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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Doyon, J., & Yang, L. (2022). Shades of red: changing understandings of political loyalty in the Chinese Communist Party, 1921-2021. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 51(3), 386-410. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026221119220>

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Shades of Red: Changing Understandings of Political Loyalty in the Chinese Communist Party, 1921–2021

Journal of Current Chinese Affairs
2022, Vol. 51 (3) 386–410
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sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/18681026221119220
journals.sagepub.com/home/cca



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Abstract

While changes in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recruitment are generally described as different phases focused on recruiting either “reds” or “experts,” giving more or less weight to political or technical criteria, we instead stress the importance of changing understandings of political loyalty to examine these evolutions. By tracing these changes throughout the party’s 100 years, we show that how the party understands loyalty is largely strategic, detached from a purely ideological approach. The CCP has alternatively approached loyalty in ascriptive terms, based on class background, and behavioural ones, looking at active displays of loyalty or passive obedience. The level and form of activism expected from party members and cadres have also dramatically changed over time. Relying on recruitment data, this article shows that it is paradoxically during periods of party expansion that the CCP becomes more politically demanding with its members.

Manuscript received 1 December 2021; accepted 11 July 2022

Keywords

Chinese Communist Party, political loyalty, redness, political recruitment

Introduction

As the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) 100th anniversary approached, General Secretary Xi Jinping called on party members to “not forget their original aspirations

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and firmly remember their mission” (不忘初心, 牢记使命, *buwang chuxin, laoji shiming*). This slogan illustrates the current leadership’s focus on party members’ devotion and loyalty to the party (Central Office of the Chinese Communist Party, 2020). Regarding party-state officials more specifically, various researchers have noted the increased importance of political criteria in cadre recruitment and discipline under Xi (Brødsgaard, 2019; Doyon, 2019; Li, 2018; Snape, 2019).

How to interpret the CCP’s focus on “original aspirations” and devotion to the organisation? For some, the current emphasis on virtue and loyalty contrasts with the declining importance given to political criteria in recruiting party members and officials in post-Mao China (Snape, 2019). Until recently, many viewed the Chinese party-state as moving away from being a “virtuocracy” (Shirk, 1982), a promotion system based on one’s political virtue understood as the conformity to ideological ideals, and towards a meritocracy or technocracy (Bell, 2018; Lee, 1991; Nee and Lian, 1994). Similarly, surveys conducted by Bruce Dickson (2014) show that while “working for Communism” was one of the main incentives during the Mao era (1949–1978), it has been replaced by less ideological motives in the post-Mao era, such as advancing one’s career. By contrast, some research stressed the continuity between Mao and post-Mao China regarding the mobilisation and disciplining of party members and cadres (Heilmann and Perry, 2011; Koss, 2018; Luo, 2021). Speaking to the issue of political loyalty more specifically, Andrew Walder (1985) has noted that while it has taken different forms over time, in response to political and economic circumstances, party members and cadres’ political loyalty has always been central to party leaders, and the “redness,” or virtue, of party members and officials, was never replaced by expertise, or ability, as a recruitment criterion.

This article contributes to this debate by exploring how the party’s understanding of political loyalty has changed over its 100-year history. Challenging the tendency to treat the CCP’s definition of loyalty as a monolithic and unchanging concept, we stress the complex and pluri-dimensional aspects of the party’s understanding of this notion. At different times, the question of who must be loyal, emphasising cadres or members more broadly, and how to show it, has changed drastically. When studying the relationship between the party and the individuals who populate it, amounting now to more than 95 million members (Organisation Department of the Chinese Communist Party, 2021) and more than seven million officials (Chan and Gao, 2018), a whole branch of literature is dedicated to better understanding how the CCP did and does think about ability and performance, and how this understanding has changed over time. Previous studies have analysed how work performance, understood in various ways, influences political recruitment and promotion (Landry et al., 2018; Li and Zhou, 2005; Shih et al., 2012). There is, by contrast, very little research on how the CCP understands political loyalty, despite the impact, it may have on the CCP’s ability to maintain cohesion among its ranks as well as expand and diversify its membership, key aspects of its resilience (Shambaugh, 2008).

To fill this gap, we focus on how the CCP itself has discussed loyalty and political virtue throughout its history. We rely on a corpus of Central Documents, the most critical intra-

party documents (Lieberthal, 1978), spanning 1921 to 2021 (see in the Appendix for a list of documents; we referred to these documents in the main text after their number in Table 1 in the Appendix): they contain all the party regulations, orders, and directives issued by the CCP Central Committee itself focusing explicitly on issues of organisational development, the recruitment and appointment of party members and officials. While various departments of the CCP, and in particular the Organisation Department in charge of human resources, have published hundreds of documents on recruitment issues, the Central Documents issued by the CCP Central Committee are the more authoritative, encapsulating the perspective of the party leadership at a given time (on the importance of party rules, see Smith, 2021). To historicise and contextualise these central regulations and orders, we also rely on a range of other party documents and leader speeches.

Throughout this corpus, we focus on three critical notions the party uses to describe its relationship with its members: “loyalty” (忠, *zhong*), “virtue” (德, *de*), and “party spirit” (党性, *dangxing*). As detailed below, the party started using the term loyalty at its founding in 1921 and put forward its goal to recruit virtuous (as well as competent) members in the 1930s. We stress that by the late 1930s, these two notions started to be fused in the CCP’s discourse. In other words, a loyal member is fundamentally a virtuous one. The concept of “party spirit,” understood as an unconditional dedication to the party, embodies this merging of loyalty and virtue. In line with Kenneth Jowitt’s (1992) argument that a unique feature of communist parties is that they are political organisations “based on charismatic impersonalism,” the notion of “party spirit” implies a member’s devotion to the organisation itself rather than its cause or leaders. “Party spirit,” popularised through Liu Shaoqi’s famous *How to Be a Good Communist* written in 1939, emerged in the context of the CCP’s struggle against the Guomindang (GMD) and Japan (Pieke, 2018; Sorace, 2016). In addition to the close links between these three notions (i.e. loyalty, virtue, and party spirit), this article highlights their malleability, which has allowed the CCP to interpret and operationalise them in different ways throughout its history, depending on its needs and objectives.

With this long-term survey, we trace not only the changes in the party’s understanding of loyalty at different points in time, but also what drove these evolutions. We argue that the party changed its definition of political loyalty when it aimed at expanding and/or diversifying its membership in response to new social, economic, and political circumstances. The first dimension of variation is between ascriptive understandings of loyalty, giving more importance to one’s background and personal connections, and behavioural ones, based on one’s actions (Walder, 1985). Early on, the CCP became reliant on an ascriptive understanding of loyalty based on class labels to ensure its survival as a small, clandestine group in a hostile environment. Yet, this ascriptive definition of loyalty was superseded by a behavioural one when the party needed to expand its recruitment beyond the so-called revolutionary classes of workers and peasants. For instance, “party spirit” emerged in the late 1930s and 1940s as a behavioural approach to political loyalty, when membership went from 25,000 in 1936 to close to five million in 1949 and the ratio of members not from a worker or peasant background doubled (Gore, 2011). The ascriptive definition of loyalty based on class labels was

then abandoned in the early years of the reform era as the party expanded its recruitment among technocrats and burgeoning economic elites to implement economic reforms.

The second dimension of variation, focusing on the behavioural element, is tied to the level and form of activism expected from party members and cadres. While in some cases, a heightened focus on activism may be accompanied by extreme rectification campaigns and a sharp, albeit short-term, decrease in party recruitment, we show that overall it is paradoxically at the outset of periods of party expansion that the CCP becomes more demanding. As we will see in the remainder of the article, such insistence on activism can take many forms depending on the historical context, but, all in all, it can be understood as a willingness to mould new recruits whose loyalty remains partially questionable, and to deal with enemies from within – intellectuals seen as close to the GMD in the 1930s, the 1989 “rebels,” or more recently party members who would challenge the authority of Xi Jinping as the core leader. More broadly, the political virtue of its membership is a way to maintain the party’s vanguard and charismatic status while it becomes increasingly inclusive (Jowitt, 1992).

This article chronologically traces the evolution of the party’s understanding of loyalty, focusing on turning points, and explores how it interacts with the CCP’s recruitment trends. During its early years (1921–1935), the CCP developed an ascriptive understanding of the loyalty of its ranks in order to survive the GMD’s continuous repression. The notion of “party spirit” later emerged as a behavioural approach to loyalty in the context of the post-Long March organisational developments (1935–1948). After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and until Mao’s death in 1976, the CCP oscillated between periods of intense activism and membership expansion, and other periods focused on economic planning. Under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, the party moved to a behavioural definition of political loyalty, tied initially to one’s actions during the Cultural Revolution. As the party opened its doors to entrepreneurs in the early 2000s with Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents,” the demand for loyalty became increasingly focused on cadres. At the same time, in the context of rising corruption, the CCP’s definition of political virtue and party spirit expanded into the realm of morality, asking officials to be loyal but also exemplary in their personal and familial ethics. Finally, as the CCP under Xi Jinping’s leadership further diversifies its membership, we see a push towards activism: the morality and ethics of both party members and cadres are being increasingly monitored to ensure their loyalty to the party is genuine.

Class Labels as an Initial Answer to the Party’s Difficulties in Guaranteeing Loyalty (1921–1935)

In its first charter (1921) the CCP stipulated that people who wanted to join the party had to show their willingness to become “loyal and honest members” (忠实党员, *zhongshi dangyuan*) (Document 1, p. 4). However, the party had difficulties implementing this requirement. The CCP’s founding members recruited “intellectuals” through Marxist study societies or their regional connections at universities. These recruits were mainly

loyal to the members they were personally tied to, rather than the organisation as a whole (Bianco, 1971; Van de Ven, 1992). Due to its lack of funds to support its members as professional revolutionaries, the CCP had to allow them to work in government or companies. What's more, in 1923, one year after the CCP joined the Third International, which was under the *de facto* leadership of the Soviet Union, it received instructions from the latter to cooperate with the GMD (Saich, 2020). Accordingly, its members automatically qualified for GMD membership, which further complexified where exactly their allegiance lay (Selected Central Committee Documents of the CCP, 1989a).

Against this background, the CCP developed organisational tools to solve this issue. In 1923, it standardised the screening process for recruiting members. Since then, a recruit has to be introduced by two party members and to remain a "candidate member" (候补党员, *houbu dangyuan*) for months of screening before becoming a full member (Selected Central Committee Documents of the CCP, 1989b). Yet, as its membership expanded from around fifty in 1921 to about 50,000 in 1927, the party lacked the financial means and ideological support to shape members' loyalty in a complex environment (Van de Ven, 1992: 181). Facing this challenge, the party could not do much more than ask its new members to read Karl Marx's work (Document 2).

In 1927, the breakup of the cooperation between the CCP and the GMD led to a reduction of about 80 per cent of the CCP's membership, with many members finding themselves at odds with the party (An, 1949; for a detailed survey of the breakup, see Yang, 2008). This pushed the CCP to investigate why they betrayed the organisation and how to ensure its members' loyalty (Document 2). To solve this issue, and following the Third International's orders, the CCP increasingly relied on its members' class status to assess their loyalty. The investigation into the breakup with the GMD revealed that most of those who betrayed the party were "petty intellectuals" and their actions were said to have led many local party organs to be destroyed by the Nationalist government. In response to this, the CCP put a great deal of effort into replacing party secretaries, from the provincial to the county levels, with members labelled as "workers" and "poor peasants" (Document 3). For example, Mao Zedong was instructed to reshuffle the Hunan Provincial Committee he headed. Among its nine new committee members, at least three had to be selected among workers and poor peasants, and three had to be specifically responsible for mobilising workers and peasants (Selected Central Committee Documents of the CCP, 1989c). In 1930, the Third International ordered the CCP to further reduce the proportion of intellectuals among its members: more than 80 per cent of its members had to be workers and poor peasants. The Third International's view, which the CCP adopted, was that the "proletarianisation" of the CCP could help the party maintain its members' loyalty (Document 4).

This ascriptive approach to loyalty, relying on class status as a proxy, resulted in a great purge in the Jiangxi revolutionary bases. Between late 1930 and 1934, many members labelled as "rich peasants" were arrested and executed for spreading rumours against Mao Zedong and complaining about his military decision-making (Chen, 1994). According to the CCP, the Nationalist government's military operations had shaken their faith in the party, and the rumours they spread were meant to subvert the

party from the inside (Document 5). The CCP then ordered the examination of the class status of all members in an attempt to further purge intellectuals and rich peasants. The official view was that members with the correct class background, that is, workers or poor peasants, would never waver in their determination to support the party (Selected Central Committee Documents of the CCP, 1989d). This examination of members' class status ended as the Nationalist government destroyed the communist bases in Jiangxi. The CCP's Central Committee had to evacuate from Jiangxi in 1934, and its membership plummeted from 300,000 to 40,000 after the Long March in late 1935 (An, 1949).

After the Long March (1935–1948): The Emergence of “Party Spirit”

As the CCP reflected on its failure in Jiangxi, its understanding of loyalty took a behavioural turn. In December 1935, the CCP convened a Politburo meeting to review the Third International's policy concerning recruiting members (Sheng, 1992). The resulting resolution stated that members' class status should not be the primary criterion for assessing their loyalty and that intellectuals could be faithful “allies” (同盟者, *tongmeng zhe*). The result was that intellectuals could join the party again, and their behaviour and work performance became the basis for demonstrating their loyalty (Document 6). In the following years, the CCP managed to expand its territory and set up a new power base in these areas. As it did not have enough capable party members and cadres (Lee, 1991: 26), it indeed pushed to recruit many university students and leftist intellectuals (Documents 7 and 8). Mao Zedong also realised the importance of intellectuals in mobilising villagers to support the party and its military. He said that if intellectuals were “relatively loyal and honest” (比较忠实, *bijiao zhongshi*) to the party, they were qualified to be party members (Mao, 1939a). In Mao's words, these party members should be “both virtuous and expert” (德才兼备, *decai jianbei*) (Mao, 1939b). Among these intellectuals, schoolteachers, in particular, played a crucial role in the Chinese communist revolution. They helped the CCP take root in the countryside and to further create and sustain base areas in central and north China (Liu, 2009).

Along with this practical turn regarding its views on loyalty, a certain distrust of intellectuals, particularly recent recruits, emerged in the late 1930s and early 1940s when the CCP claimed to have discovered the infiltration of traitorous members into its organisations. All members came under examination, checking their class backgrounds and their connections with the GMD (Lee, 1991: 36). As per the Nationalist government's regulations on prisoners' release, between 1934 and 1935 more than 60 per cent of party members were said to have filed statements of repentance, renouncing their membership in the party and opposing communism (Liu, 2004). While some of them later managed to reinstate their CCP membership, and even take up important positions within party organs, their loyalty was always under suspicion. Recently recruited intellectuals in general were also suspected of working for the GMD (Selected Central Committee Documents of the CCP, 1989e).

As the CCP's membership significantly increased during the war with Japan (1937–1945), intellectual members again accounted for a substantial proportion of its membership, and the party viewed them as self-interested. The party hence attempted to remould them and cultivate their loyalty in order to consolidate its strength. Liu Shaoqi's *How to Be a Good Communist* (1939) exemplified this turn towards a behavioural understanding of loyalty. According to Liu, being loyal requires members to subordinate their interests to those of the organisation, whatever the circumstances, and even sacrifice their life for the party. Self-sacrifice and a shared acceptance of the party's centrality were seen as crucial in forging a suitable morality among members. Consequently, "morality" increasingly meant being loyal to the party and serving its interests. In Liu's words, when party members have "only the party's interests at heart," their unwavering "party spirit" is established (Liu, 1939).

The Yan'an Rectification Movement (1941–1945) was launched based on this understanding of loyalty, aiming at rectifying party members and cadres, and remoulding them into loyal servants of the organisation, as well as consolidating the centrality of Mao's leadership (Document 10). While this behavioural take on loyalty and party spirit was still merged with ascriptive elements – the "proletariat" being seen as reliable and loyal – these efforts to remould members through political education, criticism, and self-criticism meant that even disloyal ones could be transformed into "the awakened vanguard fighters of the proletariat" (Liu, 1939). To ensure that party organs remained under the management of "loyal, honest, and reliable" (忠实可靠, *zhongshi kekao*) members (Document 9), the party initiated the Cadre Examination Campaign in 1943. This first massive inner-party rectification campaign aimed at remoulding unreliable individuals deemed to have infiltrated its organs (Gao, 2018). In the CCP's words, these members had "two hearts" (两条心, *liangtiao xin*): one was towards the party in public and the other was towards the GMD under the cloak of secrecy. The campaign thus aimed to transform members with "two hearts" into ones with "one heart" (Selected Central Committee Documents of the CCP, 1989f). As a result, many intellectual members were investigated due to their past relationships with members of the GMD when studying at university. But Mao realised that this radical practice could lead to new great purges: he ordered local party leaders not to kill any intellectual members and initiated a re-examination campaign to investigate their cases (Selected Central Committee Documents of the CCP, 1989g). In the end, the CCP proclaimed that the re-examination in Yan'an had shown that only 20 per cent of intellectual members were, to different degrees, unreliable or disloyal (Selected Central Committee Documents of the CCP, 1989h). In parallel, the CCP also institutionalised cadre evaluation to avoid adverse selection by strengthening the organisational departments at each level and institutionalising "virtue" as a key criterion in the recruitment and promotion of officials. This overall move to a partly behavioural view on loyalty, and the rectification campaign that accompanied it, set the basis for the expansion of the CCP. In 1945, when the war with Japan ended, CCP membership increased to more than 1.2 million, paving the way to seizing national power (Mao, 1991 [1945]). Over the following three years, the party's membership increased three-and-half times, and the CCP

continued relying on the cultivation of members' loyalty as a source of its cohesiveness (Liu, 1986 [1951]).

The Mao Era (1949–1976): Expertise, Activism, and the Display of Loyalty

Between 1949 and 1976 the CCP membership increased from 4.48 to 35 million and its understanding of its members and cadres' loyalty changed along with the party's political agenda. The issue of CCP members' and cadres' loyalty also became increasingly entangled with their behaviour and job performance, oscillating between periods of intense activism and others focused on economic planning. These oscillations marked changes in recruitment strategies as reflected in Figure 1, with activism being underscored when the party expanded.

During the early years of the PRC, particularly before 1951, the lack of CCP members and cadres to administer the country and manage industries compelled the party to change its criteria for defining its members' loyalty, leaning towards a behavioural approach. Loyalty increasingly had to do with their ability (Document 11). To demonstrate their loyalty, members had to acquire the scientific knowledge and skills necessary to serve the party's new political agenda (Schurmann, 1971: 5). In early 1949, An Ziwen, then director of the CCP's Central Organisational Department, reported to Mao that the party was in dire need of recruiting new members who could manage industries and cities. The existing members, coming mainly from a rural background, lacked the knowledge and skills to establish economic stability and carry out industrialisation (Gao, 2004). The party's organisation departments at different levels focused on recruiting individuals with higher education or technical skills, and existing members had to show their political zeal by undergoing further training. As shown in Figure 1, this led to a decrease in CCP admissions because the total number of experts and intellectuals was small compared to the rural population that constituted the bulk of the membership.

To counter this trend, the CCP started expanding again in the early 1950s, while closely monitoring the recruits' political loyalty. The CCP recruited intellectuals, yet it still distrusted their loyalty in the Cold War context and initiated political campaigns to examine their virtue and loyalty (Oksenberg, 1968). In early 1950, the CCP launched a rectification campaign among party members and cadres to secure their loyalty by cultivating their "virtue" (Document 12). Two years later, Liu Shaoqi said it was wrong to prioritise members' expertise over their virtue and loyalty. In Liu's analysis, many educated members had studied and worked under the Nationalist government, which put their dedication to the party in doubt. They might be in touch with officials of the Nationalist government in Taiwan. Liu thus ordered organisation departments to cultivate their political virtue through criticism and self-criticism sessions (Liu, 2005 [1953]). In that context, the Central Organisation Department standardised "virtue" and "expertise" as the critical criteria in party member and cadre recruitment. Here virtue referred to the

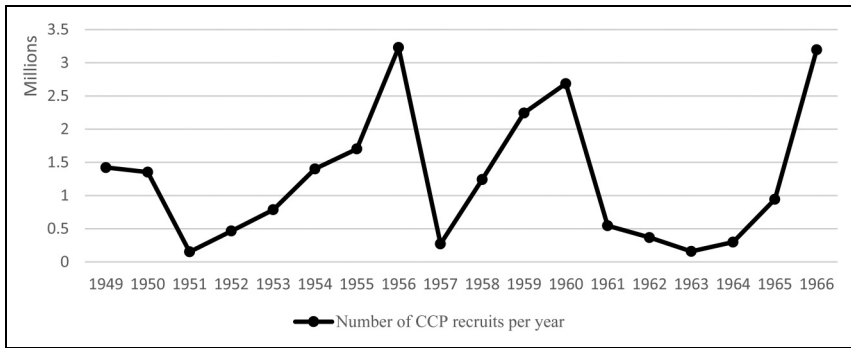


Figure 1. Trends in Chinese Communist Party recruitment (1949–1966).

Source: Organisation Department of the Chinese Communist Party (2011).

acceptance of the party's ideology and regulations and was therefore indistinguishable from political loyalty (Document 14). Expertise meant members should learn the necessary scientific knowledge and skills to perform their duty effectively. Meanwhile, the new technical cadres were instructed to work under the supervision of "old revolutionaries" to ensure their virtue and loyalty towards the party (An, 1953). The CCP thus ordered local units to cultivate these new party members: if they were relatively loyal, provincial authorities had to promote them, even if it bypassed the normal promotion process (Document 13).

Starting from 1955, the CCP's top leaders became increasingly concerned about collusion between the American camp and the alleged Chinese domestic "enemies" (Mao, 1955). Against this background, the mid-1950s witnessed both high levels of recruitment and the purge of allegedly disloyal party members. The party initiated a campaign to examine the individual histories of its members, ranging from the rank-and-file to provincial party secretaries (Selected Documents on Organisational Work, 1957). According to official statistics, between 1955 and 1960, more than 51 million cadres, party members, and public sector staff members were investigated. Around 630,000 of them were identified as "hidden enemies" (隐藏的敌人, *yincang de diren*), most of them intellectual party members (Collection of Documents from the Campaign to Wipe Out Hidden Counterrevolutionaries, 1961: 32).

The party's distrust of intellectuals peaked with the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957–1958 and the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961). More than half a million intellectuals were forced into manual labour or banished to frontier regions (Cheek, 2015). Cadres with intellectual class status were said to have become a privileged class as they had indulged in a "bourgeois lifestyle." In the early 1960s, millions of cadres were sent to villages to live, work, and eat together with villagers (Selected Documents on Organisational Work, 1960). Making them more like villagers and cultivating their sense of the "proletariat" became one of the main ways of ensuring they would be loyal to the party (Document 16). To showcase their political loyalty, they had to share the villagers' daily routine

(Selected Documents on Organisational Work, 1960). While the emphasis on monitoring the behaviour of party members and cadres to ensure their loyalty took place at a time when the CCP membership was increasing rapidly (1951–1960), as shown in Figure 1, the extreme form taken by the Anti-Rightist Campaign led to a disruption of recruitment in 1957 (Document 15). The following years saw a decrease in recruitment as the CCP blamed rural cadres for the failure of the Great Leap Forward and curtailed its expansion in the countryside (Selected Important Documents since the Founding of the People's Republic of China, 1996).

CCP recruitment started to pick up again in 1964 and peaked in 1966 in the wake of the Socialist Education Movement and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Once again, CCP urban party members and cadres were sent to the countryside to change their lifestyle to resemble that of villagers, their ability to adopt a “proletarian” lifestyle being a sign of loyalty (Document 17). About three-and-half million officials and university students were sent to the countryside to carry out the Socialist Education Movement (1962–1966) (Perry, 2019: 552).

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a unique period as personal loyalty to Mao Zedong was placed above loyalty to the party. With the party apparatus virtually collapsing, Mao sustained his reign through a personality cult (Wu, 2014). While party spirit as an organisational view of loyalty became less relevant, it was during this period that a behavioural approach to loyalty became central within the CCP. Mao's personality cult translated into repeated and ritualistic demonstrations of loyalty that pervaded everyday life, art and culture (Leese, 2011). While Figure 1 shows a net increase in CCP recruitment in 1966, the disruption of the CCP bureaucracy and the lack of data or archival material make it impossible at this point to systematically analyse how this personalised view on loyalty was operationalised in the party's recruitment policy in following years.

The Deng Xiaoping era (1978–1997): Party Spirit Against Factionalism and Rebellion

After the beginning of Reform and Opening following Mao Zedong's death, the party's approach to political loyalty changed drastically, moving away from ascriptive criteria. Class labels gradually disappeared as a criterion to join the Communist Youth League and the CCP, as well as to enter school or receive job assignments. Individuals were no longer to be referred to by their earlier class designation (Lee, 1991). The CCP also changed its policy concerning individuals' overseas connections, as such links were no longer a legitimate reason to bar someone from joining the party (Lee, 1991: 191). Overall, one's family background or social relations became less important in evaluating one's loyalty when admitting them into the party or getting them promoted.

The implementation of economic reforms required technically skilled individuals and, as a result, educational qualifications became increasingly important in recruiting CCP members and officials (Lee, 1991). In 1980, Deng Xiaoping called for the recruitment and promotion of individuals who were “revolutionary, younger, more educated, and

more technically specialised” (革命化、年轻化、知识化、专业化, *geminghua, nianqinghua, zhishihua, zhuanqiyehua*) (Deng, 2014: 316). The “productive forces standard” (生产力标准, *shengchan li biao zhun*) became central in cadre management as recruiting and promoting officials was increasingly based on their technical skills and work performance (Takahara, 2018). Yet, Deng still emphasised revolutionary qualities, referring to CCP members’ and cadres’ adherence to the current party line and their behaviour during the Cultural Revolution. The party line was defined by the “Several Principles of Political Life in the Party,” a landmark central document of the reform era issued in 1980 (Document 18). It criticised the previous poor implementation of collective leadership and stressed the leadership’s opposition to “personal arbitrary rule.” It called on party members to “study diligently, be both red and expert” and revived the notion of “party spirit” after it was set aside during the Cultural Revolution, presenting it as a remedy against factionalism.

This definition of party spirit directly targeted the individuals who had advanced their political careers under the protection of the “Gang of Four”:

“There are still a number of cadres and Party members relatively deeply influenced by Lin Biao and the ‘Gang of Four’ that are still factionalist, and are even still conducting factionalist activities; [...] ‘there are no visible mountains but there are hidden rocks’” (Document 18).

A notice on the selection of cadres more specifically was issued in 1986, calling for a careful investigation of their behaviour during the Cultural Revolution and since the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee held in December 1978. Against this background, a rectification campaign was implemented (1983–1987) to deal with the “three kinds of people” who obtained party membership and advanced their political careers during the Cultural Revolution (Baum, 1994; Ch’i, 1991).

In line with what we have seen during previous periods, this turns into a definition of loyalty based on members’ current and past behaviour that took place at a time of party expansion. As shown in Figure 2, the number of yearly party recruits started to increase again in the early 1980s after a decade of overall stagnation and decrease, and it peaked during the rectification campaign.

The definition of political loyalty based on members’ behaviour during the Cultural Revolution became obsolete once the party had weeded out what it perceived as factionalist elements. As a result, party recruitment progressively became routinised and procedural in the late 1980s. Figure 2 in fact shows a clear drop in recruitment after 1985–1986. In addition to the decrease in recruitments, widespread inactivity among party members has been widely seen as a sign of political decay, leading to the 1989 movement (Ch’i, 1991; Rosen, 1990).

The June 1989 mobilisations, in which many CCP members took part, pushed the party to rethink its approach to recruitment. A central notice published in August 1989 criticised the low quality of party members and the tendency to rely mainly on age and diplomas in appointing and promoting cadres. It noted that the party could not



Figure 2. Trends in Chinese Communist Party Recruitment (1972–2020).

Source: Organisation Department of the Chinese Communist Party (2011); “Internal Chinese Communist Party Statistical Reports” (from 2012 to 2021), <https://news.12371.cn/dzybmbdj/zzb/dntjgb/> (accessed 12 April 2022).

rely on “the productive forces” standard as a substitute for the principle of having both virtue and talent and that recruiters “must be prevented from paying more attention to talent and less to virtue” (Document 20). In 1990, the party drafted for the first time a separate central document dedicated to the process of recruiting CCP members (Document 21). To limit adverse selection, it stressed the screening and training of individuals before their admission to the party. It set a minimum training requirement of forty hours for new recruits and a compulsory bi-annual evaluation of every cell’s recruitment work. The political education of party members and cadres to strengthen their party spirit was further stressed by a 1994 central decision on party building (Document 22). This emphasis on loyalty and political education was accompanied by another wave of party expansion as shown in Figure 2. This post-1989 recruitment drive has been widely documented and was particularly strong among students: the party wanted to ensure they developed a stake in the regime’s survival (Gore, 2011; Rosen, 2004).

The “Three Represents” (2000): A Moral Turn in the Party’s Understanding of Loyalty

As China further liberalised its economy, Jiang Zemin initiated the Three Represents policy to co-opt an emerging middle class within the party. Jiang Zemin first introduced this policy during an inspection tour of Guangdong Province in February 2000. In practice, the policy lifted the ban on recruiting private entrepreneurs into the CCP (Dickson, 2003), as the party was to represent not only the three revolutionary classes – workers, farmers, and soldiers – but also the “advanced productive forces” (先进生产力, *xianjin shengchanli*), the “advanced culture” (先进文化, *xianjin wenhua*) and the “interest of the vast majority of the Chinese people” (中国最广大

人民的根本利益, *zhongguo zui guangda renmin de genben liyi*) (Jiang, 2002). This policy was included in the party charter in 2002. This change was accompanied by a new push in party recruitment after 2002, as shown in Figure 2. It also accelerated the sociological transformation of the CCP towards a middle-class party: while workers and peasants still represented more than 50 per cent of its membership in 1997 (Gore, 2011: 19), they represented less than 35 per cent in 2019 (Organisation Department of the Chinese Communist Party, 2020).

Due to high levels of corruption (Wedeman, 2012), which resulted in the masses increasingly objecting to party members' morality (Li, 2008), discussions of members' and cadres' ethics became increasingly important in the late 1990s and 2000s. A 2001 central document called for the improvement of the party's "workstyle" (作风, *zuofeng*) to limit "formalism," "bureaucratism," and "hedonism," and to prevent disconnection from the masses. The issue of "workstyle" is directly linked to the party's image, and therefore political loyalty: "Some cadres do not have excellent moral integrity, and their behaviour is not checked carefully, which impacts the image and prestige of the party" (Document 24). This expanded definition of what constitutes virtue, and by extension loyalty, became the norm in the early 2000s and remained so under Hu Jintao. Issues of workstyle and party spirit were effectively conflated in a 2009 central document on party building: "strengthening the cultivation of Party spirit provides important foundations and impetus for developing a fine workstyle" (Document 26).

In that context, party cadres became the main focus of attention, instead of mere members. In a 1995 speech, Jiang asked cadres to "pay attention to politics," study ideological texts, and exemplify party spirit (Jiang, 1995). As the party increasingly fused the question of political virtue with personal and family ethics, Jiang Zemin also asked cadres to "take the lead in establishing a good family style" (Jiang, 1998). The educational campaign of the "three stresses" launched in 1998, also called on party cadres to "stress study, stress politics, stress righteousness" (Luo, 2021).

Beyond such campaigns, it is through the institutionalisation of recruitment, evaluation, and promotion mechanisms that cadres were to be kept in check. This process started under Deng Xiaoping, as central regulations structured an assessment system based on the cadres' "virtue" (德, *de*), "ability" (能, *neng*), "diligence" (勤, *qin*), and "achievement" (绩, *ji*) (Document 19). The party regularly reviewed cadres' behaviour and performance, asking them to conduct criticism and self-criticism sessions focusing on their behaviour, ideology, and adherence to party policies and regulations (Lee, 1991: 315; Manion, 1985). Jiang Zemin went one step further with the issuance in 1995 of the first complete and systematic central document on the management of leading cadres, specifying that they were to be held responsible for the performance of their units (Document 23). These mechanisms were further defined as the 1995 provisional document was replaced in 2002 by the full-blown "Regulations on the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres" (for an analysis of the different versions of this document see Doyon, 2019).

New cadre management regulations adopted the expanded definition of loyalty mentioned above, fusing political virtue and personal ethics. Contrasting with the Deng era's

understanding of virtue as “upholding socialism and party leadership” (Deng, 1980), the 2007 Provisional Regulations on Civil Service Assessments defined virtue as “referring to political and ideological quality as well as displays of personal integrity, professional ethics, and social virtue” (quoted in Snape, 2019). This trend is in line with Jowitt’s (1992) argument regarding the evolution of communist systems: as they become more inclusive in dealing with society, communist party-states must maintain discipline among their officials so as not to lose their charismatic impetus and legitimacy. In parallel to the widespread co-optation of social actors through party membership, it implies the training and mobilisation of officials to maintain their “party spirit” (Pieke, 2009; Sorace, 2016) as well as the standardisation and expansion of the discipline apparatus to ensure the cadres’ compliance (Brødsgaard, 2012; Li, 2018).

The Xi Jinping Era (Post-2012): Combatting Fake Loyalty

The domain of political virtue and party spirit expanded under Xi Jinping in the context of a massive anti-corruption drive (Fu, 2014). Not only has the meaning of virtue further expanded into the realm of ethics and personal relationships, but also, and by contrast to what has been the norm under his two predecessors, party members are once again the focus of the centre’s calls for loyalty, alongside cadres.

As we have seen, political criteria never disappeared from cadre selection and promotion in the reform era. They have, however, become increasingly crucial under Xi Jinping as his administration has criticised the tendency to select cadres based on artificial indicators of ability, such as gross domestic product growth (Doyon, 2019). Virtue is once again seen as more important than ability in selecting officials. The 2014 and 2019 versions of the Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres put forward “political quality” (政治素质, *zhengzhi suzhi*) and “political standard” (政治标准, *zhengzhi biao zhun*) as essential criteria for cadre recruitment and evaluation (Documents 27 and 31).

The emergence of these vague notions of political quality or standard goes hand in hand with an extensive understanding of virtue and party spirit. Going one step further in the direction of fusing political virtue and personal ethics, recent regulations ask for the “strengthening of (cadre) monitoring outside of the workplace, inquiring about (their) social morality, professional ethics, family virtue, personal integrity, etc.” (Document 31). Confirming the fusion of the two notions that emerged under Jiang Zemin, for Xi Jinping, “workstyle issues are fundamentally party spirit issues” (Xi, 2016). Moreover, cadres’ relationships, particularly with family members, have become increasingly important in judging their loyalty. Official criticisms of “naked officials” (裸官, *luoguan*) illustrate this tendency well. As officials whose immediate families live abroad, they are perceived as at risk of defecting or using their overseas connections to facilitate corrupt behaviour (Organisation Department of the Chinese Communist Party, 2013). Interestingly, this broadening of the definition of virtue does not concern only cadres: according to the revised party disciplinary regulations, both

cadres and members can be sanctioned for violating social or family morals (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, 2018).

Against this background, cadres, as well as mere party members, must be increasingly active in performing their political loyalty. According to the “Several Principles on Political Life in the Party under the New Situation,” a revised version of the landmark document of 1980 discussed above, party members must “unswervingly implement the party’s basic line” and they cannot have an “ambiguous,” “aloof or indifferent” stance on ideological issues. These guidelines also note that

“when the people’s interests are harmed, when the image of the Party and the state is damaged, or when the Party’s ruling position is threatened, one must stand up for them with a clear stance and take the initiative to wage the struggle resolutely” (Document 29).

Party members who do not actively show their loyalty risk being accused of being “two-faced individuals” (两面人, *liangmian ren*). This term, reminiscent of the “two hearts” intellectuals of the 1930s–1940s, did not appear in the 1980 version of the document. According to a central document on party building issued in 2019, the term refers to individuals who challenge the authority of the leadership by “complying in public with the centre’s orders while opposing them in private” (Document 30). Along these lines, party members are forbidden to “openly express viewpoints and opinions that run counter to the lines of theories, guiding principles and policies, as well as the implementation of major decisions of the Party Centre” (Document 32).

These different forms of unsanctioned behaviour fall under the umbrella term of “fake loyalty” (伪忠诚, *wei zhongcheng*) (Document 30). As detailed by a provincial party school team, fake loyalty can take a variety of forms, illustrating the party’s encompassing definition of loyalty:

First, the ones who pay lip service to Marxism, while in reality they have faith in Feng Shui masters and have only personal promotion and wealth in their hearts. Second, the ones who look diligent on the surface but eat, drink and are merry in private. Third, the ones who pretend to focus on economic development but abuse power for personal gain behind the Party’s back. [...] Fourth, the ones who behave like they are dedicated to the public but under the table mix up officialdom and business. [...] Fifth, they are Party members or leading cadres on the surface but [...] they see foreign countries as escape routes and are always preparing to “jump ship” [...] (Hubei Party School, 2018)

The Xi Jinping administration relies on encompassing definitions of political virtue and party spirit as tools to strengthen party cohesion, with issues of corruption and disloyalty being closely monitored and sanctioned by the party disciplinary apparatus. Going beyond the institutional checks on cadres developed in the past forty years, party cadres and members have been asked since the Mass Line Education Campaign launched in 2013 to take part in criticism and self-criticism sessions, called “democratic life meetings” (民主生活会, *minzhu shenghuohui*) (Doyon, 2014). They should also join regular

training sessions, on CCP history or the CCP's charter, for example, to rectify their work-style and strengthen their party spirit (Central Office of the Chinese Communist Party, 2020).

The emphasis on rectification and active loyalty of party members has been accompanied by a change in recruitment policy. A revised version of the Working Rules for Recruiting Members was published in 2014, giving more weight to the screening and education of recruits and overall calling on recruiters to stress quality over quantity (Document 28). While we see in Figure 2 a clear drop in the number of annual CCP recruits between 2012 and 2016, numbers have risen again since then. The turn to a voluntaristic take on political loyalty has, in fact, gone together with the growth of party cells in social organisations and private businesses, further expanding beyond the CCP's traditional support bases and among potentially less reliable publics (Doyon, 2021; Koss, 2021).

Conclusion

With the objective of contributing to a better understanding of the CCP's evolution, this article draws on a corpus of Central Documents spanning the 100 years of the CCP to show the malleability of the CCP's understanding of its members and cadres' loyalty. Far from monolithic and unchanging, the CCP has shown its adaptability and ability to rethink its relationship with its membership in response to the evolving political, social, and economic circumstances.

Tracing these evolutions, we show that the CCP's understanding of political loyalty has evolved mainly along two dimensions. First, it fluctuated between ascriptive interpretations of loyalty and behavioural ones. While in its early years, the CCP primarily relied on an ascriptive view of loyalty, linked to class labels, it quickly realised the importance of recruiting more intellectual members to expand its territory and influence. It is in that context that the party popularised the notion of "party spirit," as developed in Liu Shaoqi's *How to Be a Good Communist*. Beyond the question of class background, party members' loyalty could be cultivated by transforming their "two hearts" into having "one heart" towards the party. In that context, the issue of political loyalty became fused with that of virtue to justify the necessity of subordinating their individual interests to those of the party. This behavioural approach to political loyalty continued to play an essential role in the following decades. It became hegemonic with the disappearance of class labels in the early years of the reform era and with the policy of the Three Represents that marked the end of the party's class nature.

Second, as part of the behavioural approach to loyalty, the level of activism expected from CCP members and cadres varied drastically over time. This activism took the relatively narrow form of a personality cult under Mao, but also more encompassing ones, in particular as the CCP's understanding of virtuous behaviour expanded to personal and family ethics in the later reform era. The party's call for activism at times focused specifically on CCP cadres seen as the key political elite whose loyalty really matters, as was the case under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. At different times, it extended to the broader

CCP membership to ensure the organisation's mobilisation capacity, as under the Xi administration.

This article also shows that the CCP emphasises behavioural notions of loyalty, and in particular high levels of activism, when it wants to expand and diversify its membership. Rather than a pure sign of atrophy, emphasising political activism is hence part of the CCP's inclusion strategy as it aims at ensuring the loyalty of new and diverse members and can contribute to the adaptability and resilience of the CCP as an organisation (Nathan, 2003; Saich, 2021; Shambaugh, 2008). This push for party expansion can, however, be disrupted by extreme rectification campaigns when the leadership becomes highly suspicious of new members and tries to govern every aspect of their lives. In line with Liu Shaoqi's approach to loyalty and party spirit, every element of party members' behaviour must then reflect their dedication to the organisation. We saw that CCP recruitment dropped during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the 1950s and during the anti-corruption and mass line campaigns of the early 2010s. Beyond limiting its inclusiveness, such campaigns can also limit internal debates, preventing the CCP from tapping into the diversity of its membership to ensure its adaptation to changing social developments.


Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Appendix

Table 1. Regulations issued by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee on organisational development.

Document Number	Year	Title in Chinese	Title in English
Document 1	1921	中国共产党第一个纲领	The First Program of the Chinese Communist Party
Document 2	1925	组织问题决议案	Resolution on Organisational Issues
Document 3	1927	最近组织问题的重要任务决议案	Resolution on Recent Important Tasks Regarding Organisational Issues
Document 4	1930	关于发展党的组织决议案	Resolution on the Development of the Party Organisation
Document 5	1931	中央关于干部问题的决议	Party Centre's Resolution on the Cadre Question
Document 6	1935	中央关于目前政治形势与党的任务决议	Party Centre's Resolution on the Current Political Situation and the Party's Tasks
Document 7	1938	中央关于大量发展党员的决议	Party Centre's Resolution on the Recruitment of Large Numbers of Members
Document 8	1939	中央关于大量吸收知识分子的决定	Party Centre's Decision on the Inclusion of Large Numbers of Intellectuals
Document 9	1939	中央政治局关于巩固党的决定	Politburo Decision on Strengthening the Party
Document 10	1939	中央关于增强党性的决定	Party Centre's Decision on Strengthening Party Spirit
Document 11	1948	中共中央关于准备五万三千个干部的决议	Party Centre's Resolution on the Preparation of 53,000 cadres
Document 12	1950	中央关于发展和巩固党的组织的指示	Party Centre's Instruction on Developing and Strengthening the Party Organisation
Document 13	1953	中央关于统一调配干部,团结、改造原有技术人员及大量培养、训练干部的决议	Party Centre's Decision on the Unified Allocation of Cadres, the Reforming of Technicians, and the Cultivation and Training of a Large Number of Cadres
Document 14	1953	中央关于加强干部管理的决定	Party Centre's Decision on Strengthening Cadre Management
Document 15	1957	中央关于第二个五年计划时期接收新党员工作的通知	Party Centre's Notice on the Work of Recruiting New Members during the Second Five-Year Plan
Document 16	1957	中央关于今后干部工作方法的 通知	Party Centre's Notice on Current and Future Cadres' Work Method

(Continued)

Table I. (continued)

Document Number	Year	Title in Chinese	Title in English
Document 17	1964	中共中央关于领导有控制有重点地接受新党员的指示	Party Centre's Instruction on Leaders Having to Control and Prioritise the Recruitment of New Members
Document 18	1980	关于党内政治生活的若干准则	Several Principles on Political Life in the Party
Document 19	1986	中共中央关于严格按照党的原则选拔任用干部的通知	Party Centre's Notice on Strictly Selecting and Appointing Cadres According to Party Principles
Document 20	1989	中共中央关于加强党的建设的通知	Party Centre's Notice on Strengthening Party Building
Document 21	1990	中国共产党发展党员工作细则 (试行)	Chinese Communist Party's Working Rules for Recruiting Members (Provisional)
Document 22	1994	中共中央关于加强党的建设几个重大问题的决定	Party Centre's Decision on a Few Important Issues Regarding the Strengthening of Party Building
Document 23	1995	党政领导干部选拔任用工作暂行条例	Provisional Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres
Document 24	2001	中共中央关于加强和改进党的作风建设的决定	Party Centre's Decision on Strengthening and Improving Workstyle Construction
Document 25	2002	中共中央关于印发《党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例》的通知	Party Centre's Notice on Issuing the "Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres"
Document 26	2009	中共中央关于加强和改进新形势下党的建设若干重要问题的决定	Party Centre's Decision on Important Issues Related to Strengthening and Improving Party Building Under New Circumstances
Document 27	2014	中共中央关于印发《党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例》的通知	Party Centre's Notice on Issuing the "Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres" (revised version)
Document 28	2014	中国共产党发展党员工作细则	Chinese Communist Party's Working Rules for Recruiting Members
Document 29	2016	关于新形势下党内政治生活的若干准则	Several Principles on Political Life in the Party under a New Situation

(Continued)

Table I. (continued)

Document Number	Year	Title in Chinese	Title in English
Document 30	2019	中共中央关于加强党的政治建设的意见	Party Centre's Opinion on Strengthening the Party's Political Construction
Document 31	2019	中共中央关于印发《党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例》的通知	Party Centre's Notice on Issuing the "Work Regulations for the Promotion and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres" (revised version)
Document 32	2021	中国共产党党员权利保障条例	The Chinese Communist Party's Regulations on the Protection of Party Members' Rights

Note: The documents are extracted from 中共中央文件选集 (*Selected Central Committee Documents of the CCP*), vols. 1–18 (Beijing: Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao Chubanshe, 1989–1992); 组织工作文件选编 (*Selected Documents on Organisational Work*), 1949–1966, vol. 1–10 (Beijing: Zhonggong Zhongyang Zuzhibu Bangongting, 1980); 十一届三中全会以来重要文献选编 (*Selected Important Documents since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh National Congress of the CCP*), vols. 1–5 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1982–2000); vols. 6–9 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2005–2018).