

DOCTORAL THESIS

The Institutionalization of Primary-level Party System in Rural China: Managing the Unintended Consequences of Grassroots Democracy

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Abstract

This study examines the attempts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to mitigate the unintended outcomes of accommodating grassroots democracy in rural areas through the institutionalisation of the primary party organisation (PPO). The implementation of grassroots democracy caused unanticipated consequences of elite splits, collective action dilemmas, and rampant corruption due to the problems of incumbent election advantage, declining social capital, and local cadre collusion. Taking advantage of the amphibious features of state control and society penetration, the ruling party has been trying to manage elite conflict, rebuild social capital, and reinforce top-down discipline by revitalising its cells. Three key mechanisms were identified by exploring three significant aspects of grassroots democracy (access to power, exercise of power and power supervision): *information funnel*, referring to massive information gathering and the exclusive use of information; *resource dominance*, the extraction and redistribution of state spoils and social wealth; and *instantiated framing*, the use of popularised rhetoric and successful cases to influence cognition. This institutional turn affects the operation of grassroots politics by partially alleviating collective action and official accountability dilemmas.

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