Konstantinos D. Tsimonis

The Chinese Communist Youth League

Juniority and Responsiveness in a Party Youth Organization

Amsterdam University Press

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To Daphne, the source of all happiness

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Acknowledgments

Work for this book began at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) as research for my PhD thesis, and was completed a few blocks away, at King's College London. Necessary 'detours' included a few years in Beijing, long visits to Zhejiang, Shanghai and Shandong, intensive writing periods in Sai Wan Ho (Hong Kong), Peckham and Pimlico (London) and Kifisia (Athens), and unmissable summer breaks in Palio (Kavala). In all these places, I was fortunate to have the academic and personal support of many wonderful people.

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I have presented bits and pieces of my work on the Communist Youth League at different conferences and seminars including the Conference on Youth Mobilisation and Political Change (ZOiS, Berlin 2019), the European Association of Chinese Studies Biannual Conference (Glasgow 2018), the 10th Annual International Asian Dynamics Initiative Conference (Copenhagen 2018), the 10th and 11th Conferences on Asian Studies, Palacky University (Olomouc 2016, 2017), the International Conference on Political participation in Asia (Stockholm 2015), the British Association of Chinese Studies Conference (Newcastle 2014) and the China Postgraduate Network Annual Conference (Lancaster 2013). During these events, the challenging questions and comments by fellow panelists and participants were enormously helpful. Among the people I met at these academic occasions special thanks are due to Olga Dror, Felix Krawatzek and Maria Strasakova.

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As I started working on the book well after I finished my PhD, some of its parts have previously appeared in other publications. Specifically, Chapters 3 and 4 are respectively derived from articles published in *Modern China* Vol. 44, No. 2, March 2018, pp. 170-207 (Tsimonis, 2018), and the *Journal of Youth Studies* Vol. 20, No. 10, 26 November 2017, pp. 1362-1379 (Tsimonis, 2017), while short portions of these articles have also been included in the Introduction and Chapter 2. My thanks to Sage, and to Taylor & Francis, for their permission to adapt these articles as part of the present book.

Life in academia is a constant race against deadlines, publishing goals, and ever-expanding administrative tasks, to say nothing of countless hours reading, writing and teaching – and then thinking about all the above. The rewarding feeling one gets from a good peer review, a student's expression of gratitude and a pat on the back from a senior colleague make it all worthwhile. But for me, the beam of light at the end of the tunnel of self-doubt, stress and tiredness in which we often find ourselves, is always family. My

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Konstantinos D. Tsimonis
September 2020

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Fieldbo: *But what will you do with your League?*

Stensgard: *The League shall remain as it is; it is founded on a pretty broad basis. Its purpose is to counteract noxious influences; and I am just beginning to realize what side the noxious influences come from.*

Fieldbo: *But do you think the "Youth" will see it in the same light?*

Stensgard: *They shall! I have surely a right to expect fellows like that to bow before my superior insight.*

Fieldbo: *But if they won't?*

Stensgard: *Then they can go their own way. I have done with them. You don't suppose I am going to let my life slip into a wrong groove, and never reach the goal, for the sake of mere blind, pig-headed consistency!*

– Henrik Ibsen, *The League of Youth* [translated by William Archer]

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1 Introduction

Abstract
Chapter 1 introduces the research question and identifies three reasons to focus on the "keep youth satisfied" mandate under Hu Jintao: a) unpacking Xi Jinping's criticism and decision to downgrade the League; b) understanding the institutional dimension of Party-youth relations; and c) opening avenues for comparison on youth political participation under authoritarianism and democracy. The Chapter continues by outlining the League's problematic engagement with youth under Mao and during the first period of reform, and Hu Jintao's decision to break the cycle of youth's political alienation leading to conflict with the Party, by increasing the League's responsiveness. It then presents the analytical approach of this study and the concept of 'Juniority', and explains the methodology and outline of the book.

Keywords: CYL, League, Youth, Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping, Juniority

Xi Jinping's administration has been eventful and intriguing, as scores of Chinese political and military figures, who were previously considered 'untouchable', have lost their titles, offices and freedom (Brown, 2018a; Walder, 2018). Apart from individual officials, however, the body count of Xi's first five-year term also includes one of the most well-known and respected organizations of the Party, the Communist Youth League (CYL, League). As an alleged bastion of factional support for the Hu-Wen administration, in early 2016 the League was severely criticized by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection for exhibiting an 'aristocratic' (*guizuhua* 贵族化) and 'entertainment-oriented' (*yulehua* 娱乐化) mentality. Its budget was then halved, many of its central officials were demoted or had their careers stalled, and the CYL central committee lost control of its training institutions and business interests (Lam, 2016; Doyon, 2019a; Shan and Chen, 2020). Xi Jinping justified these measures on the grounds that they reduced the League's bureaucratic character and increased its capacity at

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the grassroots, with the goals of better serving young people, and bolstering their support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, the Party) and for his own 'China Dream' (CYL Reform Plan, 2016; Xi, 2017: 11-19).

Xi offered a conservative prescription for achieving these goals, consisting of intensified indoctrination and an effort to re-energize the political functions of local League organizations. But there could not be a starker contrast between his instruction for a uniform and overtly 'red' engagement with young people, and the pluralistic landscape of contemporary Chinese society. Four decades of economic and social development have diversified the Chinese youth, generating groups with disparate social realities, and varying demands, views and aspirations. In this new social context, young people view politics with apathy and exhibit instrumentalist attitudes towards joining the Party and participating in its organizational life (Rosen, 2004; Fish, 2015; De Kloet and Fung, 2017). Therefore, it is not clear how more propaganda, formalism, and pressure to adhere to top-down, prescribed political behaviors can solve the problem of the youth's passivity and cynicism towards, and disassociation from official politics. It is difficult to imagine that intensification of practices like group study of Party documents, flag-raising ceremonies and self-criticism sessions can remedy young people's alienation from the political life of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

As a matter of fact, Xi Jinping's prescription is quite familiar and somewhat banal. Like many other conservative leaders in China and in the former socialist world, Xi responded to young people's distance from officially sanctioned channels for political participation, not by inducing their engagement with more meaningful processes, but by bringing the same form of politics closer to their everyday lives (Solnick, 1998; McDougall, 2004; Saunders, 2007; Fürst, 2012; Tsipursky, 2015a, 2015b). Paradoxically, communist regimes have often reacted to youth political apathy by eventually implementing a rebranded yet almost identical version of the type of politics that alienated youth in the first place. Interestingly, though, this was not always the case: under socialism, communist parties experimented with new forms of engagement with young people, aimed at appealing to their needs, their desire for self-expression, as well as their cultural and lifestyle preferences (McDougall, 2004; Saunders, 2007; Sadowska, 2016; Spaskovka, 2017).

What is the role of the Communist Youth League in China's socioeconomic context of reforms, that is characterized by marketization, globalization, and authoritarian resilience? How does the League engage young people and is it effective in cultivating support for the CCP? This is the first book-length study of the Chinese Communist Youth League that explores its role

and effectiveness vis-à-vis its constituency of young people. But instead of focusing on a period characterized by a 'back to the roots' intensification of youth indoctrination and Party-building that is still ongoing, it concentrates on a time when the regime chose a less politicized approach to achieving these goals. Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, soon after taking power, called upon the CYL to increase its responsiveness in order to 'Keep Youth Satisfied' (2003 CYL Yearbook: 5). What followed could be characterized as the CYL's 'Golden Decade', a period during which the League had substantial political support at the top, and a mandate for a more meaningful engagement with young people at the grassroots.

The League's emphasis on youth's 'satisfaction' during this period, and its concomitant efforts to adapt its work as a means of fostering support for the communist regime, are areas for study that remain unexplored. This lacuna is symptomatic of a broader scholarly inattention to the League's functions as a mass organization and its engagement with young people. Thus far, the literature on Chinese youth has not engaged with this important state-society perspective, treating the League essentially as a secondary theme in investigations on youth political attitudes (Rosen, 2009; Clark 2012; Fish, 2015; De Kloet and Fung, 2017). This creates an important gap in our understanding of young people's experience with official politics in the PRC. The CYL's membership in the last two decades ranges consistently between 70 and 90 million, encompassing a large part of the young Chinese population (between 14 and 28 years of age). Although preparing young people for CCP membership remains its central task, the League is also the main channel for Chinese youth's political socialization and normative instruction; in addition, it has expanded its role in the areas of youth welfare and recreation through both nationwide and local activities, as well as specialized institutions.

Other mass organizations, notably the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU, the Unions) and the All-China Women's Federations (ACWF, the Federations), have attracted considerable scholarly attention for their dual role in offering a channel for bottom-up representation and responsiveness, while also cultivating loyalty to the regime and maintaining social stability. Many studies have recorded the difficulties and tensions faced by cadres in carrying out these inherently contradictory tasks, as well as their responses and initiatives in addressing social problems (Hershatter, 2004; Lee, 2007; Angeloff and Lieber, 2012; Pringle, 2011). The League, in comparison, remains an understudied organization, possibly because it is considered too close to the CCP and too preoccupied with Party membership preparation to develop an autonomous role. The present study will

contribute to filling this gap in the scholarship by investigating the League's response to the challenge of increasing its capacity to relate and respond to its youth 'constituency' while preserving its main characteristics as a mass and Party-dependent organization.

Scope and importance of the study

Apart from expanding our understanding of the CYL and the political system of the People's Republic of China, there are three main reasons to study the League's attempt to redefine its 'youth work' (*qingnian gongzuo* 青年工作) to 'serve youth' (*fuwu qingnian* 服务青年) in the Hu-Wen era. To start with the most immediate one, unpacking the regime-youth relationship through its main intermediary organization can shed light on the motives behind the recent attack on the CYL. Although the media quickly attributed the CYL's fall to factional cleansing,[1] it is necessary to pay closer attention to Xi's own consistent criticism of the League as an essentially self-serving organization that fails to engage the youth (Xi, 2017).

A fuller view of Xi Jinping's indirect dismissal of the CYL's efforts under Hu and Wen, and of his conservative backpedaling on how the Chinese regime should approach young people, demands a better understanding of what exactly happened during this period. How was this call for responsiveness implemented organizationally and how was it received by young Chinese? Answering this question and analyzing the reasons behind the developments it encompasses, can help determine whether the League's downgrading under Xi is solely the outcome of factional considerations, or also reveals other concerns. One alternative way to explain these changes could be that they are part of Xi's efforts to reinvigorate Party life both organizationally and ideologically, which have been translated into more routine Party processes, and an emphasis on morality, discipline and ideological indoctrination across the CCP and government (Brown, 2018b: 128-130). However, the League has received much more attention than any of its sister organizations, including trade unions and women's federations. Thus, a third possible explanation emerges, namely the regime's deepening mistrust about what lies under the political apathy of the youth, and a consequent apprehension that the

1 In an almost univocal manner, media reports identified the so-called Tuanpai (the CYL Faction) as the target of Xi's moves against the League, for instance: Hornby, 3 August 2016; Buckley, 4 August 2016; Feldman, 11 August 2016; Kang and Blanchard, 30 September 2016.

CYL is incapable of addressing it. Perhaps, ultimately, Xi is more worried about the loyalty of young generations than about his factional opponents.

Understanding the implementation of Hu's call for responsiveness can help explain the motives behind his successor's decision to overhaul the League. If the implementation was successful and created more support for the regime, the 'factional' explanation gains prominence, portraying Xi essentially as having sacrificed a successful experiment for his own efforts at political consolidation. If, however, 'Keeping the Youth Satisfied' was an elusive task, poorly carried out by a large and lethargic organization, then there is more merit to the other two explanations, and accordingly more attention is due to the logic of Party reinvigoration, and to the CCP's concerns over youth loyalty, respectively. In relation to these concerns of the CCP, it is especially worthy of investigation that, if the CYL's more responsive mode of operation failed to generate youth support for the Party, there is little reason to expect that the intensification of propaganda and compulsory political participation will fare any better.

Secondly, examining the CYL's policies and activities under Hu and the ways these were received by young people, offers an opportunity to understand the nature of the youth-regime relationship in the post-Tiananmen period. Are young Chinese supportive of the political system of their regime or just tolerate it? Can the absence of confrontation and contentious politics since 1989 be attributed, even partially, to the ability of the CYL to co-opt social groups and offer institutional responses to bottom-up demands? Or is it ephemeral, based primarily on a combination of fear, successful performance of the Chinese economy and the manipulation of nationalism that the Party has employed to sustain support more broadly?

The post-1989 loyalty to the CCP apparent in Chinese society in general, and in the youth in particular, is usually attributed to the promise of opportunity for material and professional advancement, the careful merging of patriotic duty and obedience to the Party under the same umbrella of nationalism, and the threat of coercion (Zhao, 1998; Wright, 2010; Wang, 2014). But under closer examination of each of these factors, the fragility of this loyalty and its circumstantial basis become glaringly obvious. Citizens below the age of thirty have no memory of poverty and hardship under socialism, and take fast economic growth and material abundance for granted (Wright, 2010: 176). As a result, appealing to economic development to enhance popular acceptance of the CCP may become a less convincing narrative, especially if China experiences an economic downturn, rising unemployment and salary stagnation. Similarly, nationalism is actively cultivated within the educational system (Wang, 2012) and the Young Pioneers (Woronov, 2007),

the Party's organization for children aged 6 to 14 years old, but this too can turn against the Party if it fails to deliver on its nationalistic discourse and promises (Weiss, 2014: 2). Finally, coercion is also an important pillar of authoritarian rule and creates strong disincentives to dissent, but it has to be a last-resort option for the regime rather than a ubiquitous condition, otherwise it risks and furnishes justification for violent resistance, as in the case of many Arab autocracies before the Spring of 2010 (Brownlee, 2015).

In response to the high degree of uncertainty attached to these modes of fostering loyalty, the Party increased its reliance on institutional mechanisms at the top and at the base to bolster its own resilience. This move included the improvement of its capacity for responsiveness through meritocratic, differentiated and specialized bureaucracies, and the opening of feedback channels and input institutions (Nathan, 2003). The call for a more responsive League follows exactly this logic. As the reformist regime's commitment to secure employment has long been abandoned and young Chinese face a very competitive and deregulated job market, the League cannot offer a loyalty-for-career trade-off as in the past (Montaperto, 1977; Healy, 1982; Shirk, 1982), at least not on a mass scale. Further, its effectiveness in spreading nationalist propaganda and in assisting the Party's monitoring capacity, especially in well-defined spaces such as university campuses, carries the same uncertainties and limitations as the regime's own efforts. With these obstacles in view, Hu Jintao recognized and articulated the necessity for the League to increase its engagement with young people's views and demands, to provide channels for feedback and participation and to augment its capacity for responsiveness (Yang, 2009; Li, 2010), according to the CCP's prescription for authoritarian resilience. Understanding the strengths and limitations of this effort will enable better evaluation of the effectiveness and durability of the means available to the regime to sustain loyalty among young Chinese.

The third reason for studying the Communist Youth League in the Hu-Wen decade is its comparative value. Taking a step back from the Chinese context to look at youth political participation more broadly, one cannot but identify patterns and similarities in state-youth relations that cut across different historical and contemporary political contexts. On the one hand, communist regimes in Europe and elsewhere during the Cold War struggled to maintain support among young people and often experimented with new approaches to achieve the same. A growing body of research has recorded these (mostly) abortive attempts, which met with internal opposition from conservative Party elites as well as bureaucratic resistance from within youth organizations (Fürst, 2002; McDougall, 2004; Saunders, 2007;

Neumann, 2008). These experiments, usually short-lived and half-hearted, sent contradictory messages. Their failure to deliver on their promises intensified young people's disappointment with politics, fueling protest and, occasionally, rebellion.

On the other hand, the rise of youth apathy towards the political life of Western democracies has attracted considerable scholarly attention. This phenomenon has taken the form of low voter turnout in elections, declining participation in parties and their youth organizations (Lamb, 2003; Hooghe, 2004; Fieldhouse et al, 2007; Mycock & Tonge, 2012; Quintelier, 2015), as well as, more recently, increasing support for populist parties and candidates (Mierina & Koroleva, 2015; Seippel & Strandbu, 2017; Westheimer, 2019). The reduced appeal of party youth organizations corresponds to the overall decline of mass parties in Western democracies. However, research has revealed that the membership of youth organizations has declined even faster, thereby accentuating generational imbalances within parties (Hooghe and Stolle, 2005; Mycock and Tonge, 2012). Although the rejection of official channels co-exists with a search for alternative spaces and forms of political expression and action (Coleman, 2007; Loader, 2007; Amadeo, 2010; Hooghen and Boonen, 2015), it is a major concern for democracies how the quality of representative processes will be impacted by rising political apathy among the youth.

With this broader picture in mind, a comparative question emerges: If young people in authoritarian and democratic states alike choose to abstain from official politics, can the causes of their apathy be similar or, at least, comparable? This question directs us to concentrate more on young people's experiences with institutions designated for youth, and less on the heterogeneous political systems that host them. In such institutions, the meaning of 'youth' as a socio-political category is shaped through complex power relations that are reflected in formal processes and policies. The study of a large organization such as the CYL will reveal the social, political and generational power relations that determine youth policy in an authoritarian context. Furthermore, concentrating on these dimensions makes it possible to start thinking about youth in politics from a comparative perspective that bridges historical and contemporary political divides, thus allowing for reflection on the broader phenomenon of youth disassociation with politics, and on possible ways to address it.

This book's focus on the Hu-Wen decade further contributes to such a comparative line of inquiry. Hu Jintao's overall supportive stance towards the CYL, and the relatively liberal social and political conjuncture of his administration in comparison to both Jiang's and Xi's, were conducive to a

more autonomous and responsive form of youth work. By examining a period when the Party was less intrusive, and was explicitly encouraging the CYL to address youth problems and needs, this research aims to dissect the power relations in play that inform its institutional capacity for responsiveness.

Before turning to Hu Jintao's call to 'Keep Youth Satisfied' in 2003, I will first briefly explore the nature of the challenge facing the League at that time. Despite its autonomous origins as a revolutionary organization, the CYL developed a symbiotic relation with the CCP, which led it into open conflict with Chinese youth twice in its history. As such, by the time Hu Jintao came to power, the CYL had an already long record of rather modest results in engaging youth.

The challenge: Reversing the legacy of an uneasy relationship

Surprisingly, the League's dependent and subordinated position to the CCP was not predetermined at the time of its founding. The Socialist Youth League (*Shehuizhuyi qingniantuan* 社会主义青年团), as the CYL was originally named, was officially established in 1922, but its first local organizations had already emerged autonomously in 1920, fueled by the revolutionary fervor of the May 4 movement (Graziani, 2014: 124). Until the end of the first United Front with the Guomindang in 1927, the League developed rapidly as an organization for the urban-based educated youth and young workers, exceeding the CCP in membership and competing with it in terms of influence (ibid.: 119). In this period, its political and organizational subordination to the Party had not been solidified; on the contrary, it retained significant autonomy and even challenged the CCP for the leadership of the Chinese communist movement (Chen, 2015: 37-73). In the 1930s, however, the League was transformed into the youth branch of the CCP's agrarian revolutionary army (Graziani, 2014: 146-147). As with youth organizations elsewhere in wartime (Neumann, 2011; Dror, 2018), its functions were subsumed by the Party's military efforts, first in the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and then in the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949) (Chen, 2015: 115-124).

Regime-building and the League's first fall

From 1949 onwards, the New Democratic Youth League (*xinminzhuzhuyi qingniantuan* 新民主主义青年团), as the League was titled until 1957, concentrated on the regimentation of Chinese youth, and followed the political ups and downs of the CCP in the Maoist era. Sporadic studies offered

glimpses into the CYL's organizational development as a transmission belt in the early People's Republic (Barnett, 1952; Chao, 1954; Pringsheim, 1962). Montaperto (1977) examined the League's attempt to cultivate communist values and morality in young people, but discovered a sluggish bureaucracy resembling a revolutionary movement in nothing but its symbols and rhetoric. Essentially, the League operated as a component of a conservative establishment that 'socialized China's young people to the wrong things' (ibid.: 258) instead of revolutionary ideals. In secondary education it was preoccupied with political instruction and ritual, socializing students with political models and correct attitudes, with varying effectiveness (Whyte, 1974: 113,118-121). In universities, the League organized cultural, recreational and sports activities but maintained a heavy emphasis on 'ideological mobilization and political education to increase production' (Healy, 1982: 110-111). As a result, between 1949 and 1966, the CYL's bottom-up representational function was 'nothing more than a myth' (ibid.: 112).

The Cultural Revolution (CR) posed an existential challenge for the League, as radicalized youths sought organizational alternatives by forming militant Red Guard groups (Israel, 1967: 4). The League was too close to the CCP to 'respond dynamically to changing political conditions' (Leader, 1974: 707), and consequently was quickly rendered obsolete by Red Guards (Funnell, 1970). In fact, the CYL, controlled by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, attempted to water down the Cultural Revolution by initially implementing a moderate rectification campaign, which made it a target for radicals (Israel, 1967: 9; Leader, 1974: 707).

The findings on the dependent and bureaucratic character of the League are consistent with the literature on the CR that emphasizes societal causes to explain its intensity. Lingering social tensions piled up during the first two decades of CCP rule resulting from official class categorizations; from 'frightening' campaigns that created open accounts to be settled among individuals; and from resentment towards bureaucratic power and privilege (White, 1989: 46-47). Shirk (1982: 67) quotes a secondary-school student who explained his motivation for joining the League: 'League members were powerful in class because they could struggle against people they wanted to 'get' for other reasons… get a job… join the PLA… and get into the Communist Party'. In the 1950s and 1960s, the League became indistinguishable from the CCP as a bastion of privilege in schools and universities. Active members cultivated social capital with teachers and obtained more opportunities for career advancement (ibid.: 68-70). In the microcosm of the classroom, League members were viewed as 'little specially privileged persons' (Chou, 1973a: 52), attracting the animosity of

their peers, who turned against them at the outset of the CR (Israel, 1967: 15; Funnell, 1970: 127; Leader, 1974: 702).

Rosen (1982) in his study on Guangzhou Red Guards points out that members in the most radical groups came from 'bad' family backgrounds (classified as bourgeois, professionals, landlords, capitalists, pro-Guomindang, etc.) which disqualified them from enjoying the special privileges and political affiliations of their peers with revolutionary classification (that is, poor, working, cadre) (ibid.: 147). Whereas most studies show that infighting among conservative and radical groups took place along such ascribed class categories (Blecher and White, 1979: 81; Dikotter, 2016: 115-117), others have demonstrated that students joined factions opportunistically during the process of institutional collapse at the start of the Cultural Revolution (Walder, 2009: 9-15). On the whole, however, there is broad agreement that the CYL was seen as part of the same establishment that Red Guards vowed to destroy, which sealed its fate for this period.

The League ceased to exist in the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution and only re-emerged with the Party's effort to re-establish control in the early 1970s, when CYL organizations were restored and membership expanded again (Wang, 1972; Chou, 1975). In this period, young people became disillusioned with the League, its bureaucratic reassertion of authority among Red Guards, and its new emphasis on political re-education and 'red' recreational activities (Chou, 1973a; 1973b). This form of youth work continued into the first decade of reforms, leading to a new round of alienation, contention and conflict.

The second fall of the League

In the years leading to the student protests of the late 1980s, it is possible to identify dynamics similar to those in the 1960s: a far-reaching policy shift (in this case Deng's reforms) created social conditions that triggered 'exit' responses by young people. During the 1980s, opinion surveys among students and young workers revealed a trend of increasing disassociation from the Party both ideologically and organizationally (Liu, 1984; Rosen, 1987), a prevailing skepticism towards socialism, a lack of interest in political instruction, and a declining desire to join the CYL (Liu, 1984: 979, 986, 990). Indeed, educators, Party and League officials reported significant difficulties in recruitment of young students and workers, as well as cynical and satirical attitudes towards CCP membership, even among League cadres (Rosen, 1987: 59, 85, 88). Proposed solutions ranged from conservative recipes, such as intensified indoctrination and stricter criteria for new members, to more

attention towards young people's needs and demands. This discussion revealed a sense of crisis among officials and a lack of direction on how to deal with politically dissociated youth (ibid.: 3). Characteristically, in the 12th CYL National Congress held one year before the Tiananmen massacre, Song Defu, then the League's first secretary, spoke of a 'divorce' between the CYL and youth masses (Chiang, 1988: 36).

In this time of crisis, the Party's reflex action was to intensify ideological instruction and propaganda in the League (Liu 1984: 991-993). Gold (1996: 186-189) explains the ambivalence inherent in preaching compliance with lofty collectivist ideals and Lei Feng-style selflessness, in a social environment that revered individualism, consumerism and wealth. Grassroots cadres responded in two ways to this approach. The first was to emphasize their non-political work, such as sports competitions and cultural activities, coupled with a rather perfunctory and limited engagement with their political duties (191). The second response was a mixture of 'voice' and 'exit'. Investigating the backgrounds of leading protesters, Rosen (1992) argues that the 'real threat' for the CCP did not come from the CYL cadres who were unconcerned with politics and who mechanically joined rebellious youths, but rather, from 'more committed student cadres who found officially sanctioned organizations irrelevant and therefore created new ones' (Rosen, 1992: 188). CYL cadres in fact played a leading role in creating new, informal organizations on campus, using skills and resources they had gained in the League to organize protests (Wasserstrom and Liu, 1995: 383). As the sequence of contentious events unfolded during April-May 1989, Youth League cadres became critical of the government's intolerant reaction to peaceful student demonstrations and protested accordingly (Liang, Nathan and Link, 2002: 101). Thus, as in the Cultural Revolution, the League in the late 1980s also failed to respond to rapidly changing social conditions, with the result that its local organizations either became paralyzed or were hijacked by members and cadres-turned-protesters.

The already limited academic work on the League almost disappears after 1989. Surveys and qualitative studies of Chinese youth (mainly focused on university students and graduates) show that in contrast to the idealism of the first decade of reform – a lost generation in the eyes of the Party (Rosen, 1992: 168) – those born after 1980 are 'success oriented' and openly seek the 'good life' (Liu, 1996: 171; Rosen, 2004: 159); they have passive political attitudes, and join the League and the Party for career reasons, while they channel their grievances and criticism into online forums (Chan, 2000; Rosen, 2004: 161-170; Clark, 2012: 194-195; De Kloet & Fung, 2017: 32-35, 38). Against this background, a new Chinese leadership with a long career in

the League emerged in 2002 and decided to break the vicious cycle of failed routine engagement with young people leading in turn to their alienation from official politics, and eventually crisis.

Enter Hu Jintao: 'Keep the Party Assured and the Youth Satisfied'

The League's new mandate for engagement with the Chinese youth emerged in a period of expansion of social policy in China, when the CCP leadership appeared committed to addressing various injustices and welfare needs that emerged after rapid marketization in the 1990s (Brown, 2012; Howell and Duckett, 2018). Hu and Wen's vision of a harmonious (*hexie* 和谐) and moderately well-off society (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会) created a favorable political context for the CYL's experimentation with new types of youth work.

Hu Jintao introduced his call for a more responsive League on 25 July 2003, just a few months after being appointed president and general secretary of the CCP. Addressing the first session of the 15th National Representative Congress of the Communist Youth League, Hu's speech followed Party protocol closely (2003 CYL Yearbook: 3-5). He explained, first, the importance of the present conjuncture for China's development, then outlined the goal of 'building a well-off society in an all-round way' (*quanmian jianshe xiaokang shehui*全面建设小康社会) as had recently been decided at the 16th Party Congress, and continued by defining the duties of young Chinese in general and of the CYL in particular. The content of his speech was didactic and paternalistic, again not deviating from his predecessors. Hu expressed 'three hopes' (*sandian xiwang* 三点希望) for the Chinese youth: 'to be diligent in learning' (*yao qinyu xuexi* 要勤于学习 in order to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for economic development and comprehend the Party's ideology and goals; 'to be good at creating' (*yao shanyu chuangzao* 要善于创造) in order to build a well-off society; and 'to be willing to give' (*yao ganyu fengxian* 要甘于奉献) by 'consciously serving the motherland and selflessly contributing to society' (*zijue fuwu zuguo, wusi fengxian shehui* 自觉服务祖国，无私奉献社会). Hu Jintao's 'hopes' echoed the expectations of the regime from young Chinese at the turn of the 21st century: learn, create, follow the Party line and serve the motherland.

Since 1989, when Chinese students and youth from all segments of society clashed with the CCP, the Party meticulously regimented the education system and promoted nationalism in the curriculum, expanded compulsory military training for all new university students, and intensified its efforts in indoctrination to regain youth support (Wang, 2014; Fish, 2015; Genevaz,

2019). Hu Jintao, like Party leaders before and after him, was a strong advocate of co-opting the youth and keeping them aligned with the social contract as it was first imposed under Deng Xiaoping and then violently reaffirmed in the Tiananmen massacre of 1989: in exchange for political stability, economic development and opportunities for wealth and better living standards.

Nevertheless, Hu Jintao's instructions to League cadres indicated a new awareness that the CCP's and the CYL's efforts also had to take into consideration the many socioeconomic pressures and challenges that young Chinese faced. Accordingly, after religiously reiterating the Party's expectations of loyalty and industriousness from CYL cadres, Hu continued by instructing them 'to be dedicated to their posts in the League' (*reai tuande gangwei* 热爱团的岗位), 'to serve youth wholeheartedly' (*jiecheng fuwu qingnian* 竭诚服务青年) and 'to work hard to keep the Party assured and the mass of youth satisfied' (*nüli zuo rang dangfangxin, rang guangda qingnian manyi de ganbu* 努力做让党放心、 让广大青年满意的干部). Thus, in addition to indoctrinating and mobilizing young people, preparing them for Party membership and offering aspiring cadres a career avenue, the former Chinese leader ordered the League to engage with the needs and demands of its youth constituency as a means of cultivating political support for the communist regime.

One day after Hu's speech, the 15th National Representative Congress of the CYL passed a resolution (2003 CYL Yearbook: 22-29) to amend the League's constitution, recognizing its new role in 'assisting the government in managing youth affairs' (*xiezhu zhengfu guanli qingnian shiwu* 协助政府管理青年事务) (Chen, 2015: 296). The resolution also explained the political rationale behind the League's new mandate, pointing out that by 'serving youth wholeheartedly' the League would improve its ability to 'attract and unite youth' (*xiyin he ningju qingnian* 吸引和凝聚青年). Official documents, work handbooks, articles and speeches by Chinese leaders repeated the CYL's new commitment to 'serving youth' in education and in the workplace, by improving the training of its cadres accordingly, and carrying out youth work campaigns and projects as well as expanding local infrastructure to 'cover youth' (*fugai qingnian*覆盖青年) and address its needs (CSCCYEC, 2004: 39; Li and Liu, 2007; Li, 2008; Fu and Wang, 2008; Yang, 2009; Fu and Yang, 2010).

Hu's call was codified as the slogan 'Keep the Party Assured and the Youth Satisfied' (*rang dangfangxin, rang qingnian manyi*让党放心，让青年满意) and informed the CYL's discourse and self-perception, as well as the expansion of its youth work, over the next decade. Perhaps it is hard to think of a more laconic yet precise articulation of the CYL's new tasks,

despite the many contradictions it entails. Cultivating legitimacy for the Party requires the League's engagement with the needs and demands of its youth constituency and the augmentation of its capacity for responsiveness. In order to achieve this, the League has to expand its activities beyond its traditional political areas, increase capacity for social work and responsiveness, and moderate its formal and bureaucratic outlook and processes to allow for meaningful participation.

At the same time, however, the CYL is dependent on and subordinated to the CCP, and as such its loyalties have always been clear, while the space available for maneuvering has remained limited. This created many contradictions and pressing questions for cadres. How should they engage young people in a meaningful manner without abandoning political indoctrination and mobilization as the League's key functions? How should League cadres involve young people in consultation, and negotiate on their behalf with the Party and government to promote their views and demands, while keeping them loyal and committed to the regime and its policies? How should they develop specialization in social work, in an organization that is preoccupied with routine political tasks? And, last but not least, how should they convince the Party to create the necessary conditions in terms of resources, incentives and organizational expectations, for this broad mandate to be translated into concrete action? The way cadres have dealt with these contradictions and questions has defined the outcome of the 'Keep Youth Satisfied' mandate and the CYL's effort to engage youth.

Beyond dependency: 'Youth' as a junior political subject

This book explores the organizational life of the League in the Hu-Wen decade and discovers a series of abortive, superficial and half-hearted attempts to change its operation in order to increase its appeal and relevance for young Chinese. More importantly, it reveals that the disappointing outcome of Hu's call for responsiveness cannot be adequately explained on the basis of organizational dependency and the various political controls that the Party has in place. Whereas one could be tempted to conclude that the CYL's failure to adapt to the social environment of the 2000s was simply the outcome of dependency on the Party, this investigation reveals a more complex set of dynamics in play, that impede organizational change.

Dependency on the CCP is often assumed to create an impenetrable web of control that determines every organizational decision of the dependent part. Indeed, the literature on Chinese youth treats the League as little more

than the arm of a monolithic regime, explicitly or implicitly explaining its interactions with young people on the basis of this dependent relation (Rosen, 2009; Clark, 2012; Fish, 2015; Woronov, 2015; De Kloet and Fung, 2017). This approach, albeit capturing interesting insights on the regime's effort to regiment youth, is one-dimensional, and lacks nuance and interpretative depth in its analysis of the dynamics that materialize the 'youth' as a political subject in the work of the CYL.

The literature on China's mass organizations, in fact, shows the opposite: in their efforts to promote the interests of different social groups, cadres do negotiate the limits between dependency and autonomy (for instance, Croll, 1995; Hershatter, 2004; Kohrmann, 2005; Pringle, 2011). As a result of this negotiation, the state at the local and national levels has expanded its institutions and policies on a wide range of social issues, and has engaged in new forms of collaboration with civil society. In order to give voice to social demands, and respond to them in the socioeconomic context of reforms, cadres must not only circumvent the limitations imposed by organizational dependency on the CCP but, more importantly, offer meaningful solutions to a wide range of problems. Emanating from structural forms of subordination of social categories like women and workers, these problems include resurrected patriarchy, all-pervasive marketization, and deteriorating capital-labor relations (Shang, 1999; Howell, 2000; Zhu and Chan, 2005; Hishida, 2010; Angeloff and Lieber, 2012). These forms of structural subordination are present not only in society but also within the Chinese political system and are evident, for instance, in the low political representation of women, and in labor policies (Jin, 2001; Wang, 2004).

Reflecting on the findings of this literature, I evaluate the impact of dependency but also seek to understand the structural forms of subordination of the youth, and how these forms impede responsiveness in the League. 'Youth', of course, is a very broad social category, as diverse as the concept of the 'people' itself. Therefore, patriarchy, marketization, heteronormativity and other forms of subordination (Ferfolja, 2007; Ward & Schneider, 2009; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015) are all shaping the social position of different groups of young people. However, the unfavorable position of youth within the generational hierarchies that permeate state and society requires a closer investigation. This book studies a Party youth organization, and also the ways generational subordination in society is institutionalized in government and policy, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including: interviews with cadres in national and local CYL committees; surveys and ethnography in universities, workplaces, urban

and rural localities; as well as data from official CYL and youth research publications.

My main argument is that the CYL failed to materialize the new mandate for responsiveness under Hu Jintao, because its discourse and work methods continued to embody a disempowering notion of youth, which limited its ability to engage young people in a meaningful and responsive way. This notion emanates from the League's *juniority*, conceptualized as a form of subordination that is distinct from institutional dependency, since it merges political control and generational authority. Juniority is institutionalized and expressed in the set of norms, organizational practices and incentives that constitute youth as a junior political subject, whose interests and duties are top-down defined through hierarchies that favor the structural position of more senior stakeholders in politics and society, including Party committees, government departments, university authorities, employers, unions, etc. The League, as a junior organization, has no real ability to develop localized strategies for responsiveness and for innovation in youth policy. This incapacity produces widespread apathy and cynicism among young people and League members, and demotivates cadres who see little benefit in sustaining a commitment to youth work. In consequence, juniority prevents the League from following the path of other Chinese mass organizations, which modestly adapted their work methods to partially respond to the demands of their constituencies.

Rather than treating it as an abstract concept, my investigation will reveal the ways juniority is institutionalized and normalized in the League, thus undermining the League's prospects of increasing its own responsiveness. Crucially, the problematic notion of *youth* as equivalent to *junior*, is mirrored in the disadvantaged position of Communist Youth League cadres in all places in which they operate. Their agency is conditioned by seniority-based power relations that permeate both grassroots spaces and the vertical structure of government administration. The CCP's paternalistic approach towards youth is replicated through organizational practices in appointments and promotions, that keep League cadres attached to weak positions within multiple hierarchies: political, administrative, academic or professional. In a system that provides cadres with very little material incentive, and few unconstrained processes for realizing the 'Keep Youth Satisfied' mandate, their juniority ultimately blocks the only channel available for responsiveness in China's authoritarian setting: the agency of committed and professional individuals, working from within the political system, who take pro-youth initiatives that gradually expand and reorient the tasks and focus of the League. The individuals assigned with the task

of representing and responding to young people experience the tension between the social mandate and their positional weakness in their everyday work. Ultimately, CYL cadres represent youth as a junior political subject, not as a diverse social reality.

In this context, 'youth affairs' as a policy area is belittled and lacks a meaning of its own, other than that assigned in a top-down manner. The League's institutional weakness and inaction are discursively normalized by traditional notions of the youth's subservience, and of the filial duties incumbent on them. Youth as a social constituency is delineated at will by conservative morality and by the regime's political phobias and priorities, in a way that prioritizes certain groups of young people and justifies the neglect or exclusion of others. This book will explore the tensions between youth as a junior political subject and the mandate to increase responsiveness to young people in the case of the Chinese Communist Youth League. In the course of this exploration, I hope to demonstrate that the analytical usefulness of the concept of juniority exceeds the Chinese context, and has a comparative value for the study of youth politics and policy more broadly.

Researching the League

It is a formidable task, especially for a single researcher, to analyze strategies for increasing responsiveness, as well as the challenges and difficulties this objective presents, which are magnified in an organization as gigantic as the CYL. For this reason, my research design sought to explore the interplay between the endemic characteristics of China's authoritarian political system and the particular structural factors constituting youth as a sociopolitical category, as it takes place within selected organizational contexts and spaces.

My examination of the League gives paradigmatic emphasis to qualitative research within a mixed methods framework, an approach that is deemed particularly suitable when political conditions and red tape hinder the collection of data (Tarrow, 1995: 473; also Creswell et al, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2010). The qualitative component of the fieldwork was carried out in Beijing and in Zhejiang province, supplemented by targeted visits in Shanghai and Shandong to investigate local CYL initiatives and new patterns of collaboration with social organizations. Data collection concentrated on interviews, assessment of official documents and publications, as well as personal observation. As part of my fieldwork I visited CYL committees from the grassroots level to the League's headquarters at number 10, Qianmendong Dajie in Beijing. I used the findings of the qualitative part

to formulate questionnaires for surveys, which aimed at connecting and contrasting the experiences and views of cadres with those held by university students, the League's largest pool of members. The rationale behind this 'reconstructive methodology' in designing surveys was to avoid imposing my questions, by attending as closely as possible 'to subjects' own constructions of politics' (Dryzek and Berejikian quoted in Blecher, 2006: 62) and their own understanding of youth as a sociopolitical category.

I chose fieldwork locations in affluent regions of coastal China to avoid areas where financial and material shortages rendered League Committees dysfunctional. As such, my aim was not to identify a representative sample of local areas in terms of economic development and state capacity, but to concentrate on sites where material conditions were supportive to the League's operation. Whenever lack of financing was reason for inaction, this was because of prioritization of funds in a manner unfavorable to the CYL and youth affairs in general, rather than due to their unavailability.

I began my investigation in the Chinese capital because it houses the CYL Central Committee and its affiliated organizations. Fieldwork in the municipality of Beijing focused on two densely populated urban districts (*qu* 区) with high concentration of universities and businesses, and one rural district. In Zhejiang, I shortlisted fieldwork sites through snowball sampling, and after evaluating access and contacts with local government and League organizations. As in the case of Beijing, the rural areas visited in Zhejiang (township government seats) are within two hours' drive from the respective cities where fieldwork took place. Consequently, these rural sites have benefited from their proximity to urban centers and are not regarded here as reflecting the conditions of remote and less developed parts of the Chinese countryside. Lastly, during fieldwork, interviewees identified exceptional cases of local-level experimentation with social organizations. As reformist China has a tradition of pioneering local-level initiatives that result in national-level policies (Heilmann, 2018), I visited two such cases in Shanghai and Shandong and investigated their development, and their prospects of informing the CYL's future direction.

The CYL's official membership range is 14 to 28 years of age, but fieldwork concentrated on university students and young employees, covering the 18-28 range. Access to League members in high schools was neither possible,[2] nor

2 League membership in high schools is not uniform and all-encompassing as in university campuses, so fieldwork in schools would require free access to students to identify members and talk to cadres. At the preliminary stage of research, I explored the feasibility of such an endeavor, but in the end, free access to high schools was not possible.

analytically essential for my inquiry. In order to compensate for this 'gap' in my examination of political socialization in the CYL and to understand the rationale of the official age range, I asked interviewees to reflect on their years in the League during high school. I also investigated policies and campaigns targeted at the younger cohort of members (14-17 years old) and even children, to understand how youth is constructed in the CYL's social work.

My examination of grassroots CYL organizations includes five universities and twelve work units, and then committees at township, county, provincial and national levels. The selection of these organizations followed purposive sampling according to the different nature of the various institutions in which the League has presence. In addition, I visited League-affiliated research institutions and social organizations, such as the China Youth and Children Research Centre in Beijing. The particular characteristics of the organizations I visited, and my fieldwork, are explained in detail in the respective chapters.

During my visits, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with committee secretaries and cadres. I spent as much time as possible observing members' work and talking to them, and accessed organizational documentation on membership, awards, activities, youth projects and cadre training sessions. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 3 hours, and in total I interviewed 60 individuals, whose positions in the League are presented in Appendix 1. In most cases, access to League organizations and cadres would not have been possible without guaranteeing full anonymity of the interviewees' personal details, work or study unit and location below the provincial level. Accordingly, I present most fieldwork locations in coded form, revealing only the names of provinces and provincial-level cities (Beijing and Shanghai municipalities) and organizations.

Organization of the book

My investigation begins in Chapter 2 with developing the analytical framework of this study, and establishing its value for unpacking the institutional dynamics that inform the relationship between communist regimes, youth Leagues and the youth in China and beyond. Since the CYL's functions remain unexplored from a state-society relations perspective, I first review the efforts of other Chinese mass organizations to respond to their social constituencies, within the context of institutional dependency to the Party. The experiences of the Trade Union and the Women's Federation demonstrate

that, under bottom-up pressure to engage with their corresponding social groups, cadres have attempted to partially increase responsiveness, update Party discourse and introduce policy and legislative improvements at the local and national levels. The second part considers the experiences of youth Leagues in the former socialist world as arenas of generational politics, and explains the value of this body of literature for the study of the Chinese case. These two comparative lines of inquiry lead to the discussion of generational subordination and the concept of juniority, and establish the analytical advantages of this concept for the present examination of the League.

The main body of the book follows the logic of capturing the dynamics informing the League's youth work in key spaces and different levels of administration during the Hu decade, and is organized in two parts. The first (Chapters 3 and 4) concentrates on the League's operation on campus and at the workplace vis-à-vis its largest pools of membership. The second (Chapters 5 and 6) investigates the CYL's cadre training and social work.

Chapter 3 discusses the findings of fieldwork in five different universities in Beijing and Zhejiang, examining the League's operation, activities and relations with students. It shows that the League has an unimpressive record of engaging in a responsive manner with its largest constituency, university students, because cadres faced important disincentives and obstacles in creating participatory processes and in providing a platform for advocacy and social work. Overall, the League's involvement in student affairs was from a junior, subordinate position, and its volunteer activities pursued a Lei Feng-style didactic agenda, while in its interaction with student societies the League assumed a regulatory role as a Party agency. With very little space for autonomous action, political and administrative matters dominated the League's interaction with students, thereby augmenting the problem of its relevance. The second part discusses the findings of surveys conducted on three campuses, asking students to evaluate the League's responsiveness. According to the surveys, students remained skeptical of the League's efforts to appear more inclusive, they demanded more attention to their interests and were cynical about the CYL's claim to represent them. This chapter reveals that while often regarded as evidence of loyalty to the regime, the impressive numbers of League members reported on campus hide a reality of distancing from its organizational life.

In chapter 4, I examine the League's operation in workplaces by analyzing qualitative data collected from twelve different sites in Beijing and Zhejiang province. The chapter begins by reviewing the official documents and policies that establish the League's mandate in workplace representation. It then assesses the impact of labor deregulation on the League's institutional reach

to the working youth, demonstrating that market socialism has resulted in its significant decline. Regarding the CYL's role in employee welfare and representation, I find that its context of operation was antithetical to assuming a pro-youth stance. League cadres occupied junior positions in political and workplace hierarchies, resulting in their multifaceted subordination to the senior power holders present: the management, Party committee and Union leadership. This institutionalized juniority of the cadres created strong disincentives for pro-youth employee initiatives, and led to failure in articulating a distinctive youth labor agenda. Accordingly, the CYL's functions in the workplace have been corporatized, and aim at sustaining labor peace and improving corporate image.

In Chapter 5, I examine whether the CYL training programs were adapted to enable cadres to confront the multifaceted challenges of their social mandate. I find that training policies under Hu and Wen were insufficient in developing a specialization in 'youth affairs' among League cadres, and relatedly, in cultivating an esprit de corps that promotes social work. At the local level, training in League schools (*tuanxiao* 团校) remained weakly institutionalized and largely dependent on the local Party committee, replicating the same problems in content, frequency of sessions, and quality of instruction that are also present in local Party schools. At the national level, the Central League School has not managed to establish a distinct youth affairs curriculum. Similarly, other nationwide personnel-development and exchange programs reflected the Party's developmental priorities, and did not promote social work or improve youth conditions in poor regions. Without promoting normative commitment to youth work and relevant skills, training in the League, thus, has failed to contribute to the 'Keep Youth Satisfied' agenda.

Under Hu, the CYL increased its social work, created a network of top-down youth organizations, and attempted to open up spaces for consultation with young people. Chapter 6 investigates these efforts. The first part examines work norms associated with social work and finds that the majority of League activities were directed to non-youth related areas as decided by the Party and other government departments. As a result, the League's own social work, including youth employment programs and building youth infrastructure, were deprioritized and exhibited poor results. The League's public consultation spaces were overtly ceremonial in nature, providing very limited opportunities for genuine bottom-up representation of youth views. This chapter also examines the League's relations with youth organizations and groups, showing that instead of developing synergies in social work, the CYL unsuccessfully sought to

expand its monitoring capacity, and to interfere with their activities as a corporatist agency of the Party.

The book concludes with an appraisal of its main findings and evaluates the League's efforts in addressing the needs and demands of its constituency. It also connects this study to recent developments under Xi Jinping, suggesting that the drastic reduction of support and mass demotion of League cadres that is part of Xi's power consolidation, will have a negative impact on the CYL's capacity for social work and responsiveness. As the League has entered a period of uncertainty, the political reflex of its cadres will likely be to abandon the 'Keep the Youth Satisfied' initiatives and concentrate on the traditional tasks of indoctrination, preparation for Party membership, and mobilization, that have in the past alienated the youth. As such, the problems identified in this study are likely to remain relevant and indeed their impact to increase, further deepening the apathy prevalent among League members and the youth in general. Lastly, in conclusion, I will reflect on the value of these findings for the systematic and comparative analysis of youth party organizations across different political contexts.

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