarantee for CYL work. It should regard 'recommending outstanding League members as candidates for party membership' as an important responsibility of the League. In achieving this, CYL should improve the government coordination mechanism, formulate youth development plans, and formulate corresponding plans in various localities, focusing on the connection with economic and social development plans. The grassroots work positions in CYL must be promoted. Furthermore, the plan also indicates that CYL must improve a stable and standardized system for guaranteeing funding for its work.

It is clear that CCP under Xi Jinping tries to rearrange CCP-CYL relationships with more CCP control and less CYL autonomy. Then, on 21 April 2022, the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China released the white paper on 'Youth of China in the New Era,' which, though not directly stated, pushes a lot of responsibilities to CYL in order to equip Chinese youth to be prepared for the new era. According to the white paper, many of CYL projects, i.e. Project Hope,

Young Marxists Training Project, Youth Core Socialist Values Study Project, Youth Physical Health Improvement Project, Youth Internship Plan, Youth Choicest Cultural Works Project, Youth Internet Civilization Development Project, Young Chinese Volunteer Campaign, and Youth Ethnic Unity and Progress Promotion Project must be integrated and coordinated in order that Chinese youth can play an important role in the rejuvenation of Chinese nation (The State Council Information Office, 2022a).

On the other hand, the population of CYL members is also controlled under Xi's leadership. Not only has the number of the League members been reduced from 89.5 million in 2013 to 73.58 million in 2022 ("Number of Communist Youth League of China (CYLC)...," 2022), but Youth League faction has also lost many CCP high-ranked positions as well. For example, during the 18th CCP Congress, there were 2 Politburo Standing Committees (PSCs) who came from Youth League faction. They were Premier Li Keqiang, and Liu Yunshan. The number of Youth League faction in the PSC was increased to 3 during the 19th CCP Congress. They comprised of Li Keqiang, Wang Yang, and Han Zheng. However, there are no PSC who comes from Youth League faction during the 20th CCP Congress.

Moreover, Xi Jinping has ideologically engaged more with 'Chinese Young Pioneer' (CYP), which is one of the organizations under the control of CYL. The organization consists of children between the ages of 6 and 14, the recruitment process of which resembles that of CYL. The Young Pioneers who are above 14 will be gradually transferred to CYL members. Interestingly, the number of CYP has been growing from 110 million young pioneers in 2021 to 114.67 million young pioneers in 2022 (The State Council Information Office, 2022; and Cheng, 2023). This reflects Xi's policy direction towards youth affairs. Clearly, CYP is one of the best channels to cultivate Xi's influence to Chinese children as Xi's Thought was imposed to be the core of CYP teacher's training materials in 2021 (Bloomberg News, 2021). If this campaign is successful, CYL will be under Xi's full-control within 10 years since CYP members will finally become CYL members. All of these are the evidence that CYL has lost its autonomy under Xi's leadership.

Conclusion

In sum, CYL is totally sidelined under Xi Jinping since its autonomy has been limited by the CYL reformation plan, the CYL population control, and the growing of CYP. In fact, these caused a lot of frustration to the Youth League Faction. Combining with the failure of Xi's Zero-Covid policy and the growing Le Keqiang's influence in the country's economy, the Youth League Faction prepared to force Xi Jinping to make pledges to adopt a more pro-market stance after the 20th Party Congress, and he might have been obliged to appoint more members of the 'anti-Xi faction' to the Central Committee and the Politburo (Wo-Lap Lam, 2022).

However, this CYL campaign against Xi Jinping immediately disappeared after the U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi did her unscheduled state visit to Taiwan from 2 to 3 August 2022. The U.S. action stirred more tension to the cross-strait relations, which the strong Chinese leadership is absolutely required to manage. As a result, CYL and all the 'anti-Xi factions' had no choice but must support Xi Jinping's measure in dealing with Taiwan and the U.S. unconditionally, which allowed Xi to establish his absolute and unchallenged leadership faction in the 20th CCP Congress in October 2022. However, the elimination of the Youth League faction also causes the lack of an economic expert in the Politburo Standing Committee of the 20th Congress, most of whom are ideologically and politically oriented. The Third Plenary Session of the CCP Central Committee, in which Xi's leadership must propose the new economic policy to determine the direction of economic development in China, has been postponed from December 2023 to July 2024. This could be a sign of asymmetry within Xi's leadership and the rearrangement and renegotiation between Shanghai faction and Youth League faction should be required to solve this asymmetry.

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