

## New Regulations for the Central Committee: Codifying Xi Era Democratic Centralism

‘The Two Protects’ is the New Era’s creative application of democratic centralism  
(Ding Xuexiang, 2019)<sup>1</sup>

‘The Two Protects’: Resolutely protect General Secretary Xi Jinping’s status as the Party Centre’s core and the whole Party’s core; resolutely protect Party Centre authority and centralist unified leadership.  
(Party Member Political Birthday Handbook)<sup>2</sup>

In autumn 2020 a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo meeting approved a new set of Central Committee Work Regulations (CCWR). As I’ve argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> the very fact that these Regulations could be approved by the Politburo, not a National Party Congress, reflects a tampering with institutionalised apportioning of power at the top. Here I focus on an element of the CCWR that further alters the dynamics of power relations at the pinnacle of the CCP, this time by modifying a fundamental principle that underpins Party rule.

In its General Provisions the CCWR states principles that the Central Committee (CC) must uphold. They include the exercise of “*correct, effective centralism*” (Art. 4.5). This cements a change in democratic centralism at the apex of power – a change that was prefaced by amendments to the Party Charter’s General Program at the 19th National Party Congress in 2017. Altering democratic centralism – the Party’s fundamental organizational principle – is no small matter. As Guo Sujian has explained, “so critical is [democratic centralism’s] role in the exercise of power that one cannot really understand the operation of the Leninist party-state without considering [its] key characteristics.”<sup>4</sup> The CCWR substantively alters those key characteristics. Further, by

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<sup>1</sup> Politburo member Ding is director of the CCP General Office, which is responsible for interpreting the Central Committee Work Regulations. This quote is from a piece attributed to Ding: 完善坚定维护党中央权威和集中统一领导的各项制度 (Improving each of the systems for resolutely protecting Party Centre authority and unified leadership), *Central Research Institute for Party History and Literature*, 25 November 2019, available at: <http://www.dswxyjy.org.cn/n1/2019/1125/c430907-31473228.html>.

<sup>2</sup> In Chinese: 坚决维护习近平总书记党中央的核心、全党的核心地位，坚决维护党中央权威和集中统一领导, from 党员政治生日手册, Beijing: China Legal Publishing House, 2019:64.

<sup>3</sup> Snape, Holly, The New Central Committee Regulations in Context: Changing the Rules to Make the Rules? *China Neican*, 20 October 2020, available at: <https://neican.substack.com/p/new-central-committee-regulations>.

<sup>4</sup> Guo Sujian, *Chinese Politics and Government: Power, Ideology, and Organization*, Routledge, Oxon, 2013:30.

operationalizing the “strategically ambiguous”<sup>5</sup> concept of the “Party Centre” (党中央), the CCWR maximizes the flexibility with which New Era democratic centralism can be used at the top to manipulate the dynamics of decision-making.

### A Note on Analysing the CCWR

As a set of “regulations” (条例) the CCWR sits third only to the Party Charter and “codes” (准则)<sup>6</sup> in the hierarchy of Party-legal efficacy.<sup>7</sup> It codifies rules for one of the top Party bodies, the CC, its internal bodies—the Politburo (PB) and Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC)—and the General Secretary. But its significance is not easy to fathom because there is not much to compare it with. In the past, Miller’s masterful work probed how CCP top-level decision-making worked under Hu Jintao without such a set of codified rules to refer to.<sup>8</sup> Until the CCWR was released this October, the only (publicly known) equivalent rules on the CC dated back to 1923 and 1938. Here I draw on past versions of key Party regulations, Xi Era Party regulations, and existing scholarship on the CCP’s history in a tentative attempt to dig underneath the surface of the CCWR’s text.

### Some Substance of Democratic Centralism

Though often given little space in the go-to books on contemporary Chinese politics,<sup>9</sup> the Leninist principle of democratic centralism (incorporated into the CCP’s Charter in 1927)<sup>10</sup> is the “foundation and backbone of the exercise of power”<sup>11</sup> under the Party.

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<sup>5</sup> Li, Ling, Appeal of Strategic Ambiguity on Party Centre: Reading the Party Directive on the Operation of the Central Committee (Part I), *The China Collection*, 18 October 2020, available at: <https://thechinacollection.org/appeal-strategic-ambiguity-party-centre-reading-party-directive-operation-central-committee/>.

<sup>6</sup> There are currently only three “codes” in the Party regulation system (see Zhuang Deshui, 中央党内法规程序规定的技术性分析及发展路径 (Technical Analysis and Development Path of Procedural Statements of the Central Inner Party’s Laws), *Journal of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics [Social Sciences Edition]*, 33.5, 2020). This is certain to change: the second five-year plan for formulating Party regulations prioritises “code” making, and amendments to the 2012 *CCP Intra-Party Regulation Formulation Regulations* in 2019 expanded the types of content codes can cover.

<sup>7</sup> See Li Jingtian and Zhang Hengshan eds., 中国特色社会主义制度中的政治法律建设 (Political-law building in the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics) People’s Press, Beijing 2018: 362–3.

<sup>8</sup> See Alice Miller, The Politburo Standing Committee under Hu Jintao, *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 35 available at: <https://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM35AM.pdf>; Miller, Hu Jintao and the Party Politburo, *China Leadership Monitor*, No.9. available at: [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/clm9\\_lm.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/clm9_lm.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Saich, Tony, *Governance and Politics of China*, 4th ed., London, Palgrave, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> See Gao Xinmin and Zou Qingguo, 黨內民主研究——歷史與現實的述評 (A study on intra-Party democracy: history and reality), Feixiang Shidai, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Guo Sujian *Chinese Politics and Government: Power, Ideology, and Organization*, Oxon: Routledge, 2013:30.

A key tenet of the CCP's version of this democratic centralism is the set of "Four Obeys"<sup>12</sup>— rules meant to dictate the behaviour of Party organizations and members. Officially-curated Party history calls Mao's statement of these Obeys in 1938 a "reassertion" (重申) of Party discipline.<sup>13</sup> Mao set them out at the Sixth CC Sixth Plenum, which "finally established [him] as the leader of the CCP and ended a period of serious disunity among its leadership,"<sup>14</sup> dashing any hopes of leadership for Wang Ming.<sup>15</sup> The Plenum closed with the adoption of a *Decision on Central Committee Work Rules and Discipline*.<sup>16</sup>

The "Four Obeys," notwithstanding alterations, have been core to the CCP's operations ever since. Mao's original version, rendered into English by the Party's translators, was worded as follows:

- (1) the individual is subordinate to the organization (个人服从组织)
- (2) the minority is subordinate to the majority (少数服从多数)
- (3) the lower level is subordinate to the higher level (下级服从上级)
- (4) the entire membership is subordinate to the *Central Committee* (全党服从中央)<sup>17</sup>

Note number four. Official translators chose to render the ambiguous Chinese "zhongyang" (中央) into the specific "Central Committee." This has been a common way of translating "zhongyang" ever since. But Cheng Zhenqiu, who together with

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<sup>12</sup> They seem to bear some similarity to principles formed in Russia: "a) The application of the elective principle to all leading organs of the party, from the highest to the lowest; b) Periodic accountability of party organs to their respective party organizations; c) Strict party discipline and the subordination of the minority to the majority; d) The absolutely binding character of the decisions of the higher organs upon the lower organs and upon party members" see Michael Waller, *Democratic Centralism: A Historical Commentary*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981:62, quoted in Canchu Lin & Yueh-Ting Lee The Constitutive Rhetoric of Democratic Centralism: a thematic analysis of Mao's discourse on democracy, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2013:151.

<sup>13</sup> See CCP Party History Research Institute, 中国共产党历史 第一卷（下册）党在全民族抗日战争时期（1937年7月—1945年8月）(CCP History Vol I Part 2: The Party During the Period of the Anti-Japanese War [July 1937–August 1945]), 4th edition, Beijing: Central Party History Press.

<sup>14</sup> Kampen, Thomas, Wang Jiayang, Mao Zedong and the 'Triumph of Mao Zedong-Thought' (1935-1945), *Modern Asian Studies*, 23.4, 1989, 705-727: 715.

<sup>15</sup> Kampen, Thomas, From The December Conference to the Sixth Plenum: Wang Ming Versus Mao Zedong. *Republican China* 15.1, 1990: 82-97; Tanaka Hitoshi 中国共産党の組織再編をめぐる一考察（一九三四～一九三八）(Chūgokukyōsantō no soshiki saihen o meguru ichikōsatsu) (Study on the reorganisation of the Chinese communist party) *JAAS Asian Studies*, 1999, 44.4, 1-36.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, Kampen, Thomas 1990: 89-90 gives a full list by date of reports and other documents from this long Plenum. Liu Shaoqi on 6 November—the same day as Wang Jiayang's closing address—gave a "Report on Party Statutes" followed by the "Passage of Several Resolutions."

<sup>17</sup> 《毛泽东选集》第二卷 (Selected works of Mao Zedong Vol. II) Beijing: People's Press, 1991: 528; *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung Vol. II* Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965: 204. available at: <http://www.marx2mao.com/PDFs/MaoSW2.pdf> (emphasis added).xx

Xu Yongying headed the English translation team charged with translating the *Selected Works of Mao*,<sup>18</sup> later reflected on this choice:

Lexically, there are still many issues...for example, the translation of zhongyang (中央)...Sometimes zhongyang refers to the Central Standing Committee (中央常委), sometimes it refers to the Central Politburo (中央政治局), and more often it refers to the Central Committee. Abroad some have begun translating it as “the Centre”; on this issue there’s room for further research.”<sup>19</sup>

As an alternative to the official version, we could translate Mao’s fourth “Obey” literally as “the whole Party obeys *the Centre*.”

Between the 7th Congress in 1945, which inscribed the “Four Obeys” into the Party Charter, and the 11th Congress (after Mao’s death) in 1977, the neat 4x6 character composition using “Centre” (中央) remained untouched.

#### Who is the “Centre”?

In 1982 the above wording of the Four Obeys in the Party Charter was edited, swapping “the Centre” for two specific organs (not one ambiguous concept). This was following political breakthroughs in and around the 11th CC Third Plenum, when the first Party Charter of the “Reform and Opening” era (hereinafter “Reform Era”) broke the laconic but ambiguous 6x4 composition. The fourth Obey changed to “the whole Party’s every organization and the whole body of Party members [shall] obey the Party’s *National Congress and Central Committee*.”<sup>20</sup>

This brings us to a relationship at the pinnacle of the Party that forms the “dual leading organs system” (双领导机关制),<sup>21</sup> a relationship which itself is considered part of democratic centralism. The CCWR, drawing its legal-like basis from the Party Charter, states: “The highest leading organs of the Party *are* the National Congress and the Central Committee which it [produces].”<sup>22</sup> Understanding the “highest organs” as

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<sup>18</sup> Guangming Ribao, 架设通向世界的思想之桥——记中共中央编译局对外翻译群体 (Jia Shetong, bridge to the world on thought: CCTB’s group that translates into foreign languages) available at: <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/n/2014/0707/c85037-25248111.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Cheng Zhenqiu 《翻译论文集》 (Collection of Essays on Translation) Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001:26.

<sup>20</sup> In full, the Four Obeys were changed to: 党员个人服从党的组织，少数服从多数，下级组织服从上级组织，全党各个组织和全体党员服从党的全国代表大会和中央委员会。

<sup>21</sup> Li Zhongjie, 党章内外的故事 (Stories on the ins and outs of the Party Charter) Beijing: CCP Party History Press, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> (CCWR Art. 2; Charter Art. 10.3); The English I use here is from the official translation of the latter (plus my emphasis). In the Chinese it is not indicated whether “highest body” is singular or plural (党的最高领导机关). This is quite normal in Chinese, where plurality can be understood through context. Invaluable unofficial English translations of the CCWR – which are otherwise excellent – get this bit

plural and pausing to consider the relationship between the two can help in unpacking the CCWR's possible significance.

Analysis of Chinese politics often deals with this relationship cursorily, if at all. This is perhaps because of the practical impotence of the National Party Congress (hereinafter "Congress"); or perhaps because the relationship has, for the Party, long been both an awkward and adaptable one that doesn't stand up well to explicit definition but that does facilitate manipulation.

On the Congress's impotence, political scientist Wu Guoguang has examined in detail the contradiction between the powerful Congress as a formal institution and the puny Congress in practice. The shallowness of the Congress, he concludes, makes it no less politically vital. Instead, manipulation of formal institutions enables "*the possibilities and facilities* for those in power to manoeuvre norms, rules, and procedures and to engineer the Party Congress to endorse their preferences."<sup>23</sup> The Congress, and the manipulable rhythmic structure it gives to politics, cannot be ignored as a key facilitator of political manoeuvring.

On the peculiarity of the Congress-CC relationship, which is replicated throughout the system at lower levels and is linked to the Congress's toothless manipulability: "Party congresses and the committees they produce are set out in the Party Charter in parallel as 'leading organs'; this relationship does not sit quite right."<sup>24</sup> In practice this contradiction is dealt with by hollowing out congresses while the committees act as permanent agencies dominating both decision-making *and* execution. While lower-level reforms have attempted to tackle this by establishing regular congresses, rather than solving the problem, this essentially inverts the roles of decision-maker and executive.<sup>25</sup>

The peculiar parallel setup whereby both the CC and the Congress are "*the highest*" has not always been the case. The first Party Charter in 1922 made a clear distinction, putting the Congress on top: "The National Congress is this Party's highest body; during the period when the Congress is in recess, the Central Executive Committee<sup>26</sup> is the highest body."<sup>27</sup> A *Central Executive Committee Organisation Law*, passed in

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wrong: "the Party's highest leading body is...." see Creemers, Rogier, Work Regulations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *China Copyright and Media*, 13 October 2020, available at: <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2020/09/30/work-regulations-of-the-central-committee-of-the-communist-party-of-china/>.

<sup>23</sup> Wu Guoguang, *China's Party Congress: Power, Legitimacy, and Institutional Manipulation*, Cambridge University Press, 2015:12 (emphasis added).

<sup>24</sup> Wang Changjiang 党内民主 (Intra-Party democracy) in Jing Yuejin, Zhang Xiaojin and Yu Xunda eds. 理解中国政治—关键词的方法 (Understanding Chinese politics: keywords as method) Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2012: 69.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 2012:69.

<sup>26</sup> The Central Committee was originally called the Central Executive Committee (中央执行委员会). Its name changed, dropping the "Executive" in 1927.

<sup>27</sup> Art. 17 全国代表大会为本党最高机关; 在全国大会闭会期间, 中央执行委员会为最高机关.

1923,<sup>28</sup> further clarified the Congress's status: "[the Committee] in all its actions is responsible to the Congress." Only "during the interval between two Congresses" was the Committee the Party's "highest guiding organ."<sup>29</sup>

Though the qualification (the interval between congresses) was kept in the 1938 *Decision on Central Committee Work Rules and Discipline*, passed days after Mao's speech delineating the Four Obeys, the sentence was flipped on its head. This made the CC the main focus: "the Party's Central Committee is, during the period before and after a National Party Congress, the Party's highest body, politically and organizationally guiding all the Party's work."<sup>30</sup> Then the 9th Party Congress in 1969 adjusted the relationship between the two,<sup>31</sup> putting the CC on a par with the Congress: "The Party's highest organs are the National Congress *and* the Central Committee it produces." The "during the interval" line was dropped.

Finally, in the 1982 Charter (which explicitly name-checked "the Centre" to be obeyed) the qualification regarding the Congress's recess was restored, with the Congress and the CC both named "the highest." This contradictory relationship – the two are equals but the Congress is *primus inter pares* – has remained basically consistent in each version of the Charter up to the present.

The CCWR essentially observes this relationship, though highlights "leading" rather than "executing,"<sup>32</sup> defining the CC's identity as:

"The Party's highest leading organs are the Party's National Congress and the Central Committee that it produces. During the period when the National Committee is in recess, the Central Committee leads all the Party's work and represents the Chinese Communist Party externally."<sup>33</sup>

### A Fluid, Malleable Centre?

The Congress-CC relationship needs to be borne in mind when attempting to understand the CCWR's use of the "Party Centre." As Ling Li argues, the CCWR's use

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<sup>28</sup> 《中国共产党中央执行委员会组织法》 full text available at:

<http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64555/4428214.html>.

<sup>29</sup> 其一切行动对大会负责，在两大会议之间为本党最高指导机关 (Art. 1).

<sup>30</sup> 党的中央委员会在党的全国大会前后期间内，是党的最高机关，在政治上、组织上指导党的一切工作”，扩大的中央第六次全会关于中央委员会工作规则与纪律的决定 full text available at: [cpc.people.com.cn/GB/69112/73583/73601/74108/5039663.html](http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/69112/73583/73601/74108/5039663.html).

<sup>31</sup> Full text available at: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64561/4429444.html>.

<sup>32</sup> It does remove the clause "the Central Committee executes National Congress resolutions" – which since 1982 has appeared in the Charter sandwiched between "when...in recess" and "the CC leads all the Party's work" and instead shifts it to a later chapter on functions.

<sup>33</sup> CCWR Art. 2.

of this undefined concept is no accident. It is a case of “strategic ambiguity,”<sup>34</sup> the product of a refusal to define or explain. As Mao’s Four Obeys show, such ambiguity is not new, but Xi is putting it to new uses.

In Chinese political language, precision and ambiguity are tools of political manipulation that can be applied or jettisoned as needed.<sup>35</sup> But given the CCP’s identity as sole ruling party, it can’t overtly, explicitly, or pointedly state that it is ditching principles pursued by previous leaderships (without shooting itself in the foot). Ambiguity can be relied on to obscure a departure from the past as well as providing flexibility for manipulation in the present.

Michael Schoenhals explored the CCP’s use of ambiguity, highlighting the rarity of a CCP formulation “lend[ing] itself to only one clear and concise interpretation.” Instead, the meaning of formulations “can be bent in a number of directions.”<sup>36</sup> Perry Link took this idea further, citing Schoenhals’ point that formulations can be a ‘form of power’: “This simple claim has greater profundity than may appear on the surface...[formulations] have an intrinsic power...when they cut off alternative ways of thinking and limit the conceptual horizons of the people who adopt them.”<sup>37</sup>

The “strategic ambiguity”<sup>38</sup> of the “Party Centre” not only blunts people’s ability to think about and question who has the power to do what but, in doing so, creates an intrinsic dimension of flexibility at the heart of this one-party system’s power structure.

The answer to my question “who is the Party Centre?” seems to be contingent on political need. The “Centre,” as official translations show, has often been accepted to mean “the Central Committee.” It could also be a part thereof (the PB or PBSC). But what about the Congress?

In the CCWR’s first Chapter on “Leadership Status”:

“The CC, the PB, and the PB Standing Committee are the brains and [nerve] centre of the Party’s organization system....On major programmatic and policy issues of a

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<sup>34</sup> See Li, Ling, Appeal of Strategic Ambiguity on Party Centre: Reading the Party Directive on the Operation of the Central Committee (Part I), *The China Collection*, 18 October 2020, available at: <https://thechinacollection.org/appeal-strategic-ambiguity-party-centre-reading-party-directive-operation-central-committee/>.

<sup>35</sup> This subsection draws on my postdoctoral thesis: Snape, Holly, “六经注我。我注六经” A Study on Discourse in Contemporary Chinese Politics: Authority Over and Under the Authority of Discourse” submitted and defended in 2019 at the School of Government, Peking University.

<sup>36</sup> Schoenhals, Michael, *Doing things with words in Chinese politics: Five studies*, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1992: 11.

<sup>37</sup> Link, Perry (2013) *An anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, metaphor, politics*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2013:275.

<sup>38</sup> Op Cit., Li, Ling, 2020.

whole-Party, whole-country nature, only the Party Centre has the power to make decisions and interpretations.” (Article 5)

Juxtaposing the concrete concepts of the CC, the PB, and the PBSC with the amorphous “Party Centre,” the CCWR gives an equivocal pairing. It links the CC, PB and PBSC with “the Party Centre.” The statement is odd when we remember the primus inter pares Congress, though of course it doesn’t flatly rule the Congress out.<sup>39</sup>

A second, equally perplexing, pairing is found in the Code of Conduct for Intraparty Political Life Under New Circumstances introduced in 2016.<sup>40</sup> The Code, which as a 准则 (zhunze) ranks second in legal-like efficacy only to the Charter,<sup>41</sup> stipulates on Party member behaviour.<sup>42</sup> Citing the Four Obeys the Code contains a subsection headed “Resolutely Protecting *Party Centre* Authority,” juxtaposing an embryonic form of the “Two Protects” (explained below) and the “Party Centre” with the “Congress and CC.” This gives a clear peek at the ambiguity of the “Party Centre” and its need to account for not one but two highest organs. It reads:

“Resolutely protecting the authority of the *Party Centre* (党中央) and ensuring Party-wide compliance with its orders and prohibitions has a direct bearing on the future of the Party and country...[First Obey, Second Obey, Third Obey]...all organizations and members of the Party must obey *the National Congress and Central Committee*; the core is that every organization and every member of the Party obey *the National Congress and Central Committee*.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The current Party Charter contains a similar but more limited statement: on major policy issues of a whole-country nature only the Party Centre has the power to make decisions (Art. 16). This comes a few lines after the Four Obeys (which explicitly name-check both the Congress and the CC). While the whole Party must obey both “the Congress and the CC,” “only the Party Centre” can make such decisions.

<sup>40</sup> 《关于新形势下党内政治生活的若干准则》

<sup>41</sup> Its place in the Party regulations hierarchy is even reflected in the physical format of regulation handbooks as a reminder of its importance.

<sup>42</sup> This is not some obscure document that no-one reads. For example, it features prominently in the “Two Studies, One Do” Educational [campaign] and the “Don’t Forget the Original Aspiration, Keep at Heart the Mission” [campaign]. See for example CCP General Office, 《关于推进“两学一做”学习教育常态化制度化的意见》 (Opinion on promoting the regularization and institutionalization of the “Two Studies, One Do” Educational [campaign]) 28 March 2017, available at: <http://news.12371.cn/2017/03/28/ARTI1490690573414153.shtml>; “Don’t Forget the Original Aspiration, Keep at Heart the Mission” Thematic Activities Leading Group 《关于在“不忘初心、牢记使命”主题教育中对照党章党规找差距的工作方案》 (Work 21 July 2019, available at <http://www.12371.cn/2019/07/21/ARTI1563710195150619.shtml>)

<sup>43</sup> 坚决维护党中央权威、保证全党令行禁止，是党和国家前途命运所系，是全国各族人民根本利益所在，也是加强和规范党内政治生活的重要目的。必须坚持党员个人服从党的组织，少数服从多数，下级组织服从上级组织，全党各个组织和全体党员服从党的全国代表大会和中央委员会，核心是全党各个组织和全体党员服从党的全国代表大会和中央委员会。

In this codified passage, demanding protection of “the Party Centre” in connection to the Four Obeys, the Party Centre cannot be treated as synonymous with the CC without rejecting the 1982 Reform Era edition of the Four Obeys. In other words, it links the “Party Centre” with both Congress and CC. Though we cannot know whether this is for political exigency – to claim Xi is the Centre of both Congress(!) and CC—or because Xi cannot simply flout the existing Four Obeys of democratic centralism.

In contrast with this pairing, other CCP doctrinal texts treat the “Party Centre” as plainly synonymous with the CC. The 19th Congress Report states, for example: “the Party Centre has convened seven plenums....” Here “plenums” can only feasibly refer to the Central Committee.

Perhaps the only possible conclusion is that the “Party Centre” is befuddling. It frustrates efforts to pin it down, to give it a clear, distinct definition. But maybe this is the point.

#### The Game Changer: What is “Correct Centralism”?

While “the Centre” is fluid or malleable, “correct centralism,” in its post-19th Congress form, is concretely defined (containing the fluid “Centre”). The definition hangs on the “Two Protects”:

Resolutely protect General Secretary Xi Jinping’s status as the Party Centre’s core and the whole Party’s core; resolutely protect Party Centre authority and centralist unified leadership.<sup>44</sup>

The Xi era notion of “correct centralism” contrasts starkly with that pushed for by Deng Xiaoping at the pre-meeting to the 11th Central Committee Third Plenum, his speech at which was “designed to oppose and ingeniously revise Mao’s view on democracy”<sup>45</sup>: “We need centralist, uniform leadership, but it’s imperative that there be ample democracy, only then is it possible to achieve *correct centralism*.” This was, he said, because “for a very long time, democratic centralism was not genuinely practised, centralism was divorced from democracy and there was too little democracy.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> 坚决维护习近平总书记党中央的核心、全党的核心地位，坚决维护党中央权威和集中统一领导

<sup>45</sup> Yu Keping, *Toward an Incremental Democracy and Governance: Chinese Theories and Assessment Criteria*, *New Political Science*, 2002, 24:2, 181-199: 184.

<sup>46</sup> This is from a speech given by Deng on 13 December 1978. It was his closing speech at the Central Work Meeting before the famed Third Plenum, though the editors of the volume it appeared in (Selected important readings since the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee) remark it was: “in fact the keynote speech of the plenum”(1987:1), see Central Party Literature and Research Office ed. 十一届三中全会以来重要文献选读 Vol. I (Selected important readings since the Third Plenary Session

In the Reform Era, the Party Charter's content on democratic centralism was set out in two parts: passages in the General Program (总纲) and "basic principles of democratic centralism" in the main text.<sup>47</sup> The latter has remained mostly unchanged since 1982.<sup>48</sup> The Reform Era wording of the Four Obeys has remained entirely untouched.

Since 1992, in the context of the basic demands for Party building, the General Program has contained what it refers to explicitly as "correct centralism." It is here that Xi has asserted his New Era version of democratic centralism, departing from Reform Era "correct centralism."

The Charter's General Program used to read: "...practice correct centralism, ensuring the unanimity of the whole Party's actions, ensuring the Party's decisions receive rapid, effective implementation."<sup>49</sup> It now reads (with the addition italicized):

*... practice correct centralism, firmly establishing political consciousness, big-picture consciousness, core consciousness, [and] keeping-in-line consciousness, [and] resolutely protecting the authority and centralist unified leadership of the Party Centre with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core, ensuring the unanimity of the whole Party's actions, ensuring the Party's decisions receive rapid, effective implementation.*<sup>50</sup>

This, I believe, alters the nature of democratic centralism, confining debate to what people governed by this principle perceive to be in line with the Party Centre-with-Xi-at-its-core. Since this change, to avoid breaking Party discipline, all discussion must be limited within the boundaries of "core consciousness" and "protecting the authority and centralist unified leadership of the Party Centre with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core." This is what sketches out the boundaries of legitimate debate. Views that tiptoe beyond that definition are in contravention of Party discipline.

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of the Eleventh Central Committee Vol. I) Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1987:22; see also 邓小平文选 Vol. II (Selected works of Deng Xiaoping), Beijing, People's Publishing House, 1994:144.

<sup>47</sup> The state Constitution also stipulates, in Art. 3: "The state institutions of the People's Republic of China shall practice the principle of democratic centralism."

<sup>48</sup> There were changes in 1992 and 2002, both on decision-making. The former changed the 1982 version 民主讨论, 作出决定 to 集体讨论, 作出决定; the latter added 按照集体领导、民主集中、个别酝酿、会议决定的原则....

<sup>49</sup> 必须实行正确的集中, 保证全党行动的一致, 保证党的决定得到迅速有效的贯彻执行 (in 2007 团结统一 was added to 行动一致).

<sup>50</sup> 必须实行正确的集中, 牢固树立政治意识、大局意识、核心意识、看齐意识, 坚定维护以习近平同志为核心的党中央权威和集中统一领导, 保证全党的团结统一和行动一致, 保证党的决定得到迅速有效的贯彻执行.

This break from past notions of centralism works in concert with other Party regulations, like the CCWR. As an example, immediately after the 19th Congress, on 27 October 2017, the PB met and approved “Some Rules of the CCP Politburo on Strengthening and Protecting Party Centre Centralist, Unified Leadership”<sup>51</sup> To the best of my knowledge they have not been publicly released, but some content can be gleaned from related reporting, for example: “all PB comrades must...self-consciously struggle against words and actions that violate the Party Charter, break Party discipline, or harm Party Centre collectivist leadership and unity and oneness, diligently performing their responsibility for comprehensively ruling the Party strictly in the departments, fields, or localities under their charge.” Note this bleeds seamlessly into the state through their leadership. The Two Protects is not just a slogan, it comes with a system of rules designed to make sure it gets implemented.

The original Four Obeys stipulated that the whole Party should obey the Centre. This was changed in 1982 to the whole Party should obey the Congress and the CC. Now, as democratic centralism stands, the Obey retains the latter form only it comes qualified by the binding provision of protecting the authority of the Party Centre-with-Xi-as-core. That Centre, as we’ve seen, can be different things depending on the context. This fluidity of the “Party Centre” facilitates the shifting of decision-making to the forum where decisions can be passed with sufficient support—support enunciated in a way that is in keeping with the adjusted notion of correctness.

What the CCWR does is take a concrete step, at the pinnacle of the Party, toward cementing this altered version of the Party’s fundamental organizational principle into a system of implementable institutions. Consider Guo’s suggestion that democratic centralism is a formative element of the CCP’s identity.<sup>52</sup> It may then merit asking what this adjustment to that identity means in practice, and whether or not it is reversible.

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<sup>51</sup> The regulations, in Chinese, are named 《中共中央政治局关于加强和维护党中央集中统一领导的若干规定》. This report on them, titled 中共中央政治局召开会议 研究部署学习宣传贯彻党的十九大精神 (CCP PB holds meeting, researches and makes arrangements for study, propaganda and implementation of the 19th Party Congress spirit), 29 October 2017, is available at: <http://iplr.whu.edu.cn/info/1030/1687.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> See Guo Sujian, *Chinese Politics and Government: Power, Ideology, and Organization*, Oxon: Routledge, 2013:12–32.