

Runaway State-Sponsored Movement: How the CCRG Failed to Contain Beijing's Red Guard Factional Warfare, 1966–1968

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Abstract

Why did the party-state elites lose control of the state-sponsored movement it helped launch during the early Cultural Revolution? This article examines the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG), a Mao-appointed body that held an ideological monopoly, that initially effectively steered Beijing university students against work teams and bureaucratic targets but failed to halt the factional violence that ensued once contention turned inward among their loyalists. Drawing on 715 archival documents coded into 233 CCRG–faction meetings and combining relational network evidence with close reading of directives and factional publications, this study argues that the way the CCRG governed through selective ideological endorsement, which enabled them to effectively steer factions initially, nevertheless laid the ground for their later failure. In the initial phase of the movement, which was under CCRG's control, by publicly certifying some factions as “left” and protecting them from scrutiny, CCRG leaders created segmented patronage ties and centers of protection. These ties were effective for mobilizing attacks on shared enemies, but they also hardened factional boundaries and shifted incentives: Minority factions' immediate interests in accumulating power and defeating rivals progressively decoupled from any imperative to demonstrate loyalty to an abstract ideological line. When the fight became a competition for power over campus and bureaucratic vacuums in the second phase, unilateral restraint became costly for factions, while defiance carried few credible sanctions with the same patronage remained. As a result, factions maintained rhetorical loyalty to Maoist authority while disregarding CCRG unity and cease-fire orders. The case shed light on failed coordination among state-backed allies, highlighting a mechanism through which state-sponsored movements can escape delegated control, underscoring limits of ideological steering in high-uncertainty contentious arenas. This study also makes contributions to theories of state, ideological power, and contentious politics.

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1 Introduction

In 1966, Beijing’s universities became the epicenter of the early Cultural Revolution. Student groups that soon called themselves Red Guards produced big-character posters, staged rallies, and carried out “struggle sessions” that moved from campus authorities to ministries and other bureaucratic agencies. The Beijing Red Guard movement thus began as a state-sponsored mobilization against “capitalist roaders” inside the Party-state.

At the political center, Mao created the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG) to lead Cultural Revolution affairs. The CCRG claimed the monopolized authority to adjudicate ideological rightness and to signal the “correct line” as routine bureaucratic hierarchies came under attack (Kuo 2021). Meanwhile, Party moderates and ministries dispatched work teams to universities. These temporary cadre-led teams were tasked with directing the movement on campuses, but they intervened unevenly. Many stigmatized some students as politically suspect while endorsing others, and these early classifications structured subsequent factional alignments.

The first phase of the movement followed such cleavage under work teams’ intervention (Walder 2006). Stigmatized students formed rebel minorities. They sought to overturn work-team judgments, protect themselves from investigation, and escalate struggle against the bureaucratic actors behind the work teams. Students protected by work teams formed conservative majorities, defending campus administrations and supervising ministries. In this setting, the CCRG could steer the movement. It backed rebels against work teams and encouraged attacks on bureaucratic targets. The CCRG did not create rebel motives from scratch. It appropriated the rebels’ existing impetus under stigmatization and redirected it toward the CCRG’s goal of weakening moderate control.

By early 1967, however, the conflict axis changed. With work teams withdrawn and conservatives largely defeated, the CCRG tried to unify remaining student forces through citywide coordinating bodies and repeated calls for restraint. Instead, the rebel camp split again into two opposed coalitions, commonly known as “Heaven” and “Earth,” anchored in rival clusters of leading universities and their affiliated factions. Their rivalry centered on defeating the opposing side, control of newly seized campus committees and bureaucratic offices, and the symbolic status of being recognized as the “true left.” The struggle became an extended competition within a power vacuum created by the breakdown of routine governance. Despite the CCRG’s continued efforts to unify, both coalitions professed loyalty to Maoist authority while de facto escalating attacks on their rivals, until the army intervened.

This sequence raises the central puzzle of the paper: why did a movement launched and initially steered from the political center escalate into infighting that the CCRG could not stop? I argue that the answer lies in the CCRG’s steering patterns. In the first phase, it governed through selective ideological certification that functioned as patronage. Public endorsement and protection stabilized favored factions and made them hard to challenge, while creating segmented ties between specific CCRG patrons and specific factions and strengthening factional boundaries. Such steering process de facto decoupled factional interests from their legitimacy. The CCRG also lacked routine coercive tools to impose credible penalties. When the second phase became high-stakes intra-rebel

competition, unilateral restraint was costly and sanctions were weak. Factions could maintain rhetorical conformity while ignoring unity and cease-fire orders. I develop this argument using 715 archival documents coded into 233 CCRG-faction meetings, combining network evidence on interaction structure with close reading of directives and factional responses. The findings of this study can contribute to the theories of state, ideological power, and contentious politics.

2 Data

I collected data from multiple sources to capture the CCRG’s steering and its interactions with Beijing university Red Guard factions from June 1966 to August 1968. The corpus comprises 715 records, commentaries, and paraphrased accounts.

Specifically, first, in a four-month archival study, I manually coded items related to the CCRG from the Chinese Cultural Revolution Collection, 1966–1976 at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University ([Hoover Institution Library & Archives 2024](#)). This produced 296 articles from Beijing universities’ Red Guard newspapers directly concerning the CCRG. Topics include reprints of official announcements, records of official meetings, polemics against CCRG members, and attacks on rival factions issued with the CCRG’s quotes and names.

Second, I coded 419 records and memoranda documenting meetings between the CCRG and Beijing university Red Guard factions, together with important notices and announcements, drawn from the digitalized archive the Chinese Cultural Revolution Database ([Song, Yongyi and Editorial Board 2002](#)).

Finally, I consulted Fracture Rebellion ([Walder 2009](#)) and Agent of Disorder ([Walder 2019](#)) for detailed chronology and cross-checks on Beijing Red Guard mobilization.

3 Method

Using a mixed-methods research design, I traced the behavior patterns and messages exchanged to understand how the CCRG exercised delegated ideological authority in the Beijing Red Guard arena. I also examined how its steering capacity and the incentives for factions changed when factional contention shifted from attacking work teams and bureaucratic targets to intra-rebel rivalry.

I coded these materials into 233 unique interaction events (“meetings”) including face-to-face meetings, mass rallies where CCRG members issued directives to specific campuses, and documented message exchanges, recording participating CCRG officials, participating universities/factions/leaders when identifiable, date, and each event’s primary steering aim (e.g., instigation versus coordination). Figure 1 plots the temporal distribution of total meetings and multi-school meetings across the two phases of the movement, showing the shift in interaction scale over time.

Figure 1: Frequencies of Meetings and Multi-School Meetings
(See Appendix, page 8. *Click here to jump to figure*)

These coded events support a network relational analysis in two steps. First, I construct weighted bipartite networks linking CCRG members to Beijing universities and estimate these networks separately for two phases of the movement. I evaluate segmentation and clustering using community detection (fast-greedy modularity optimization) and report modularity as a summary measure of how concentrated ties were within patronage-like clusters; I also compute weighted centrality measures (strength, betweenness, and closeness) to identify which officials and campuses functioned as brokers versus insulated clients. Second, to assess coordination within the CCRG layer, I project an official–official co-attendance network from the same events and compare its cohesion to the cross-level segmentation observed in the bipartite structure.

Combined with this longitudinal network analysis which summarizes evolving cleavages and behavioral pattern, I also rely on qualitative evidence to specify mechanisms. I conduct close readings of directives and meeting records to code the content of interventions (e.g., endorsement/denunciation, boundary-setting claims about “the left” and “the enemy,” and unity/ceasefire instructions), and I trace how factions publicly echoed these signals while strategically resisting behavioral restraint. This integration allows me to show, with appropriate caution about missing faction identifiers in some records, how patterns of selective access and dispersed endorsement are linked to the CCRG’s later difficulty in coordinating allies.

4 Findings

Across both phases, the CCRG’s authority and interventions rested on an unusually high-legitimacy/low-capacity base during the Cultural Revolution. Its authority was widely treated as proximate to Mao and anchored in central directives that elevated Cultural Revolution leading groups above routine bureaucratic channels, giving the CCRG privileged standing to adjudicate ideological “rightness,” certify actors, and signal the Center’s line, yet without stable coercive means to enforce discipline once mass contention escalated.

My evidence shows that what changed over time was, despite the consistent ideological recognition of the CCRG from most student factions, a shift in how CCRG-issued certification interacted with factional incentives through patronages/patronage ties once the arena of competition moved from “rebel factions vs. conservative factions/work teams/bureaucratic targets” to “rebel vs. rebel.”

The network evidence from the first phase already reveals a structured pattern of selective access. As shown in Figures 2–4, the official–school bipartite network displays visible clustering rather than a uniformly integrated structure. The Fruchterman–Reingold layout (Figure 2) indicates uneven density of ties and nodes, and fast-greedy community detection (Figure 3) together with the hierarchical dendrogram (Figure 4) demonstrates the presence of relatively modular patronage clusters.

Figure 2: The Official-School Network Between Individual CCRG Members and Student Factions, First Phase (Fruchterman–Reingold Layout)
(See Appendix, page 9. *Click here to jump to figure*)

Figure 3: Community Structure of the Official–School Network, First Phase (Fast-Greedy)
(See Appendix, page 10. *Click here to jump to figure*)

Figure 4: Hierarchical Community Structure of the Official–School Network, First Phase
(Fast-Greedy Dendrogram; y-axis shows merge heights)
(See Appendix, page 11. *Click here to jump to figure*)

In the first phase, the interaction pattern between CCRG and student factions already displayed selectivity and segmentation. The bipartite network built from 233 coded meetings is highly skewed in who gained access to whom: a small subset of campuses and factional coalitions repeatedly interacted with a small subset of CCRG members, and community detection reveals relatively modular patronage clusters rather than a single integrated whole.

Figure 5: Centrality Profiles of Officials and Schools in the Official–School Network, First Phase
(See Appendix, page 12. *Click here to jump to figure*)

Centrality profiles further clarify the differentiated structure of authority. As shown in Figure 5, a few officials (notably junior members of the CCRG, such as Qi Benyu) occupied brokerage positions that linked otherwise weakly connected segments, while senior figures tended to concentrate symbolic interventions at key hubs (e.g., Tsinghua, Peking, Normal, Geology, and Aeronautics). This segmented access produced differentiated patronage of protection and credible expectations of backing that attached to particular ties, not to an impersonal, uniform command structure.

Close reading of meeting records and directives from the same period shows how this structured pattern translated into behavioral consequences. CCRG communications repeatedly performed boundary work against work teams and bureaucratic “targets,” while selectively affirming minority rebel factions as “in the right line,” including practices such as endorsing organizations, destigmatizing activists, and (in some episodes) supporting the destruction or invalidation of “black materials.” In these interactions, certification operated as a scarce political resource: it stabilized legitimacy for favored actors, granted them discretionary immunity from certain forms of ideological scrutiny, and, crucially, delegated on-the-ground ideological judgment to faction leaders under the rubric of “mass self-education.” The result was that mobilization against common enemies became easier and coordination was temporarily tractable, but factions also learned a consequential lesson: as long as they maintained rhetorical alignment and avoided direct challenge to CCRG authority, they could pursue aggressive strategies while expecting protection rather than sanction.

Figure 6: The Official-School Network Between Individual CCRG Members and Student Factions, Second Phase (Fruchterman–Reingold Layout)
(See Appendix, page 13. *Click here to jump to figure*)

Figure 7: Community Structure of the Official–School Network, Second Phase (Fast-Greedy)
(See Appendix, page 14. *Click here to jump to figure*)

Figure 8: Hierarchical Community Structure of the Official–School Network, Second Phase
(Fast-Greedy Dendrogram. Y-axes represents merge heights)
(See Appendix, page 15. [Click here to jump to figure](#))

In the second phase, the interaction structure shifts in scale and format but not in a way that fully dissolves the segmented patronage pattern. As shown in Figures 6–8, the official–school network becomes more citywide and cross-factional in its convening profile (Figure 6), yet community detection and the hierarchical dendrogram (Figures 7 and 8) still indicate substantial residual segmentation rather than a single reintegrated structure. Individualized relationships with particular CCRG members continued to matter, and political shocks (e.g., the purge of key junior figures) had immediate downstream implications for which student blocs lost or retained protective coverage. Content-wise, CCRG unity and ceasefire directives were frequent but weakly enforceable: officials criticized “anarchism” or “self-struggle,” pressed for restraint, and sometimes demanded self-criticisms, yet typically stopped short of stripping either side’s core “rightness” in a way that would weaken student forces. Under conditions of symmetric intra-rebel competition, unilateral restraint was strategically costly while defiance remained only weakly sanctionable, producing continued ideological deference alongside behavioral noncompliance and escalating factional conflict that ultimately required external coercive intervention (i.e., the army) to terminate.

Taken together, these findings show how high ideological legitimacy can coexist with, and partly generate, coordination failure: selective certification that mobilizes effectively in phase 1 can harden segmented protection and delegated discretion that makes discipline and de-escalation strategically irrational in phase 2.

5 Discussions and Implications

This study contributes to research on state-sponsored movements in nondemocratic settings, an area that remains less developed in mainstream contentious politics and social movement scholarship. By tracing the Beijing Red Guard movement across two phases, it provides an empirical account of how an ideological steering organ with exceptional symbolic standing, the CCRG, could nevertheless lose control over the insurgent mobilization it helped set in motion.

The analysis offers three theoretical payoffs. First, it clarifies a systematic gap between ideological conformity and behavioral compliance. Factions could continue to recognize the CCRG as a legitimate judge of “correctness” while pursuing strategies that undermined the CCRG’s concrete objectives (Schoon 2018, 2022). Second, it specifies a scope condition for the limits of delegated ideological authority in contentious arenas. When an authority can confer recognition but cannot impose credible sanctions, selective certification can harden factional boundaries and intensify competition among allies, especially once contention shifts from attacks on shared enemies to intra-coalitional rivalry (Kurzman 1996; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Scott 1985). Third, it extends the concept of patronage beyond material exchange by showing how ideological endorsement can operate as patronage, distributing protection, status, and discretionary authority, and how this

resource can backfire under political fragmentation.

A broader implication is that “state capacity” during contentious episodes should not be inferred from ideological legitimacy alone. Delegated ideological authorities may succeed at igniting mobilization yet struggle to realign interests once local contests become decisive.

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Appendix

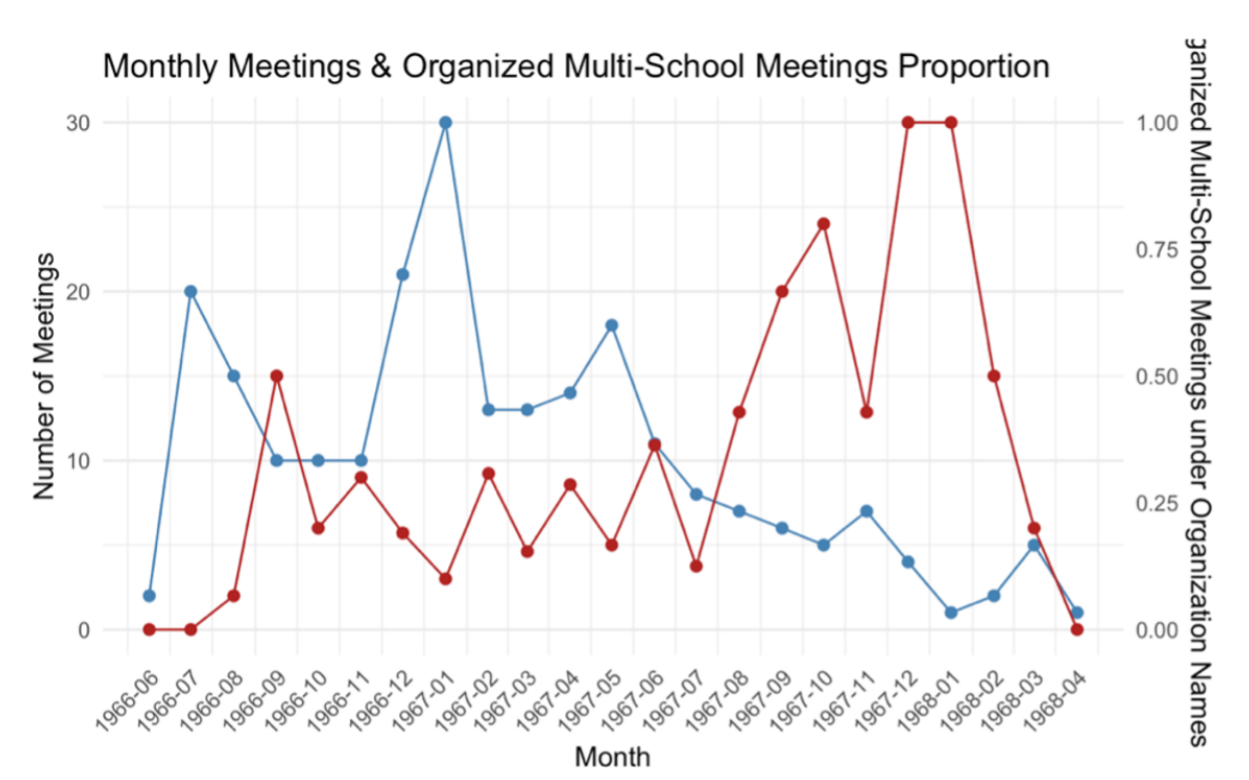


Figure 1. Frequencies of Meetings and Multi-School Meetings

Official-School Network

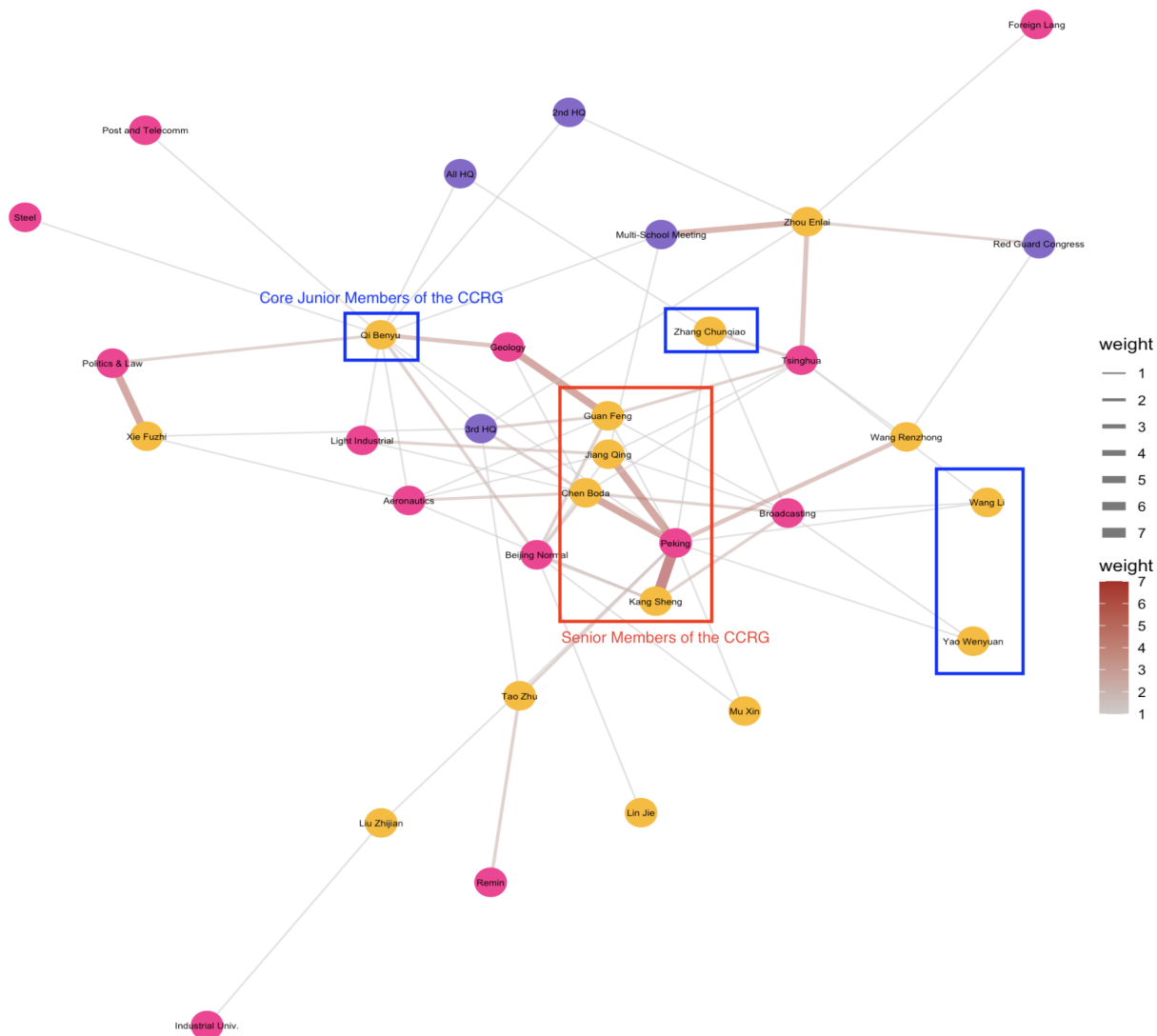


Figure 2. The Official-School Network Between Individual CCRG Members and Student Factions, First Phase (Fruchterman-Reingold Layout)

Official–School Network (Fast-Greedy)

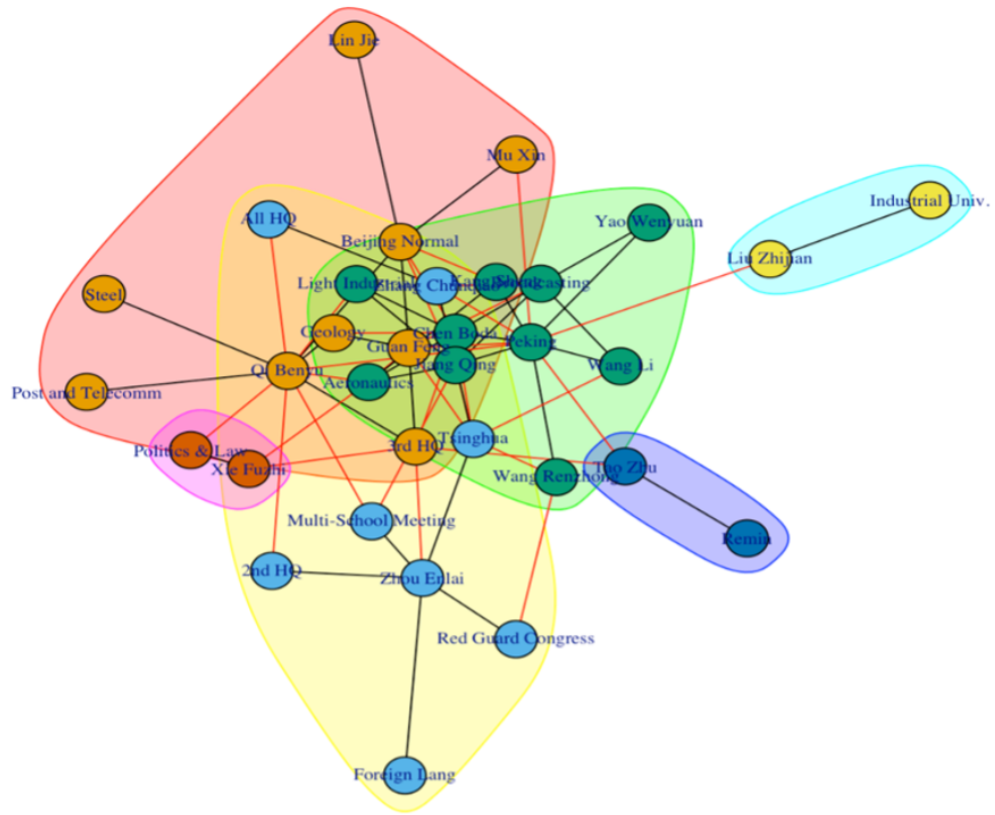


Figure 3. Community Structure of the Official–School Network, First Phase (Fast-Greedy)

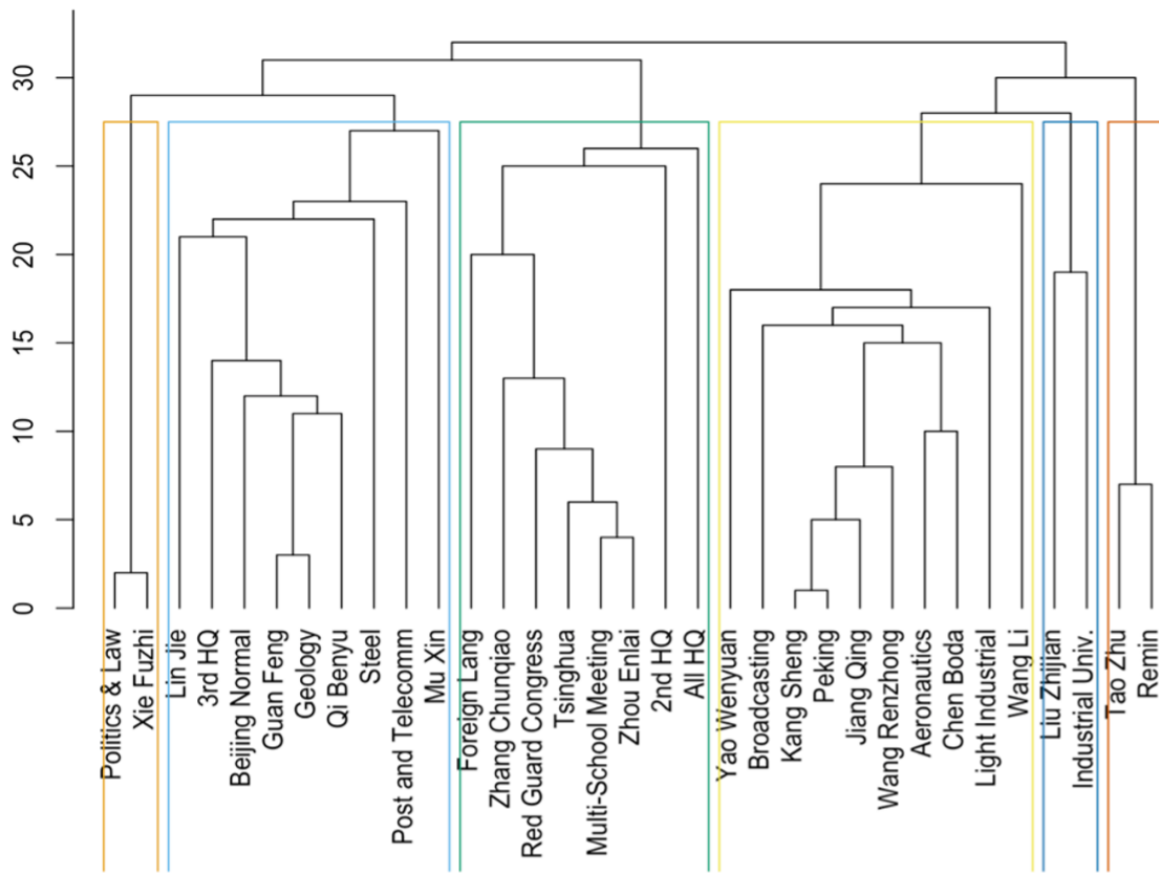


Figure 4. Hierarchical Community Structure of the Official-School Network, First Phase (Fast-Greedy Dendrogram; y-axis shows merge heights)

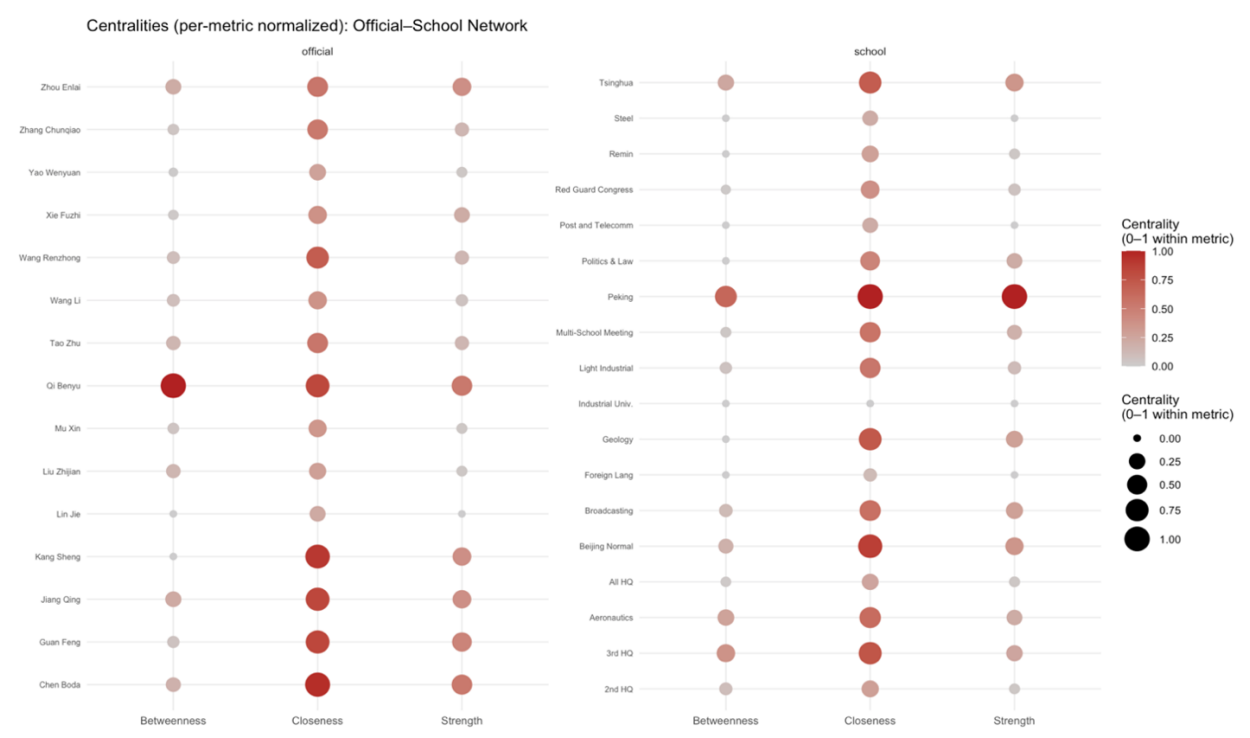


Figure 5. Centrality Profiles of Officials and Schools in the Official-School Network, First Phase

Official-School Network

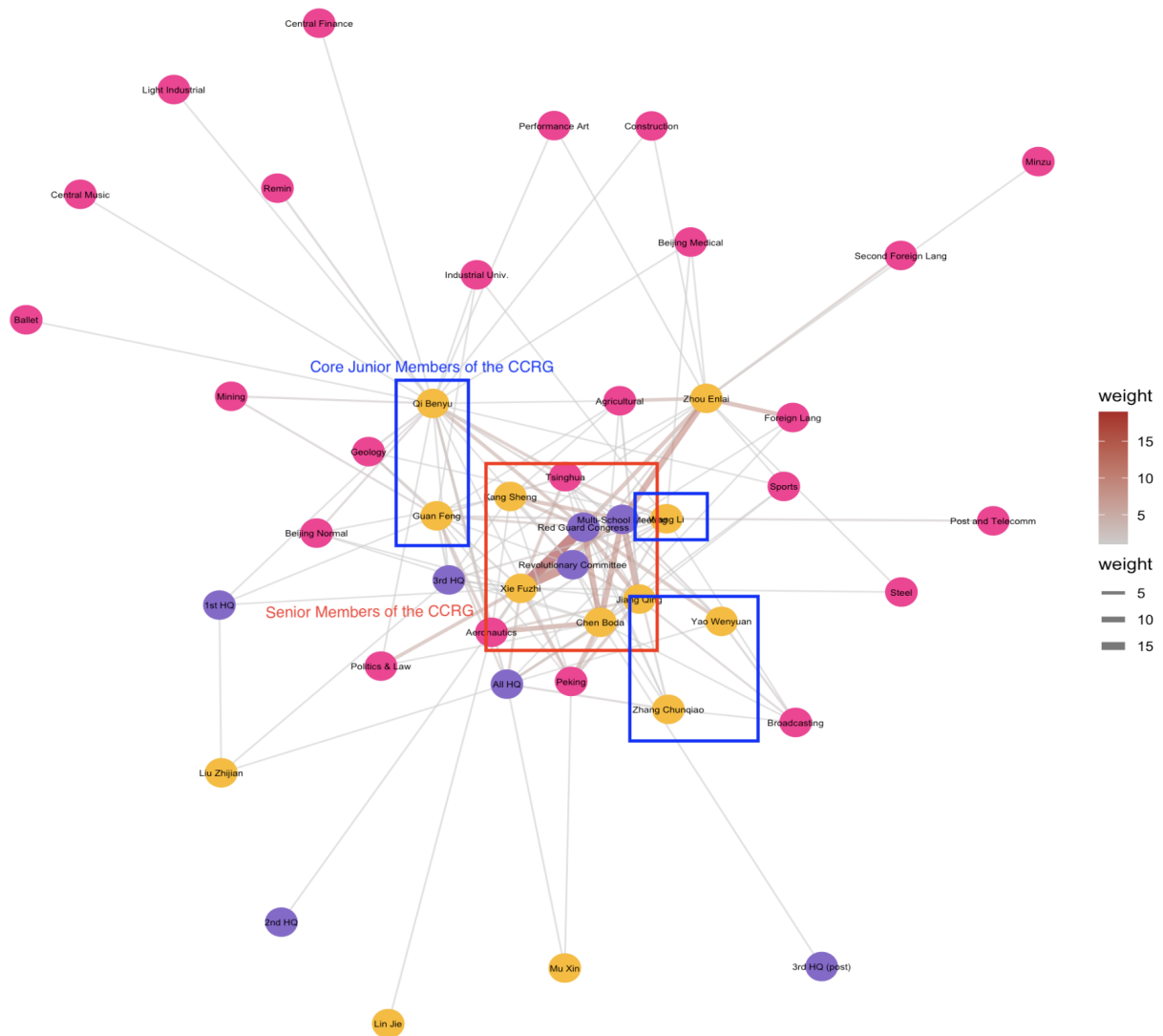


Figure 6. The Official-School Network Between Individual CCRG Members and Student Factions, Second Phase (Fruchterman-Reingold Layout)

Official-School Network (Fast-Greedy)

This visualization shows the 'Official-School Network' using a Fast-Greedy clustering algorithm. The network consists of numerous nodes, each labeled with an organization's name, and edges representing connections between them. The nodes are color-coded and grouped into four distinct clusters, each highlighted by a semi-transparent background shape:

- Light Blue Cluster (Top Right):** Includes nodes like 'Light Industrial', 'Central Music', 'Central Finance', 'Remind', 'Beijing Medical', 'Beijing Normal', 'Beijing', 'Geology', 'Industrial Univ.', 'Post and Telecomm', 'Li Zhiqian', 'All HQ', 'Peking', 'Zhang Chunqiao', 'Broadcasting', 'Lin Jie', '2nd HQ', 'Mu Xin', '3rd HQ (post)', 'Yao Wenxuan', 'Chen Boda', 'Liang Qiong', 'Revolutionary Committee', 'Kang Sheng', 'Multi-Schools', 'Zhou Enlai', 'Foreign Lang', 'Sports', 'Construction', 'Performance Art', 'Minzu', and 'Second Foreign Lang'.
- Light Green Cluster (Top Left):** Includes nodes like 'Minzu', 'Second Foreign Lang', 'Sports', 'Construction', 'Performance Art', 'Foreign Lang', 'Zhou Enlai', 'Revolutionary Committee', 'Kang Sheng', 'Multi-Schools', 'Zhou Enlai', 'Foreign Lang', 'Sports', 'Construction', 'Performance Art', 'Minzu', and 'Second Foreign Lang'.
- Light Red Cluster (Bottom Left):** Includes nodes like 'Steel', '3rd HQ (post)', 'Yao Wenxuan', 'Chen Boda', 'Liang Qiong', 'Revolutionary Committee', 'Kang Sheng', 'Multi-Schools', 'Zhou Enlai', 'Foreign Lang', 'Sports', 'Construction', 'Performance Art', 'Minzu', and 'Second Foreign Lang'.
- Light Purple Cluster (Bottom Right):** Includes nodes like 'All HQ', 'Peking', 'Zhang Chunqiao', 'Broadcasting', 'Lin Jie', '2nd HQ', 'Mu Xin', '3rd HQ (post)', 'Yao Wenxuan', 'Chen Boda', 'Liang Qiong', 'Revolutionary Committee', 'Kang Sheng', 'Multi-Schools', 'Zhou Enlai', 'Foreign Lang', 'Sports', 'Construction', 'Performance Art', 'Minzu', and 'Second Foreign Lang'.

The network is highly interconnected, with many nodes having multiple connections, particularly in the central region where the clusters overlap. The Fast-Greedy algorithm has successfully identified these four main groups of related organizations.

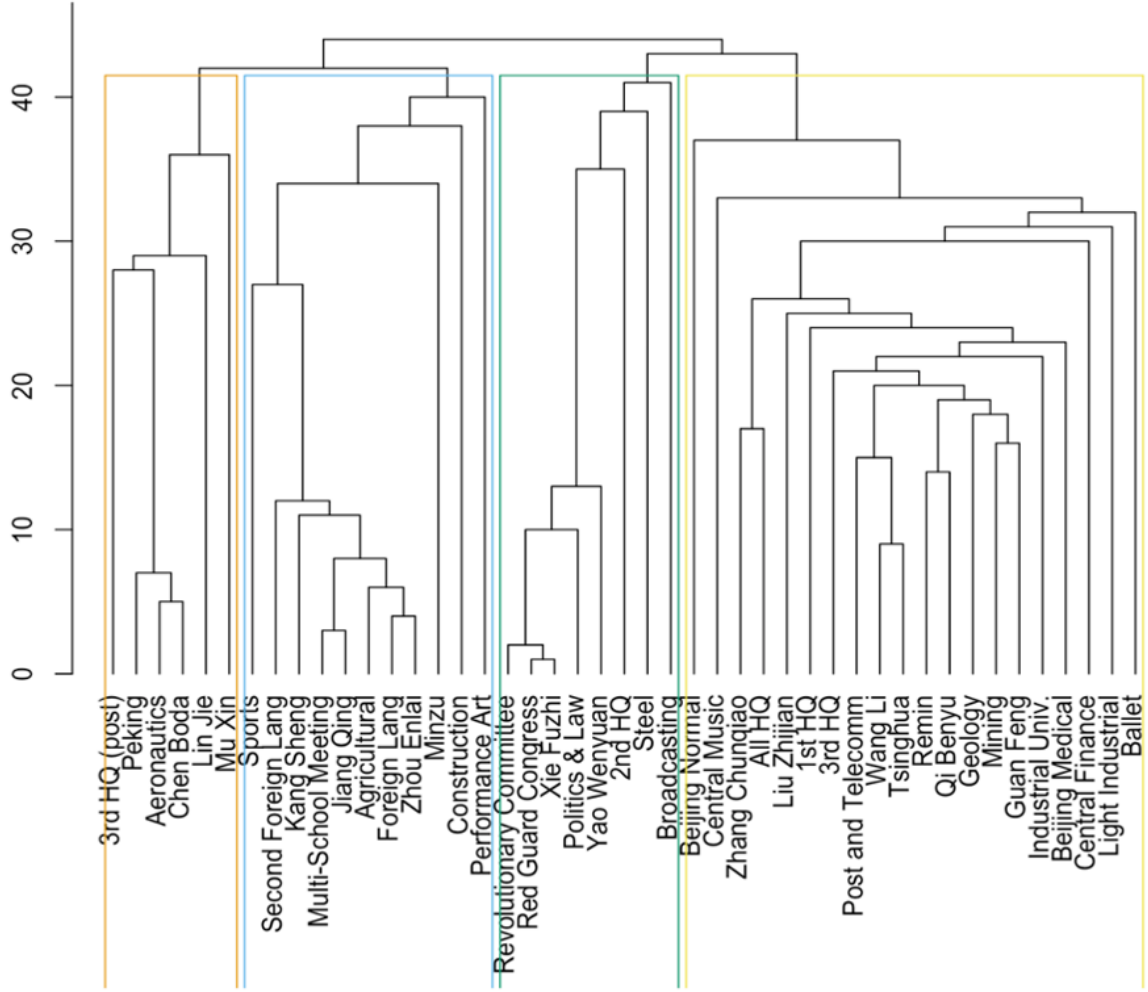


Figure 8. Hierarchical Community Structure of the Official-School Network, Second Phase (Fast-Greedy Dendrogram. Y-axes represents merge heights)

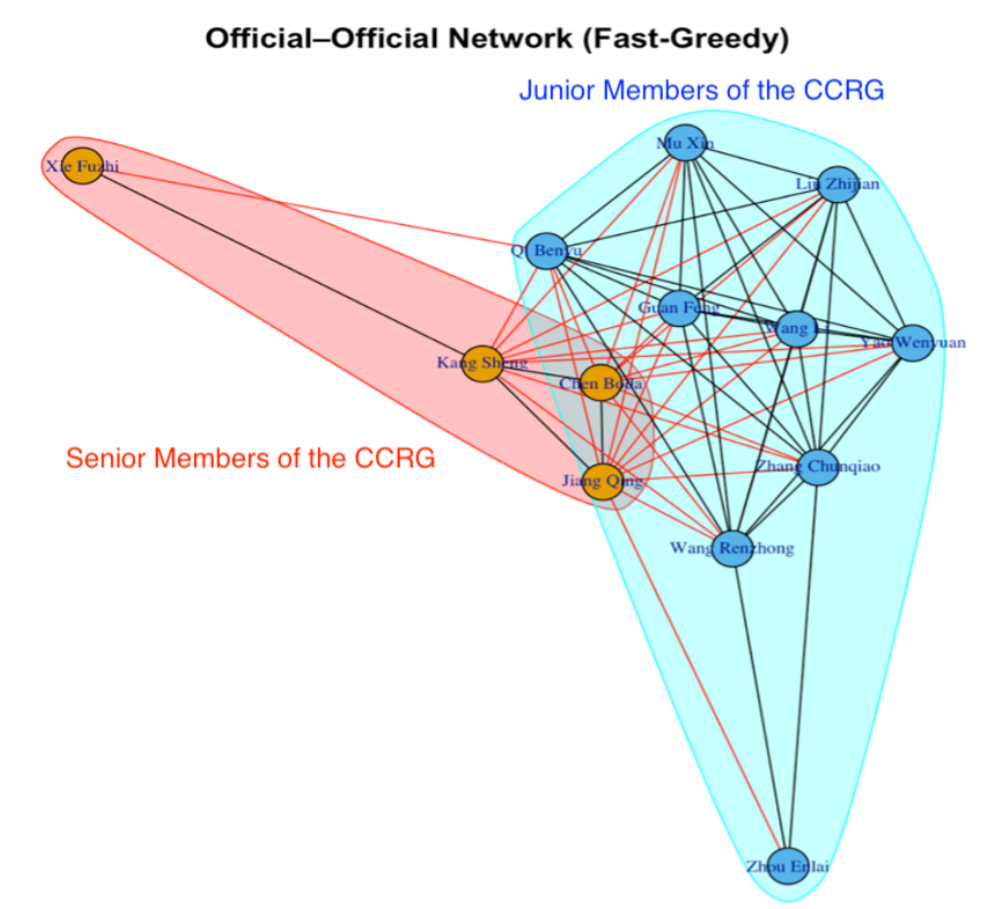


Figure A1. Community Structure of the Official–Official Network, First Phase (Fast-Greedy)

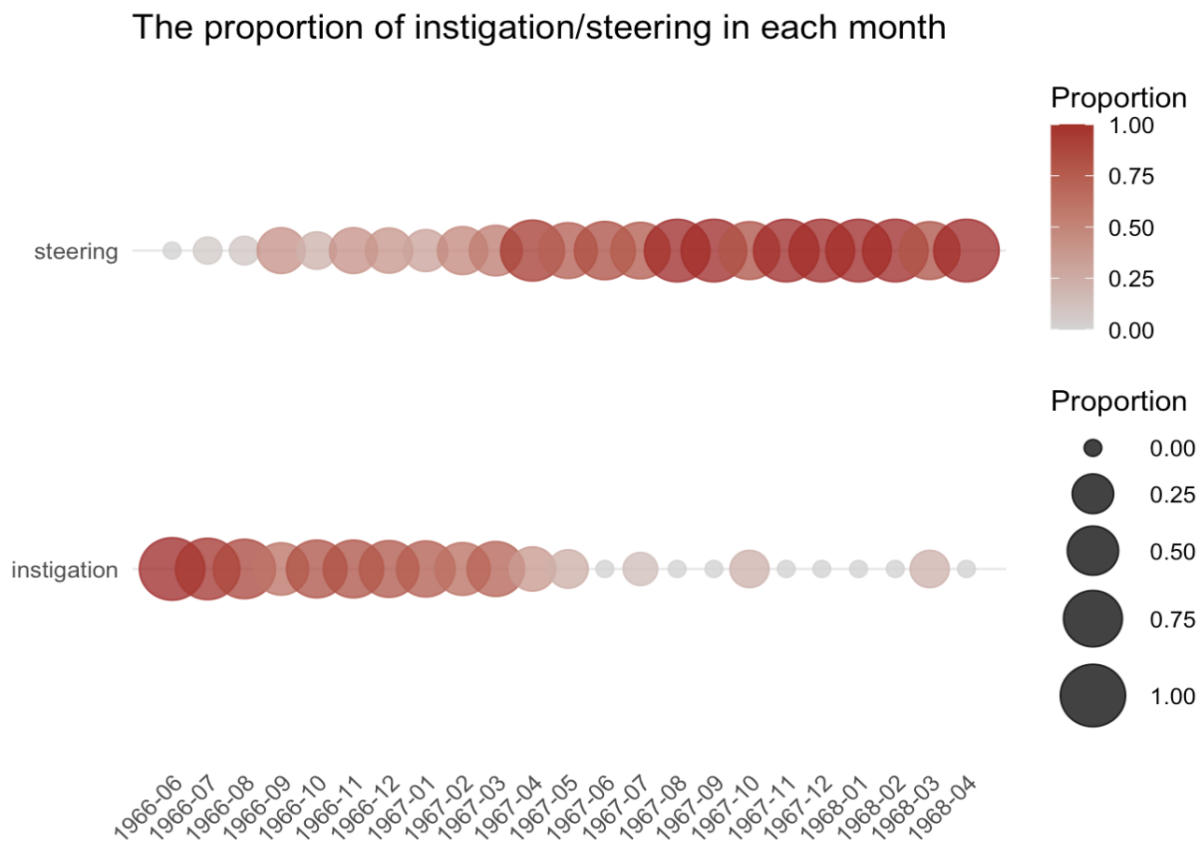


Figure A2. The proportion of instigation/steering in each month