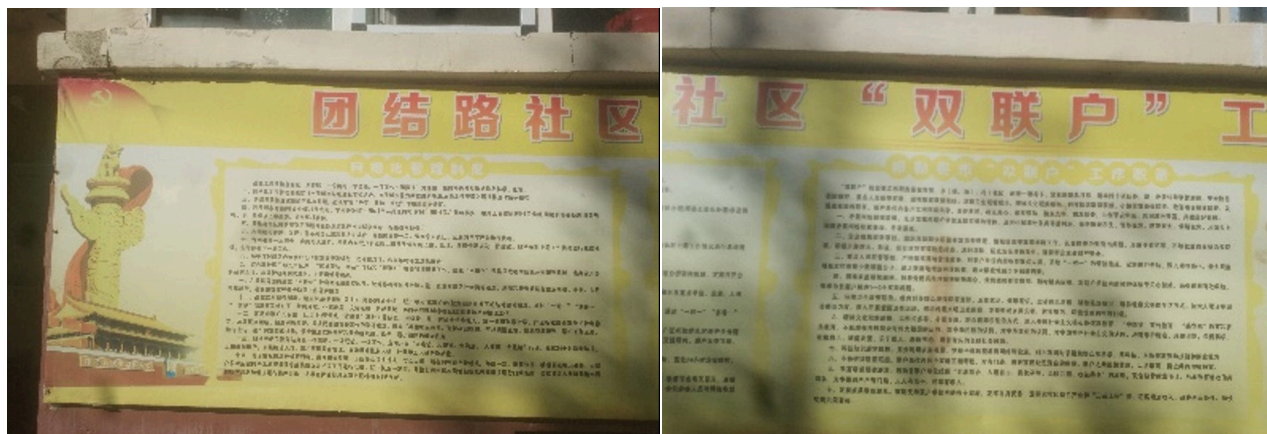# Extending Grassroots Power and Mobilizing the People:

How the CCP Built a Pervasive Security System in Xinjiang

By Yao Qu

As part of the crackdown on Turkic people in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) from 2016, Chen Quanguo (陈全国), the current Party secretary in the XUAR, reproduced an all-pervasive security system across the region from his Tibetan experience [1], (#_ftn2) called the Ten Family Joint Defence groups (TFJD, 十户联防) [2] (#_ftn3), which involves almost all residents in public security activities in the name of 'counterterrorism.' The TFJD is not a new invention by the XUAR authority; on the contrary, it is a result of decades of efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to extend its power at the grassroots level and a long history of mobilizing the people as a way to organize security forces at a low cost in earlier Chinese regimes (both Imperial and Republican).

(https://xinjiangdocumentation.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2022/02/Screen-Shot-2021-08-12-at-1.35.10-PM-e1644615752403.jpg)

(https://xinjiangdocumentation.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2022/02/Screen-Shot-2021-08-12-at-1.35.48-PM-e1644615784637.jpg)

Figure 1: Posters reading "Work Mechanisms for 'Joint Defence Households' in Unity Road Neighbourhood". Photos were taken by an individual in Altay, Xinjiang, 2020. For the English translation of the featured photographs, **click here (https://xinjiangdocumentation.sites.olt.ubc.ca/?p=25550)** .

Extending grassroots governance in the XUAR: From *danwei*/*shequ* (Work Units & Neighbourhood Districts) to the *shihu lianfang* (Ten Family Joint Defence groups)

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the CCP has been trying to strengthen its power through grassroots governance (基层治理). In the XUAR, the CCP's grassroots governance began with organizations used throughout China: Work Units (*danwei* 单位) and Neighbourhood districts (*shequ* 社区) and has developed through "grids" (*wanggehua guanli* 网格化管理) and has now culminated in the Ten Family Joint Defence groups. From Work Units to Neighbourhood Districts to the Joint Defence groups, the CCP's power has been increasingly penetrating the everyday life of residents in the XUAR.

In the period of the planned economy (particularly before the 1990s), the CCP had created work units in factories, workshops, and offices to mobilize people and limited resources for industrialization (Liu and Chai, 2013). Based on different social functions, people were separated into different work units to work, study, and live. A new worker or graduate would be assigned to a work unit and were essentially required to stay there for their whole lives. The work unit was the initial form of grassroots governance in the PRC that helped the CCP control people at the level of the village or

neighbourhood. However, after the reforms of the national economy around 1978, work units came to be seen as hindering the new market economy because it restricted the mobility of people (H. Zhang, 2018). Hence, work units have been gradually replaced by a new form of grassroots governance, the neighbourhood district, which is comprised of the Civil Affairs Ministry tasked with surveillance and education.. Different from work units, neighbourhood districts are organized by physical space, generally residential communities and their local shops. While preserving the monitoring functions of work unites, neighbourhood districts give more mobility to people since they can easily change their jobs or locations to seek higher living conditions in a more open economy (H. Zhang, 2018).

However, to the CCP, the neighbourhood district system was not pervasive enough when it came to grassroots security in the XUAR. Back in 2007, the regional capital, Ürümqi, broke down "huge neighbourhood districts" (大社区) into "small grids" (小网格) to achieve initial grid-style management (Y. Zhang, 2018). After Chen Quanguo became the party secretary of the XUAR, the XUAR government further strengthened the grid system and integrated it into the larger security system, along with neighbourhood districts, "convenience security stations" (便民警务站) on many streets, and other security forces (Y. Zhang, 2018). Based on grid-style management, the Ten Family Joint Defence system was developed to further extend security control at the grassroots level in the name of 'counterterrorism.'

In grid-style management, all neighbourhood districts are broken down into smaller grids, normally 4,000 to 5,000 people in one grid for most of China, but much smaller, 200 to 400 people (70 to 100 families) for one grid in the XUAR (Tian and Xue, 2012). Compared with neighbourhood districts, grids are much smaller units that can enhance the efficiency of grassroots governance. In the XUAR, based on the distribution of residents, security conditions, and areas deemed key to public security, all neighbourhood districts are divided into smaller "grids." Each of them has a "grid leader" (网格长) and several "grid crews" (网格员) who are responsible for the public security within the grid. Those leaders, normally selected from neighbourhood district officials or "Fanghuiju" (访惠聚) (https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/chinese-sources/cadre-materials/cadre-handbooks/) working crews (Y. Zhang, 2018), are responsible for several security issues:

> **First,** the grid leaders need to establish a mechanism with other security forces (e.g., neighbourhood districts, security stations, and the leader of the TFJD) to collect and analyze 'enemies' and societal information (敌社情).
>
> **Second**, they need to build a patrol system within their grids to arrange security patrols.
>
> **Third**, they need to evaluate the leaders of the TFJD and coordinate issues with other grid leaders. Based on work performance, all grid leaders and crews are evaluated every year, from "one-star" to "five-stars." Those who get two stars or below will be warned or fired, and those who get five stars will have a chance to be promoted (Y. Zhang, 2018).

Within each grid, the CCP further developed the most pervasive security units in the current XUAR, called the Ten Family Joint Defence (TFJD) system, in some cases also named the Double Joint Defence (*weiwen shuang lianhu*维稳双联户) [3] (#_ftn4) . Based on proximity, every ten families (or local shops which are often family-run) are designated as one security unit to maintain stability in daily life (Li, 2020). On a daily basis, the TFJD is responsible for "ten tasks," which include organizing security patrols and information collection, 'transforming' targeted people (重点人员) (https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/glossary/) (that is, educating individuals identified as problematic by local authorities), and launching patriotic education. Members of the TFJD need to obtain and keep handy some 'anti-terrorist' tools (e.g., alarms, riot shields, helmets, and sticks) and practice 'anti-terrorist' combat every afternoon, guided by a local policeman. When one of the families/shops is attacked by 'terrorists,' the family can push an alarm that will inform the other nine families within the same security unit and the nearby police station (Li, 2020). Hence, before the policemen come, the ten families can first organize together to fight against the "terrorists."

Every security unit has a leader (十户长/双联户长) who is normally selected from among the families or shops (Pan, 2018). The leaders are responsible to mobilize other nine families to do security patrols. The leaders also need to cultivate informants (信息员) who can help collect "four situations" (四情): the enemy's situation, societal situation, public opinion, and residents' situation (敌情、社情、

舆论、民情), and report these to the neighbourhood district who then reports to the corresponding police station. In terms of inter-surveillance, the leaders need to often "visit" other nine families or shops to detect "abnormal issues," solve any local conflicts, educate the "focus" (problematic) people, and propagandize the CCP's policies and ideas.

From work units and neighbourhood districts to grids to the Ten Family Joint Defence groups, the CCP has been trying to extend its control over people at the grassroots level. Based on the 'counterterrorism' discourse, the CCP has mobilized ordinary people into this security work in the XUAR. Moreover, the government does not need to formally hire any members in the TFJD groups, thus saving the government budget. The TFJD system is, according to these Chinese studies, a 'well-designed' security system that is pervasive and effective but costs little money from the government. To understand the TFJD system, we need to examine the idea behind it, that is, mobilizing people against their neighbours.

The Philosophy of People Mobilization: from *Baojia* System to Self-defence Self-governance

The idea behind the TFJD system, which aims to mobilize ordinary people to keep an eye on their neighbours, is not a recent invention. On the contrary, the TFJD in the current XUAR is a product rooted in Chinese local governance from past centuries.

In the Ming dynasty, a security system, called the *Baojia* system (保甲), was created to respond to the decline of social stability (Hu, 2014). This can be seen as the prototype of the TFJD. Similar to the current grassroots security system in the XUAR, the *Baojia* system also adopts decimal units (ten family units). In the *Baojia* system, every ten families are assigned as a "*Jia*," which corresponds to the TFJD, every ten or five "*Jia*" a "*Bao*," which corresponds to the grid in the XUAR. Apart from the decimal organization, the TFJD is also similar to the *Baojia* system in terms of security functions. In the *Baojia* system, families within the same Jia must surveil and support each other; if one family violates the laws, the other nine families within the same Jia will also be punished (Hu, 2014). In the TFJD, though all families are responsible for watching out and preventing the crimes of their neighbours, there is no evidence that they will be punished for the crimes committed by their neighbours. To the rulers in the Ming dynasty, the *Baojia* system not only could strengthen social stability at the grassroots level but also could save the government budget since no security forces were formally hired in the system.

After the establishment of the PRC [4] (#_ftn5) , the *Baojia* system and similar measures were abolished by the CCP, and CCP's scholars have criticized *baojia* as a cruel control over people's daily life (Zhao, 2017). Still, in 1963, a similar system was revived in *Fengqiao* County, Zhejiang Province, during a class struggle campaign to eliminate "four types of enemies" (including landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, and "bad elements"). During the movement, the *Fengqiao* government mobilized the residents to catch, surveil, and "educate" such enemies, aiming to transform them into "new people" (新人) (Li, 2019). Mao Zedong highly approved of the *Fengqiao* experiment. He named it the "*Fengqiao* Experience" and promoted it across the country. Though not adopting decimal units, the idea behind *Fengqiao* Experience is close to the *Baojia* system, which emphasizes drawing on the people to work against themselves. The *Fengqiao* Experience requires that all security issues should be solved right on the spot by the people, which can improve social stability while saving the budget for the government.

Since becoming the new president of the PRC in 2013, Xi Jinping has emphasized the "significant meaning" of *Fengqiao* Experience in the Mass Line (群众路线) and has required all party members and government officials to learn it (Xi, October 2013). In a meeting in 2014, Xi Jinping further came up with the "Self-defence, Self-governance" (群防群治) (Xi, April 2014), which can be seen as a manifestation of *Fengqiao* Experience in "counterterrorism" practice. Self-defence, Self-governance requires the government to organize the people into security units that can help solve conflicts and do security work (Zhang, 2014). As a working principle in public security, these Chinese studies emphasize that the core of Self-defence, Self-governance is to rely on the people themselves to solve security issues. In Chinese "counterterrorism" discourse, Xi Jinping (April 2014) described a security system based on Self-defence Self-governance that makes "terrorists" become "rats crossing the

street that are attacked by everyone" (过街老鼠，人人喊打), which is a very vivid metaphor for the community self-enforcement of Self-defence Self-governance. In a meeting with the XUAR representatives in 2017, Xi Jinping emphasized that the XUAR government should "cling to Self-defence Self-governance, complete grid-style management, and achieve a solid security system that has no cracks, no blind or blank spots" (Li, 2020).
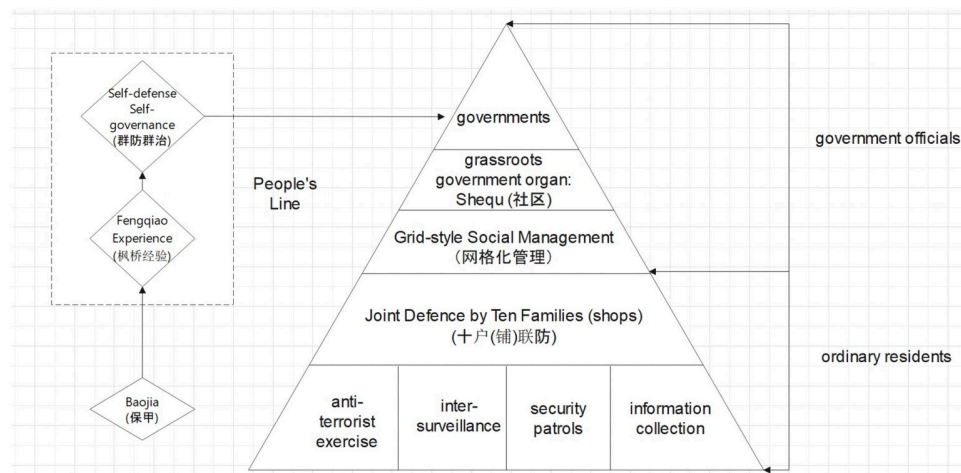

Figure 2: Grassroots Security System in the XUAR (author's chart drawn from information in the articles covered in this report.)

Conclusion

Our conclusion based on reading these Chinese reports and my own fieldwork is that the TFJD, guided by Self-defence Self-governance policy, is a reproduction of the *Baojia* system and *Fengqiao* Experience in the 'counterterrorism' discourse in the XUAR. The idea behind it is to solve security issues by mobilizing people against each other, which has a long tradition in Chinese statecraft. The TFJD emerged in the XUAR as a result of three things: CCP's efforts to extend its control at the grassroots level, the Party's Mass Line policies, and CCP's urge to handle ethnic issues in the XUAR as 'a war on terror.' Based on a 'counterterrorism' discourse, the CCP has mobilized all residents in the XUAR to 'voluntarily' engage in security activities, thus building a most pervasive security system at a relatively low cost. However, switching the cost from the government to the people has a potential to stir up the grassroots discontent since people's daily life is disturbed by such activities without compensation (only the leaders can receive hundreds of Chinese Yuan as subsidies), and most even need to pay for the necessary equipment themselves. In theory, the TFJD is a perfect security system for the CCP since it is so pervasive and low-cost. But in practice, a security system that makes all residents unpaid laborers faces challenges in the long term.

Acknowledgment

(#_ftnref1)

[1] (#_ftnref2) As the Party secretary in Tibet from 2011 to 2016, Chen Quanguo had implemented the Double Joint Defence in Tibet, which works as the same as the TFJD. See: https://news.ifeng.com/a/20160829/49857646_0.shtml

[2] (#_ftnref3) Here, 户 can refer to both a family's home or a shop.

[3] (#_ftnref4) In the Double Joint Defence, "double" refers to double duties: maintaining social stability and promoting unity and harmony (联户促社会稳定 联户促团结和谐). See: https://web.archive.org/web/20210730233421/http://www.bingtuannet.com/btrb_stdt/201910/t20191023_1811.html

[4] (#_ftnref5) During the rule of the Republic of China (1912-1949), Guomindang also used Baojia system to maintain control.

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