

Constructing the idea of organization: Thought self-checks and the organizational review of cadres (1952–1960)

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Abstract

This paper explores the history of state power construction, focusing on the period of regime change and how the state constructed a new governance structure, according to the ideological examinations, work reports, year-end summaries, and organization and examination reports of some cadres in the 1950s. The focus of the article is an attempt to understand how the state constructed a new governance structure during this period of regime change. This paper shows the state used its unique organizational power to carry out a series of administrative activities for cadres and groups: cadres took turns laboring, carrying out self-thinking clean-ups, and organizing the group to exchange learning activities and to implement and systematically organize the trial and handling procedures, the trial of the cadres of the ideological performance of the classification, the formation of written records, and the establishment of a new assessment approach to cadre behavior to institutionalize the organization of personnel work. These processes laid the foundations for the initial institutionalization of the cadre selection and management system, followed by the development of principles that have been consolidated and refined. The obvious effect of this process was that the new behavior requirements and employment standards became widely practiced by urban cadres, the new standards were used to shape the cadres' own concerns and work ethics, and the

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cadres and new organizations were gradually constructed. These activities not only established organizational governance authority, but have also had a far-reaching influence on the behavior of cadres and their overall characteristics in terms of expression.

Keywords

State building, organizational power, work ethic of cadres, organizational concept

Background and the issue

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the state regime began its journey of self-development as the political power changed. Once the war had ended, the governing party emerged from rural areas and took over cities and massive civil organizations in the 'occupied areas'. In the face of a totally new governance realm and changes in organizational authority, the organizational identification of faculty workers, positioned as cadres, in these civil organizations was proposed.

The issue of organizational identification was approached differently in rural and urban areas. In rural areas, grassroots economic and political relations centering on landlords were diminished by extensive land reforms, social class recognition, and the wealth redistribution movement; organizational relations were established between the new regime and farmers. These moves not only built broad political support for the new regime, but also provided opportunities for getting to know cadres' political performance and stances.

Things were quite different in cities. First, most urban organizations were work units in civil engineering, education, commerce, water resources, medical care, and citizen administration, and their resources were thus professional or skilled people, rather than fixed assets. The new regime had to take over these urban organizations, keep them working, and make them useful rather than destroy them. By no means could the new regime adopt the same methods it used in rural areas, where landlords were deprived of their land, and their wealth, including land, was redistributed, thus completely changing the old organizational relations and codes of behavior. Second, these urban organizations were highly specialized, which may be why they were often unable to adapt to the new political situation. Their long years of local experience also made it difficult for them to get along with governing forces from the outside world. Many workers had previously been educated in schools, and their political stances did not necessarily correspond with their family backgrounds. Third, many administrators of the new regime had only military experience and had not worked in civil affairs, so they failed to develop a public affinity with the common citizens. Thus, in the aspect of urban organization governance, the relations between the new political regime and old organizations, although not completely in opposition, were nevertheless quite new and incompatible, a situation that was difficult to avoid. For new governors, their job in taking over these organizations was not finished until they took full control of their employees.

Under these circumstances, the primary tasks of urban organization work for the new regime were to create new governance structures, enhance obedience and

cooperation, narrow disparities and disagreements, eliminate ideological confrontations or potential hatred as much as possible, and build up feedback and recognition for the new power relations. The very first step was to fully understand how the cadres thought and behaved, keep them profiled and categorized, then make selections. Thus, a lot of paperwork appeared, including autobiographical reports, work reports, ideological reports, self-assessment reports, and assessment reports by individuals' organizations. These paper reports reflect the process by which state power was used to construct organizational authority, that is, the principle that the organization always comes before the individual and its corresponding work ethic. By writing these reports, cadres could clear their thoughts, 'do some sense-making', and establish their new behavior standard of right and wrong. After they were assessed through institutionalized organizational evaluation procedures, they were to share the same feeling. I call this process 'building one's organizational concept'.

In contrast with common present-day group ethics like 'cooperation' and 'sharing', the 'organizational concept' was a totally new political standard. For all grassroots cadres, the new standard implied a thorough reconstruction of relations between an individual and their organization. The theoretical issue involved was the establishment of organizational identification: what kind of elements might affect the process by which an individual would be led to accept the authority of an organization, become obedient to it, and share the same values with it?

In religious societies such as Laos in Southeast Asia, people tend to share the same social beliefs. In such societies, most people follow one particular social value system in which a series of its principals and standards are widely accepted. Thus, social obedience is yielded and organizational force is seldom required to reinforce social order. Because religious organization can spread, maintain, and represent its social values, it can affect people's behavior by interfering with their beliefs. People who choose to follow these values belong to these religious groups. They choose the organization according to their beliefs, and the people's will regarding beliefs is ahead of their choice of organization. In this paper we discuss the opposite situation: people have already become affiliated with a new organization, and their new organizational identity leading to new beliefs is the issue we discuss.

As with religious beliefs, cultural homogeneity also plays a role in enhancing the sharing of values. People who share the same cultural tradition normally have similar values. However, it is worth noting that disparity in values is only visible when people are confronted with different cultures and their culture is changing. Many people change their codes of behavior when placed in different cultural backgrounds, so it is difficult for researchers to prove whether their behavioral changes are the result of an old, more flexible culture or of a new, more rigorous culture. Furthermore, culture covers such a wide range of content that to decipher a specific cultural phenomenon is difficult and unconvincing. For example, it is commonly seen that people have disparate values within the same cultural background and those who come from different cultural backgrounds share the same values. Thus, cultural elements do not provide a satisfactory answer to questions of why values sometimes deviate within the same culture or are the same in different cultures. To approach the value disparity in

political issues from the perspective of cultural interpretation is even less convincing, because it has never occurred in human society that people who share the same culture necessarily have the same political orientation.

Another research study from the cultural perspective provides us with an important observation: the practice of organization-community is of vital importance to the construction of organization commitment. For example, after observing the process by which people in religious groups develop their group commitments, Xinqi Chen (2016) pointed out that constructing a community's identity helps form the organization's values recognition. The role that exterior environment and events play in this process should not be underestimated: environment, as the condition of forming values recognition, provides pressure and momentum for people's efforts towards realizing their beliefs. If religious followers share the same experiences in some events, these experiences may reinforce their commitment and bond to the organization community (Chen, 2016). Although they do exchange and share information before these experiences, they cannot reach such a high level of consensus regarding the value system and behavioral orientation. If those value systems are politically significant, morality and religion, to some extent, will influence people's organization commitment and political attitudes through regular activities such as performing organizational disciplines (Xu, 2013: 773–796).

In contrast with the above perspective, Marxist theory provides a structuralist answer. Marxist theorists believe that people's social and economic characteristics may explain their value recognition and disparities. According to this theory, people from a particular group within the social structure, in terms of career, social class, nationality, education level, gender, etc., will share the same interests with other people in that group, thus sharing similar values and organization recognition. This is because they have similar characteristics in terms of social structure; for example, they are all proletarians, they are all exploited and oppressed, or they have similar ways of making a living. Thus, they share the same value concept and recognition of social class. In textbooks of Marxism, this principle is summarized as the superstructure condition being determined by economic level. According to this principle, values as a superstructure condition are the manifestation of shared interests determined by the economic level, i.e. people's social status.

There is a wide range of interpretations of this theory. If the key logic was that interests affect organization recognition, more detailed analysis would be necessary. People's cognition of interests lies in social attributes such as their economic and social status, their ideology, and their political environment, that is, superstructure conditions. More importantly, the former are preconditioned and definite interests, and the latter are changeable and uncertain interests. If 'interests' here means an individual's greatest concern regarding their vital issues in some conditions, it becomes extremely important to point out how these conditions might change people's concerns regarding their vital issues. Thus, we propose the following question: what kinds of environmental elements, aside from people's social

structural characteristics, might reconstruct people's concerns regarding their vital issues and thus affect their behavior?

Traugott and Walder found, in different cases, that an acute change in political and organizational environment exerts great influence on values construction and choice of organization, and on people's judgements about what their most important interests are (Traugott, 1980: 32–49; Walder, 2006: 710–750). If individuals are required to constantly adapt to a new environment, observe changes, understand new information, and make decisions, then they must clarify the correlations between new information and their present and future. The reason for this is simple: to survive, people are likely to change their priorities when their circumstances alter.

Political sociological research studies have found that organizational environment, especially power relations and changes in threat orientation, tend to create new kinds of interests (Walder, 2006), thus affecting people's attitudes and behavior. This point of view has been supported by many case studies. For example, during the time when China was invaded by the Japanese army, many merchants showed vague and swinging political attitudes (Brook, 2015). Another example is that during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, many cadres, in the face of uncertainty or new threats, changed their political stance from conservative to radical, or vice versa, and changed their political attitudes from positive to passive (Walder and Lu, 2017: 1144–1182). In China, 1949 was a year of regime change in political and organizational power. A large number of new power organizations appeared. People needed to adapt to new requirements of historical circumstances. In their changing environment, people's social status and self-interest relations tended to change: this might happen to social categories and relations like bourgeois and proletarian, civilized and uncivilized, local people and migrants, authorities and followers, administrators and subordinates, civil servants and military staff, upper level social classes and lower level social classes, irrelevant groups and relevant groups, political stances and professional skills, individuals and organizations, etc. These changes were inevitable as the new political regime was established. The changes kept destroying old relations of interests and redefining established priorities.

To summarize this discussion, scholars have found that individuals' beliefs, economic and social characteristics, changes in organizational environments, and organizational experiences might all exert great influences on their behavior. However, following the logic of these research studies, we note that influences are mainly about personal choice. These studies assumed that individuals could gradually form their beliefs and self-choices when placed in certain social groups. But a great number of examples show that before an organization can interfere, individuals form a wide range of recognitions, which makes it impossible for them to become unified. Thus, we still need to answer questions such as why the cadre group exhibits relatively unified behavioral characteristics, how did those characteristics form, and how was a unified organizational concept formed by relations between cadres and their organizations. We believe that relevant historical archives can help answer these questions.

Thought self-checks

As part of their work in the human resource departments, cadres were required to hand in their work and self-assessment reports at the year end and after certain occasions, such as officially becoming a regular staff member, being promoted, laboring on a farm, and receiving training. These reports have been kept as archives for wide use by organizations since the 1950s. The same format was used in writing these reports, and the main body of a cadre's self-assessment report was about their self-inspection regarding ideology and behavior. The self-inspection was meant to be a kind of general ideological report. People did not have to make mistakes, but they were supposed to acknowledge weaknesses in their own thinking, express their attitudes, and make promises in accordance with their new situation and policy orientation.

It could be noted when reviewing this kind of material that although writers were varied in their careers, positions, levels of education, and ranks, they all chose to write using the same pattern: self-examining their own behavior (or faults), then answering five questions: what problems did they have (providing facts); why did they have these problems (finding the source reasons); what kind of problems were they (whether deviating from the fixed standard); what was their current way of thinking (ideological status); and how could they change (demonstrating their stance and delivering assurance).

In the 1950s, few people were able to do any advanced writing. The writing style was supposed to vary in accordance with the writer's educational level and background. But the reports were written in the same pattern with similar word use, and writers would always refer to new political requirements and policies when evaluating their own behavior. This demonstrates that explicit requirements and standards did exist for a qualified report. Although writers might have had different careers, they all had very clear ideas about what they should focus on in their writing: overcoming individualism and establishing a work ethic of collectivism. In almost every report, summary, and self-check report, we find that when writers were reflecting on their thoughts and behavior, they would use a series of measurement criteria that they had never used or heard of before.

For example, in his ideological summary in September 1959, a cadre named HWL working in the Civil Affairs Department wrote about his attitude toward the Great Leap Forward Movement and the People's Commune Movement. He used the new measurement criteria that the 'organization was superior'. He wrote,

I used to believe that the establishment of the People's Commune was the result of a bold move to leap forward into communism and a consequence of wrongful judgement regarding the reality that our nation was still poor and blank. Now I realized that so long as our organization can do its job and fully display its superiority, the problem of our people's living which lasted for a thousand years can be resolved and that it is by the People's Commune that our current economic burden can be removed.

This cadre then followed the writing mode: fact->reason->nature->attitude->change, that is, he found the source and nature of his original attitude, made it clear that his ambiguous understanding of new principles and policies and the lack of resolution in his mind were all the results of liberalism, and thus he needed to study harder to correctly understand the overall situation in a complete way. In his writing, he demonstrated at last that he had already overcome his pessimistic feelings and become ready to engage in the People's Commune Movement. For this cadre, the criterion was about the superiority of the organization and collectivism. By expressing his opinions on policies regarding the People's Commune, he acknowledged the opposition between the organization (collectivism) and the individual (liberalism).

Another new criterion concerned the opposition between 'proletarian' and 'bourgeois' ideologies. For example, in his report on his bourgeois ideas, ZA, a dean of studies at a primary school, reflected that he had tried to avoid his job responsibilities and been afraid of shouldering more work.

I understood the dividing line between proletarian ideology and bourgeois thought. Considering nothing but oneself was not what a proletariat would do.

The contradiction between 'organizational concept' and 'undisciplined freedom' is also a frequently mentioned new criterion in self-check reports. In their self-assessment reports, many cadres mentioned they had lacked a strong sense of the organization, and had not been disciplined enough to put the organization's requirements at the top of their consideration. However, they had finally realized that to highlight oneself was a demonstration of individualism and a low level of ideological thinking. The way to correct this was to 'erase individualistic ideas', to strengthen one's sense of collectivism and bond with working people, and to rectify one's idea that an individual was of 'paramount importance'.

Another criterion was the opposition between 'collective interest' and 'individual interest'. People who had been greedy for small profits, ill intentioned, unwilling to work in the countryside, afraid of hardship, unsettled at work, detached from the working people, arrogant, undisciplined, indifferent to surrounding circumstances, nonparticipant in political struggles, avoiding political study, fond of luxurious living, etc. related all this to their lack of self-discipline and over-emphasis on personal gains and interests. It was imperative they rectify their poor performance with active efforts.

In accordance with the new criteria, the ideological check was conducted not only among leader cadres, but among all levels of cadres who worked in official organizations, with only a few exceptions in some careers, identities or specialist positions. For example, a medical staff member reflected only on his ideology and political ideas in his summary, not his medical work. He did not focus on his daily work as a medical professional, but on his work's ethical status. He criticized his own full engagement with his work as reflecting his 'indifference to ideological struggle', which he considered politically naive and being due to his inadequate

understanding of the superiority of the People's Commune. He made his attitude quite clear at the end of his summary by saying, 'I would never resonate with voices which defy socialism'. His summary was not about his medical work, but about his ideological status. This was probably related to the political education about the policy situation at that time. It indicated that cadres' attitudes to national public policy were becoming an important criterion in evaluating their professional work, that is, the belief that no matter what jobs people were engaged in, they all needed to enhance their ideological thinking, respond to public policy, and reveal their attitudes.

Some aspects of self-assessment reports merit attention. First, the number of words that were required: not enough words meant one's attitude was not correct. Second, the writing might be revised several times: rewriting was requested when some parts were not good enough. Many drafts in the archives were found with marks of revision and rewriting. One writer specifically noted his date of writing, which was almost 3 months earlier, delayed by the revision of the previous draft. Third, deep probing into one's ideological thinking, especially one's values, was a necessity in writing a self-assessment report. A definite attitude was a must. Correct values were to be confirmed, and wrong values criticized. One should also put on paper that one would correct one's mistakes. Obviously, a clear declaration of one's attitude was one criterion for measuring a qualified report.

For example, a league cadre named ZCR reflected in his summary of farm work that he was easily affected by bad ideas. He believed it was a temporary 'confused moment' for his mind, resulting from his weakness in ideological thinking, his ignorance of theoretical study and his lack of collectivism and political sense. He realized that he should work harder on his study and strengthen his critical thinking against bad ideas. In his summary, he declared that his opinion on collective living and political study had already 'changed'. His declaration, true or not, was supposed to be manifested through his actions and thus had a certain restraining influence on his actions. After his declaration, he should not avoid collective living or make sarcastic comments, because he would not want to break his promise.

Another example was deputy section head TDC's grassroots work report. He wrote that he was not ready to devote himself to grassroots work and was afraid of difficulties, and he would rather go back to work at his original position in a government department. He realized that these thoughts reflected his 'low self-requirement'. After his labor work at the grassroots, he understood that a cadre should be highly disciplined in accordance with the 'Red' criterion, so he began to love labor work and became happy working at the grassroots. YHJ, a cadre from the water conservancy department, added in his self-check report that the self-check he did in the past was not deep and qualified enough because at first he did not realize he had become a 'prisoner of bad people'.

My wrongful behavior was all traceable. It was all because I loosened my political study, lost my belief in Marxist-Leninism and my class stance, and my bourgeois idea was not

fully reformed. With quite smooth experience during the revolution, I lacked a strong sense of organizational discipline and high level of political understanding and my class stance was not firm enough, so I was not alert to wrongful behavior in the Daming Dafang (Free Expression) Campaign (around the 1960s) and thus became a follower of bad people. That's the main reason why I made those mistakes.

The institutionalization of these measures reinforced the new work ethic, that is, an individual who had a second opinion on policy should obey the organization. Whenever the organization made a decision, an individual should follow it up and respond. Whether a cadre followed up could reflect if their organizational concept was strong. Thus, the most frequently seen self-criticism was about the organizational concept. In a self-assessment report by YXQ, a cadre working at a district-level cooperative, YXQ confessed that his 'organizational concept was not strong', and he 'did not put the requirements of the organization or the collective interests of members in first place,' but he believed he would 'strengthen his self-discipline' in the future.

ZA, a dean of studies at a primary school, did not act as requested by the organization when his personal interests collided with collective interests in his work. He was removed from his position but was reinstated after he swallowed his bad feelings and confessed his mistakes. He realized the 'power of the organization' after this incident. He still believed it was quite difficult to overcome personal interests, because absolute obedience to the organization and absolute altruism required an extraordinarily 'great' mentality:

I became aware of the dividing line between proletariat and non-proletariat. Non-proletarians do everything based only on their own interests; they would always first consider their gains and losses before doing anything, regardless of mass interests and national interests. I used to say that I did my job to serve the people, but the truth was that I did what I did for myself. Proletarian ideology was totally different. Proletarians consider everything but themselves. They obey the orders of the organization, serve the people whole-heartedly, and make every possible effort to overcome difficulties and obstacles. If every citizen in our country would work and settle problems with this great ideology, our country would surely make greater progress.

Hand-written opinions from organizations were found in many summaries and self-assessment reports. Many of them were quite direct and blatant. Opinions from the organization could be noted from the most frequently used comments, such as that some people had 'strong personalities which should be restrained'; some were 'somehow individualists'; some had 'traces of liberalism'; and some were 'outside of the organizational concept'. These comments were focused on questions such as how reporters viewed their organizations, what their relations were with their organization, and whether they had an organizational concept.

What was the organizational concept? How was one to evaluate its upgrading? LYZ, a cadre who worked in a human resources department, believed the answer

to these questions involved honesty, that is, 'telling the organization about one's own problems, as much as possible...if one did not do so, one's mind would become apathetic and class enemies would take advantage of loopholes'. ZCR, a cadre who was sent to work at the grassroots level, talked about his ideological transformation from relying on himself to relying on the organization.

I did not enjoy living in a group. No matter what problems I encountered in my daily life, I would not want to talk with my organization. After working on a farm, sometimes my feet hurt so much that I had to come back for a rest; my classmates delivered dinner for me, and my teacher visited me several times a day. They made me feel how lucky I was living in a group! I loved my group; my classmates were more like brothers, and my teacher was like my own parents. If something bad happened, I would definitely rely on my classmates and my group.

Cadre examination

To review, organize, restore, and evaluate so much archived material was a gigantic task for which a special organization, the Office of Cadre Examination, was responsible. The office was under the leadership of the organization department, in charge of the filing in cadre archives. More specifically, their job was to review and screen cadres' personal materials, present their opinions, organize group investigations and individual talks, conduct admonishing education, ask cadres' own opinions, and create a conclusive classification report on every cadre, taking into consideration each cadre's problems, performance, and political attitudes. The reports classified cadres into three groups: those who did not need to be examined; those who were to be further observed through work performance; and those who required further examination through normal procedures or with focused attention. The conclusion of each report was reviewed and approved by a higher-level organizational department and kept, finally, in the cadre file.

Here is an example of how a county-level Office of Cadre Examination reported their filing work on cadres who were sent to work at the grassroots level.

After a careful review and examination of every piece of material, we now basically grasped the whole situation. Among 109 cadres sent to work at the grassroots of our county, 51 (approximately 47%) did not need to be examined (we did not detect any problems in their experiences; a few of them had ideological issues, but not of a political nature); 20 (about 18%) required further observation through work performance; and 19 (about 17%) of them were to be further examined, including 11 (10%) who would go through normal procedures and 8 (7%) who were to be examined with focused attention.

The report demonstrated that the requirement of cadre examination was not only about proletariat ideology but also on specialized skills. Cadres' ideology was the subject of examination, and must be evaluated through actual labor work,

so to arrange for cadres to work at the grassroots level was a necessity. Their labor time was guaranteed: two-thirds of their time was spent engaged in labor and group activities, and one-third was spent on grassroots work, social work, and political study. By doing this, cadres were 'tested and trained in actual labor and political struggle'. Those who spent less than a year doing labor should not be 'transferred to positions in government departments or enterprises and public institutions' and should not 'hold leadership positions such as chief in the People's Commune and community, chief party secretary, or chief accountant'. If work units, township government, or communities wanted to employ those cadres, they 'would need a higher authority's approval'. If these cadres broke laws and violated regulations, they would be punished according to party disciplinary rules and national laws. The procedure included requiring that the unit where a cadre worked to first propose an organizational suggestion concerning the cadre's punishment; the authorities asked his original work unit's opinions, and 'administered the punishment according to regulated procedures' with the approval of the county's party committee. 'If a cadre required transfer back to work, he must have the transference order from the organization department of the county; otherwise, the township party committee and cadre's work unit could reject the proposal'.

This declaration indicates that the employment of those cadres was related to the cadre examination on their labor performance by the organization's department. The permission to reuse those cadres was in the hands of the county's organization department, not those of their original or current work unit. The cadre examination organization was clearly appointed with the obligation to check cadres' ideological status and report on cadres' information to higher authorities. Although they could not handle problems on their own and still needed authorization from higher authorities, they retained the power to suggest personnel plans, which was no less than the power of cadres' original and current work units. In other words, neither cadres' original nor current work units could make arrangements for cadres without going through the organization department's examination process.

The cadre examination office was also responsible for talking to and educating problematic cadres. These talks were supposed to 'clearly identify their problems' and help them to realize their mistakes in their political stances, opinions, and ideology. The work procedure by the cadre examination office clearly required that they talk with cadres regularly, so they could become familiar with cadres' ideological statuses and notice 'prominent behaviors'. Cadres who were asked to engage in these talks were very conscious that their attitudes could affect their future employment evaluations, so their attitudes towards the organization department became a very important part of their political performance.

A cadre examination organization was supposed to deliver an estimation of the overall situation of these cadres in its jurisdictional area. A municipal cadre report shows that arranging for cadres to work at the grassroots level was not a 'penalty' imposed on some minority cadre, but a necessary link of cadre evaluation and test for all cadres, because it was not meant to find those few 'flawed' ones but was

a prelude to reallocating a large number of cadres. The focus of evaluation on cadres' labor and ideological status was whether the cadre was 'qualified enough'. The result of evaluation would directly affect the cadre's future, whether they would be returned to their post as a cadre or 'kept working in the labor force'. In a cadre examination report on a whole city, the evaluation was as follows.

In our city, 485 cadres were to be distributed to work, for their labor work was above the average level and they met basic cadre requirements. 241 cadres needed to continue their labor work, for they did not meet cadre requirements. 19 cadres had to keep working on the labor force for a long time. 3 cadres were given disciplinary and criminal penalties.

The cadre examination report pointed out that although most cadres could be transferred back to work, the organization could not 'relax our efforts'. So many cadres were not settled at their work and were always calculating their time of transference. The report listed multiple ideological problems: some cadres always asked about the criteria of proletariat ideology and specialized skills, the term of labor work, who got transferred back, and where work staff were needed. Thus, those cadres who got transferred back first were benchmarks of ideological performance. Some cadres would compare themselves with them, then feel discouraged, saying they could hardly meet the expectations of those posts and 'were given no choice but to stay where they were'. The information showed that most cadres cared about whether they were qualified enough to meet the criteria and to be transferred to good posts. It was natural that they would bring the best of themselves to work to be transferred back or assigned to good posts.

The evaluation by the organization department required thorough knowledge about a cadre's work performance. However, cadres were scattered to different areas for labor, so how could the organization department keep supervising their ideological statuses? A work report from the grassroots level revealed their organization departments' solutions: groups were formed according to work places' distances from the organization. One or two group meetings were to be held every month, so cadres could get together, exchange their ideas, opinions and thoughts, hold summary contests, and reveal their own problems. The work report claimed this was a 'brilliant method' that helped cadres solve problems through mutual support and helped the department to understand cadres' ideological statuses. In the work report, they mainly focused on four aspects, to get to know their

- class stances, ideological thoughts, attitudes toward labor and the masses, and their work ethics and creative spirits;
- relations with grassroots cadres and masses, amiable or not;
- study progress, especially their knowledge about agricultural production and their learning speed; and
- roles in all kinds of movements and activities, whether they were active, and whether they obeyed orders and disciplines.

These aspects reflected the organization department's cadre employment standards: clear class stance, enthusiasm about their job, amiable relations with the masses, good learning habits, active participation in all kinds of activities, obedience to leadership, and work discipline. Wrongful work behaviors included: some felt reluctant to work at the grassroots level, doubting whether the assigned labor work could be attributed to his superior having a negative opinion of him; some were extremely pessimistic, requesting 'resignation for home'; some were unwilling to work at the grassroots level, 'not participating in social work'; some plunged themselves into work, regardless of political study; some did not attend any study activity, 'they did not take notes, comment, or read newspapers'. These examples were all recorded with actual names in the report, displaying the grassroots government's role in information exchange and reports. On every cadre, the examination office kept a file, for example,

For ZYZ (positioned as a deputy commissary of publicity in No.2 district), his work performance and ideological status were recorded as follows:

Advantages: he was quite obedient to his superiors, with a humble attitude; he was quite responsible for his job, always being a willing hand and not afraid to lose.

Shortcomings: his political understanding was on a quite low level; he was too absorbed in the work and thus did not spend much time on study and did not conduct investigations on problems in his work. He was, to some extent, aimless at his work. Not enough self-criticism. (1955)

PSR (positioned as a member of the township committee), who worked actively.

Current ideological status: he believed he had worked long enough at the town level, with a promotion to district committee, so why could he not be promoted to work for the district government? (1955)

At the bottom of each cadre profile, there was a column headed 'Examination Opinion' in which the higher level organization department signed their conclusions and instructions for how the cadre should be used and with what kind of salary standard. This opinion column was of great importance to a cadre's career. In a county-level cadre examination report delivered in 1955, it was noted that the examination opinion and conclusion was the judgement made by the organization department on a cadre's political history, and that every conclusion made during a cadre examination was an important basis for selecting, training, and employing cadres. This mattered so much that the county paid a lot of attention to its cadre examination work.

With a realistic attitude, and through attentive verification of the cadre files, and analysis of the problems, including that reflected by their own or by investigation materials, finally we made conclusive opinions on 161 cadres. We also made arrangements for the other 12 cadres. But the files of two cadres that were not clarified were archived for long-term investigation for failure of in-depth investigation at that time... In making conclusions, we maintained a high level of political vigilance and kept our class stance in heart, systematically analyzed related profiles, and wrote the opinions based on the facts.

All the materials regarding cadre examination were written by specialized writers, and conclusions were made through group discussions. Then they were sent to the cadres for personal suggestions before reporting to upper authority for approval.

Cadre examination opinion by the organization department mainly covered four aspects: the cadres' advantages, shortcomings, efforts in the future, and conclusion opinions. Examples are as follows,

MGL (staff member of engineering management office)

Advantages: responsible, professional.

Shortcomings: likes showing off and overstates job titles (for example, claiming to be chief of water conservancy station, but an observer in fact). A bit liberal, sometimes telling lies, and sometimes not obeying his superiors.

Opinions from organization department: not a problem of political history. (1952)

MSZ (observer)

Advantages: active in learning professional knowledge, a bold critic.

Shortcomings: quite complacent, slackening in politics, careless and frivolous in life, too much heroism, not accepting suggestions, poor work consciousness.

Efforts in the future: enhancing political study, strengthening class awareness, more disciplined, overcoming the sloth in life, establishing a correct work ethic and working harder.

Organizational opinion: agree with the salary level of deputy class head. (1952)

According to the conclusive statement in a county's cadre examination report, the purpose of the cadre examination was to grasp the cadre profile, investigate the collected materials, and clarify the boundaries among those who did not need to be examined, those who needed to be examined, and those who needed focused examination: 'to identify problems of a political nature first, and to cross-reference non-political or general problems'. Then, the analysis was to be done with consideration of the cadre's characteristics, ideology, and problems. Those who 'refused to tell their problems to the organization or pretended to be active' were specially supervised. Finally, cadres were classified and their reports kept in the archives.

However, after reviewing all the cadre files, we were able to find only a few cadres who were dismissed, even in the category in which focused examination was required. In a county register archive of discharged cadres in 1955, there were six recorded discharged cadres since 1951, with an average of one per year. This indicates that having a cadre dismissed from his post was not the primary method of restraining cadres, but a solution in dealing with incorrigibles. Except for personal reasons such as health or family issues, organizational reasons for discharging a cadre were mainly about their ideological performance and work style. Three examples are as follows.

FHR (work staff member in the civil affairs department)

He was once punished for corruption. Quite arrogant and complacent. He regarded himself as the senior cadre, looked down upon lower-ranking comrades. He complained

a lot when he knew that his companion colleague got promoted while he was still a working staff member. He was in charge of the household register, but the information he filed was unclear, and he took bribes for helping unqualified people register their households illegally. His thinking was quite backward and could not be reformed even after a long period of education. Dismissed. (1952)

CAB (worker at a hospital)

Chronic illnesses, so he could not work consistently. His ideological style was not good. Disobeyed his superior and disrespected management system. Dismissed. (1951)

XGY (general employee)

Bad living habits and worse work ethic. Dismissed. (Year of the record unknown)

The construction of the organizational concept

It can be concluded that after summarizing the important information in the historical materials above, the checking and examination of cadres represents the governance of urban organizations implemented in the middle of the 20th century, which focused on the political and ethical standards of the staff member's thinking and behaviors and required people to change their behaviors according to new work ethics, namely, to overcome individualism with collectivism, to overcome liberalism with organizational discipline, to overcome the primacy of personal interests with public interests, to overcome numbness, compromise, and irresolution with wariness and struggle consciousness, and to overcome independent conduct by relying on organizations. The process started the collection of a great many documents concerning cadres. The examination documents composed by cadres or organization have a unified form and ideological contents, which are actually used for establishing the status of the organizational principle and have a strong impact on the concept construction of cadres.

Concept construction is mainly accomplished through the following two approaches.

First, establish unified ethical standards in working with cadres: mold their political consciousness and organizational concepts other than vocational skills. This approach was not new, but here it had a very different range of application than previously. Some experts have discovered that in the early stages of the revolution, the self-criticism study group served as the basic system in the communist order (Zarrow, 2016). However, at that time, the construction of such concepts was limited to a minority of vanguardists, who saw themselves as 'true believers' who would change the world (Apter and Saich, 1994). It is not surprising that a minority of vanguardists responded positively, since they were believers in new thought. A new characteristic that began in the 1950s was the extension of new thoughts and work ethics to general cadres, in the hope they would all become such followers, or at least accept and obey the new standards.

Second, establish a special linkage between cadres' performance and the organization of personnel: specialized organizations were established to take charge

of cadres' ideological performance, policy learning, filing, and examination; and their ideological performance is recorded and archived to become the basis for personnel operation, such as elimination, employment after probation, appointment, promotion evaluation, and handling of discipline violations. Cadres' personnel archives served not only as a record of their family backgrounds, but also as a reflection of their ideological performance and sense of organization. In this case, cadres' ideological performance and sense of organization were associated with future post opportunities. This would surely change the cadres' focus of concern.

Because the organization had the power to define the system (personnel procedures), the institutionalization of such practices as personnel regulations resulted in remolding the interest sequence for cadres and establishing a selective linkage between their ideological performances and their future careers. Everyone was concerned about the stability of their work position, and the new standards in personnel procedures released definite information: those who failed to meet the conditions might encounter difficulties. Such interconnection promoted adaptive changes in cadre behaviors. They gradually came to understand that as cadres, they not only needed to have political awareness—they were fully sensitive to the point of policies and organizational instructions, but also needed to grasp a special working language—give active responses, definite attitudes, and positive assurances in written reports and speeches. Such awareness and language were essential skills in communicating with the organization. Through a great many exchanges, the interactions between individual cadres and organizations, the maintenance of significance and value sharing could be promoted unprecedentedly. For example, ZCR's anxiety was typical. He asked the organization to provide guidance for his own progress.

I feel I have too many shortcomings and my thoughts are weak. I also want to correct some shortcomings as soon as possible, but the process is very slow...the changes in thinking cannot keep up with the development of the situation...I feel ashamed and empty, I have a hope, (which is) to join the organization as soon as possible. This is the direction set by myself. (But) how can I make it faster on the road to correction? How can I correct my shortcomings faster? These two issues are often haunting my mind. I hope that the organization can help me.

It is clear here that the value resonance between individuals and the organization is not purely a personal choice but a result of the interaction between the organizational environment and the individual concern. Otherwise, it is impossible to explain the similar behaviors exhibited by large numbers of cadres. This demonstrates that the organizational environment exerts an important influence on group behavior. Therefore, in response to the previous theoretical question of which environmental factors may reconstruct people's concerns about interests, and thus affect their behaviors, one can say that the connection between individuals and the organization is crucial. No matter how powerful the organization is, if it is not related to people's actual concerns, it cannot exert a strong impact.

The historical literature of the 1950s shows that once the link between cadres and the organization is established, the organizational power to change the standards of behaviors may increase. In the face of choices provided by the organizational environment, people tend to make adaptive adjustments, considering their advantages and disadvantages. Such a mechanism can be summarized as follows: through organizational arrangements and promotion, organizational concepts and selective pressures are ‘produced’ to promote agreement between individuals and organizations, which changes the ‘principles’ formulated by the organization into personally acknowledged ‘principles’.

Through reading written personal conclusions and thought-examination texts of cadres, we can discover that their manner of writing had definite organizational requirements and standards. They seemed to be personally written texts; however, because they had the same characteristics, personal evaluations, cross-profession and cross-identity, degrees of formality, feedback requirements and procedures, they should be identified as a kind of extensive organizational activity, rather than personal or individual activity. The application of ‘organizational power’¹ was a kind of systematic power of the state. In Chinese society, establishing a unified value system through organizational activities had been attempted during the Yan’an period; however, it was restricted to part of one group and did not become a comprehensive and systematic procedure for administration and governance. The method was maintained and extended and later consolidated in the 1950s. Even now, it is still being widely applied in all kinds of formal organizations.

Compared with early communist groups in terms of discipline, these organizations resembled each other. For example, former student unions had requirements as part of their organizational discipline, and all members had to report their ideological and moral statuses to the unions at least once a year. The student unions were extremely concerned about the moral conduct of members and would punish members over improper acts and words. This was actually a practice of self-cultivation that originally belonged to the private domain in traditional culture (Xu, 2016: 773–796); in other words, through promotion by the organization, a series of choices in individual life, such as compliance with an organization and discipline observance, were converted into a unified code of conduct for cadres.

The conversion was implemented on a large scale in the 1950s, signifying its great importance and profound influence. First, the organizational concept was transformed into unified professional ethics and discipline rather than conduct arising from personal choices, except when an individual intended to give up their professional career. Moreover, an organizational concept is linked to one’s public political position, and the nature of related opposing principles, such as individualism versus collectivism, liberalism versus organizational discipline, personal interest versus public interest, compromise in numbness versus struggle in wariness, and independence versus reliance on the organization, was no longer only a matter of personal morality, but rather about one’s attitude towards organizational requirements. Furthermore, the political and moral beliefs that originally existed

among a small number of elites (vanguardists) were widely extended to the general cadres, resulting in a fully cohesive force in ideology and organization. From then on, obedience to the organization as a basic conduct discipline, an honest and loyal expression to the organization, and a standard political morality went beyond the personal choices of a minority of elites, party members or individuals, and extensively pervaded the organizational life of cadres, becoming an important standard in personnel consideration for public organizations.

The significance of this research lies in revealing the molding function of the organizational environment for conduct. It can help us to recognize the sources of a series of governance methods. Whether the authority of an organization can effectively exercise its power depends on its ability to exert influence on the conduct of its members (Tyler, 2015: 277). The heritage of concept construction in the 1950s left a deep imprint on the shaping of cadres' behaviors: the concept of organization became extremely important among various standards. The organization transcending individuals has become a basic principle for measuring cadres' moral standards. Consistent with the standard of appointing cadres, the principle has created a widely applied behavioral characteristic of cadres' obedience to the organization. However, it has potential problems: even if the ideological system and policy contents have changed, as long as the organization has made a decision, regardless of agreement by individuals, their response to the decision is the basic work ethic and disciplinary requirement; therefore, some cadres are more concerned about formal completion of prescribed behaviors, which is in fact a countermeasure, a separation of attitudes and behaviors. This probably explains why, in a particular environment, stand declarations and assurances show no concern for implementation: the declarations and assurances are helpful for 'proving' cadres' consistency with organizational concepts.

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Note

1. ‘Organizational Power of Incumbents’ was proposed by Steven Levitsky and Lucan A Way (2010).

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