

The Evolution of Party–Government Relations and the Impact on Decision-Making in China

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ABSTRACT

The administrative decision-making of the Chinese government needs to be understood from the perspective of the relationship between the Party and the government. Since the reform and opening-up period, this relationship has transformed from a unified Party–government structure to the separation of the Party and the government, followed by the strengthening of the Party’s comprehensive and centralized leadership. This transformation has influenced the administrative decision-making system of the Chinese government. In this paper, we describe and analyze this transformation process and its impact on the government’s decision-making system. The research indicates that the mainstream model is one where the Party and the government are organizationally separate but functionally integrated. Both the Party and the government have their own decision-making systems: the Party operates under a collective deliberation system, while the government follows a system of individual responsibility led by its head. Owing to the functional integration of the Party and the government, as well as the Party’s leadership position and significant role in the decision-making process, the Chinese government in practice operates under a decision-making system that combines both the individual responsibility system and the collective deliberation system. However, the way in which these two systems are integrated varies across different local governments. Overall, this system helps the Party exercise leadership over major decision-making issues but also raises concerns about decision-making efficiency and accountability.

Keywords: Party–Government Relations, Organizational System, Decision-Making System

La evolución de las relaciones entre el Partido y el Gobierno y su impacto en la toma de decisiones en China

RESUMEN

La toma de decisiones administrativas del gobierno chino debe comprenderse desde la perspectiva de la relación entre el Partido y el gobierno. Desde el período de reforma y apertura, esta relación se ha transformado desde una estructura unificada entre el Partido y el Gobierno hasta la separación del Partido y el Gobierno, seguida del fortalecimiento del liderazgo integral y centralizado del Partido. Esta transformación ha influido en el sistema de toma de decisiones administrativas del gobierno chino. En este artículo, describimos y analizamos este proceso de transformación y su impacto en el sistema de toma de decisiones del gobierno. La investigación indica que el modelo dominante es aquel en el que el Partido y el Gobierno están separados organizativamente, pero integrados funcionalmente. Tanto el Partido como el Gobierno tienen sus propios sistemas de toma de decisiones: el Partido opera bajo un sistema de deliberación colectiva, mientras que el Gobierno sigue un sistema de responsabilidad individual liderado por su líder. Debido a la integración funcional del Partido y el gobierno, así como a la posición de liderazgo del Partido y su importante papel en el proceso de toma de decisiones, el gobierno chino, en la práctica, opera bajo un sistema de toma de decisiones que combina tanto el sistema de responsabilidad individual como el de deliberación colectiva. Sin embargo, la integración de estos dos sistemas varía según los distintos gobiernos locales. En general, este sistema ayuda al Partido a ejercer liderazgo en asuntos importantes de toma de decisiones, pero también plantea inquietudes sobre la eficiencia y la rendición de cuentas en la toma de decisiones.

Palabras clave: Relaciones entre partidos y gobierno, sistema organizativo, sistema de toma de decisiones

中国党政关系的演变及其对决策的影响

摘要

中国政府的行政决策需要从党政关系的角度去加以理解。改革开放后，党政关系经历了一个从党政一体到党政分开再到加强党的全面集中领导的变化。这一变化影响了中国政府的行政决策体制。本文阐述并分析了这一变化的过程及其对政

府决策体制的影响。研究表明，党政组织分立、职能合一的模式是一个主流模式，党和政府都有自己的一套决策体系，党实行合议制，政府实行首长负责制。由于党政职能合一以及党的领导地位和在决策过程中的重要作用，中国政府事实上实行的是一种将首长制和合议制两者相结合的决策体制，但在两者如何结合上，地方政府的决策过程又呈现了不同的特点。总的来说，这一体制有助于党对重大决策问题的领导，但也会产生决策效率和决策责任的问题。

关键词：党政关系，组织系统，决策

China is a centralized unitary state, where government decisions have a decisive impact on societal development. The importance of government decision-making, therefore, is self-evident. However, how exactly are these decisions made? This has always been an intriguing question. Scholars of Chinese government decision-making have focused predominantly on the decision-making process and analyzed how decision-makers and stakeholders interact, how policy issues emerge, and how policies are implemented. These studies typically approach the topic from a dynamic and functional perspective. In contrast, in this paper, we adopt a static institutional perspective and argue that the decision-making system (or structure) determines how decisions operate. For example, China's constitution stipulates that the government follows a system of individual responsibility led by its head, which gives the head of government a decisive role in decision-making processes. However, China is also a country led by the Communist Party, which operates under a collective deliberation system that differs from the govern-

ment's individual responsibility system. Since China follows a Party-government integrated governance model, the Party intervenes in government decision-making. How has the evolving Party-government relationship affected government decision-making? How do these two distinct decision-making systems function within the decision-making process? What issues does their relationship create? How do they influence final decisions? In practice, what kind of decision-making system does the Chinese government actually implement? These are the key questions that we seek to explore. The study is primarily descriptive, with the aim to first clarify what this system entails, as there has been little research in this area. On the basis of this description, we then conduct an analysis and draw relevant conclusions.

I. Party-Government Relations and Their Reform

The Party-government relationship is the core relationship of China's political system. As the Party is the supreme leader and gov-

ernment departments exercise their administrative powers under the Party's leadership, changes in the Party-government relationship profoundly affect the government's decision-making process. To understand the administrative decision-making of the Chinese government, we must examine it from the perspective of Party-government relations.

The relationship between the Party and the government has undergone several changes since the founding of the People's Republic of China. This period can be divided into three phases.

The first phase lasted from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the beginning of the reform and opening-up period in 1978. This was a period of highly centralized power within both the Party and the government. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, China's political system largely followed the Soviet model. The basic characteristics of the Soviet model are as follows:

All power belongs to the Soviets, with the Supreme Soviet, as the representative assembly, having the highest power. This is similar in form to Western countries, where the highest power is concentrated in the parliament. Unlike the case in Western countries, the Soviets are under the leadership of the Party, with the Party being the highest authority because it is the creator of the new state. In the design of Party and state organizations, the Party and government departments are integrated, with the Party being the highest decision maker. The concentration of power in the Party is determined by the historical conditions at the time. First, at

the establishment of the Soviet regime, the country faced several years of war and required a strong command center, which naturally fell to the Party. Second, the planned economy system was implemented after the establishment of the Soviet Union. This system is fundamentally different from a market economy system. It operates from top to bottom and requires central departments to plan and command, which necessitates the concentration of power in the central departments of the Party and the state. Furthermore, the Leninist Party-building ideology was practiced. Lenin believed that the Communist Party was the vanguard to directly execute power and stated that the Communist Party, after coming to power, "does not share power with anyone" (Lenin, 1994, p. 191). Power was held by the Communist Party.

The fundamental characteristics of the Soviet model were also reflected in the political system established after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Constitution of the PRC designates the National People's Congress as the highest organ of state power, but the preamble of the Constitution explicitly affirms the leadership position of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of China. The PRC also adopted a centralized unitary system, which is manifested primarily in the following two aspects: 1. In the relationship between the central and local governments, local governments are subordinate to the central government; 2. In the relationship between the Party and the government, power is concentrated in the Party. As Mao Zedong

noted, “In terms of organization, this should be reflected in two aspects: First, in the interrelations among various organizations at the same level, the Party leads all aspects—industry, agriculture, commerce, education, military, government, and the Party itself. It is not parallel to these sectors, let alone in opposition to them. Second, in the relationship between higher and lower levels, subordinates must obey superiors, and the entire Party must obey the Central Committee” (CCP documentary, 1979, p. 222). Mao further stated, “Major policies are decided by the Politburo, and specific arrangements are made by the Secretariat. There is only one ‘political design institute,’ not two. Both major policies and their implementation are unified—the Party and the government are not separate. Specific execution and detailed decision-making fall under government institutions and their Party groups” (Mao, 1993, p. 268).

Here, Mao essentially outlines the most important features of this political system. In this paper, we refer to this characteristic as the “one-core, two-tier” structural model. “One-core” refers to a single “political design institute” and means that major policies are determined by the Party. “Two-tier” refers to the two organizations of the Party and the government, where in terms of organizational structure, the government is subordinate to the Party’s leadership. Furthermore, within government departments, there are two components, administrative bodies and Party groups, with the Party groups serving as the leadership and decision-making centers (Zhu, 2021, p. 126).

This centralized system encountered some issues in its later operation, primarily in the relationship between the central and local levels. The concentration of power at the central level led to passivity and inactivity at the local level. Thus, in the mid-1950s, Mao Zedong raised the issue of balancing the initiative at both the central and local levels. In *On the Ten Major Relationships*, he stated, “On the premise of consolidating the unified leadership of the central government, we should expand the authority of local governments to some extent, grant them more independence, and allow them to handle more matters” (Mao, 1977, p. 275). Similarly, at the 8th National Congress of the CCP (1956), Deng Xiaoping noted the main shortcomings in the administrative relationship between the central and local governments: “Inappropriate and excessive centralization is not only reflected in economic, cultural, and other state administrative affairs but also in the Party’s work” (Deng 1994, pp. 198-199). Deng believed that there should be an appropriate division of power between the central and local governments: “Matters of national significance and those requiring unified decisions across the country should be handled by central organizations to maintain the Party’s centralized unity. Matters of a local nature and those that should be decided by local governments should be handled by local organizations to facilitate policies suited to local conditions” (Deng 1994, pp. 227-228). However, at that time, neither Mao Zedong nor Deng Xiaoping discussed the issue of separating powers between the Party and the government.

The second phase, from 1978 to 1988, was a period of relatively decentralized power. The decentralization during this period was intended to support adaptation to the changes brought by the reform and opening-up policies. Although a market economy system was not yet fully established during this period, markets had begun to emerge, goods were starting to circulate, and the planned economy system was beginning to be broken down. Diverse interests also started to appear. As a result, the highly centralized system could not respond effectively to these new circumstances. As Deng Xiaoping noted, "Our leadership at all levels is involved in many matters that should not be managed, cannot be managed well, or are beyond our capacity. These matters, if properly regulated and delegated, could be handled well at lower levels, such as enterprises, institutions, and social units, allowing them to handle them genuinely under democratic centralism. However, if all of these are brought to the Party and government leadership organs, especially to the central departments, it becomes very difficult to handle. No one has such magical powers to deal with such burdensome and unfamiliar matters" (Deng, 1982, p. 288). Deng Xiaoping suggested that "excessive centralization of power increasingly fails to adapt to the development of socialist undertakings" (Deng, 1982, p. 289). He defined excessive centralization of power as "under the slogan of strengthening the unified leadership of the Party, inappropriately and uncritically concentrating all power in Party committees, with the power of

Party committees often concentrated in several secretaries, especially in the first secretary. Everything requires the first secretary's leadership and decision. The unified leadership of the Party often becomes personal leadership" (Deng 1982, pp. 288-289).

Deng Xiaoping also noted the reasons for this problem, stating, "In the past, power was divided between the central and local authorities several times, but each time it did not involve how to divide the political power between the Party and the government, economic organizations, mass organizations, etc." (Deng, 1982, p. 289). Based on this understanding, Deng Xiaoping proposed political system reform, stating, "The content of the reform, first, is to separate the Party and the government, resolving how the Party can effectively lead. This is the key and should be given the top priority. The second content is to decentralize power, resolving the relationship between the central and local authorities, and at the same time, each level of the local authorities also has the issue of power decentralization. The third content is streamlining institutions, which is related to power decentralization" (Deng, 1993, p. 177).

The report of the 13th National Congress of the CCP implemented Deng Xiaoping's idea of separating the Party and the government, considering it the key to political system reform. According to the report, the separation of the Party and the government refers to the separation of their functions, namely, the functions of Party organizations and state power, where the

Party should ensure that government organizations fully perform their functions. The Party's leadership is political leadership and concerns the establishment of leading political principles, political directions and major decisions and the recommendation of important cadres to state power organizations. As the main means of political leadership, legal procedures ensure that the Party's propositions become the national will. The main responsibility of local Party committees is to make decisions on major local issues, in addition to implementing the instructions of the Party Central Committee, the State Council, and superior Party and government organizations.

The measures taken in this reform are as follows: 1. Party committees at all levels no longer appoint full-time secretaries or standing committee members who do not hold government positions but are responsible for government work; 2. Party committee office institutions should be few and efficient. Departments that overlap with government institutions should be abolished, and the administrative affairs they currently manage should be transferred to relevant government departments; 3. The Party groups of government departments are responsible to the Party committees that approved their establishment, which is not conducive to the unified and efficient operation of government work and should be gradually abolished; 4. The Party's disciplinary inspection committees should not handle cases in violations of law and discipline but should focus on managing Party discipline and assisting Party commit-

tees in managing Party conduct (CCP documentary, 1987).

The third phase, from 1989 to the present, has been marked by a renewed concentration of power, particularly in the Party, which has led to a re-emphasis on Party-government integration and the strengthening of the Party's centralized and unified leadership. A key feature of this period was the establishment of a market economy system. However, the diversification of interests brought about by the market economy led society to become increasingly pluralistic. The social structure evolved from a state-dominated system to a tripartite model consisting of the state, society, and the market. This newly emerging decentralization created a need for renewed centralization. The Party-government separation reforms weakened the Party's functions and authority and thereby affected its leadership position, which led to the discontinuation of these reforms. In later development, some local governments instead began reforms to integrate the Party and the government.

A typical example is the reform in Shunde, Guangdong Province. Under this reform, the originally separate systems of the Party and the government were merged, such that some Party leaders concurrently held administrative leadership positions. The Party and the government were integrated with the justification that their separation at the grassroots level was not conducive to improving work efficiency. This reform effectively broke the previous situation of separate Party and

government organizations (including before the reform and opening-up). If the original separation of the Party and the government referred mainly to the separation of their functions, then the reform in Shunde merged the Party and the government departments at the organizational level to achieve an actual unity of organizations. To some extent, this reflected a more direct integration of the Party and the government than had previously existed. Because they belonged to the same organization, the different functions of the Party and government departments became functions within the same organization's structure.

The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China began to emphasize the importance of “adhering to the Party's leadership in all work” (CCP documentary, 2017). The Chinese Communist Party oversees all aspects of the government, the military, as well as education and society, exerting influence nationwide in every direction. After the 19th National Congress, the reform of the relationship between the Party and the government, which began with the eighth institutional reform (the eighth and ninth institutional reforms began to use the term “institutional reform of the Party and state”), was explicitly aimed at strengthening the comprehensive leadership of the Party's centralized unity. The reform measures include the following:

The three major functional departments of the Party directly manage administrative affairs: that is, the Organization Department manages civil servants; the Propaganda Depart-

ment manages publishing, news, and film-related matters; and the United Front Work Department assumes the functions of the Religious Affairs Bureau and the National Ethnic Affairs Commission. These affairs originally belonged to the government system.

The reform also promotes the integration of Party and government institutions. For example, the newly established National Supervisory Commission integrates the responsibilities of the former Supervision Ministry and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, whereas the Supreme People's Procuratorate, along with the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, investigates and handles corruption, bribery, dereliction of duty, and other corruption-related responsibilities to strengthen the centralized and unified leadership of the Party in anticorruption work.

The leadership system was reformed via the transformation of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform into committees to conduct top-level design, overall planning, coordination, overall promotion, and the supervision and implementation of relevant matters.

Party's central decision-making and coordinating institutions, such as the Central Comprehensive Law-based Governance Committee, the Central Audit Committee, and the Central Education Work Leading Group, were also established. Their responsibilities include leading the related affairs in their respective fields. For instance, the Comprehensive Law-based Gover-

nance Committee is responsible for the top-level design, overall planning, coordination, overall promotion, and supervision and implementation of comprehensive law-based governance. These committees have offices in relevant departments. For example, the office of the Comprehensive Law-based Governance Committee is located in the Ministry of Justice, and the Secretariat of the Central Education Work Leading Group is located in the Ministry of Education.

The 20th National Congress once again emphasized that “the Party is the highest political leadership. It is necessary to adhere to the leadership of the Party in all areas of state governance” (CCP documentary 2022). The ninth institutional reform (2023) after the 20th National Congress also reflects the strengthening of the Party’s comprehensive and centralized leadership. For example, this reform led to the establishment of two committees, the Central Financial Committee and the Central Science and Technology Committee, to strengthen the Party Central Committee’s centralized and unified leadership in finance and science and technology. For example, a new central functional department, the Central Social Work Department, has been established within the Party’s organizational system and is responsible for coordinating and guiding people’s petitions and coordinating the promotion of Party building to lead grassroots governance and grassroots political power construction, among other tasks. Thus, the Communist Party’s functional departments have increased from three (Organization Department, Publicity

Department, United Front Work Department) to four.

The transitions from Party-government integration to separation and then back to strengthened Party leadership were motivated by the same fundamental objective: to enhance the Party’s leadership role. The original intention behind the Party-government separation reforms was also to strengthen the Party’s leadership. The reintegration of Party-government functions and the shift toward comprehensive Party leadership were simply considered better alternatives. Nevertheless, these changes have had a significant effect on China’s government decision-making system.

II. Changes in the Relationship between the Party and the Government and the Impact on the Decision-making System

Decision-making is an organizational function and behavior inherently connected to organizations. From the perspective of the relationship between the Party and the government, Party and government organizations can be divided into two types. The first type is organizational separation and functional unity; namely, the Party and government are two independent organizations with their own decision-making systems. The functions (i.e., decision-making matters) of these two organizations are cross-corresponding. As mentioned above, the personnel departments of the government are responsible for the Party’s organization departments, where there is no sep-

aration in terms of functions. This is the organizational structure adopted since the founding of the PRC.

From the perspective of decision-making, after the reform and opening-up, the Party's organizations adopted a deliberative system, which means that in decision-making, the final decision is made through voting based on the principle of majority rule. Such a decision-making system was adopted not only to prevent the excessive concentration of power in individuals but also because the Party's organization is deliberative rather than executive. One of the tasks of Party organizations is to determine major political guidelines and significant issues. Discussions do not need to be rapid; speed is not important. Instead, a wide range of opinions and thorough consideration are needed. Therefore, the Party's decision-making system adopts a deliberative form. The government organization is different; the government is an executive body that emphasizes speed and efficiency in execution. Therefore, the 1982 Constitution stipulates the implementation of a system of chief executive responsibility in China's government system. The so-called chief executive responsibility system means that in the decision-making process, the chief executive has the decision-making power. This also means that decisions are not made through voting. Unlike the decision-making system of Party organizations, where each person has an equal vote, in the government decision-making system, participants ultimately follow the chief executive's decision. Although there may be discussions before

the decision, there is no voting mechanism, and the final decision is made by the chief executive.

Under the reform of separating the Party from the government, the organizations remain separate, with two separate systems for the Party and the government, and the functions of the Party and the government are separated. Therefore, the separation of the Party from the government means the separation of the functions of the Party and the government, that is, the separation of Party affairs and administrative affairs. The Party manages mainly Party affairs, while administrative affairs are managed by the government. As Deng Xiaoping noted, "[We must] truly establish a strong and effective working system from the State Council to local governments at all levels. In the future, all matters within the scope of government authority will be discussed, decided, and promulgated by the State Council and local governments at all levels, and will no longer be directed and decided by the Central Committee of the Party and local Party committees" (Deng, 1983, p. 299). Although Deng Xiaoping discussed this issue mainly from the perspective of opposing the excessive concentration of power, from the perspective of decision-making, such separation also helps improve the efficiency of decision-making because there is a division of labor in terms of decision-making objects and matters.

In the original system, Party affairs and administrative affairs were not separated, and there was no distinction between them. After the reform, first,

administrative affairs were managed by the government, which supported increased specialization, and second, decisions were made by the chief executive, which could improve decision-making efficiency. However, one issue here is that the separation of the Party from the government was intended to enhance the Party's leadership, and one aspect of Party leadership is the leading of major decisions, as emphasized in the 13th Congress report. Therefore, do major decisions also include significant decisions regarding administrative affairs? If the Party does not participate, then how is Party leadership reflected? Second, what kinds of matters constitute major decisions? In fact, these questions were not clearly addressed at the time and lacked operational guidance. Therefore, the return from the separation of the Party and the government to the unity of the Party and the government may have been partly intended to address these questions.

The second type of Party and government organizations concerns organizational integration, with unified functions. This is a form that emerged during the return to the unity of the Party and the government and occurred mainly at the grassroots level. A typical example here is the reform of "Party-government linkages" conducted in Shunde, Guangdong Province, which demonstrates the unity of the Party and the government, with the Party replacing the government's role. The reform characteristics are specifically manifested as follows: 1. The boundaries between Party and government departments and joint Party and government offic-

es are broken. The reform reduced the original 41 Party and government departments to 16 (six Party departments, ten government departments). All Party committee departments are jointly located with government agencies, and district Party committees are jointly located with district governments. The propaganda department of the district is also the cultural, sports, and tourism bureau, and the district political and legal committee is jointly located with the judicial bureau. 2. The two offices are integrated, with leaders simultaneously managing Party and government affairs. Most of the newly established "departments" are concurrently held by deputy secretaries of the district committee, members of the district committee, and deputy district heads, with the original heads of "departments" all becoming deputy positions.

This form of organizational integration and unified functions can also be found at the township level in China and presents characteristics similar to those of the reform in Shunde. Initially, it involves the integration of Party and government functions. After integration, the government structure usually consists of 3–5 agencies, with typical agency settings being the Party and government office, the office of economic development, and the office of social affairs. For example, in Hubei, the original internal agencies at the township level are abolished and merged with the comprehensive Party and government office, the office of economic development, and the office of social affairs. "The most prominent feature of Hubei's township reform is

the actual unity of the Party and the government” (Chi, 2006, p. 17). Here, unity refers to the integration of Party and government organizations, which naturally leads to the integration of Party and government functions. Second, Party and government leadership positions are integrated, with secretaries concurrently serving as township mayors or chairpersons of township people’s congresses. For example, under the reform in Zhejiang, town Party committees have 1 secretary and 2 to 3 deputy secretaries (with one serving as township mayor and one serving as secretary of the discipline inspection commission); the chairperson of the township people’s congress is concurrently held by the Party committee secretary. Township Party and government leaders advocate for cross-appointment, and they can concurrently hold leadership positions in internal township institutions without the appointment of assistant township mayors (Hangzhou, 2001).

Although Shunde’s reform entailed a return to the mainstream model of organizational separation and unified functions in 2018, this structural model still exists. In the recent round of institutional reforms, the “five offices, one station, two centers” model (including the Party and government office, the office of economic development, the office of social affairs, the office of planning and construction, and the comprehensive law enforcement office, the station for retired service services and guarantee work, and the Party and mass service center and the comprehensive convenience service center),

which essentially represents this model, has been widely adopted at the township level. Shunde’s model ultimately returned to the model of organizational separation and functional unification, but the township model remains. This may be because townships are grass-roots executive institutions in the true sense and the unity of the Party and government offers advantages in terms of policy implementation.

The model of joint office between the Party and the government is one way the structure of integrated organization and unified function has evolved. Article 5 of the “Regulations on the Work of Party Organs of the Communist Party of China (Trial)” passed in 2017 stipulates that “based on work needs, Party organs can merge or jointly set up with government agencies with similar responsibilities.” In 2018, the “Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions” emphasized that “cities and counties should make greater efforts to merge or jointly set up Party and government agencies.” Thus, in the eighth round of institutional reform, institutions with joint offices of the Party and government were established. For example, by integrating the responsibilities of the Supervision Ministry and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, the Supreme People’s Procuratorate established the National Supervisory Commission to work jointly with the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, perform both disciplinary and supervisory duties, and implement a single set of working structures and two agency names. Such structures have also been established at

the local level. For example, in Shanxi Province, the county Party committee's political and legal committee jointly worked with the county judicial bureau, and the county petition bureau was incorporated into the county Party committee's political and legal committee under the 2022 institutional reform. The county Party committee office and the county government office also work jointly (Zhong, 2022).

The integration of the organizational and functional roles is one form of governance where Party departments replace governmental departments in direct administrative management. Unlike the case in the previous model where both Party and governmental organizations were involved, here, only the Party organization is present, but it oversees administrative affairs. The reforms in 2018 merged the National Civil Service Bureau into the Central Organization Department, under which the unified management of civil servants was established. This included aspects such as recruitment, deployment, assessment, rewards, training, and welfare. Similarly, the Central Propaganda Department took charge of managing news, publishing, and film work; setting policies and supervising their implementation; and coordinating industry development. Additionally, the Central United Front Work Department assumed leadership over the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and managed religious affairs, ensuring alignment with socialism and absorbing the State Administration for Religious Affairs. The external branding of the State Administration for Religious Affairs was

retained by the Central United Front Work Department.

Although the reforms in Shunde and townships were driven mainly by the goal of improving efficiency, while the integration of Party and government offices was aimed primarily at strengthening the Party's leadership, from a decision-making perspective, these models share similarities. The consolidation of Party and government organizations for decision-making raises two issues. First, the Party and the government are two organizations with different functions that are subject to different constraints. Party activities are governed by internal regulations, while the government adheres to national laws. The pathway through which the Party influences state institutions should be as follows: "Party regulations adjust the behavior of Party organizations and members within state organs, indirectly affecting the governance of state affairs and thereby becoming an invisible regulatory system within state organizational operations" (Qin & Chen, 2018). However, owing to the Party's special status, its influence on decision-making often involves the direct exertion of power.

Second, the decision-making systems differ. The Party operates on a collective decision-making basis, whereas the government follows a system where decisions are made by leaders. The examples mentioned above usually take the form of governmental organizations (except the direct Party administration of the government). In such integrated organizations, how are decisions ulti-

mately made? Since such decisions pertain to the government, they should be made according to a leader-based system. However, the “Regulations on the Work of Party Committees of the Communist Party of China (Trial)” (2015) stipulate a collective leadership system within Party groups in administrative organs, where decisions must be made through voting. As administrative heads are usually Party group members, they cannot exercise decision-making authority here. The result of the Party group’s decision-making process may not align with the true intent of the administrative head. Consequently, decision-making processes often “sacrifice the decision-making power vested in the constitution to the Party” (Qin & Chen, 2018). Regarding specific administrative management by Party organs, such as the Organization Department managing civil servants, these organizations face a practical dilemma. Despite ideally requiring a leader-based decision-making system for efficiency, the nature of these organizations as Party entities dictates a collective decision-making system.

III. The New Developments in Decision-Making Systems: “Interim Regulations on Major Administrative Decision-making Procedures” and Their Implementation

Although the organizational structures of the Party and the government are different, they are still interrelated in terms of decision-making systems. From the per-

spective of organizational separation, a question is how to maintain the system of chief executive responsibility in the administrative organization’s decision-making process. One viewpoint holds that China’s system of chief executive responsibility is characterized by collective decision-making, which makes it a form of democratic centralism. However, this analysis highlights an institutional problem: the conflict between the collective decision-making system implemented by the Party committees within government departments and the system of chief executive responsibility within administrative departments. The core issue is how to ensure that the system of chief executive responsibility truly allows the chief executive to make decisions while also ensuring the leadership of the Party.

The existence of Party committees within government departments is intended to provide leadership and supervision and ensure that governmental work aligns with the Party’s intentions. This creates a decision-making system different from that of administrative departments. The solution proposed at the Thirteenth National Party Congress involved two approaches: first, abolishing Party departments that duplicate the functions of government agencies and transferring their administrative affairs to relevant government departments (for example, the Political and Legal Affairs Committee was temporarily abolished); and second, abolishing Party groups within government agencies, as “the existing Party groups in various government departments are each responsible to the Party committee that

approved their establishment, which is not conducive to the unity and efficiency of government work, and should be gradually abolished.” However, if these two methods were implemented, how would the Party then exercise leadership over the government? How would this leadership be manifested?

The outcome of the reform eventually revealed that the returned Party departments overlapped with governmental functional departments, with government departments retaining Party groups. This institutional contradiction in decision-making persists, even though it may not be manifested in every decision-making process. The crux lies in how to truly implement the system of chief executive responsibility in decision-making processes.

The solution requires the revision of the scope of decision-making and the functions of Party and government organizations. Although the Thirteenth Party’s Congress proposed the separation of Party and government functions, it still emphasized the leadership of the Party in major decisions. Major decisions encompass significant issues, such as major policies, as discussed by Mao Zedong. However, how major issues are defined remains unclear, as they are not confined to Party affairs but also include administrative matters.

The “Interim Regulations on Major Administrative Decision-making Procedures” issued in 2019, for the first time, listed major administrative decision-making matters, including the formulation of major public policies

and measures in various fields, such as public services, market regulation, social management, and environmental protection. These matters provide a general overview of government functions, which are further detailed on the basis of local realities and jurisdiction.

With respect to decision-making systems and procedures, the principles outlined in the regulations emphasize the comprehensive leadership of the Party in major administrative decision-making processes, which aligns with the Party’s line, principles, policies, and decisions throughout the process. However, how to adhere to and strengthen the comprehensive leadership of the Party remains a question.

The regulations stipulate that draft decisions must be discussed at the executive meeting or general meeting of the decision-making body, and the administrative chief makes the final decision on the basis of collective discussions. If the chief’s decision differs from the majority opinion, he must explain the reasons. The regulations also require reporting to the same-level Party committee for consultation and approval before major administrative decisions are made. This indicates that the ultimate decision-making authority lies with the Party, even though the decision is ultimately announced and executed in the name of the government. In conclusion, according to the principle of unified responsibility, who bears the responsibility for these decisions?

Although the “Regulations” stipulate the procedures for major decisions, the existence of the CCP’s “Reg-

ulations on Party Committees” has led to different interpretations and understandings at the local level in the process of implementing the “Regulations.” We can observe various local regulations on major administrative decision-making established by county-level governments on the basis of the “Regulations.” Two different patterns can be identified.

One pattern follows the conception of the “Regulations” and emphasizes the role of government leaders. For example, the “Decision-making Procedure Regulations of Dawu County People’s Government on ‘Three Importance and One Major’” (Dawu, 2022) state, “The executive meetings or general meetings of the county government for studying and deciding on ‘Three Importance and One Major’ matters are generally convened and presided over by the county magistrate. When discussing and deciding on ‘Three Importance and One Major’ matters, there must be over two-thirds of the attendees present. The draft of ‘Three Importance and One Major’ matters shall be discussed at the executive meetings or general meetings of the county government. The principal leaders of the county government shall make decisions based on collective discussions. Before the decision on ‘Three Importance and One Major’ matters is issued, it shall be submitted to the county party committee for approval or reporting as required” (Dawu, 2022). This statement aligns with the “Regulations.” Here, the role of the chief executive is evident, although the “Regulations” do not explicitly state whether the chief executive is permitted to disagree with the majority

opinion, which is a feature of the chief executive system. However, ultimately, decision-making must still be reported to the same-level Party committee for consultation and reporting.

Another approach emphasizes the role of the county government’s Party committee in decision-making without involving the role of the administrative chief. For example, the “Implementation Measures of Zhijin County Committee of the Communist Party of China for Implementing the Collective Decision-making System of ‘Three Importance and One Major’” matters stipulates that the decision-making of such matters is generally collectively undertaken at the meetings of the county government’s Party committee or executive meetings. The decision-making process for “Three Importance and One Major” matters is collective discussion and decision-making according to the meeting’s agenda. Meetings to discuss “Three Importance and One Major” matters must be attended by more than two-thirds of the members of the Party committee, and approval requires a majority vote from more than half of the members present (Zhijin, 2023). Here, the collective decision-making system of the Party replaces the chief executive responsibility of the government.

It is interesting to note the case of Ziyang County. In 2017, before the issuance of the “Regulations,” the Ziyang County Committee of the Communist Party of China promulgated a notice titled “Implementation Measures of the Ziyang County Committee of the Communist Party of China for Imple-

menting the Collective Decision-making System of “Three Importance and One Major.” These measures indicate that decision-making meetings are to be convened and presided over by the county Party secretary or other members of the standing committee on the basis of suggestions. Topics related to county government departments should first be discussed in the county government’s executive meetings to formulate specific opinions, which are then submitted in the name of the county government’s Party committee. Decision-making meetings are generally convened and chaired by the county Party secretary, and more than two-thirds of the members of the county standing committee are required to attend. At these meetings, decisions are made by means such as oral voting, raising hands, anonymous voting, or named voting, and are approved if the votes in favor exceed half of the members present. This document indicates that decisions on the “Three Importance and One Major” matters are made by the Party organization through voting (Ziyang, 2017). This model clearly replaces the government with the Party, which, to some extent, responds to the emphasis in the 19th National Congress of the CCP (2017) on “upholding the Party’s leadership over all work.”

After the issuance of the “Regulations” in 2019, Ziyang County issued a revised notice titled “Implementation Measures of the Ziyang County People’s Government for Implementing the Collective Decision-making System of ‘Three Importance and One Major’” matters in the name of the government.

The notice stated that all “Three Importance and One Major” matters within the jurisdiction of the county government, except in cases of major emergencies, should be collectively discussed and decided upon at meetings of the county government’s Party committee or executive meetings. These meetings are generally convened and chaired by the county magistrate, and more than two-thirds of the government’s leading members are required to attend. Leaders express their opinions at these meetings, important matters are decided through voting, and approval requires the support of more than half of the attending members (Ziyang, 2022).

The variation observed in Ziyang County indicates a shift in decision-making authority from the Party committee to the county government’s Party committee or executive meetings, with the convener being the county magistrate. However, it is not specified that the convener makes decisions on the basis of collective discussions; instead, decisions are made through voting. In this context, Ziyang County’s approach is the same as that of Zhijin County. The difference, however, is that in Ziyang County, the convener is the county magistrate, whereas in Zhijin County, the convener appears in the form of a Party group.

The emphasis on the Party committee’s role is based on the “Regulations on Party Committees,” which define the Party committee as the leading organ in various social organizations and institutions, including the government, and one of its functions, as outlined in Article 10, is to discuss and decide on major

issues within its jurisdiction. These major issues include “Three Importance and One Major” matters. According to Article 21, decisions on these major issues should be made through collective discussions by Party committee members based on the principle of the minority obeying the majority.

Here, we consider two different decision-making approaches. The Dawu model accurately reflects the intent of the “Regulations” in 2019, where the administrative chief makes decisions on the basis of collective discussions at government meetings (note that this is not the government Party committee meeting). The Zhijin model involves the government Party committee making decisions according to the principle of the minority obeying the majority. In this case, the administrative chief typically holds only one vote in the voting process. However, even in this scenario, the intentions of the administrative chief are generally upheld because, according to the “Party Committee Regulations” (Article 7), the Party committee secretary is usually the main leader of the unit, which means that the county magistrate is usually also the secretary of the county government’s Party committee. Therefore, in general circumstances, his intentions can be implemented because, within the existing organizational culture, the opinion of the top leader is usually respected. However, the voting procedure cannot guarantee that each decision reflects the intention of the administrative chief. Therefore, under such circumstances, the system of chief executive responsibility is not fully realized,

especially with consideration of the rare scenario where the chief executive is not a Party member.

IV. Brief Conclusion

On the basis of the descriptions and analyses above, we can draw several conclusions. First, from the perspective of the relationship between the Party and the government, despite the existence of reforms separating their functions, the model of separate Party and government organizations with unified functions has become mainstream (excluding grassroots townships). Second, the separation of the Party and government organizations has led to a situation in which each has its own decision-making system and mechanism. However, owing to the unified functions where both the Party and the government are involved in making decisions on major issues, conflicts between the two different decision-making systems (i.e., collective decision-making and the chief executive system) and challenges regarding how to connect the two have arisen. Third, the coexistence of the Party and government regulations is the reason for the differing practices in the decision-making process of local governments, which results in diverse characteristics at the county level. There are practices such as those of Dawu County, which emphasize the chief executive system, and practices such as those of Zhijin County, which emphasize collective decision-making by the Party committee. The collective decision-making adopted by the Party committee and the

chief executive system adopted by the government are reconciled according to the method in which the administrative chief concurrently serves as the Party committee secretary. However, although in general circumstances, the opinion of the top leader is usually respected, the intention of the chief executive cannot be fully realized. Fourth, China's government decision-making system is not theoretically a system of chief executive responsibility; it is a decision-making system that combines the chief executive system and collec-

tive decision-making. The role of the administrative chief varies depending on the decision-making process. Finally, the advantages of this system lie in ensuring Party leadership, but its drawbacks include the potential impact on the efficiency of decision-making and issues regarding who ultimately bears the responsibility for the decision. When the intention of the administrative chief is not realized, yet he is still held accountable for the decision, the principle of accountability is violated.

Note

- * “Three Importance and One Major” refers to important issues to be decided, important cadres to be appointed and dismissed, important projects to be deployed, and large amount of funds to be used. When decision concerned with these matters, it must be made on the basis of collective discussion. ‘Three Importance and One Major,’ as a part of political discipline, originated from the six session of the 14th party’s central committee of discipline in 1996.

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