

Institutional Changes, Influences and Historical Junctures in the Communist Youth League of China

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Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regards the Communist Youth League (CYL) as a critical and distinctive mass organization that acts as an “assistant” and “reserve army” for the Party. This article uses the analytical concepts of historical institutionalism and critical junctures to discuss the changes in the CYL during the post-Mao period. We focus on two critical junctures: 1982, when the CYL became a route to rapid promotion for cadres, and 2016, after which its cadres had fewer opportunities for promotion and the CYL was pushed back to its original role in youth United Front work. We also find that the CYL has refined its United Front methods to attract talented young people by offering them services. This reflects the efforts of the CCP regime to adapt to circumstances and ensure its survival.

Keywords: adaptation; cadre recruitment; Communist Youth League (CYL); critical junctures; youth United Front work

The Communist Youth League (*gongqing tuan* 共青团, CYL hereafter) is the most politically distinctive of all the various mass organizations in China. Apart from assisting the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with the management of youth affairs, the CYL has also performed the function of cultivating younger cadres and Party members. The CYL Constitution states that the CYL is the “assistant” (*zhushou* 助手) and “reserve army” (*houbeijun* 后备军) of the Chinese Communist Party.¹ Since the league was first established in 1920, however, there have been times when it has been in fierce contention with the Party. At the end of 1936, the need to strengthen the Party’s leadership to deal with escalating tensions with Japan was used as an excuse to disband the

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1 “Zhongguo gongchanzhuyi qingniantuan zhangcheng” (The Constitution of the Communist Youth League of China), http://www.gqt.org.cn/ccylmaterial/regulation/200612/t20061224_12147.htm. Accessed 25 February 2021.

CYL; the organization was not re-established until after the CCP came to power in 1949.²

Post-1949, the CCP sought to prevent the league from once again competing with the Party by stipulating that all CYL cadres at a particular level of the organization must be appointed by the Party committee at that level.³ This meant that the CYL became a mass organization under the leadership of the CCP. As a result of these changes, academic research into the CYL can be roughly divided into two categories. Studies in the first category deal with the promotion and influence of CYL cadres within CCP officialdom.⁴ The second category consists of studies that discuss the role played by the CYL in education and publicity work directed at youth.⁵ Here, we intend to discuss institutional changes and the influence of the CYL from the perspective of historical institutionalism, especially during the post-Mao period.

It is argued here that the CYL has undergone two important institutional changes in the post-Mao period: one in 1982 and the other in 2016. This study uses first-hand information gathered from 23 interviews conducted between February 2019 and February 2021 across three central provinces (provinces G, K and Z). Interviewees included cadres working in local CYLs and CCP organization departments as well as individuals working for social organizations.⁶ We use the concept of “historical institutionalism” to analyse the institutional changes that took place within the CYL at two critical junctures, in 1982 and 2016, focusing on their impact on cadre recruitment and youth-oriented United Front work. We argue that these changes may have helped the CCP regime to adapt in order to survive at these points in its history.⁷

Institutional Changes and Critical Junctures in the History of the CYL

Historical institutionalism tends to view the operation of a system as a relatively stable process, with changes in institutions or norms being restricted by existing design, showing continuity of “path dependence.”⁸ Unless a critical juncture occurs, the system is unlikely to change. A critical juncture is defined as a point at which the system undergoes major changes in a relatively short period of time owing to the emergence of important factors in the process of path

2 Ding 2005, 21–27.

3 For discussion of this appointment system, see Burns 1994.

4 Kou 2014; Li, Cheng 2009.

5 Xu 2012; Tsimonis 2021.

6 The 23 interviewees included cadres from the CYL Central Committee (2), CYL cadres from provinces G (6), K (4) and Z (5); and officials of the Organization Department of Province G (6). Most are former classmates, colleagues or acquaintances of the authors. We conducted in-depth interviews with these cadres, mostly in restaurants or cadres’ offices. Province G is an underdeveloped province in the west; provinces Z and K are developed provinces in the east, which makes our sample selection more representative.

7 For discussion on adaptation within the CCP system, see Shambaugh 2008.

8 Mahoney 2000.

dependency.⁹ The critical juncture may be prompted by both exogenous and endogenous motives.¹⁰ Here, we define exogenous motives as factors that are not related to the organization or system of the CYL, for example, adjustments of national development policies. Endogenous motives are factors related to the operation of the CYL itself – such as problems with its work – that require the system to be adjusted.

In this article, we take a historical institutionalism perspective to examine the development of the CYL. Although the CYL was reinstated in 1949, the Party intentionally limited its development and accumulation of power. During the Revolutionary War, the CYL had not always responded to the Party's commands and had aspired to transform itself into a “second party,” as mentioned above, giving the Party reason to be wary of it. Ren Bishi 任弼时, the member of the CCP Central Secretariat in charge of CYL affairs at the time, emphasized the need to prevent the league from arguing for “independence.” He ensured that its responsibilities were confined mainly to educating young people and organizing them to participate in production and construction.¹¹ In line with this mission, the CYL set up “youth commandos” (*qingnian tujidui* 青年突击队), “youth production teams” (*qingnian shengchandu* 青年生产队) and other similar organizations. Under the command economy of that period, the work of the CYL was embedded in the Party-led drive to boost production. Under Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦, the then first secretary of its Central Committee, the CYL was charged with mobilizing young people to contribute to economic development.¹²

During the Cultural Revolution, many leaders of the CYL, including Hu Yaobang, were persecuted. The work of the CYL at all levels was paralyzed, with youth work being almost entirely taken over by the Red Guards. In 1975, Jiang Qing 江青 and her allies pushed for the CYL to be abolished and replaced by the Red Guards, a proposal that was dropped once Jiang and her confederates were ousted. The CYL, from its Central Committee downwards, resumed its activities in 1978.¹³

Since the beginning of reform and opening up, the CYL has undergone two major institutional changes, or critical junctures. In 1982, the CCP issued its “Opinion on the age issue for CYL leading cadres at all levels” (*Guanyu geji tuanwei lingdao ganbu nianling wenti de yijian* 关于各级团委领导干部年龄问题的意见, “Opinion on Age Issue” hereafter). This was followed in 2016 with the “Reform plan for the CYL Central Committee” (*Gongqingtuan zhongyang gaige fang'an* 共青团中央改革方案, “Reform Plan” hereafter). Each document had a profound impact on the CYL, and there were both endogenous and exogenous motives behind each of these critical junctures. The impact of the

9 Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 348–350.

10 Koning 2016, 646.

11 Ren 1987, 402–05.

12 Interview with CYL cadres of Province G, 16 February 2021. For discussion of the CYL in the Mao era, see Graziani 2019.

13 Zheng 1998.

Table 1: Critical Junctures in the Post-Mao History of the CYL and Accompanying Institutional Changes

Political Juncture	Event	Exogenous Motive	Endogenous Motives	Results of Institutional Changes (adaptation to regime)	
1982	“Opinion on the age issue”	The Party’s need to recruit younger cadres to carry out modernization.	Hu Yaobang and other leaders had close ties with the CYL.	<p><i>Cadre Recruitment</i> 1982–2015*</p> <p>CYL becomes route for fast-track promotion to Party and government positions; rise to political prominence of CYL.</p>	<p><i>Youth United Front Work</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CYL becomes lead agency for youth work. 2. CYL becomes increasingly “bureaucratic, administrative, aristocratic, and entertainment-oriented” (“four orientations” <i>sihua</i> 四化).
2016	“Reform plan”	CCP seeks to strengthen CYL’s role in youth work under the Grand United Front.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Four orientations” of the CYL criticized. CCP wants to see CYL cadres remain in the league long term to continue with youth work. 2. No close ties between Xi Jinping and CYL. Xi tends not to promote CYL cadres to important positions in the Party and government. 	<p>2016–present</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CYL no longer route to fast-track promotion. CYL cadres have fewer opportunities for transfer to Party and government posts. 2. Cadres from other government systems transferred to work in CYL, thus promoting exchanges between different systems. 3. CYL becomes more like the CPPCC (<i>zhengxiehua</i> 政协化) in that members of social organizations are allowed to hold concurrent posts in CYL. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CYL no longer lead department for youth work. CCP control over CYL youth work is strengthened. 2. CYL improves its United Front work by offering services to attract young people.

Notes:

*Changes in the CYL system were introduced gradually from the end of 2012 when Xi Jinping assumed office, but for reasons of simplicity, we treat the critical juncture as occurring in 2016 and regard 1982–2015 as a homogeneous period.

institutional changes brought about can be analysed from the perspectives of the careers of CYL cadres and United Front youth work (summarized in [Table 1](#)). From these changes in the CYL, we can also see how the CCP regime has adapted to circumstances and developed.

The Two Critical Junctures: 1982 and 2016

This section analyses the exogenous and endogenous motives behind the major institutional changes in the CYL, triggered by the two critical junctures, and how these changes helped the CCP regime to adapt, survive and develop.

The rejuvenation of the cadre corps: the 1982 Opinion on Age Issue

The exogenous motive for the changes that took place in 1982 was Deng Xiaoping's proposal to "rejuvenate" (*nianqinghua* 年轻化) China's corps of cadres so that they were fit to carry out economic development following the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. How to rapidly inject energetic new blood into the Party and government and expel the old hands had become a major concern for the CCP. As the Party's reserve army, the CYL was one source of this new blood.¹⁴ The 1982 Opinion on Age Issue set out the ways in which CYL cadres could be systematically transferred into the Party and government systems (see [Table 2](#)).

[Table 2](#) shows that following the 1982 "Opinion," CYL cadres at all levels, from deputy section to full ministerial, had to be transferred to Party or government positions by a certain age. This mechanism is termed the "rule mandating transfer upon reaching a certain age" (*xianling zhuangang* 限龄转岗, "age rule" hereafter). Taking the full ministerial level as an example, cadres had to be transferred out of the CYL before the age of 45. In these circumstances, having been transferred to a full ministerial-level post before the age of 63, the age at which they were no longer eligible for further promotion, a cadre would still have 18 years in which to be promoted to a sub-national leading post.

Generally, cadres who had risen through the ranks of the Party system could not occupy ministerial posts before the age of 45. This meant that the age rule gave CYL cadres a competitive advantage, what Chien-Wen Kou and Wen-Hsuan Tsai call the "age advantage."¹⁵ This age advantage meant that the CYL was soon regarded as a fast track to promotion by many ambitious cadres who joined the CYL system in the hope of being transferred to a Party post as soon as possible, rather than through an interest in working with youth.

The implementation of the Opinion on Age Issue resulted in the transfer of a large number of CYL cadres to Party and government positions after 1982. The endogenous motive behind these appointments is also significant: the rise in

14 In the Party Constitution adopted at the 8th Party Congress in 1958, the CYL was referred to only as the Party's "assistant." At the 12th CCP Party Congress in 1982, it became the "assistant and reserve army."

15 Kou and Tsai 2014, 159.

Table 2: Age Advantage and Limits for Cadres Promoted within the CYL or Transferring to Party and Government Positions from 1982

Grade	CYL Position		(A)	(B)	(C)
	Central	Local			
Minister (<i>bu</i> 部)	First secretary, central secretariat	None	45	63	18
Vice-minister	Executive secretary or secretary, central secretariat; minister	None	42	61	19
Bureau director (<i>ju</i> 局)	Secretary; minister	Secretary of provincial committee	42	55	13
Deputy bureau director	Deputy minister; director	Deputy secretary of provincial committee	38	52	14
Division head (<i>chu</i> 处)	Director; deputy director	Secretary of prefecture-level city Party committee	38	50	12
Deputy division head	Deputy director; division head	Deputy secretary of prefecture-level city Party committee	33	45	12
Section head (<i>ke</i> 科)	Division head; deputy division head	Secretary of county Party committee	33	40	7
Deputy section head	Deputy division head	Deputy secretary of county Party committee	33	40	7

Sources:

“Opinion on the age issue.” *Zhongguo qingnian wang*, <http://www.gqt.org.cn/search/zuzhi/documents/1982/820514a.htm>. Accessed 27 September 2019; Kou and Tsai 2014, 161.

Notes:

(A) Maximum age for transfer within the CYL system; (B) age of ineligibility for promotion in the Party government system; (C) age advantage after transfer (in years).

influence of Hu Yaobang and Hu Jintao 胡锦涛. Both men had served as first secretaries of the CYL Central Committee and therefore trusted CYL cadres. Once they became leaders of the CCP, they tended to favour cadres with CYL experience for leadership positions in the Party and government.¹⁶

Since CYL cadres then had the potential to become rising political stars, the influence of the CYL increased significantly. For example, CYL cadres are managed “horizontally” (*kuaikuai* 块块), that is, they are appointed by the Party committee at the same level, and the secretary of the superior CYL committee can only suggest candidates. However, during the 1982–2015 period, especially during the Hu Jintao administration (2002–2012), Party committee secretaries at all levels would “fully respect” the preferences of the superior CYL committee secretaries.¹⁷ Party committee secretaries were reluctant to offend CYL secretaries and would try to win their favour in order to enhance their own careers.¹⁸

The Opinion on Age Issue also had an effect on United Front youth work. As a mass organization, the CYL assists the Party in the management of youth. Its statutory powers and its funds are limited, and it is not considered to be the “leading department” (*qiantou bumen* 牵头部门) with respect to youth work. Between 1982 and 2016, however, because CYL cadres had the potential to reach important Party and government positions, they were regarded by many officials as “growth stocks” worth investing in. The CYL thus acquired a leading role in youth work, and other Party and government departments were willing to actively cooperate with it. Party units funded many CYL activities, and unit leaders often attended to show their support.¹⁹

However, it was also during this period when the CYL was extremely powerful that many of its cadres tended to neglect youth work, mainly because they saw the league as a gateway to promotion. Aware of the fact that they would soon leave the CYL to take up Party or government positions, these cadres would avoid the difficult areas of youth work such as genuinely resolving the employment and life issues facing young people.²⁰ Consequently, the CYL’s youth work became increasingly “bureaucratic” (*jiguanhua* 机关化),²¹ “administrative” (*xingzhenghua* 行政化), “aristocratic” (*guizuhua* 贵族化) and “entertainment-oriented” (*yulehua* 娱乐化), a tendency that was referred to as the “four orientations” (*sihua* 四化) of the CYL.²²

16 There is an abundance of literature on this subject. Please refer to Payette 2016.

17 During the Hu period, secretaries of local Party committees would respect the opinions of CYL leaders because there was a possibility that these CYL cadres might one day occupy important positions within the bureaucracy. Also, top leaders, such as Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao, sought to expand their power by positioning their cronies in the CYL leadership. This may be one reason why Xi Jinping decided to weaken the functions and impact of the CYL (Doyon 2020).

18 Interview with L, deputy secretary of the Province Z Youth League Committee, 24 August 2019.

19 Interview with Q, deputy secretary of the City F Youth League Committee, 15 February 2021.

20 Ibid.

21 Authors’ translation. The CCP’s official concept of *jiguanhua* encompasses lengthy and inefficient administrative procedures and a lack of communication with the grassroots in the decision-making process.

22 Zhang 2016.

The term “bureaucratic” refers to the way in which CYL cadres prioritized paperwork and lacked practical experience, rarely going out into the field to talk to young people and learn about their difficulties. Described as *bujiediqi* 不接地气, meaning “not down to earth,” such cadres would make decisions and implement policies that did not fit with the actual needs of young people. CYL committees would routinely organize youth symposiums during which a CYL committee secretary would read from a prepared script and have no interaction with the young people present. These symposiums would conclude with a formal group photo of the official and members of the audience.²³ The officials would show the photos to their superiors as evidence of their efforts.

“Administrative” refers to how CYL officials paid too much attention to pomp and ceremony. The CCP expected CYL cadres to be different from their counterparts in the Party and government in that they should work with the youth at the grassroots level and their attitude should be grounded and sincere. However, most CYL cadres were no different from cadres working in Party and government units. One example of this “administrative” behaviour concerns the practice of top leaders (*yibashou* 一把手) of a particular Party or government unit accompanying their superiors throughout an inspection tour (*peitong caishi yingdaoli* 陪同才是硬道理). CYL cadres also assumed this practice. For instance, when the secretary of a provincial CYL committee inspected a county-level high school, the secretaries of the relevant city and county CYL committees would accompany them for the duration of the inspection – and the local CYL committee would arrange for reporters to follow them all the way.²⁴ This wasted CYL cadres’ time that could have been better spent in genuine youth work.

The criticism for being “aristocratic and entertainment-oriented” during this period was directed at the league’s tendency to organize its United Front for groups of a higher socio-economic status, which turned the organization into an “upper-class club.” For example, membership of the All-China Youth Federation, which is managed by the CYL, was dominated by entrepreneurs and performers, with few ordinary young people among its ranks. In addition, the CYL would tend to opt for relatively easy to organize but trivial entertainment activities, such as visiting young people and handing out gifts or organizing sports activities and performances at Chinese New Year. The CYL was rarely able to solve the key problems facing Chinese youth regarding education, employment or everyday issues. On one occasion, a CYL organization even spent a huge amount of money hiring a sociologist to teach religion and the *Book of Changes* (*Yi jing* 易经), an ancient Chinese text used to explore numerology and philosophy, to a group of young people, followed by the usual photo opportunity. Such activities did not serve any practical use to young people.²⁵

23 Interview with Cadre A of the Province G Youth League Committee, 18 February 2021.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

The Grand United Front and the issuing of the Reform Plan in 2016

The Reform Plan issued in 2016 demanded that the CYL focus on youth work and restricted opportunities for CYL cadres to transfer to leading positions in the Party or government. In a sense, this was tantamount to abolishing the “age rule.”²⁶

Three decades of reform and opening up had modernized the country to a certain extent, but it had also generated new social problems such as growing income inequality and new demands from emerging groups in society to have their interests taken into account. Following his rise to power, Xi Jinping pushed the concept of a Grand United Front (*datongzhan* 大统战).²⁷ Aimed at intensifying United Front work among emerging interest groups, the movement targets intellectuals outside the Party in particular, including members of new economic organizations and social organizations, students returning from study overseas, and influential individuals involved in the new media. The transformation of mass organizations such as the CYL has been one of Xi’s priorities.

In recent years, the CCP has adopted a carrot-and-stick approach to the governance of society. The operation of many social or mass organizations has provided an enhanced function to the legitimacy of party-state governance.²⁸ The CYL is a very important element of the United Front. For example, it is expected to provide services to students and to act as an intermediary between them and the Party. Although students may not necessarily agree with the CYL’s practices, the league’s youth work since Xi came to power is seen as more effective and sophisticated than it was under Hu Jintao.²⁹

The 2016 Reform Plan must be understood in the context of this Grand United Front, which constitutes the exogenous motive behind this critical juncture in the history of the CYL. In May 2015, the CCP held its first United Front work conference under the auspices of its Central Committee (*zhongyang tongzhan gongzuo huiyi* 中央统战工作会议, or Central United Front Work Conference).³⁰ The CCP has carried out a reform of mass organizations in general, especially those related to labour, youth and women. In addition to the Reform Plan, which relates specifically to the CYL, it issued the “National Federation of Trade Unions reform pilot programme” (*quanguo zonggonghui gaige shidian fang’an* 全国总工会改革试点方案) in November 2015 and the “All-China Women’s Federation reform plan” (*quanguo fulian gaige fang’an* 全国妇联改革方案) in September 2016.³¹ In the context of its Grand United Front, the CCP’s objective is to encourage CYL cadres to remain within the CYL system and concentrate on United Front work directed at youth.

26 “Reform plan,” *Zhongguo gongqingtuan* [CYL], No. 8 (2016), 5–11.

27 Wang and Groot 2018.

28 Howell 2019; Pan 2020.

29 Tsimonis 2018.

30 Before this, the highest-level United Front meetings were the National United Front Work Conferences.

31 Li, Zhen 2016.

In addition to this exogenous motive, there were several endogenous motives for institutional change within the CYL, in particular the abolition of the “age rule,” which meant that the CYL was no longer a fast track for promotion. First, under Xi Jinping, the rejuvenation of the cadre corps is no longer the primary focus of recruitment policy. Instead, Xi has reinforced the importance of political loyalty alongside ability. As long as cadres are able – and politically loyal to Xi – they can remain in post or obtain promotion, regardless of their age.³² This means that the average age of Chinese leaders above provincial level in the Xi period is higher than it was under Hu Jintao.³³

Second, Xi Jinping does not have close ties with the CYL. The most important Party and government cadres with a CYL background who are active in the political arena today were promoted before Xi Jinping took office, and they are not entirely trusted by Xi. To consolidate his power, Xi has promoted cadres he knows well, members of what has become known as the Xi faction.³⁴

Finally, Xi Jinping prioritizes cadres with grassroots-level experience and problem-solving skills. It is undeniable that many CYL cadres who were promoted to high office lacked experience at the grassroots or with difficult units, and they did not have the necessary skills to cope with the problems that China has encountered in the process of development. At a 2015 conference on improving the operation of mass organizations, Xi specifically criticized the CYL’s “four orientations.”³⁵ It is clear, then, that Xi Jinping does not trust CYL cadres and that the CYL is no longer a fast track to promotion.

Xi’s Transformation of the CYL

The direction of Xi’s new policies regarding the CYL is evident from the Reform Plan,³⁶ which was personally reviewed and approved by Xi.³⁷ Xi is weakening the CYL (particularly its Central Committee Secretariat) through the manipulation of personnel policies.

The Reform Plan specified that there should be a substantial increase in the grassroots membership of CYL committees at various levels in order to strengthen the ties between CYL cadres and local youth. Taking the CYL Central Committee as an example, its membership has grown more complex owing to the fact that many of its members have been transferred from the grassroots level or from outside the league, a factor which has led to internal rifts, in a process described in Maoist terminology as “undermining the foundation and sanding the soil” (*wa qiangjiao, chan shazi* 挖墙角、掺沙子). In other words, a

32 Shirk 2018, 29–30.

33 Kou and Tsai Forthcoming.

34 Bo 2017, 125–146.

35 “Xi Jinping chuxi zhongyang dangde quntuan gongzuo huiyi” (Xi Jinping attends work conference on mass organizations organized by CCP Central Committee). *Xinhua wang*, 7 July, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/07/c_1115847839.htm. Accessed 11 October 2019.

36 See Fn. 26, “Reform plan.”

37 Interview with Cadre W of the CYL Central Committee, Beijing, 7 August 2019.

leader fractures the unity of a particular unit by inserting his own people, thereby strengthening his control over that unit.³⁸

The membership of the CYL Central Committee Secretariat (excluding the first secretary) demonstrates this shift. A large proportion of members of the 16th and 17th secretariats had been promoted or transferred from within the league.³⁹ However, of the six members of the 18th Secretariat, three were seconded from other units on temporary postings (*guazhi* 挂职): Yin Dongmei 尹冬梅, deputy secretary of the Fudan University Party Committee; Qi Batu 奇巴图, deputy secretary of the Xing'an Meng Committee of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region; and Li Keyong 李柯勇, deputy director of the Xinhua News Agency Editorial Office. All three were personally selected by Xi.⁴⁰ As such, they are expected to support him in reinforcing his control over the CYL Central Committee.

The Reform Plan states also that personnel policy is to be changed thus: "Full-time cadres are to be selected based on strict criteria, instead of having declining age limits the lower their posts."⁴¹ To put it plainly, the age rule has been abolished; henceforth, older cadres will be allowed to remain in their posts. The political implication here is that the CYL path to promotion within the Party and government system has now been blocked. With this policy change, the average age of cadres at various levels of the CYL has increased. Table 3 shows how this move has affected the CYL Central Committee.

The average age of CYL Central Committee members increased substantially after the election of the 17th Central Committee (2013). The Reform Plan was issued in 2016, within the term of that committee, so its standards were applied. This meant that it was no longer possible for committee members to transfer to Party/government posts upon reaching the previous age limit. Separately, most former first secretaries of the CYL Central Committee and members of the CYL Central Secretariat had been transferred to particularly important Party/government posts. However, when Qin Yizhi 秦宜智, first secretary of the 17th Central Committee, stepped down in 2017, he was given a relatively low ministerial-level post as deputy director of the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine. This represented a substantial reduction in power compared to his position as CYL first secretary. Previous first secretaries Lu Hao 陆昊, Hu Chunhua 胡春华, Zhou Qiang 周强 and Li Keqiang 李克强 were appointed provincial governors of Heilongjiang (2013), Hebei (2008), Hunan (2006) and Henan (1998), respectively.

38 Gao 2018, 203.

39 Among the 7 members of the 16th Secretariat, 5 had been transferred from within the league system, and 5 of the 6 members of the 17th Secretariat had been similarly transferred.

40 Interview with Cadre W, 7 August 2019.

41 See Fn. 26, "Reform plan," 8.

Table 3: Ages of CYL Central Committee Members (13th to 18th)

Central Committee	Year	Leadership	Age	Average age at end of term of office
13th	1993	Li Keqiang	38–43	42.27
		Liu Peng	42–47	
		Yuan Chunqing	41–46	
		Ji Bingxuan	42–47	
		Zhao Shi	40–45	
		Bayanqolu	38–43	
		Jiang Daming	40–45	
		Sun Jinlong	33–36	
		Zhou Qiang	35–38	
		Hu Chunhua	34–35	
		Huang Danhua	39–40	
14th	1998	Zhou Qiang	38–43	42.11
		Bayanqolu	43–48	
		Sun Jinlong	36–41	
		Hu Chunhua	35–40	
		Huang Danhua	40–45	
		Cui Bo	41–46	
		Zhao Yong	35–40	
		Hu Wei	39–41	
15th	2003	Zhou Qiang	43–46	43.3
		Hu Chunhua	43–45	
		Lu Hao	41	
		Hu Chunhua	40–43	
		Zhao Yong	40–45	
		Hu Wei	41–46	
		Yang Yue	35–40	
		Erkenjan Turahun	39–44	
		Wang Xiao	35–40	
Zhang Xiaolan	38–43			
16th	2008	Lu Hao	41–46	45
		Qin Yizhi	48	
		Yang Yue	40–45	
		Wang Xiao	40–45	
		He Junke	39–44	
		Lu Yongzheng	41–46	
		Luo Mei	39–44	
		Wang Hongyan	38–43	
Zhou Changkui	40–44			
17th	2013	Qin Yizhi	48–52	50
		He Junke	44–49	
		Luo Mei	44–49	
		Wang Hongyan	43–48	
		Zhou Changkui	44–49	
		Xu Xiao	41–46	
18th	2018	Fu Zhenbang	38–43	51 (estimated)
		He Junke	49–	
		Wang Hongyan	48–	
		Xu Xiao	46–	
		Fu Zhenbang	43–	

Table 3: Continued

Central Committee	Year	Leadership	Age	Average age at end of term of office
		Yin Dongmei	45–	
		Qibatu	47–	
		Li Keyong	44–	

Source:

“Database of China’s political elites,” hosted by Chien-Wen Kou, <https://cped.nccu.edu.tw/>.

Notes:

Average age at the end of term of office was calculated based on the average age of all members of the committee in the last year of its term. For cadres who stepped down before the end of the committee’s term, their age at time of leaving was used instead. The term of the 18th Central Committee is expected to end in 2023. The cadres’ ages in that year were used to calculate the average age. Names in bold indicate first secretaries of the CYL Central Committee.

Career Restrictions and Changes to Appointments within the CYL

The Reform Plan has had two major impacts on cadre recruitment. First, the CYL is no longer the fast track to promotion that it was. Second, the nature of the appointments within the CYL bureaucracy has changed. The ratio of temporary (*guazhi* 挂职) and part-time (*jianzhi* 兼职) positions in the leadership has greatly increased. Temporary positions allow cadres from other government departments to gain experience of youth affairs, and the increase in part-time posts reflects the fact that the CYL is becoming more like the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (*zhengxiehua* 政协化).

With the abolition of the “age rule,” CYL cadres, who were previously able to transfer to the Party or government systems, have found it difficult to win top-ranking positions. The abolition of the “age rule” also means that the average age of CYL leaders is increasing. Newly appointed secretaries of a prefecture-level city CYL committee (full division level) are generally over 36 years of age, and county-level secretaries (full section level) are generally over 30. This compares to the average ages of 33 and 27, respectively, when Hu Jintao was in power.⁴² These factors have severely limited the career development prospects of leaders of city and county CYL committees.

Second, the nature of the appointments within the CYL has changed. The 2016 Reform Plan stipulated that in addition to full-time leading posts, non-leading positions such as those of deputy secretary of a CYL committee should be filled on a temporary or part-time basis. Temporary officials are civil servants who work for the CYL while retaining their original administrative duties, and part-timers are people from outside the public sector (for example, leaders of social organizations) who work part-time on an unpaid basis for the CYL. Temporary and part-time positions must now account for 50 per cent of all posts in the CYL. This is a significant change, designed to prevent the CYL from becoming an “independent kingdom” (*duli wangguo* 独立王国). It also has important political implications.

42 Ibid.

Before the Reform Plan was issued, CYL leading cadres were usually recruited straight from the education system or from within the CYL itself. The purpose of the temporary postings is to allow government cadres to gain experience of youth work. For example, in a move designed to encourage youth entrepreneurship, since 2016 the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission has selected more than 2,000 young cadres to work in county-level CYL organizations so they can learn about the current situation of youth entrepreneurship at the grassroots level, enabling them to take more effective measures to solve the financial problems encountered by young entrepreneurs.⁴³ In 2019, Province G, a relatively poor province in the west of China, assigned many of its village cadres to work temporarily in city and county CYL organizations to help lift young people out of poverty.⁴⁴

The increase in part-time positions in the CYL reflects the transformation of the organization into something like a junior version of the CPPCC – a tool for uniting social elites behind the Party.⁴⁵ The membership of the CPPCC is limited and does not usually include young people, so these part-time jobs in the CYL can make up for this deficiency to a certain extent. In addition, trade unions and the women’s federation have fewer resources than the CYL, and their ability to absorb people from other areas of society is limited. Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has recruited a large number of promising young people and representatives of emerging social groups into these part-time positions.⁴⁶ They include directors of social organizations, influencers, new media workers, freelancers, athletes, actors and young people who have returned from studying abroad. By recruiting them to work part-time in the CYL, the CCP hopes to guide these young people to “listen to the Party and follow the Party.”⁴⁷

These part-time positions also serve as marks of distinction for the young appointees. They often have their CYL position (for example, deputy secretary of the CYL committee) printed on their business cards. Holding such a position can be useful to young people, as the CYL committee may provide them with office space or a studio and may help them with their careers. A position within the CYL is helpful when applying for government funding.⁴⁸

Part-time CYL cadres play a similar role to CPPCC members in promoting United Front policies. For example, Zhou Suhong 周苏红, a member of the Chinese women’s Olympic gold medal-winning volleyball team in 2004, was selected to be deputy secretary of the Zhejiang Provincial CYL Committee in 2016. Owing to its outstanding results in recent years, the Chinese women’s

43 “Gongqingtuan tui qingchuangban zhu chuanye” (The CYL promotes the “Qingchuang Board” to forge entrepreneurship). *Ming bao*, 18 May 2017, A15.

44 Interview with cadres of the Province G Organization Department, 18 January 2021.

45 Since the CYL has become more like the CPPCC, its functions have become somewhat similar to those of the All-China Youth Federation. But the difference is that the CYL can offer non-Party members more resources than those offered by the All-China Youth Federation.

46 Interview with L, deputy secretary of the Province Z Youth League Committee, 19 February 2021.

47 Interview with L, 24 August 2019.

48 Interview with part-time cadres in Province G, 22 February 2021.

volleyball team has been hailed as a symbol of the Chinese nation's "unremitting struggle." While working for the CYL, Zhou played a role in inspiring patriotism among young people in the province. In another case, Su Mingjuan 苏明娟, a former poster-girl for a Chinese charity, was chosen to be deputy secretary of the Anhui Provincial CYL in 2017 because of her passion for poverty alleviation.⁴⁹ By recruiting these role models to work part-time in the CYL, the regime aims to encourage patriotism and support for government policies among young people.

Follow the Party in Everything: Positioning of the CYL and Services for Youth

The Reform Plan has had a two-fold impact on the CYL's United Front work. First, it stipulated that the work of the CYL must be entirely guided by the Party; second, it strengthened the operating model of winning over young people through offering services.

Under Xi Jinping, power has been centralized under the leadership of the CCP by merging the roles of the Party and the government.⁵⁰ Under these circumstances, it is difficult for the CYL to have the influence over youth work that it enjoyed when Hu Jintao was in power. The CYL was originally a mass organization that operated under the leadership of the Party; under the Reform Plan, the CYL was once again downgraded. With the career prospects of CYL cadres limited, the league was no longer seen as a "growth stock" by Party and government cadres. The CYL was left without much independence, becoming more like a trade union or the women's federation.

Xi Jinping has consolidated his control over United Front work directed at young people, and now the work of the CYL must "follow the Party." According to Hao Xiang 郝向, president of *China Youth Net*, a website controlled by the CYL Central Committee, the key to youth work is keeping "the Party at its heart and keeping it young in appearance" (*dang xin qingpi* 党心青皮).⁵¹ Hao's words vividly illustrate the nature of the CYL during the Xi period: it is subject to more control by the Party and has been forced to improve its methods of youth work in order to win recognition from young people.

The CCP has entrenched its control of the CYL by changing the way the league is funded at all levels. Since the Reform Plan came into force, the CYL's funding has been administered "horizontally" and is now managed by Party and government units at the same level. A CYL must request the necessary funds from its local Party and government departments whenever it wishes to undertake an activity such as offering guidance to young entrepreneurs or visiting

49 "Cong jiceng tuanyuan zhong xuanyong jianzhi tuanganhao" (Choose a part-time cadre from among grassroots CYL members). *Changjiang ribao*, 20 December 2017, 9.

50 Chen 2017.

51 Cao 2016.

young migrant workers. In other words, a CYL is no more than an executive unit of the local Party committee or government department.⁵²

The CYL is only expected to “assist” the Party in youth matters. For example, Party publicity departments guide ideological work directed at young people; the CYL is only responsible for encouraging young people to watch or read the relevant promotional videos or books. Party organization departments lead the cultivation of young talent, while the CYL’s responsibility is limited to recommending talented individuals to the organization departments. Party United Front work departments are in charge of liaising with young people, whereas the CYL merely assists those departments in contacting young business owners and workers in the new media. The education and management of CYL members is the responsibility of education bureaus and schools; the CYL simply facilitates this work. In other words, the CYL is no longer the leading department in youth work. As one CYL cadre told us, these days, “the CYL follows the Party in everything and coordinates [the work of] relevant departments.”⁵³

The second impact of the Reform Plan has been to focus the CYL on “attracting young people through the provision of services.” To achieve this, the CCP is trying to improve the status of the CYL and, through the policy of “strictly governing the league” (*congyan zhituan 从严治团*), increase the political advantages of CYL membership. In the past, CYL membership was easy to achieve, and almost any student could join; there was, it was said, no distinction between CYL membership and being a student (*tuán xué búfēn 团学不分*) and membership did not carry any particular status (*tuányuán xiànjìnxìng búzú 团员先进性不足*). For example, around 90 per cent of high school students were members of the CYL and most did not participate in any CYL activities. CYL membership was not regarded as a privilege among students.⁵⁴ The CCP followed the Reform Plan with another document, the “Rules for the work of developing membership of the CYL” (*Zhongguó gōngchǎn zhǔyì qīngniántuán fāzhǎn tuányuán gōngzuò xìzè 中国共产主义青年团发展团员工作细则*), which stipulated that to become a member of the league, a student must qualify as an “active candidate” (*rùtuán jījī fēnzǐ 入团积极分子*). The document set out the criteria for active candidacy and what training and testing would be required for candidates.⁵⁵ According to one internal document, by 2025 students will account for only 30 per cent of the total CYL membership.⁵⁶

The purpose of these strict qualification criteria is to create a sense of pride in league membership. CYL membership is now required for positions such as

52 Interview with J, secretary of the City H Youth League Committee, 9 October 2019.

53 Interview with L, 24 August 2019.

54 Interview with Q, 15 February 2021.

55 “Zhongguó gōngchǎn zhǔyì qīngniántuán fāzhǎn tuányuán gōngzuò xìzè” (Rules for the work of developing membership of the CYL). *Renmin wang*, 22 November, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/gqt/BIG5/n1/2016/11/22/c363174-28887192.html>. Accessed 22 February 2020.

56 “Guānyú xīnxìngshì xià tuījīn congyan zhituan de guiding” (Provisions on promoting strict administration of the CYL under the new situation). Internal document accessed by the author at the office of the City F Youth League Committee, 18 January 2021.

student union or class leader. Some junior and senior high schools require members to “show their identity” (*liang shenfen* 亮身分) by wearing a CYL emblem. This entitles them to more respect and courtesy from teachers and fellow students.⁵⁷ It also raises the visibility and increases the desirability of the CYL “brand.”

Once a young person has become a CYL member, they qualify for practical assistance from the league – assistance with their employment, for example. The work of the CYL is therefore less “entertainment-oriented” than it used to be. For example, in 2018, the CYL in Province G joined forces with a company that rents out office space in order to create a “youth business incubation base” (*qingnian qiye fuhua jidi* 青年企业孵化基地) to house a number of small and micro enterprises free of charge.⁵⁸ League members also have access to training. Province G CYL also cooperates with the provincial United Front work department to provide free training in finance, computer skills and other technical subjects. Finally, if members apply to take the civil service examination, the CYL will offer them coaching.⁵⁹

The CYL has enhanced its services to young people to co-opt them and absorb them into the party-state system. For example, young people who take advantage of the abovementioned business incubation base are required to participate in political courses.⁶⁰ To attract more young people into the CYL, the league has expanded the scope of youth work. Originally, the CYL was only responsible for people between the ages of 14 and 28. However, the 2017 “Mid- and long-term youth development plan (2016–2025)” expanded the league’s remit to include anyone under the age of 35.⁶¹

Conclusion

There have been two critical junctures in the history of the CYL in the post-Mao period. The first, the 1982 Opinion on the Age Issue, set strict age limits for the transfer of CYL cadres to the party-state system. This reflected an urgent need for young cadres capable of leading the Party and the government during reform and opening up and led to the rise of former CYL cadres in the ranks of CCP officialdom from 1982 to 2015. In 2016, after more than three decades of reform and opening up, China was facing new challenges. Priority was given to narrowing the gap between rich and poor and dealing with contradictions between newly emerging social classes, rather than the pursuit of all-out economic growth. For this reason, Xi Jinping proposed a Grand United Front of mass organizations, including the CYL, which would co-opt supporters and assist the regime

57 Interview with the principal of a high school in Province G, 20 February 2021.

58 Interview with Cadre A of the Province G Youth League Committee, 18 February 2021.

59 Interview with L, 24 August 2019.

60 Interview with Cadre A, 18 February 2021.

61 “Medium and long-term youth development plan (2016–2025).” State Council, 13 April, http://big5.www.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/zhengce/2017-04/13/content_5185555.htm#1. Accessed 22 February 2021

with governance. The 2016 Reform Plan marked the second critical juncture in the history of the CYL. From this point in time, the CYL lost its position as a fast track for promotion and refocused on United Front work directed at young people.

The institutional evolution of the CYL in the Xi period reflects three observable changes in the regime. First is Xi Jinping's emphasis on the importance of cadres' "hard skills" (*yingbenling* 硬本领). That the CYL was criticized for its "four orientations" demonstrates that its cadres did not come up to Xi's standard. In the future, cadres who have worked in difficult positions and racked up concrete achievements are likely to have more opportunities for promotion. Second, the CCP has reasserted its control of society. Under the leadership of the Party, the CYL has become an executive unit rather than a leader of youth work. This reflects the concept of "full coverage of Party building" (*dangjian quan fugai* 党建全覆盖) and integrates Party building with United Front work directed towards youth.

Finally, the CYL's operations have been improved in the sense that it is now offering young people useful services. With the recent emphasis on "modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities" (*guojia zhili tixi he zhili nengli xiandaihua* 国家治理体系和治理能力现代化), which involves the use of new technologies and new methods to strengthen governance, the work of the CYL has been revamped through changes in its organization and innovations in the methods it uses to co-opt young people. However, all of these changes reflect the mindset of the CCP's authoritarian state: improvements in governance are all aimed at adapting the regime to circumstances in pursuit of the Party's goal of remaining in power forever.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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摘要: 中国共产主义共青团（共青团）是中国共产党（中共）政权当中，一个重要且具有特色的群团组织。中共视其为党的“助手”和“后备军”。本文运用历史制度主义和关键点作为分析概念，讨论共青团在后毛时期的变化。我们关注两个关键点：1982年与2016年。在1982年之后，共青团成为干部快速晋升的途径；但在2016年，共青团失去了晋升快车道的功能，回到原来主责的青年统战工作。特别是在习近平时期，共青团改进了统一战线的操作方法，为年轻人提供相关的服务来争取其对于中共的认同。共青团在制度运作上的改变，反映出中共政权为适应执政需要所做的努力，其目的是为了确保持权存续。

关键词: 调适；干部管理；共青团；关键点；青年统战工作

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