



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between Chinese Youth and the Party: The Communist Youth League's Revival and Adjustments in the Early Post-Mao Era

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Since the beginning of the new century Chinese leaders have attempted to increase the 'relevance' of the Communist Youth League (CYL) by calling for a more responsive organisation as a way to cultivate political loyalty at a time of profound social change. Yet, the call for more responsive patterns of work is not new. Mainly based on the Chinese youth press, official documents, and leaders' speeches, as well as memoirs and biographical material, this paper provides an organisational analysis of the CYL in the post Cultural Revolution period, focusing on the functional adjustments that were discussed when the CYL was revived nationally and the economic reforms were launched. As such, it explores early national initiatives, discourses, and debates surrounding the reform of the work of the CYL as developed through the 1980s, and highlights the influence of reform-minded political leaders in pursuing a new approach to "youth work" that, by envisaging a loosening of the Party's control over League affairs, aimed at moving away from past practices and enabling the organisation to better relate to a wide range of youth concerns. This paper sheds light on the way the policies of reform and opening up impacted upon a traditional political body that was called to increasing responsiveness to the demands coming from society, but also shows the structural paradox of an institution embedded in the Leninist political system and designed to serve as an intermediary between the Party and the country's youth.

21 世紀以來，胡錦濤等中國領導人提倡共青團要創新並增強社會性職能，只有將共青團的政治職能向服務職能轉變，才能增強對青年的吸引力。回顧歷史會發現這其實並非新問題。通過對中國媒體資料、歷史數據和中共領導人傳記的研究，本文分析了共青團在文化大革命結束後的發展，尤其是自 1978 年開始的有關共青團地位、作用和體制改革的討論和政策。在胡耀邦等人領導下，共青團在 1980 年代的發展反映了改革開放政策對一個傳統團體產生的影響以及共青團在新形勢下要轉型成一個代表青年的組織所面臨的挑戰。

Keywords: Chinese communist youth league, Chinese youth movement, Youth work, Hu Yaobang, Mass organisations, People's Republic of China

關鍵詞：中國共青團，中國青年運動，青年工作，胡耀邦，羣眾組織，中華人民共和國

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Introduction¹

Over the past forty years, the policies of reform and opening up to the outside world have affected many aspects of Chinese society, bringing about profound changes to the country's socio-economic structure as well as in people's mentality and behaviour. The early transition that occurred in the value system of society and the tension between official ideology and social realities had the greatest implications especially among China's younger generation. While since the 1990s urban youth have been generally described as "success-oriented", "money centred", and pursuing "the good life" (Rosen 2004), their counterparts in the 1980s have been defined as "searching for life's meaning" (Xu 2001). This definition points to the members of a generation that had lost confidence in the future of socialism and was alienated from the regime and its ideology (Ownby 1986; Kwong 1994; Hooper 1985, 159-174). As rapid economic reforms engendered new opportunities for personal welfare and social mobility, Chinese young people became less idealistic and more independent, concerned less with politics and more with their personal lives.

The majority of youth in the early and mid-1980s were born on the eve of the Cultural Revolution and grew up in a period of great turmoil and terror (Gold 1996, 186-189). This experience, combined with the contradictions generated by the promotion of old social ethics and political beliefs and the simultaneous glorification of material consumerism, led to increasing alienation from the existing Party-state. As Stanley Rosen has shown in his study of youth and public opinion on the eve of the 1989 "pro-democracy movement", the limited appeal of official values and norms, the pursuit of individual values, and the attitude of thinking and acting independently went hand in hand with a declining political commitment toward the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Rosen 1990a, 62-67; 1992). This was also reflected in officially sanctioned

¹ This analysis has benefited from conversations with many people. In particular I wish to thank Merle Goldman for exchanging ideas about youth-state relations in early post-Mao China, and Michael Schoenhals for sharing historical material on the CYL organization. I am also grateful to Pang Ching Lin for her suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, which makes this piece better.

youth groups, as evidenced by the diminished appeal of the Communist Youth League (CYL) among its target population in the age bracket 14-28 (Ch'i 1991, 147-148).

Whereas most scholarly works have focused on the changes in values and belief system occurring among the young, as well as on students' attitudes toward official values and "traditional" channels of political participation (Francis 1991; Rosen 1992, 1990b, 1989b; on post-1989 changes in value orientation and attitudes see especially Rosen 2009), official "youth work" and the CYL organisation have so far been largely understudied. Despite its crucial importance in the Chinese political system, the only Western scholarly works available on the CYL until a few years ago dated back to the early 1980s (Healy 1982; a study on the CYL also appeared in Taiwan in the 1980s, Tang 1985). Newly published studies on the CYL as a bridge between youth and the Party in post-Mao China have appeared recently. In particular, they have shed light on the organisation's low appeal for young people and the constraints limiting both its responsiveness to the youth and its ability to influence policymaking in the Hu-Wen era (Tsimonis 2021), but also on its role as a promotion path for future party leaders (Kou 2014, Doyon 2020). Recent research has also looked at the CYL's institutional changes over time (Tsai and Liao 2021) and its activities in the welfare sector through volunteering programs, at both the domestic and international levels (Xu 2012, Ciccagno and Graziani 2016).

Yet the only work that has been published so far on the impact of economic reforms on Party-youth relations in the early post-Mao era, with a focus on the CYL's initiatives directed at young people, is the one by Stanley Rosen (1985), that analysed CCP attempts to find a coherent strategy to re-engage with a disillusioned and increasingly independent young generation following the disaster of the Cultural Revolution. In addressing the main debates over how to revive the activities of the organisation, he revealed the tension between those who criticised the pressure of political education and saw the need to accommodate youth demands, and those who proposed more "conservative" solutions, arguing that ideological control had to be strengthened so as to avoid the youth's increased independence eventually undermining the country's

stability. This tension clearly reflected deepening intra-Party divergences between reformists and conservative leaders over the direction of youth work, which in turn were also the result of a generational transition of the leadership at that time.

This article focuses on the CYL's organisational developments in the post Cultural Revolution period, highlighting the influence of reform-minded leaders in the discussion over the CYL work reform as it developed in the 1980s – a largely neglected era in CYL studies. Mainly relying on Chinese documentary sources, including official CCP and CYL documents, the national youth press, biographical material, and CYL yearbooks, as well as reports and articles produced by cadres and scholars affiliated with League schools, it explores how the organisation tried to identify its position and adjust its work in the light of the broader changes taking place in Chinese society, attempting to strengthen its representative function and carve out new spaces of autonomy vis-à-vis the Party. As such, in this article, I mainly delve into internal debates and national initiatives aimed at making the CYL more responsive to the demands coming from youth by engaging more actively with their real needs and interests. The focus of this analysis is on reform-oriented discussions and intentions at the centre, rather than on their implementation and impact on the ground.

The article will first provide an overview of the CYL organisation in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Then it reviews the process of reviving CYL activities after the Cultural Revolution ended and the reforms were launched, highlighting its role in pushing for a new reformist vision under the influence of Hu Yaobang. Finally, the paper clarifies the main difficulties encountered in the new period and examines the early debates about reforming the CYL's work that eventually led to the formulation of a plan for the institutional reform of the CYL that would have allowed the organisation more autonomy, had the Tiananmen movement in 1989 not renewed calls for a strengthening of Party control over its mass organisations. In the conclusion, I address the relevance of this analysis for the understanding of more recent developments in CCP-CYL-youth relations.

The CYL: An Overview

In the PRC there have been and continue to be a series of mass organisations which were set up on a national basis around 1949 in order to propagate Communist ideology and assist the CCP. Even though they are not part of the state power apparatus, China's mass organisations are nonetheless tied to it in many ways, representing an essential part of the organisational matrix of Chinese communist rule. They function as “transmission belts” which bring the masses of people into direct organisational contact with the CCP, encouraging them to conform to the demands of the political authorities and producing the popular support of Party policies that the “mass line” (*qunzhong luxian* 群眾路線) demands. As Barnett put it, they were to represent the means through which “the weight of communist apparatus makes itself felt upon the average individual” (Barnett 1951, 76). Although on paper they are also responsible for defending the interests of their members (the upward functioning of the transmission belt should indeed guarantee that the views of the masses are reflected to the higher authorities), however, because of the supremacy of the collective interest in China, they have always devoted more attention to supporting the Party policies than to reflecting their members' interests, thus being generally regarded as “little more than appendages to the Party” (Townsend 1969, 151–157; Teiwes 2000, 129; Saich 1989, 51). Not by chance, both Chinese terms used to refer to this kind of political association, *renmin tuanti* 人民團體, “people's organisations”, and *qunzhong zuzhi* 群眾組織, “mass organisations”, refer to the greatest collective interest, with *qunzhong zuzhi* indicating a close but subordinate relationship to the Party (Ma 2006, 82–84). Today, mass organisations “continue to deliver CCP policy, and their prestigious status represents the reach of the party into society” (Ibid., 71). Yet, while being close to official Party-state institutions, they are directly in contact with the population: this ambivalent position or “in-betweenness” (Audin and Doyon 2019, 5) has made possible the adoption of new strategies to remain appealing to their constituencies, including the development of forms of advocacy to influence the policymaking process, as evidenced, in particular, by the work of the All-China Women's Federation (see, for instance, Jin 2001).

Being an age-based mass organisation, the CYL brings young people aged fourteen to twenty-eight² into organised political activity. Originally named the Socialist Youth League, it held its First National Congress in 1922, when the birth of a national unified youth organisation was proclaimed. Thereafter, the organisation changed its name several times: to Communist Youth League in 1925, New Democratic Youth League in 1949, and Communist Youth League of China in 1957 (Pringsheim 1962; Graziani 2014). While before 1949 the League played a key role in mobilising young people towards revolutionary objectives and in the CCP struggle for power, after the establishment of the PRC it became an instrument for the Chinese Communists to politically socialise and manage youth (Graziani 2019, 110–112). As such, it was characterised by a well-developed and powerful basic-level organisation, that reached almost every corner of society (with League units within the PLA, the industrial system, and the educational system) and monopolised “youth work” (*qingnian gongzuo* 青年工作), providing leadership of youth activities. As shown by studies on the Red Guards, Party-sponsored youth groups such as the CYL played an important role in supervising the political life of young people and shaping their values and behaviour so as to gain the active commitment of the new generation to the Party’s policies and to Mao’s vision (see especially Chan 1985).

In addition, the CYL’s main functions as assistant (*zhushou* 助手) to the CCP and reserve force (*houbeijun* 後備軍) – enshrined in both the CYL and the CCP statutes since the 1950s – made it an important tool for supplying new blood to the Party and “cultivating successors”, which explains the League’s close relationship with the CCP. This aspect became especially important in the early 1960s, as the “struggle to revolutionise youth” (see Hu Yaobang’s report 1964 to the Ninth National Congress of the CYL in *Gongqingtuan Zhongyang bangongting* 1964, vol. 1, 34) was brought to the forefront and the task of “cultivating revolutionary successors” (*peiyang geming jiebanren* 培養革命接班人) took on unprecedented urgency (Townsend 1967). Not by chance, in this context competition to join the CYL increased among urban youths

² Before 1982 people aged between 14 and 25 were eligible for CYL membership.

(Chan 1985; Unger 1982; Shirk 1982 and others). Many youths eagerly pursued admission into the CYL in order to prepare themselves to become political activists and cultivate the necessary qualities to deserve Party membership, as former members recalled (see, for instance, the memories in Bennett and Montaperto 1971, 18; Frolic 1981, 139).

Yet, with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, the CYL became one of the most challenged institutions (Funnell 1970, Healy 1982, Leader 1974, Wang 1970). In June 1966, its Beijing Municipal Committee was purged, and later that year its Central Committee was reorganised, with several of its leaders being singled out for criticism (including the First Secretary Hu Yaobang, accused of being a loyal agent of Liu Shaoqi). In August 1966 the CYL was eventually replaced by Red Guard organisations, which operated in a relatively autonomous way. After that, the Youth League ceased to exist in any meaningful sense for years until the mid-1970s.

It was only in 1978 that the CYL resumed its political functions at the national level (with the convening of its National Congress after 14 years), reasserting control over the political life of Chinese youth. However, the traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution and the profound changes that occurred following the death of Mao Zedong impacted upon the way both youth and the leaders understood “youth work”. As a new reform discourse emerged, the very nature of the League was discussed in an attempt to redefine its position vis-à-vis the youth. As a result, new spaces for the articulation of a discourse on the reform of the CYL’s work emerged, against the backdrop of weakened CCP legitimacy and a widespread crisis of faith in the party and official ideology among the younger generation. This issue will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

The revival of the CYL after the Cultural Revolution

The revival of the Communist Youth League structure at the national level in October 1978, after twelve years of suspension, was aimed at re-establishing political control

over young people. Yet the first attempts at reconstructing the organisation took place at the local level in the early 1970s and followed upon Party reconstruction as announced by the Ninth National Congress of the CCP (April 1969). The process of reviving the CYL was largely completed by 1973 with the convening of the municipal, regional, and provincial League congresses throughout the country. The task was complex, as the rectification process required the achievement of a new consensus and synthesis of outlook among newly formed groups and between old cadres and those who had emerged as talented activists during the Cultural Revolution (Montaperto 1981). At the national level, it was only in February 1975 that the CCP Centre initiated preparations for the convening of the CYL Tenth National Congress, which in the end was not convened for yet another long period of time. Indeed, after the arrest of the Gang of Four the preparatory group (*choubeizu* 籌備組) stopped working and a reorganisation of the leadership was carried out at all levels to remove leaders associated with ultra-left radicals. Preparations for the convening of the CYL National Congress were resumed only after Deng Xiaoping returned to work in 1977 under Hua Guofeng (Li Yuqi 2009, 277–290; Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu et al. 2000: vol. 19, 285–286, 393; Vogel, 531–610).

On May 4th 1978 the CCP Central Committee issued the “Circular on the convocation of the Tenth National Congress of the CYL” which set the task of the forthcoming Congress and praised the League’s work in the Maoist era, while denouncing the damage brought about by the Gang of Four. The Circular affirmed that the majority of young people were “full of promise” (*dayou xiwang* 大有希望) and “able to develop their ability to the fullest” (*dayou zuowei* 大有作為), and urged the rectification of the leadership of the League at every level, calling for the convocation (where necessary) of provincial level congresses (Zhongyang tuanxiao qingniantuan gongzuo jiaoyanshi 1979, 450–457). Afterwards, a preparatory committee for the Tenth National Congress began work under Han Ying (Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu et al. 2000: vol. 19, 393). In July the Central School of the CYL reopened, while the newspaper *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* 中國青年報 (China Youth Daily) and the journal *Zhongguo Qingnian*

中國青年 (China Youth), suspended during the Cultural Revolution, resumed publication in September-October, becoming important vehicles of new ideas and political approaches (Goldman 1994, 39-40). At the same time, in some places (e.g. Shanghai, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Heilongjiang) provincial congresses were held to elect a new leadership (Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu et al. 2000, vol. 19).

The Tenth National Congress was finally convened in October 1978. The work report delivered by Han Ying adhered to Mao's revolutionary line and stressed continuities with the past, calling on young people to "hold high the great banner of Mao Tsetung Thought" while making contributions to the "four modernisations" (Han 1978). At the same time, it underlined the importance of "seeking truth from facts" and "practice as the sole criterion for testing truth", a principle that was at the centre of the ongoing ideological campaign to legitimise political change from the Maoist policy at a time when the struggle between the "whateverist" faction and the pragmatists was unfolding within the CCP (Misra 1998, 19-53; Schoenhals 1991).

The newly elected Secretariat confirmed Han Ying (a leader who benefited from the Cultural Revolution and was promoted to this post directly by Hua Guofeng) as first secretary, and included a few leaders close to Hu Yaobang, such as Hu Qili (as second-in-command) and Hu Dehua (Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu et al. 2000, vol. 19, 393-394; Kou 2001, 21). Both had worked under him in the CYL before the Cultural Revolution and Hu Qili would become one of his closest associates in the following years.³

Available material suggests that Hu Yaobang, as former Secretary of the League from 1953 to 1966 (with experience in guiding the Party's youth work that could be traced back to the years of rural revolution in the Jiangxi soviet) and current head of the CCP Organisation Department, played a key role in the revival of the CYL, supervising the preparatory work for the convocation of the National Congress and participating in

³ Between 1980 and 1981, with the weakening and the end of the influence of the whateverist faction, the leadership would undergo a reshuffle with new leaders close to the reformists entering the Secretariat (among them Li Ruihuan and Chen Haosu), while in November 1982 Han Ying would be replaced as First Secretary by the reform-minded Wang Zhaoguo (Zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu et al. 2000, vol. 19: 393-394).

central meetings (Chen 2012). As early as May 1978, he had directed attention to two delicate issues that needed to be tackled in order for the CYL to move towards new directions: the generational transition and the definition of new tasks in line with the goal of the “four modernisations” (*sige xiandaihua* 四個現代化). During a speech delivered on 4 May in front of more than 2,500 youth and members of the CYL in Beijing (Dongcheng district) to commemorate the national Youth Day, he stated:

“All of us, old comrades who have worked in the Central Committee of the CYL, have come here today mainly to express our mood. You have just told us ‘welcome’ but this is not appropriate because we have become or are becoming old and no longer have the qualifications for conducting the League’s work. You must say goodbye to us and welcome the leaders of the CYL committees at the provincial level who are being elected and will conduct the work of the League in the future” (Sheng 2007, vol. 1, 171).

Then, he mentioned the “new Long March” (*xin changzheng* 新長征) as the main task of the Party, defining it as a march that “makes our great nation a strong socialist country based on the four modernisations”, as a march that “required 23 years of proof in practice” as well as “preparations, a firm and correct political orientation, and a high technological and scientific level” (*ibid.*, 171–172). After his speech, precisely on 6 May, the first meeting of the preparatory committee for the Tenth National Congress of the CYL criticised the negative influence of the Gang of Four and stressed the importance of ‘emancipating minds’ and propagating the idea of the “new Long March” (Han 2009, 275–276)⁴.

On 28 October, two days after the end of the CYL National Congress, Hu Yaobang spoke at a meeting with old and new cadres, saying that the most important question at that time was how to better and faster realise the “four modernisations”. He thus exhorted the cadres to dedicate themselves to study and investigation and to rely on

⁴The slogan of the “new Long March” entered the report to the Tenth National Congress and in 1979 became a nationwide CYL activity centered on economic development (Tsimonis 2021: 258).

facts, pointing to the validity of Mao Zedong Thought, in particular the principle “practice is the sole criterion for testing truth”, and saying, “If we do not discuss clearly this question, we won’t resolve the problem of talking big words, empty words, false words, and superfluous words”, that is the problem of “using stereotyped expressions, using a lot of rhetoric in speech and writing” (Sheng 2007, vol. 1, 233–235).

A few weeks later, the reversal of the verdict on the 5 April 1976 (Qingming) Tiananmen protests against Mao and the Gang of Four was officially announced by the CCP Beijing Municipal Committee. On 21 November the *Zhongguo qingnian bao* published an editorial entitled “The great April 5th movement” (*weida de siwu yundong* 偉大的四五運動) (Dai 2004, 140–141). The rehabilitation of the “Incident” as a revolutionary movement was welcomed with exhilaration by the people (especially youth), whose resentment against the radicals led by Jiang Qing and the desire for change had been growing since 1976. It was also crucial for the consolidation of the power of Deng Xiaoping and his supporters vis-à-vis the remaining Maoists within the party.

In point of fact, the CYL had a certain influence in those days, standing at the forefront of the efforts to expand freedoms: it was the CYL official journal, *Zhongguo qingnian*, in which, as former head of the CYL, Hu Yaobang played an important role, which was first to express approval of the 5 April 1976 Tiananmen protests. After twelve years of suspension, its inaugural issue scheduled for distribution in mid-September contained articles that called for a reversal of the verdict on the events of April 5th and the release of those who had been arrested, as well as an article written by Hu Yaobang himself that contained indirect attacks on the Cultural Revolution and compared the cult of Mao to blind religious faith and superstition. Confiscated twice by Wang Dongxing, then Director of the CCP CC Propaganda Department and a supporter of Hua Guofeng, the issue was finally distributed a few weeks later, appearing page by page on Xidan Wall and triggering euphoria and hope among the Chinese people (Goldman 1994, 39–40; Misra 1998, 23–24; Vogel 2011, 251–252).

The movement that followed, known as the “Democracy Wall Movement” (see Opletal’s article in this issue), saw young activists expressing new ideas, debating political issues, denouncing the injustices caused by the Cultural Revolution, and calling for the

ousting of the “Maoists” within the Politburo and for far-reaching political and economic reforms (Goldman 2005, 25–50). As is well known, popular movements were initially supported by Deng Xiaoping as useful in his political struggle against Hua Guofeng, but as soon as the activists went further by asking for political rights and freedom, Deng Xiaoping set the limits of change, with the enunciation of the “four cardinal principles” on March 1979, the most important of which was the leadership of the party. By then, the *Zhongguo qingnian* had become a major forum for new approaches, echoing ideas debated among the leaders and intellectuals close to Hu Yaobang (Goldman 1994, 35–57).

Adapting the CYL’s work to the new priorities: the role of Hu Yaobang

The decision adopted by the third plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP (18–22 December 1978) had a profound impact on every aspect of the life of the country. The decision to shift the focus of the Party’s work from class struggle to economic development implied that the CYL would adapt to the new Party priorities. Following the third plenum, a meeting of the provincial secretaries of the CYL was convened in Beijing by the Central Committee of the CYL in order to adapt youth work to meet the new tasks set by the Party. The meeting was held from 19 to 24 February while Party leaders and intellectuals close to Hu Yaobang were discussing the direction of the reforms and the Xidan “democracy wall” movement was still unfolding (Goldman 1991). The meeting made clear that the “four modernisations” should be the main lesson of the CYL’s work in the new period and cadres should ‘emancipate their minds’ in order to serve the new priorities of economic development (see *Tuan nei tongxun* 1979, n. 2, 22–24). But uncertainty and reservations still existed among the cadres, some of whom were wondering whether class struggle would be still upheld. In a speech delivered on 23 February to CYL provincial secretaries, Hu Yaobang urged cadres to abandon old slogans that were the product of specific historical conditions, in favour of new ones that could fit the new circumstances, and emphasised

the role of the CYL in providing “positive guidance” (*jījī yīndǎo* 積極引導) to the youth. He then urged the adoption of more flexible methods, stating that “in the past the authorities had interfered too much in young people’s life and it was now essential to pay attention to their particular interests and characteristics” (*Gongqingtuan zhongyang bangongting* 1979, 26–40). The same idea had been put forward a few days earlier (on 13 January 1979) during a meeting with officials of the CCP Central Propaganda Department, when Hu Yaobang underlined the importance of keeping close ties with the youth, and called on cadres to “be good at guiding youth” (*duì qīngnián yào shānyu yīndǎo* 對青年要善於引導) by considering their characteristics and starting from reality (Han 2009, 278).

In his 23 February speech, Hu Yaobang also touched upon the role of the youth press, which – in his view – should focus on issues that directly pertained to the life and problems encountered by the youth, avoiding sermons. By mentioning the Xidan movement, he thus also encouraged cadres to report those positive solicitations that came from below (*Gongqingtuan zhongyang bangongting* 1979, 26–40). Hu Yaobang showed a tolerant and mild attitude towards the student protests and the demands coming from a young generation who had suffered greatly and unjustly during the Cultural Revolution and whose voices should be listened to (Chen 2012). This attitude, which would continue to characterise Hu Yaobang and his associates in the following years, can be partly explained by considering the trauma experienced just a few years before: indeed, “the memory of the traumatic Cultural Revolution was still fresh and acute for many intellectuals and even party leaders who had been attacked” (Fang 2020, 241).

During his one year as director of the CCP Organisation Department, and after December 1978 as Head of the Propaganda Department (1979–1980), Hu Yaobang also oversaw the rehabilitation of tens of thousands of intellectuals and cadres purged under Mao in the mid-1950s. Those rehabilitated from the so-called “wrong and mistaken verdicts” (*yuánjiǎ cuo’àn* 冤假錯案) included former cadres who had worked under him in the CYL in the 1950s and early 1960s. For instance, on 25 December 1978, Hu Yaobang addressed the rehabilitation of Xiang Nan, former head of the

CYL Central Propaganda Department in the mid-1950s (Dai 2004, 18; Zhong and Wang 1999, 4-5). Xiang Nan had been criticised and purged for “rightist opportunism” at the third plenum of the Third Central Committee of the CYL (2 June-13 August 1958) which adopted the “Decision on the mistake of Xiang Nan”. In autumn 1956, during an enlarged meeting of the CYL Secretariat, Xiang Nan had indeed put forward a “proposal in ten points” (*shi dian jianyi* 十點建議) which called for “three main transformations” (*san hua* 三化): democratisation (*minzhuhua* 民主化), massification (*qunzhonghua* 群眾化), and empowerment (*zizhuhua* 自主化). The proposal also urged the youth press to become an effective vehicle of the voices of youth, so as to facilitate the genuine expression of their concerns and needs (Zheng 2004, 213-214; Zhong and Wang 1999, 6). The above-mentioned 1958 “Decision” criticised Xiang Nan and his “Proposal”, defining it as a “real programme of rightist opportunism”, an “attack on the leadership of the CCP”, an attempt to “falsify the orientation of the communist youth movement” (Gongqingtuan zhongyang bangongting 1958, 63-64). In 1979, the rehabilitation of Xiang Nan (who would soon become Secretary of the Fujian Party Committee in 1980) was accompanied by a reversal of judgement regarding the proposal he had originally put forward in 1956. The “Report on the rehabilitation of Xiang Nan” affirmed the validity of its original spirit as providing positive suggestions to overcome the main problems facing the CYL’s work in the new period (see “Zhonggong zhongyang pizhun tuan Zhongyang shujichu” 1979 and the 14 May 1979 circular “Guanyu wei Xiang Nan tongzhi pingfan de tongbao” in Gongqingtuan zhongyang bangongting 1979, 46-47).

The CYL’s declining relevance and major challenges

With the launching of the reforms, the CYL encountered enormous challenges as it sought to recover the social and political prestige it enjoyed before the Cultural Revolution. Its relevance had indeed declined significantly among Chinese youth, as a consequence both of the experience of the Cultural Revolution and of broader changes taking place in the socio-economic system.

In that complex historical period, the leaders confronted declining public faith in the CCP and official ideology as well as growing social instability. In February 1980, Hu Yaobang, who was made General Secretary of the CCP at the fifth plenum of the Eleventh CCP Central Committee, admitted that “the party confronted a threefold crisis of faith, belief and trust in its relations with the Chinese people” (Baum 1994, 91). That crisis was particularly widespread among young Chinese, many of whom had been sent to the countryside and were now coming back to the cities asking for redress of their grievances and sufferings during the Cultural Revolution. While many cities saw the explosion, in the late 1970s, of demonstrations and protests on the part of sent-down youth (see, for instance, Pan 2002, 221–237), the growing political disillusionment of youth with socialism, unemployment, and juvenile crime was becoming a serious problem that threatened social stability (Chiang 1983). The problem of youth alienation was publicised by the domestic press as early as 1980, when the first opinion surveys among the youth were also initiated (Liu 1984). In the following decade, while a minority of educated youth remained committed to seeking new political institutions and new ideas for change (Goldman 2005), the majority of young people abandoned interest in politics and became increasingly individualistic. In fact, alienation from the Party-state was exacerbated by the new social circumstances resulting from market reforms and the opening to the West (and its cultural influences), which exposed youth to new opportunities for individual development and upward mobility and to a diversified socio-cultural life, accelerating the process of diversification of outlooks and values among the younger generation (Xu 2001 and Clark 2012, among others). As Clark put it, “Most young Chinese in the 1980s and subsequent decades were not politically engaged beyond a vague sense of expectation that the state should continue to step back from its earlier intervention in people’s everyday life” (Clark 2012, 195). In this context, traditional channels of social mobility, like the Communist Youth League, encountered difficulties.

At the time when the CYL Eleventh National Congress was held in December 1982, the CYL reached less than 20% of young people in the age bracket for membership (Liu 1984, 991). During the Congress it was pointed out that 26 million of the Youth

League's 48 million members had been recruited in the previous four years. Of these, 2.7 million outstanding members had been admitted into the Communist Party (Communist Youth League Congress 1982). A document released in May 1983 by the Organisation Department of the CYL reported the following data: 46.6 million members, comprising 22.5% (that is one quarter) of the total youth population in the age-bracket (*Zhongyang tuanxiao qingnian gongzuo jiaoyanshi* 1983, 418–420).

However, problems were plaguing youth work. In 1982 CYL cadres complained that recruitment of new members was becoming difficult, and the CYL official organ, the *Zhongguo qingnian bao*, published letters from students objecting to teachers who were trying to force them to join the League (Rosen 1985, 20). In June 1981 the secretary of the CYL, Han Ying, reported that the percentage of League members to the target population had registered a reduction of 3.2% since 1977 and admitted the existence of cases of 'voluntary abandonment' among League members, which meant that many young people had either withdrawn from or renounced their affiliation to the CYL: a phenomenon that would have been unthinkable before (Han 1981, 3–4) and that, according to local reports, continued to plague the CYL in the following years (Gong 1990).

Moreover, there was a problem of organisational weakness at the grassroots that needed to be tackled, as many basic level organisations in rural areas and urban street-level organisations were in a state of laxity and paralysis (Han 1981, 3–4). The problem was particularly serious in rural areas where the introduction of the individual responsibility system stimulated the pursuit of new economic opportunities (Rosen 1985, 9–10). According to a letter sent to the editor of the journal *Jilin qingnian* (Jilin Youth) published in May 1982, "some League organisations do not hold a single meeting or give a single lecture for six months running, to say nothing of giving political and ideological education to League members" (Hong 1985). The fact that League cadres had too many concurrent jobs, that they usually failed to attend to the work of the CYL, and, finally, that some of them were busy with work in the fields were considered important factors in explaining this situation (*ibid.*). The lack of basic-level cadres was also particularly serious. For example, by the autumn of 1983, it was reported that

many units in Gansu province had abolished the office of full-time League cadre while reorganising the administrative structure in the course of setting up townships (to replace people's communes). According to a stipulation of the provincial authorities, the office of township CYL Committee secretary was to be held by the deputy secretary of the Party committee at the same level. It was believed, however, that this stipulation had weakened youth work in rural areas not only because Party deputy secretaries did not have time to attend to the League's daily work but also because of their age being around 40 (Tai 1985). Lastly, limited financial and material resources impacted negatively on CYL activities, which were described as "high in tone but low in effect" (Gong 1990, 44).

In urban areas, CYL membership remained remarkably high, albeit mainly as a result of lax admission standards rather than League organisational vigour. Available official statistics related to the distribution of membership in the early 1980s reveal the highest percentages of CYL members in universities and colleges (ca. 80%) and in government (administrative) organs (65%) (Zhongyang tuanxiao qingnian gongzuo jiaoyanshi 1983, 418; Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian bianjibu 1984, 427, 431). According to the *Yearbook of China's Youth Work*, in 1986 the percentage among university students reached 86.5 percent (Zhongguo qingnian gongzuo nianjian bianji weiyuanhui 1987, 153).

But numbers alone do not explain the whole picture, as they do not necessarily reflect the political prestige of an organisation. In fact, students were among those captive groups that were traditionally more exposed to pressure to join the CYL. As one of my informants – a former member in the late 1980s – recalled, being a member of the CYL meant nothing more than a membership title. While some students found themselves admitted on the strength of teachers' recommendations, the majority merely joined the CYL "because it was the correct thing to do at middle school and while at the university, they maintained their membership for the social functions the League organised, such as outings and dances" (Cherrington 1991, 119). This was, for instance, the case at Peking University where in the late 1980s most students showed themselves to be more interested in social get-togethers than League policies, which were viewed as "stuffy" and 'out of touch with reality'" (ibid).

Surveys conducted in 1986 on the League situation in Beijing universities confirmed that many local branches were poorly organised and that the great majority of students (95%) joined the CYL while at middle school, being generally indifferent toward the CYL as a political organisation. This was also reflected in students' preferences when it came to the activities they most favoured: the majority of League members welcomed recreational and "knowledge" activities, followed by activities pertaining to current affairs. Activities related to politics and ideology had become almost completely unappealing, according to the research (Qiao, Qu, and Zhang 1988, 216-219).

At the same time, the League membership still had some appeal to a minority of students who were looking favourably at the option of joining the Party and pursuing a political career after graduating. By choosing the political track, a young student "could become a division chief in four to five years, taking advantage of forced retirement of older cadres and political apathy of most other people" (Ch'i 1991, 302, footnote 66). But despite attempts to stress the CYL's work of recommending outstanding youth for the CCP (*tuiyou gongzuo* 推優工作), the CYL contribution to the expansion of the CCP youth component remained unsatisfactory (Ch'i 1991, 146-150). The percentage of League members joining the Party in 1982 was indeed a mere 0.9% (ca. 400 thousand League members) (*Zhongyang tuanxiao qingnian gongzuo jiaoyanshi* 1983, 419). The percentage increased to less than 2% in 1985 (*Zhongguo qingnian gongzuo nianjian bianji weiyuanhui* 1987, 211). If a political career through the League was appealing to a small percentage of students motivated by Deng's decision to step up retirement of older cadres and fill state posts with younger and better educated bureaucrats, however, as posts were filled and attitudes towards the CCP further changed (also in the light of alternative routes to success) in the second half of the 1980s, Party membership became almost completely unappealing (Zhao 2001, 111). This is also evidenced by the very low percentage of Party members among the student population at that time, especially after 1984 (Guo 2005, 375-378; Rosen 1990a, 56-67).

The Party-League relationship and the reform spirit

The new reform policies brought about profound social and economic changes and impacted upon intermediary political bodies and their relations with the CCP. The League was indeed called to adjust to the new socio-economic situation in order to increase its attractiveness among young people and win back their support.

Frictions between the CCP and the CYL had emerged since the 1920s but, at different times, the leading role of the Party had always been re-affirmed (Pringsheim 1962; Graziani 2014). Tentative efforts at gaining more autonomy from the Party's organisational control had been undertaken, for instance, in the mid-1950s, ending, however, in abject failure with the above-mentioned purge of Xiang Nan, the head of the Propaganda Department of the League Central Committee, denounced as a "rightist" for having opposed Party leadership over the League and altered the orientation of the communist youth movement (Zheng 2004, 213-214). The subsequent trend was a tightening of the Party leadership over the League during the Great Leap Forward when the "central tasks" of the Party became the unique area of activity for the League (Healy 1982).

The same tension re-emerged in the 1980s. In fact, the post-Mao reform policies opened up new opportunities for the existing mass organisations - what White (1996, 208) defined as belonging to the "caged sector" of social organisations - to broaden their traditional role and gradually move toward a more active and autonomous role in pursuing the interests of their members, albeit within Party-defined boundaries (Saich 1989, 50-53; White 1993, 219-223). A series of proposals concerning mass organisations' autonomy appeared as early as 1980, soon after Deng's 18 August speech initiated the discussion on the need for political reforms, and again in mid-1986 within a more open public discourse on political and institutional reforms. They included the famous 1980 recommendation of Liao Gailong, who called for the Party's separation not only from the government and the economy but also from mass organisations and the media, the proposal of some editors at the forum of 30 chief editors

of provincial newspaper convened by the Propaganda Department from 9 to 15 August 1986 who called for the establishment of independent newspapers by the CYL, Women's Federation, and ACFTU, and, lastly, Zhao Ziyang's recommendation in 1987 that mass organisations carry out their "work independently in light of their own characteristics" (Goldman 1994, 67-68, 171-172, 235). Seen as not representing the true interests of their constituencies and acting merely as the Party's tool, mass organisations were heavily criticised in an article appearing in *Xin GuanCha* (New Observer) which urged them to seek more independence (Li 1988, 14). The CYL was also exposed to these calls as the need to move in new directions so as to win back youth support was widely acknowledged and discussed among the leaders.

In the time frame 1978-1980, especially following Deng's August 18 speech and the September 1980 NPC plenum which advocated major political and economic reforms, the views of reformers held sway, and a debate on the reform of the CYL's work soon emerged, which was also echoed in the national media (Rosen 1985, 14-16). The media reported comments and opinions by reform-minded leaders who had worked in the CYL in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Hu Qili (then Party Secretary and Mayor of Tianjin), who on 4 October talked to the cadres of the Municipal Committee of the CYL, stressing that the CYL "must in the first place represent youth interests, report and make known their voice, strive to defend the legitimate rights of youth, help them resolve concrete problems". According to him, old methods of political indoctrination had to be abandoned in favour of new - open and flexible - approaches that would integrate ideological and political work with the resolution of concrete problems (Sun 1980). In November, Liang Buting, then first secretary of the Party Committee of Qinghai province, stated to journalists that Party committees should give the CYL organisations more autonomy to make their own decisions and represent youth so that youth could trust the organisation and report their opinions and problems. He said, "We should reform the relations between the CYL and the masses. The CYL is both an advanced and a mass organisation. If it stresses its advanced nature, it will separate itself from the masses, and thus have no energy in the society. [...] One of the guiding principles of the youth work should be do not suppress but persuade youth when

dealing with ideological problems; we should ‘guide’, not ‘suffocate’ them. [...] Genuinely paying attention to youth opinions will benefit our reforms” (Zhonggong Qinghai shengwei 1980). His opinion was reported in the Party’s official newspaper.

At that time, the official youth media became a channel through which new ideas and political approaches envisaging a loosening of the Party control over League affairs were raised. As early as July 1980, a young participant in the discussion about the “meaning of life”, launched by the journal *Zhongguo qingnian*, asked that the CYL took more genuinely into consideration the concrete problems of youth, rather than merely serving as a tool of the Party (*Zhongguo qingnian*, 7, 1980, 17). On July 24, an article appearing in the *Zhongguo qingnian bao* entitled “Do you know the characteristics of the 1980s youth?” explored the reform of the work of the CYL as discussed during a meeting held in Sichuan province (Ceng, Zhu, and Zhang 1980). The article expressed the dilemma of adjustment that characterised youth work at that time and revealed the existence of divergences among cadres on how to deal with young people who, due to the impact of the Cultural Revolution, showed signs of being more independent, increasingly disaffected with politics, and mainly concerned with their private lives. How should we understand and carry on the CYL work in the new period? How should we re-engage with youth? This is a significant passage:

“Some comrades say the change that has occurred in young people is not a bad thing but progress. What is needed now is that the work of the League is also reformed according to this change, this progress. The method of ‘cutting the feet to fit the shoes’ which expects young people to adapt while our work remains unchanged, cannot possibly bear any fruit.”

This passage suggested that youth organisations should adopt a flexible approach in re-engaging with youth. The Chinese idiom, *xuezu shilü* 削足適履, refers to the method of “cutting the foot to make it fit into a smaller shoe”, alluding to the method of forcing young people to adapt rather than expecting the CYL to be abreast of the times. This method, it was argued, would no longer bear any fruit. What was needed instead to increase the appeal of the organization and its socialization functions was

that the League should also be reformed in line with the changing needs and expectations of youth. The article goes on to report the point of view of other cadres who raised the question of whether or not the CYL had the courage to adapt to youth, providing some examples: as youth wanted to sing songs that reflected their feelings, wanted to dance, and were more concerned with their private lives, including dating issues, could the CYL organise activities that accommodated these new desires and preferences? “We know what youth wants but we do not dare to do this.” “We talk too much about youth and the importance of catering for their needs but besides words nothing is done” (*ibid.*).

By autumn 1980, reform of the CYL’s work had become the subject of significant and animated debate. In October (5–14) a national meeting on grassroots work was convened in Beijing by the CYL Central Committee, focusing on how to carry out independent activities, represent youth interests, rejuvenate and professionalise cadres, strengthen organisations at the grassroots, and improve the leadership system (Su 1981, 49; see also Jiefang sixiang 1980). On 18 October, an editorial entitled “The only way to attract youth is to represent them” (*daibiao qingnian cai neng xiyin qingnian* 代表青年才能吸引青年) appeared in the *Zhongguo qingnian bao*, praising those branches that had catered to youth needs as a model to be followed, and urging CYL organisations to expand activities for the young in the realms of technical education, culture, and recreation and to contribute to alleviating problems related to employment, education, and marriage (Daibiao qingnian 1980).

Yet it was especially following the third session of the Fifth National People’s Congress that the official youth press stimulated this debate, urging cadres, League members, and young people in general to express their opinions on every aspect of the League’s work. A special column entitled “Forum on CYL work reform” (*Tuan de gongzuo gaige luntan* 團的工作改革論壇) was featured in the *Zhongguo qingnian bao* in the latter part of 1980, while the *Zhongguo qingnian* entitled a similar column “Reform of the CYL is an imperative” (*gongqingtuan de tizhi gaige shizai bixing* 共青團的體制改革勢在必行). Articles published in this section addressed the weaknesses in the CYL’s work, pointing to the Party’s pervasive control or “absolute leadership” (*juedui*

lingdao 絕對領導) over League affairs, to the unsuitability of many cadres in terms of age, knowledge, or professional training, as well as to the bureaucratic tendencies and the attitude of many cadres of being concerned about higher levels rather than lower levels and thus unable to transform their concern for youth into concrete actions. At the same time, they called for “representation of youth interests” (*qingnian liyi de dai-biao* 青年利益的代表) and the right to “independent activities” (*duli huodong quan* 獨立活動權) in line with the principle of organisational independence once affirmed in the CCP Central Committee Resolution on the establishment of the CYL adopted in 1949 (see, for instance, Yue 1980). Gao Delin, vice-secretary of the CYL committee of Guiyang city, used these words, stressing the departure from past practices that the CYL reform implied: “For many years we have only talked about the need for the CYL to perform well the role of Party assistant, while no words have been spoken about representing youth interests.” Then, he wrote that many cadres did not dare to express the voices of youth as they feared being criticised for “claiming independence from the CCP” (Gao 1980). A young member from the Beijing College of Economics (Beijing Jingji Xueyuan) even proposed to reform the electoral system so as to allow League members to choose their candidates freely, abandoning the practice of only nominating candidates approved by Party committees (Liu 1980).

The titles of the articles appearing in this column - i.e. “We should give the CYL the power to make its own decisions”, “The safeguarding of youth interests should be added to the CYL Constitution”, “The electoral system of the CYL congresses should be reformed”, “What kind of leadership should the CCP exert over the CYL?” - indicated that the main area of discussion was the redefinition of the CYL-CCP relationship and the expansion of the League’s autonomy and social functions (see also the articles appearing on December 2 in the *Zhongguo qingnian bao*, for instance Qiu 1980).

In the same period, reform of the CYL’s work had been subject of animated and lively discussions also within the Central League School (Zhongyang Tuanxiao), where ideas such as “the League has already lost the value of its existence” (*gongqingtuan yijing sangshi cunzai de jiazhi* 共青團已經喪失存在的價值), “it should be reformed into a

youth federation” (*gaige chengwei qingnian lianhehui* 改革成為青年聯合會), “the appeal of the CYL lies in providing welfare/material benefits to youth” (*gongqingtuan de xiyinli zaiyu wei qingnian mou fuli* 共青團的吸引力在於為青年個福利), or even “the CYL should be turned into a people-run or non-official organisation” (*yao shi gongqingtuan bianchengwei minban zuzhi* 要使共青團變成為民辦組織) were raised by members (Wu 1981, 9).

A few months later, the reform of the CYL’s work was taken off the agenda (Rosen 1985, 16–17). Wu Mu, then vice-president of the CYL Central School, in a speech delivered at the “Symposium on the youth issue” held at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, stated that, like the reform of the leadership system of the Party and the State, which was aimed at strengthening and improving the leadership structure, the reform of the CYL’s work was aimed at increasing its appeal among the young and at improving the style of work of the cadres, rather than at weakening the leadership of the CCP (Wu 1981, 9). As early as January 1980, in his report to the Central Committee, Han Ying had in fact made clear that in the reform of the CYL, the question of carrying on its work independently according to the specific characteristics of youth was something fundamentally different from “asserting its independence” (*nao duli-xing* 鬧獨立性) from the Party (Han 1980, 17).

Early 1981 was indeed a time of growing ideological concerns and prevailing conservative forces that saw in China a renewed emphasis on ideological control, moral education, and “spiritual civilisation”, with mass campaigns reviving Lei Feng and promoting socialist ethics and behaviour in order to counter growing materialism and individualism (Hooper 1985, 168–170). As a result of the Campaign against Spiritual Pollution, youth work turned to concentrating on anachronistic ideological appeals in an effort to re-educate China’s youth in socialist values (Rosen 1985, 16–19). This trend would temporarily re-emerge with subsequent campaigns launched by conservatives (such as the 1983 campaign against “spiritual pollution”).

Despite the alternations between periods of ideological tightening and periods of political relaxation (the so-called *fang-shou* cycle resulting from policy divergences – also due to generational transition – within the Chinese political leadership at that time)

and the continuing importance of ideological work in the form of socialist morality, in the 1980s reformist leaders nonetheless remained committed to creating a milder environment for youth and a relaxed atmosphere in ideological work, which should be concerned with real stories and problems faced by youth rather than Communist principles (see, for example, the “Shekou Storm” controversy in Xu 1995). The idea of “being at the service of young people” (*wei qingnian fuwu* 為青年服務) thus continued to receive particular attention, and in 1988, as will be shown in the following paragraph, the safeguarding of youth interests eventually came to be officially recognised as one of the main social functions of the CYL (Luo 1996, 284–286; Ding 1999, 119–120).

In point of fact, the authorities in the 1980s called for an expansion of the CYL’s social functions and moderation of its bureaucratic outlook, emphasising the need for a more genuine engagement with the needs and demands coming from its constituency. While this may have recalled the moderate policies of the 1950s, now in the new historical context and a depoliticised social atmosphere the emphasis on the social function was seen among reformers as the only way to prevent the CYL from becoming completely irrelevant in the eyes of youth. As such, addressing and alleviating problems related to employment, education, and marriage and providing recreational facilities became important aspects that could contribute to forge a new image for the CYL, making it possible for the organisation to present a new appeal and win back a young generation that showed itself to be no longer interested in official politics or CCP membership (Ch’i 1991, 149–150; Gold 1991; see also the work report delivered by Wang Zhaoguo at the CYL Eleventh National Congress in Gongqingtuan zhongyang bangongting 2001, 65). For instance, League organisations were called upon to show concern for the well-being of youth, coordinating with relevant departments by devising ways to help young people awaiting employment to start small businesses and to provide matchmaking services in the realm of courtship and marriage. By the end of 1980 marriage introduction bureaus (*hunyin jieshaosuo* 婚姻介紹所) had been set up in several cities (Su 1981, 50), while the youth press praised League cadres who acted as go-between for young people, making tireless efforts to pair people up (Pei 1980; Ma 1980). The issue

of helping young people find a mate was given particular importance at that time, especially because of the increasing number of people in their late 20s and early 30s who were not yet married (a problem mainly resulting from the experience of the “educated youth” during the Cultural Revolution, which induced them to postpone marriage in order to secure a return to the cities in the late 1970s). Regarded as a new type of political work, matchmaking was endorsed by the highest echelons of officialdom, but the institutions devoted to providing State-sponsored matchmaking services were run not only by the CYL but also by the Labour Unions and the Women’s Federation. This mattered in terms of actual “ownership” of these activities, which gradually expanded from mere introductions to organising social events and cultural activities such as day trips, parties, cultural groups, etc. (Honig and Hershatter 1988, 82–87). The extent to which these marriage introduction bureaus were efficacious is difficult to assess. We know for instance that, between October 1980 and October 1981, more than 12,000 young men and women registered at six marriage introduction bureaus in Beijing. Of these, more than 600 couples were dating and 150 had already married. However, we also know that in 1984 bureaus had handled 120,000 registrations with a success rate (marriage rate) of only about 10 percent. Moreover, young people’s perceptions of official bureaus were not so positive; it has been documented that in Shanghai, for example, a hundred young people began to organise what they called “spontaneous marriage introduction bureaus” in local parks, saying that they had taken social activities to the streets. Instead of State-sponsored matchmaking they challenged the local authorities by choosing informal ways to meet (*ibid.*, 86–87).

The influence of the “Three Hu” over youth affairs and the 1988 plan for institutional reform of the CYL

The new pragmatic approach toward official youth work centred on the idea that young people had to be observed so as to understand their genuine needs and aspirations and emphasised the principle of “serving young people”, instead of considering

them merely as “docile tools” (*xunfu gongju* 驯服工具). Consultation rather than imposition seemed to gain prominence (Pang 1988, 7–8; Ding 1999, 118). This change reflected the Communist leaders’ acknowledgement that the current young generation, being profoundly affected by the experience of the Cultural Revolution, should be “re-engaged” and “guided” by means of new models and approaches. In the words of Wang Zhaoguo, who served as first secretary of the CYL from 1982 to 1984:

“This generation of youth was brought up during the ten years of internal disorder. They do not readily believe or follow blindly. They are not satisfied with prefabricated conclusions and truths. Yet they are ready to accept truth only after their own empirical study, personal experience, and analysis” (Gongqing-tuan zhongyang bangongting 2001, 79).

These ideas were closely associated with Hu Yaobang, who had devoted most of his time to the youth movement in the past, and his associates who came to be known as the “three Hu” (Hu Yaobang, Hu Qili, and Hu Jintao), embracing the definition of the CYL as a reform-minded group and symbol of reformism in the 1980s (Ding 2005, 107–162). As Secretary General of the Party, Hu Yaobang exerted a strong influence over CYL affairs, in terms of both personnel change and policy choices. His report to the XII Congress of the CCP acknowledged that youth work lagged behind the actual needs and instructed every League and Party organizations to get close to youth (Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi 1986: vol. 1, 54). In the following years, he continued to be concerned about reforming the CYL’s work, emphasising professionalism, intellectual achievements and calling for the adaptation of ideo-political work and broadening of youth activities, while urging cadres to go deep into the grassroots and develop their role as models in serving society and the needs of modernisation at the same time (see also Yang 1988 on Hu Yaobang’s approach). According to Ding Wang, in his view “the CYL should not sit and pontificate, should not educate by assuming a tone of superiority without taking action” (Ding 2005, 126). In the same period (1982–1987), the CCP leader Hu Qili, who also had a past in the youth movement, assisted him in supervising League affairs, exhorting the CYL to overcome the trend of acting more as an administrative department than as an organisation genuinely

committed to serving youth and their needs, while Hu Jintao was quickly promoted to the highest positions in the CYL Secretariat (1982–1985) – assuming the post of First Secretary in 1984–1985 – to further promote the CYL’s self-reform (ibid, 134–136, 142–147).

Under the influence of the “three Hu” the organization undertook a series of reform initiatives that made possible the broadening of youth programmes and envisaged a “moderate” assertion of youth interests. These attempts would result in 1988’s “Tentative plan for the institutional reform of the CYL”, formally approved in May at the Twelfth Congress of the CYL, emphasising the social representative functions of the League and its role in social consultation and dialogue. Development of this document started in 1987 when a small group (*gaige yantao xiaozu* 改革研討小組) was formed under the leadership of the CYL Secretariat with the aim of formulating a “preliminary plan on the reform of youth work and the CYL” to be submitted to the CCP Central Committee (Luo 1996, 263–266; Zheng 2004, 214–216). It was following the Thirteenth Congress of the CCP (1987), when Zhao Ziyang acknowledged that China was a pluralistic society and suggested that mass organisations carry out their “work independently” (Goldman 1994, 234–235), that the reform of the League formally entered the political agenda of the CYL Central Committee. As such, at the CYL Congress in 1988, in his congratulatory speech entitled “The hope is in youth” (*Xiwang zai qingnian* 希望在青年), Hu Qili called on youth cadres to “bring forward a reform of the CYL enabling it to participate in social consultation dialogue, democratic management, and supervision”, “to overcome the League tendency of acting as an administrative department” and “to better represent and defend the personal interests and legitimate rights of youth” (Gongqingtuan zhongyang bangongting 2001, 117). The document adopted in 1988 explained that the main purpose of reform was to provide the CYL with a clearly defined social function and legal status, an improved democratic life, vital grassroots organisations, and an effective capacity to represent youth interests (see the “Circular on the basic tentative plan on the reform of the CYL system” in Gongqingtuan zhongyang yanjiushi 1991, 407; the Plan is available at pp. 408–416). According to Li Yan, for the first time the representation and safeguarding of youth

interests was officially established as one of the main social functions of the CYL (quoted in Zhang Hua 2013, 17). These developments reflected attempts at making the CYL more relevant by opening up spaces for consultation and opportunities for a more genuine bottom-up representation of youth views and demands. At the same time, the internal debate unfolding in the latter part of 1988 on how to promote the League structural reforms also suggests the existence of different opinions (e.g. regarding the relationship between its “advanced” and “mass” nature) as well as concerns and uncertainties among cadres about how to proceed (Li 1989).

The call for a closer relation with youth may have impacted on the ground on the eve of the Tiananmen protests, intertwining with broader public discussions on political reforms and unintentionally “encouraging” the CYL organisations’ siding with students. In fact, we know that during the 1989 student movement, local units on campus were involved in rebellious politics and the journal *Zhongguo qingnian* established contacts with editors of several unofficial presses that were publishing accounts by people supportive of the movement (Zhao 2001, 172; Ding 1994, 99). Moreover, the League published a declaration of sympathy for the student movement: the “Urgent letter of appeal” (*jǐnjǐ hūyùshū* 緊急呼籲書) appearing on 18 May 1989 in the CYL mouthpiece, the *Zhongguo qingnian bao*. The declaration urged every walk of society to proceed from humanitarianism and give first aid to the students on hunger strike, safeguarding their health and safety. At the same time, it also called for the problems to be solved through dialogue and discussions, in line with the stance of Zhao Ziyang (quoted in Li 2007, 4 and Ding 2005, 138).

Immediately after the tragic events of Tiananmen, while many League cadres and secretaries were removed from their positions as punishment for the CYL’s actions, the Party called for a halt to the CYL reform proposal (Li 2007; Ding 2005, 130; Doyon 2020, 783–784). The Tiananmen crisis led to a strengthening of ideological education among youth and Party control over mass organisations. At a meeting on CYL ideological work held in November 1989, the League secretary Liu Yandong delivered a report which later appeared in the national media, stressing the fundamental role of ideological and political education (Liu 1989). Soon afterwards (in December 1989),

the CCP Central Committee issued a “Circular on strengthening and improving the CCP leadership over the work of the Labour Unions, the CYL, and the Women’s Federation” that reaffirmed the role of the ACFTU, the CYL, and the ACWF as mass organisations under the leadership of the CCP and defined them as “social pillars of the State’s political power” (Gongqingtuan zhongyang bangongting 2001, 11–19). In July 1990, at a conference convened by the research office of the CYL Central Committee, Liu Yandong clarified that reform of the League must be advantageous to the enhancement of the Party leadership over the CYL and should not weaken the role of the Party; in fact it should integrate politics with the social function and the characteristics of the members, with the function of assistant to the Party being the core (Guo 1992, 300–301). Not by chance, one of the main critiques that the League faced after the Tiananmen crackdown was having neglected ideological work and the “advanced” character of the League by “catering to the whims of the less progressive youth” and accommodating “unhealthy” liberal ideas (Rosen 1992, 182–183; Gong 1990).

Conclusion

After the Tiananmen protests movement, the space for manoeuvre was drastically reduced, as the role of the Party in the direction of Youth League affairs was strengthened, and ideological education and political control of Chinese youth were prioritised in line with the need for “maintaining stability”. Even though the CYL has been expanding its functions since 1993 and the focus of its work has been gradually shifting toward social welfare activities, this shift has been primarily understood as a way to assist the CCP in managing an increasingly complex society, encouraging young people’s public participation along officially-sanctioned lines, and advancing the Party/state presence at the grassroots (Lu 2007, 117–123). In the early 2000s, under Hu Jintao, Chinese leaders stepped up attempts at increasing the CYL’s “relevance” to its constituency by calling again for a more responsive organisation able to engage better with the views and problems of youth. Yet these efforts have largely failed: under Xi Jinping the CYL has been attacked and we have seen a renewed emphasis on Party

leadership over the League as part of the regime's broader attempts to intensify ideological and political indoctrination and bring the Party back to the centre of everything (Tsimonis 2021; Doyon 2019). These developments have occurred at a time when youth is also featuring prominently in the "China dream of national rejuvenation" narrative as loyal, patriotic, and subject to the leadership of the CCP.

This paper has shown that the question of how to define an acceptable framework for CYL autonomy and how to limit the role of the Party so as to facilitate a more genuine engagement with young people in an acceptable way has been historically central for the League. Indeed, it goes back at least to the early reform era when the direction and patterns of "youth work" emerged as a key topic of domestic debate as part of both a response to pressures from below, and a shift in the mood at the higher levels that coincided with former CYL cadres, who had suffered during the Cultural Revolution, acquiring increased influence at the top of the political system. Reform-minded leaders promoted ideas and approaches that envisaged a redefinition of youth-CCP-CYL relations and a new position for the League vis-à-vis Chinese youth. A loosening of Party control was indeed considered essential to enliven the activities of local organisations, allowing for more responsive patterns of work and for a more meaningful participation in policy process.

These debates and initiatives emerged out of the need to maintain the CYL as a relevant organisation at the frontline of state-society relations and were promoted especially at a time when a more liberal political atmosphere prevailed. While reflecting a new strategy for cultivating legitimacy for the Party among the youth in times of profound social and cultural change, they also mirror the structural paradox of reforming an institution heavily embedded in the political and bureaucratic system, highlighting the intrinsic contradiction between the CYL's political identity as "assistant to the Party" and its identity as an agency catering for the needs of young people (or, to express it differently, between its advanced and mass character) that could not be solved except by radically changing the nature of the organisation and its relationship with the Party.

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