

# **Informal Ties Shape Regime Resilience**

## **Evidence from the CCP Elites(1921-1989)\***

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### **Abstract**

A Long tradition in political sciences scholarship has established that sectarianism undermine internal unity of a political system. I argue that informal ties will be strengthened when elites has belonged to disparate "ShanTou", known as mountain stronghold mentality, over an extended period. which will increase the costs of political contention and promotes negotiations among different "ShanTou". Consequently, informal connections tends to maintain a relatively low level of polarization among political elites. I evaluate this argument by constructing an elite network based on the chronicles of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) political elites. Some descriptive statistics and case analyses demonstrate that a political elite in China's prolonged civil war period once belonged to different "ShanTou". From the current perspective, this study is incomplete. However, I feel this direction may have a lot of potential as it captures daily interactions of important individuals, which constructs a social network that captures the temporal evolution which traditional social network analysis struggles to describe.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Factional politics existed even before the formation of the state and have always demonstrated resilience. It seems self-evident that people with common bloodlines, geographic proximity, and life backgrounds, who share similar ideological preferences, will naturally band together to avoid the costs of acting alone and to enhance the welfare of the entire group through shared information.

However, throughout the history of political development, informal connections between elites have been complex and extensive, and most importantly, their preferences have continuously evolved over time. This article analyzes the political consequences of multiple factional identities among political elites. Specifically, it argues that political elites with multiple factional identities play a role in maintaining regime stability through two main mechanisms. The first mechanism emphasizes **the cost of conflict**. Political elites with multiple factional identities are less likely to fail in political struggles because their diverse affiliations provide stronger endorsements for their political survival and more resources to counterattack when faced with opposition. The second mechanism emphasizes **factional communication**. Political elites with multiple factional identities can serve as 'go-betweens' facilitating communication and dialogue between different factions. In Chinese politics, there is a specific term for this phenomenon: 'Chuanlian'. 'Chuanlian' enhances information exchange between factions, builds stronger mutual trust, reduces polarization, and prevents factional conflicts from escalating.

In the history of the CCP, data on elite social networks is often difficult to obtain. This is due not only to the limited availability of disclosed historical materials but also to the extensive censorship and redaction that these materials, especially those published officially by the CCP, often undergo. Furthermore, acquiring social network data that evolves continuously over time is even more challenging. Most elite networks constructed by scholars in the past are based on a single time snapshot, which does not support dynamic social network analysis.

However, a special type of publication primarily produced by the Chinese government, known as "chronicles", offers new possibilities for analyzing elite social networks. Specifically, this genre records the social interactions of elites in a chronological format, providing a timestamp for each social record. This allows us to analyze the day-to-day changes in elite social networks. Thus, the political elites of the Chinese Communist Party represent a meaningful yet under-explored case, distinct from those in the United States and Europe.

Constructing elite social networks over several decades is a formidable challenge. Using

data from chronicles, I have coded the social behaviors of elites recorded in these documents. I developed two indices to measure the degree of centralization within the elite network and the intensity of factional divisions within the network. Preliminary statistical results suggest that a layered political elite network may help reconcile factional conflicts and maintain internal cohesion within the elite group.

Many existing studies emphasize the destabilizing effects of factions on regime stability. However, from my perspective, examining from a temporal evolution scale, the fact that a political elite has belonged to different factions over time is actually a positive indicator for regime stability. This paper is the first to measure elite networks on a continuous time scale and to describe the role of elite factions in promoting regime stability, providing quantitative evidence to support these findings. Overall, this paper enriches the existing literature that discusses the impact of informal connections on formal institutions, linking these informal connections to regime stability.

## 2 CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: “SHANTOU”

The informal, personalized relations, variously called by names such as factions, cliques, or patronage networks, are quite common in dominant parties in both democratic and authoritarian settings.(Geddes, 2023; Grindle, 1977; Moses, 1992; Nathan, 2017) Almost all social science researchers agree that power is not merely an attribute of individuals, but is also based on a relational dynamic.(Dahl, 2007; Lasswell, Kaplan and Brunner, 2013) Social scientist and historian have long emphasized the influence of social networks(a.k.a. informal ties) on elite power. Elites can influence important political economic outcomes via their personal networks. A strong elite network often compensates for fragile institutions. It must be acknowledged that the informal power of politicians often complements their formal political power. The extent of a politician’s real political power depends heavily on the breadth and depth of his or her informal power base.(Dittmer, 1978)This is because informal institutions often build deeper trust between superiors and subordinates through the regular exchange of benefits and professional connections, thereby offsetting the agency costs generated by hierarchical systems.(Rudolph and Rudolph, 1979; Scott, 1972)

In the history of the Chinese Communist Party, the issue of cadres has been a primary focus. The Organization Department of the CCP has long been a core department due to its handling of cadre personnel matters. However, the cadre team of the Chinese Communist Party has never been a homogeneous entity. Each level of the Party organization is influenced by the culture, history,

and traditions of its respective region.(Xi-rui, 2021) During the revolutionary war from 1927 to 1949, the Chinese Communist Party's base areas were spread across the country, dispersed and lacking in communication. This resulted in the independent development of various base areas and military forces. This also means that as the armies moved around, cadres formed different political collectives, known as "ShanTou". Some of the more well-known "ShanTou" include the so-called "Soviet Area Party" () and "White Area Party" (); the "Three Main Field Armies" () and the "Four Major Field Armies" (). Veteran cadres of the CCP often refer to their origins, saying things like "So-and-so is a seasoned cadre from the Taihang Mountains." Such statements are very common among the veteran cadres of the CCP.(Nuo, 2023)

Mao Zedong's assessment of "ShanTou" was to "acknowledge, accommodate, and eliminate." This means that even the Party's highest leaders had to recognize the influence of these factions and view them as a potential force to change the political structure.(Xiaoyun, 2018; ?; ?)In the cadre community of the CCP, informal political relationships consist of various interactions and networks among cadres, forming a web of political dynamics. These informal relationships and networks play crucial roles in struggles, conflicts, or disputes that unfold due to significant policy issues or personnel changes. At times, they even act as the core of "political action groups." Metaphorically speaking, while the hierarchical pyramid represents formal politics, the spider web symbolizes informal politics, which complements and supplements the former.(Dang, 1994; Nathan, 2017; Shih, 2022)

In summary, the informal networks among the political elite of the Chinese Communist Party are a fascinating research topic. However, currently, there is limited use of quantitative methods in academia to describe the connections among these elites. In the field of international relations, many scholars use big data from international interactions (such as the GDELT database) to construct databases of interstate relations. They represent countries as nodes in a social network, where the degree of nodes reflects a country's power, and the centrality of nodes indicates a country's importance and centrality on the international stage.(Chong, 2012; Hang and Boxuan, 2021; Zhipei and Na, 2019) Currently, most scholars often identify networks among elites based on kinship, geographical proximity, or marital connections. While this approach is undoubtedly meaningful, it does not allow for the analysis of temporal changes in elite networks from an evolutionary perspective.(Jiang and Zhang, 2020)

## 3 DATA AND METHODS

### 3.1 Data

Which political elites will appear in the elite network of this study? We have collected the lists of the Central Committee members of the Chinese Communist Party from the Fifth to the Tenth Central Committees. The Fifth Central Committee members were elected in May 1927, and the Tenth Central Committee members were elected in August 1973. This period fully encompasses the time from the CCP’s armed struggle to the end of the Mao era. After deduplication, we collected a list of 309 Central Committee members. They are considered the most powerful political elites within the Chinese Communist Party during this period.

Our original dataset is comprised of network records extracted from the chronicles (“Nianpu” in Chinese) of top leaders, which were compiled by party historians for deceased leaders based upon the activities that had been recorded by their secretaries. These chronicles were compiled by the historical compilation department within the Chinese Communist Party, the Central Committee’s Party Literature Research Office. This ensures, to some extent, the completeness and comprehensiveness of the disclosed information.<sup>1</sup>

The text format of chronicles is typically fixed and consists of two parts. The first part is a timestamp in the format “YYYY-MM-DD,” which, in most cases, records changes down to the exact day. The second part documents the social interactions of the elites, such as directives, investigations, attending meetings, speeches, and communications with others, etc. We have collected 108,341 pieces of social interaction data involving political elites, spanning from 1892 to 2005.

### 3.2 Methods

According to the general methods of social network analysis, we treat political elites as nodes and their social interactions as edges in the network.<sup>2</sup> To map the chronicle texts into relationships of edges and nodes in the social network, we adopt a greedy strategy. Specifically, we establish an edge between **each pair of names** mentioned within a timestamp text, assuming equal-weight

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<sup>1</sup>It is worth noting that Chronicles, similar to diaries(QiJuZhu), are a type of annalistic historical record. Interestingly, Chinese historians seem to have a tradition of recording the social interactions in the daily lives of political elites.

<sup>2</sup>See more about the application of adjacency matrices in SNA in (Almquist and Butts, 2013, 2014; Dressel and Inoue, 2018; Keller, 2016)

connections between any two political elites mentioned in the text, as shown in fig1 and fig2. Subsequently, we employed human coders to reduce the redundant social connections caused by the greedy strategy. We used an adjacency matrix to represent and store an undirected, unweighted social network of interactions between elites.

716	1981年2月
2月 25日	将林铁 <sup>(1)</sup> 关于中共河北省委领导班子调整的建议的来信，批送胡耀邦考虑。
2月 27日	上午，会见委内瑞拉外交部部长何塞·阿尔维托·桑布拉诺·贝拉斯科博士及其一行。指出：虽然中国与委内瑞拉相距很远，但两国关系一直很好，我们的共同点很多，对一些重大国际政治问题的看法是一致的。我们都反对霸权主义，努力争取一个和平的国际环境，都属于第三世界。为了抵制霸权主义，中委两国需要加强团结，共同努力。又指出：现在是多事的时代，我们友好国家领导人多接触，经常交换意见，对付当前严峻局势很有益处。在谈到中苏关系时指出：现在不存在中国和苏联合作的问题。中国是从全球战略高度考虑中苏关系的，不只是从苏联在中苏边界驻军一百万这个因素考虑中苏关系。我们中断中苏谈判，就是因为苏联出兵阿富汗。
2月 28日	上午，在住地同李先念、胡耀邦、赵紫阳、姚依林谈话。
3月 1日	阅新华社记者反映中共浙江省委领导人对包产到户问题“讲了许多不恰当的话，做了不少错事”的来信，作出批示：“请书记处了解一下浙江的情况。”
3月 2日	上午，在住地同宋任穷谈话。
(1) 林铁，曾任中共中央委员、中共河北省委第一书记、中共中央华北局第三书记，当时任全国人大常委会委员。	

Figure 1: Deng Xiaoping Chronicle for Feb 1981

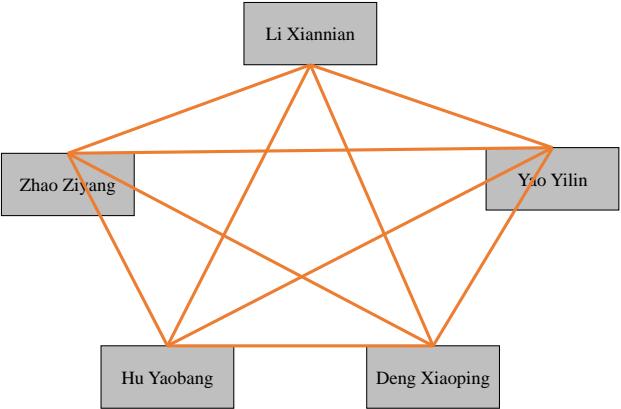


Figure 2: Network derived from the chronicle texts

To depict an evolving social network among elites over time, we constructed a cumulative adjacency matrix, as shown in fig3. In other words, we constructed an adjacency matrix based on each timestamp, which facilitated the analysis of the evolving social network over time.

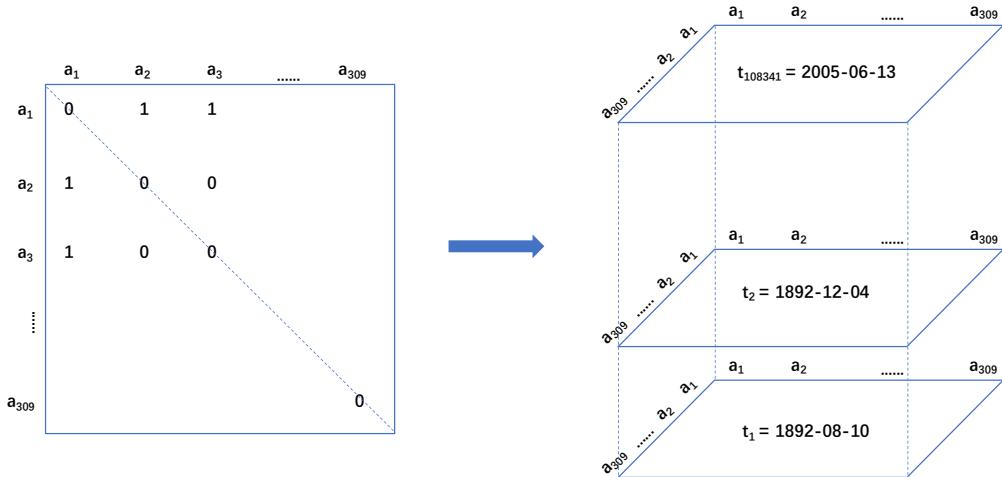
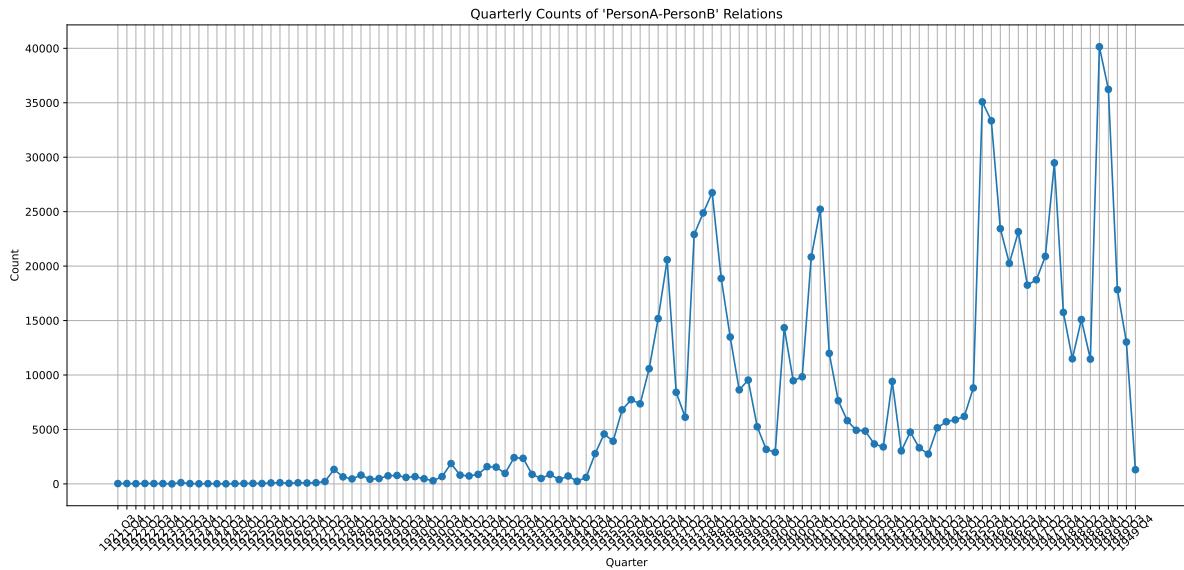


Figure 3: data format

## 4 RESULT

### 4.1 Descriptive statistics for elite networks

The social density of political elites shows significant changes over time. Specifically, as illustrated in Fig4, the line chart exhibits two peaks in 1937 and 1941. During the second phase of the Chinese Civil War, the social density of elites remained at a relatively high level. The year 1937 marks the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and around 1941 corresponds to the Yan'an Rectification Movement and the Hundred Regiments Offensive(BaituanDazhan). This suggests that large-scale wars and internal political struggles increased the social density of elites.

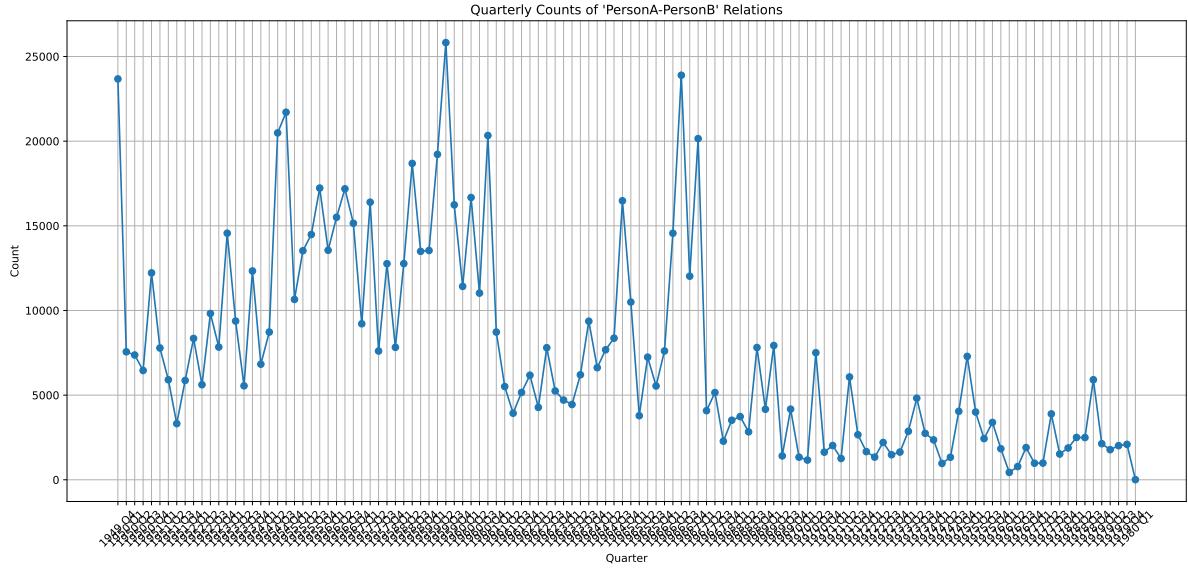


**Figure 4:** The sum of the degrees of all nodes in the elite network (on a quarterly basis): 1921-1949

### 4.2 Gini-Power Coefficient: to measure unequal distribution of power

The Gini coefficient is commonly used to measure the degree of inequality in income distribution among residents. The closer the Gini coefficient is to 1, the more it indicates that a small number of people possess the majority of wealth, meaning income distribution is more unequal. Conversely, the closer the Gini coefficient is to 0, the more it indicates that income distribution is more equal. We can transfer this index of measuring income inequality to the measurement of power inequality.<sup>3</sup> In an elite network, each node represents a different elite, and each node has a different degree,

<sup>3</sup>In other words, this method measures the degree of centralization within a regime.



**Figure 5:** The sum of the degrees of all nodes in the elite network (on a quarterly basis): 1921-1980

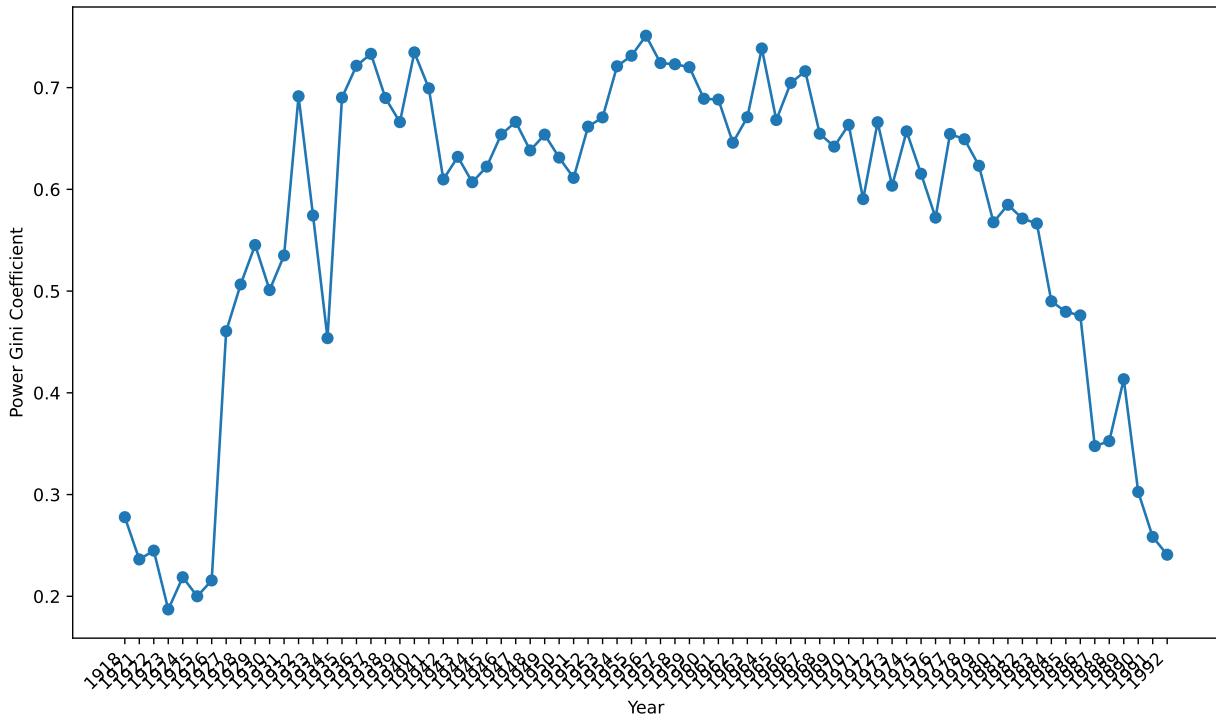
i.e., the sum of all edges connected to this node. We use the degree of an elite node to measure the extent of its informal power.<sup>4</sup>

Fig6 shows the variation of the Gini power coefficient over the years, and this graph illustrates the level of inequality in power distribution for each year. From the graph, we observe that 1927 marked a significant spike in the concentration of power. This sharp increase coincided with the Chinese Communist Party's decision to initiate armed struggle (the Nanchang Uprising), signifying a substantial centralization of power among the Party's political elite. It's worth noting that in 1934, during a period of intense political struggle within the Chinese Communist Party, the level of internal centralization notably decreased. The subsequent Yan'an Rectification Movement then marked the first peak in internal centralization.

Throughout the First Chinese Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the Second Chinese Civil War, the Chinese Communist Party consistently upheld a high level of centralized power. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, The second peak of internal centralization within the Party occurred around 1956, as the First Five-Year Plan achieved success. Mao Zedong's growing prominence in the international communist movement during this time contributed to an increase in the Party's centralization. The decline occurred around 1958, indicating the policy failures of the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent Lushan Conference,

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<sup>4</sup>In social network analysis, the degree of a node is used to measure the extent of informal power. For more discussion on this method, see:



**Figure 6:** The sum of the degrees of all nodes in the elite network (on a quarterly basis): 1921-1980

which reduced the control exerted by the Party’s top leader—Mao Zedong.

The onset of the Cultural Revolution marked the third peak in the Party’s internal centralization, and this trend hit a low point in 1976 when Mao Zedong, Zhu De, and Zhou Enlai — three prominent political figures of the Party — passed away, leading to a brief power vacuum and a decrease in centralization. During Deng Xiaoping’s era, except for 1989, the overall trend in centralization of power showed a decline.

The data trend suggests that prolonged military conflicts have consistently shaped a higher level of centralization. The stability of the highest leader’s position within the party and the intensity of internal party struggles also show a certain correlation with the degree of centralization within the party.

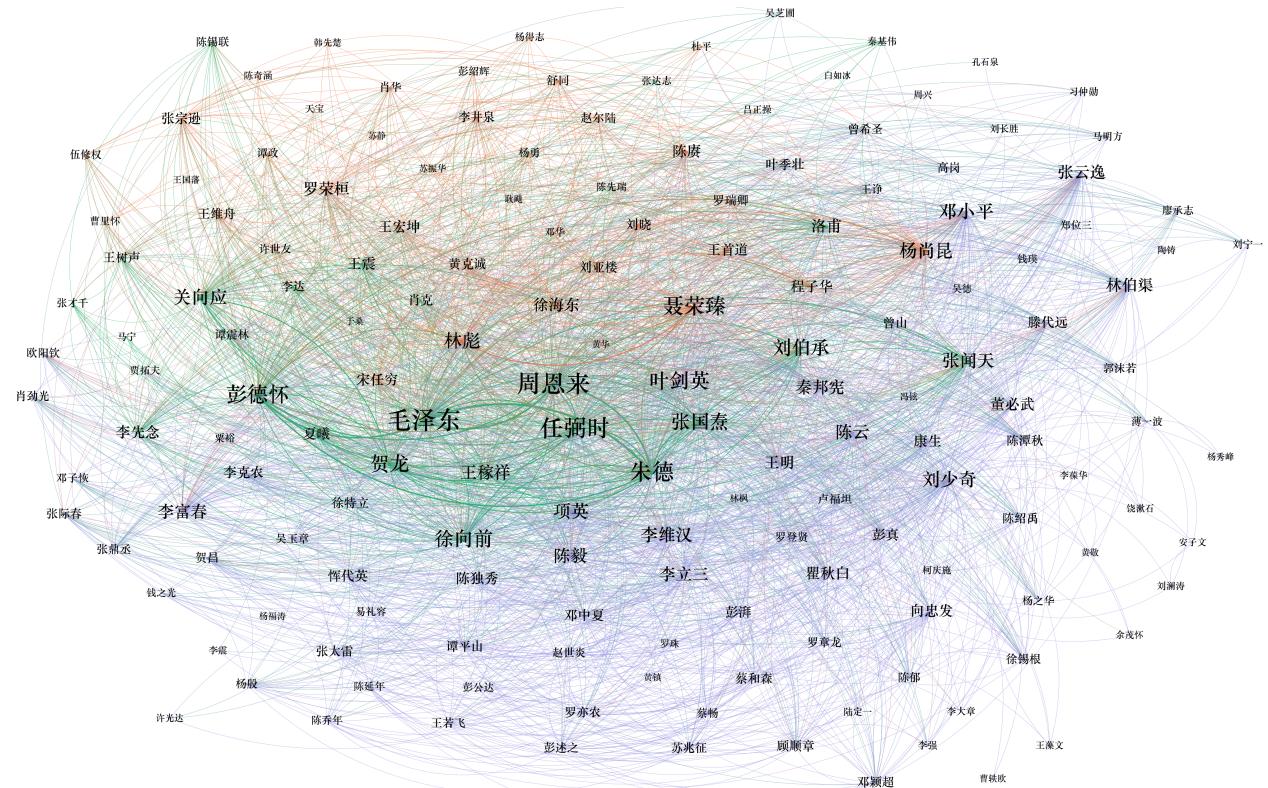
### 4.3 Informal ties between CCP Elites

Fig 7, based on cumulative data from 1892 to 1937, shows the factional landscape of CCP political elites.<sup>5</sup> During this period, the elites experienced the prolonged Chinese Civil War between the

<sup>5</sup>The size of the node labels indicates the degree of each node, while the color of the node labels signifies the faction affiliation. The following similar images follow the same pattern.

Nationalists and the Communists, as well as the Long March—a strategic retreat. Mao Zedong's position within the party was initially established but still not yet stable.

During this period, the primary basis for factional divisions was the military. Mao Zedong, Ren Bishi, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and others are shown in green; they formed the First Red Army faction. Lin Biao, Luo Ruiqing, Liu Yalou, and others are shown in orange; they represent the Fourth Red Army faction. The purple section represents the 'White Area' faction led by Liu Shaoqi and Chen Yun.<sup>6</sup>

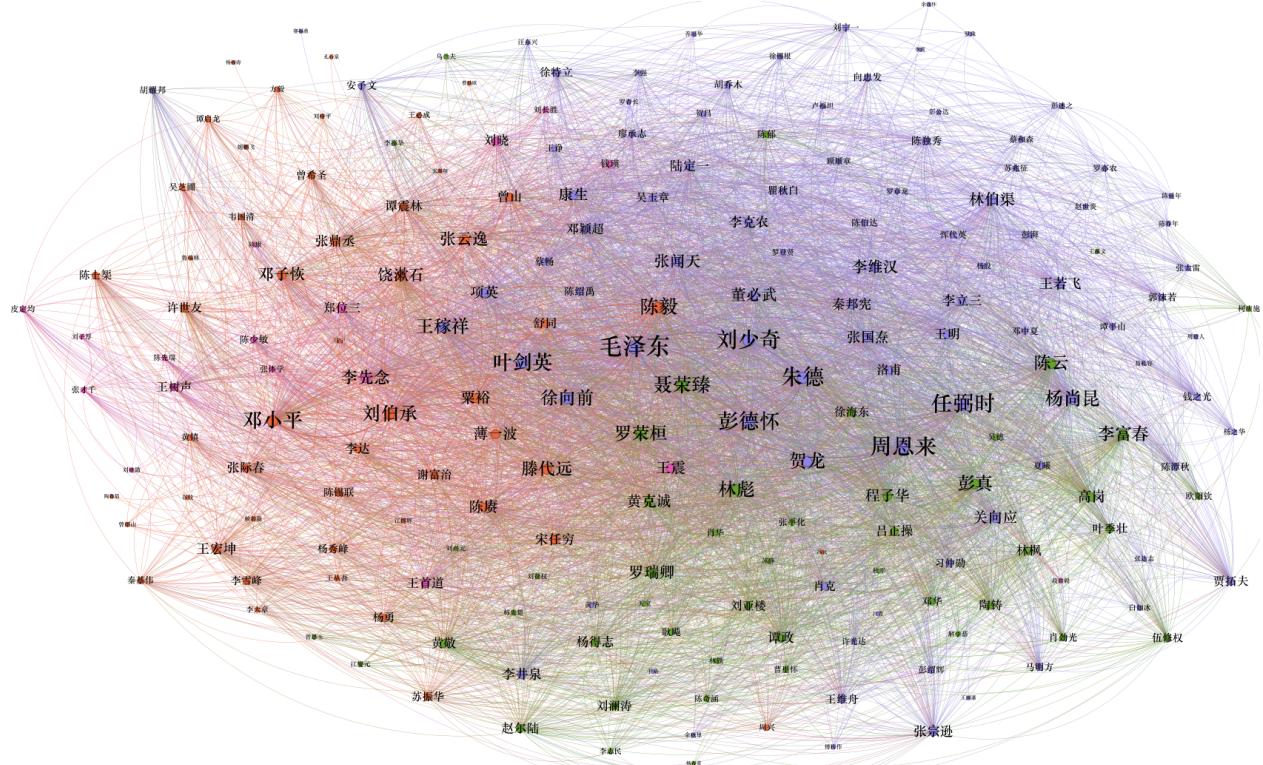


**Figure 7:** Elite Fractions: 1892-1937

Fig8, based on cumulative data from 1892 to 1949, shows the factional landscape of CCP political elites. Following the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Second Chinese Civil War, the factional structure of the Chinese Communist Party changed significantly, forming 'mountaintops' dominated by various field armies. The purple section represents the Central Military Commission, led by Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, and Peng Dehuai. The orange section represents the East China Field Army, led by Liu Bocheng, Deng Xiaoping, Su Yu, and Chen Yi. The green section represents the Fourth Field Army, led by Lin Biao, Luo Ruiqing, and Cheng Zihua.

<sup>6</sup>'White Area' was the term used by the Chinese Communist Party during the Chinese Civil War to refer to regions controlled by the Kuomintang.

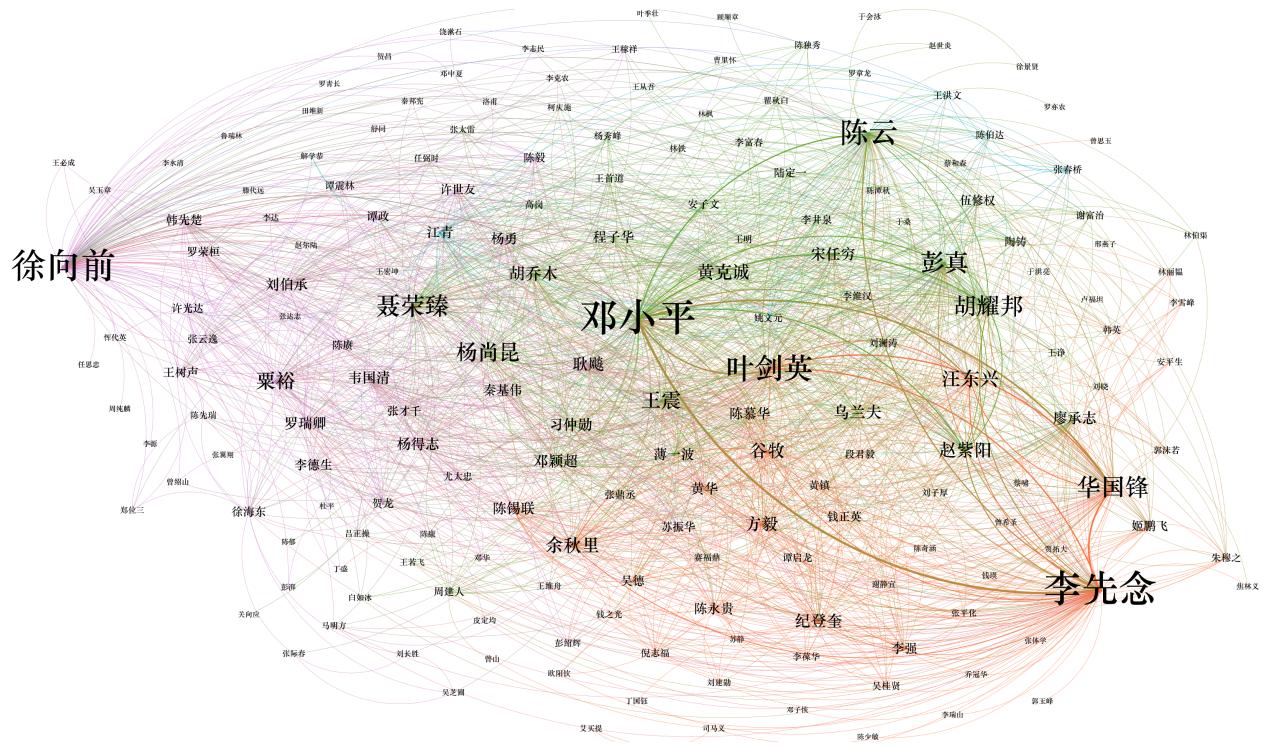
Comparing Fig7 and Fig8, the most noticeable trend is the rise of Liu Shaoqi. His strong support for Mao Zedong during the Yan'an Rectification Movement significantly elevated his status within the party. In 1943, Liu Shaoqi was appointed Secretary of the Central Secretariat and Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, becoming the de facto second-in-command of the Chinese Communist Party. In the social network, this is evident as Liu Shaoqi integrated into Mao Zedong's faction, with substantial increases in his node degree and node centrality.



**Figure 8:** Elite Fractions: 1892-1949

Fig9, based on cumulative data from 1977 to 1989, shows the factional landscape of CCP political elites. This image illustrates the relationships among political figures in China since the beginning of the reform and opening-up period. Before 1989, factional divisions within the Party were primarily based on political viewpoints. The reformist faction was led by Deng Xiaoping, Zhao Ziyang, and Hu Yaobang<sup>7</sup>; the conservative faction by Li Xiannian, Hua Guofeng, and Ji Dengkui; and the military neutral faction mainly consisted of Xu Xiangqian, Su Yu, Liu Bocheng, and Tan Zhenlin. Undoubtedly, this image reflects the divide between the conservative and reformist factions during the reform and opening-up period.

<sup>7</sup>Interestingly, Chen Yun—recognized by Party historians as a conservative—had more connections with important political figures of the reformist faction.



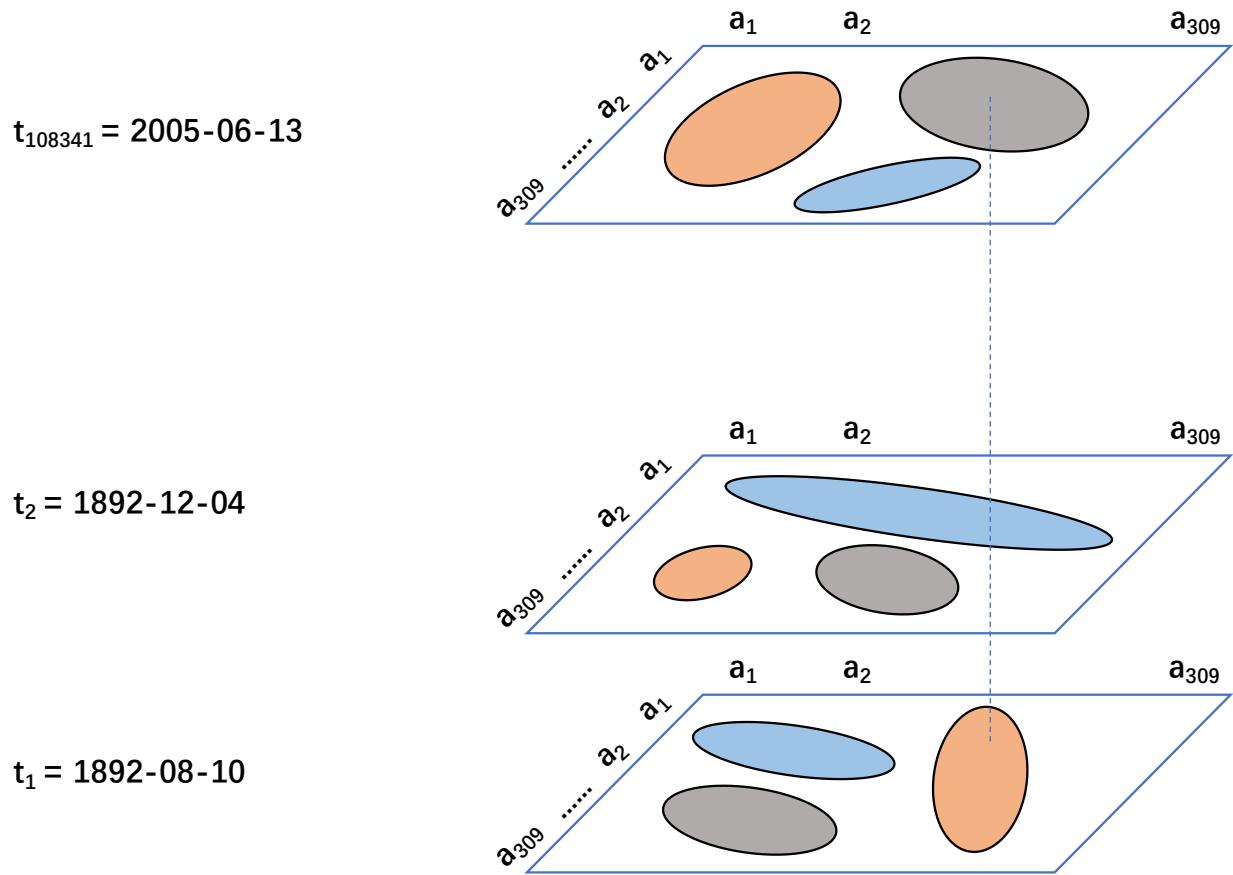
**Figure 9:** Elite Fractions: 1977-1989

#### 4.4 informal ties shape regime resilience

This article aims to elucidate the reasons why the political elites of the Chinese Communist Party have maintained a long-term 'struggle without breaking.' Based on the above data analysis and visualization results, this article concludes that, the war experiences across various regions have shaped the cumulative informal relationship networks, as shown in Fig10. This implies that most political elites have belonged to different factions at some point and have gained recognition from them, as shown at different time points  $t_0$  and  $t_1$  in Fig10. The identity within these cumulative factions not only fosters mutual recognition, increasing the cost of political struggle, but also bridges the gaps between factions through elite exchanges, contributing to the political elites' ability to engage in conflict without causing a complete rupture.<sup>8</sup>

I will use a specific example to illustrate this conclusion. Li Jinqiu, one of the senior leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, had a very extensive career, with military experience in the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Red Armies. In Fig7, he is positioned within the Second Red Army faction. By Fig8, he has aligned himself with Mao Zedong's faction in the Central Military Commission, yet he also maintains close proximity to two other factions, suggesting his role as

<sup>8</sup>"Dou Er Bu Po" in Chinese



**Figure 10:** Cumulative informal relationship networks

a mediator between them. By Fig9, he has shifted to Deng Xiaoping’s reformist faction. The evolution of Li Jinqiu’s factional affiliations highlights his involvement across different factions over time. His military background enabled him to forge ‘cumulative factions’ within the informal networks of other elites.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In summary, this article challenges a common conclusion in social science that factions within social organizations undermine the organization’s resilience. This article argues that informal connections among political elites form ‘mountaintops.’ When political elites belong to multiple mountaintops, they can act as mediators between factions with differing viewpoints, thereby enhancing the overall resilience of the regime and maintaining long-term stability among the political elites. This article constructs an informal elite network using the chronologies of Chinese Communist Party political elites and performs preliminary descriptive statistics and cluster analysis on the network data.

This study makes four main contributions. First, it establishes a database of informal connections among Chinese Communist Party political elites. Second, it is the first study, at least according to the literature I have reviewed, to examine the evolution of social networks from a continuous time perspective. Third, it offers a more in-depth, quantitatively-based discussion of the 'mountaintops' or factional behavior of Chinese Communist Party political elites. Fourth, this study challenges the conventional views in the social sciences regarding the political consequences of informal elite networks.

## 6 FUTURE RESEARCH PLANS

Clearly, this study is preliminary, rough, and has many issues. Nevertheless, I believe this is an exciting and promising research project. My future research plans are as follows:

Firstly, I aim to develop a mathematical tool to depict the intensity of social network evolution over time. While discussions on this topic are currently at the forefront of computer graphics, there is no open-source software available. Therefore, we intend to fill this gap by developing a tool to characterize time series social networks and packaging it as a Python package.

Secondly, I hope to further enhance the database. Currently, I have collected chronologies for ONLY 21 CCP political elites, which is insufficient. Historians may criticize this dataset, suggesting that official Chinese data undergoes scrutiny and censorship. There is still much content we can add to this database, such as the chronology of Lin Biao, which has been published from Hong Kong. Additionally, there are literary works similar to chronologies that we can use for comparative data supplementation, such as Bo Yibo's 'A Review of Several Major Decisions and Events.'

Thirdly, I aim to provide a more precise answer, building upon descriptive studies, to the question of "How do the political elites of the Chinese Communist Party maintain a state of conflict without collapse," including further empirical analysis.

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