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**THE COLLECTIVE STUDY SESSIONS OF THE POLITBURO:
A MULTIPURPOSE TOOL OF CHINA'S CENTRAL
LEADERSHIP**

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Summary

Shortly after taking office in 2002, China's fourth generation leaders started a new practice, the regular convening of so-called "Politburo collective study sessions." These are meetings at which top experts in the country are invited to deliver a lecture to members of the Politburo on a topic in which they specialise. Since the first study session on 26 December 2002, a total of 43 sessions have taken place, covering a wide range of issues.

Most study sessions have focused on concrete policy issues such as agricultural development, employment, education, health care, the protection of intellectual property rights, and food safety, but some sessions have explored more abstract theoretical or ideological issues, such as the development of Marxist theories internationally and domestically, and how to build a "socialist harmonious society." Several sessions are also devoted to historical topics, e.g., the history of ethnic relations in China and the development of the world's major powers since the 15th century. Much emphasis has been placed on learning about the current international situation relating to a topic and drawing useful lessons from other countries' experience. Of the total 43 sessions, 19 have included an international perspective.

Although lecturers for the study sessions have been selected from all over the country, nine Beijing-based research and academic institutions contributed nearly 60% of the lecturers, which underscores the eminent status and influence of these institutions and their privileged access to central government policy makers. Over half of the 87 lecturers are from government research institutes (including research institutes of the army and the CPC). Only 29 have come from universities. Furthermore, many of the government researchers are from research institutes directly under the central government (including the central military commission and the CPC's Central Committee) or its ministries. In addition to the State Council's Development Research Center and the National Development and Reform Commission's Academy of Macroeconomic Research, whose researchers were chosen for most of the economic topics, and the Academy of Military Sciences, whose experts covered all but one of the military topics, research institutes under the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Information Industry provided lecturers for issues overseen by these ministries. The prominent role of government researchers in the collective study sessions shows that research units inside the government still play a vital role in informing decision-making, even though the government has sought to open up the policy process in recent years by soliciting inputs from independent academics in universities.

The study sessions no doubt serve as opportunities for members of the Politburo to obtain information, analyses, and policy recommendations on specific issues from leading experts in China, but the function of these meetings goes far beyond informing policy-making. They also serve a number of other objectives, including:

- Symbolic and demonstrational effect: setting an example for lower-level officials and sending out signals about the current policy focuses and intentions of the central leadership.
- Publicizing and promoting new policies and programmes.
- Commemorating historical events.
- Forging consensus among the central leadership.
- Discovering talent: Some experts who lectured to the Politburo at the study sessions have since been appointed to senior government posts.
- Facilitating policy implementation.
- Image building: To help project a positive image of the current leaders

and establish their distinctive leadership style.

In addition to serving a number of purposes for the central leadership, the study sessions have also been used by social forces to push forward their agendas. Because of the highly symbolic nature of the study sessions, social forces can interpret them as indicating the leadership's endorsement of policies or principles which they espouse. Consequently they can use the study sessions and their topics to legitimize their own agendas.

Although the study sessions have performed some positive functions, it is also important to note their limitations. The study sessions are not designed to deliver immediate, concrete policy outcomes. Their symbolic value far outweighs their usefulness as a potential policy tool. As a result, their effect tends to be indirect, slow to materialize, and hard to measure.

The Collective Study Sessions of the Politburo: A Multipurpose Tool of China's Central Leadership

Yiyi Lu*

Hu Jintao's initiative

- 1.1 Shortly after China's fourth generation leaders took office in 2002, they introduced a new type of regular Politburo meeting called "collective study sessions." The first such session took place on 26 December 2002. At the meeting, Hu Jintao announced that to better perform their leadership duties, members of the Politburo must "further strengthen our studies." In addition to studying on their own, members would also attend collective study sessions, and this practice would be "institutionalised", i.e., continued on a long-term basis.¹
- 1.2 Since then, 43 collective study sessions have been organised, covering a wide range of topics. While "studying" is an important function of these meetings, as they allow members of the Politburo to acquire the latest information and analyses on specific issues, these meetings have also served a number of other purposes. They have become an important component of the political repertoire of China's current leaders.
- 1.3 The collective study sessions can provide valuable clues to the strategic and policy issues which occupy the minds of China's top leaders at particular times. They send important messages about both new policies and the way they are justified, therefore they can provide a useful perspective on contemporary Chinese politics and should be watched closely by China observers.

Topics and format of the collective study sessions

- 2.1 Most collective study sessions have very broad topics, for example, "China's science and technology development strategy towards 2020", "On our country's effort to become resource efficient", "Persist in ruling the country according to law, constructing socialist political civilisation." (See Appendix for the full list of topics.) Much emphasis is clearly placed on learning about the current international situation relating to a topic and drawing useful lessons from other countries' experience. Of the total 43 sessions, 17 include an introduction to relevant international experience regarding a particular issue followed by analysis of the issue in China, for example, "Systems and measures for ensuring production safety in foreign countries and intensifying the effort to construct a production safety system in China", "Urbanisation models of foreign countries and urbanisation with Chinese characteristics." In addition, 2 sessions are devoted exclusively to the study of the international situation, on "trends of military transformations in the world" and "trends of economic globalisation and new characteristics of international trade" respectively.

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¹ *Renmin Wang* (www.people.com.cn), 26/12/2002, "Hu Jintao: Jiaqiang lingdao ganbu xuexi, tigao zhizheng xingguo benling" [Hu Jintao: Strengthening the study of leading cadres, improving governing skills], <http://news.sohu.com/36/72/news205267236.shtml>, accessed on 22 September 2007.

- 2.2 Most study sessions have focused on concrete policy issues, such as agricultural development, employment, education, health care, the protection of intellectual property rights, and food safety, but a few sessions also dealt with more abstract ideological issues, for example, one session on “striving to build a socialist harmonious society” and another one conducting “a historical review of China’s socialist explorations.”
- 2.3 While the majority of study sessions address contemporary issues, 7 sessions studied history, including 5 sessions on Chinese history and 2 on world history. Of the 5 topics on Chinese history, 4 concern the history of the CPC and its revolutionary struggles. The remaining one probes the history of ethnic relations in China.
- 2.4 The study sessions use the format of lectures followed by a short discussion. The lectures are delivered by experts on the topics who come from universities, government research institutes, and state agencies. Each lecture is delivered by two experts.² Each study session is supposed to last 120 minutes. The two lecturers each speak for 40 minutes, followed by a 30-minute discussion (including questions and answers). Finally, Hu Jintao, who chairs the meetings, spends 10 minutes giving a summing-up speech.³ Apparently some sessions overran the allocated time when members of the Politburo showed great interest in discussing the issues. For example, the session on “a historical review of China’s pursuit of socialism” lasted more than three hours, with over an hour spent on discussions after the lecture.⁴

Preparing for the collective study sessions

- 3.1 The ostensibly straightforward two-hour study sessions are prepared through a highly elaborate process. Although the two lecturers are the central figures at each study session, they are not the only people involved in preparing the lectures. In fact, the texts of the lectures are always produced by a whole team of researchers. The team works on the texts together. In some cases the writing-up of the texts is actually carried out by other members of the team instead of the lecturers. Sometimes more than one research team is asked to prepare a lecture, then “a bidding process” chooses the best team whose text is delivered to the Politburo.⁵
- 3.2 A number of actors work above the research teams to direct the process. The General Office of the Party’s Central Committee is the agency in overall charge. The Central Committee’s Policy Research Office selects the topics for the study sessions. The topics are then handed to relevant central government ministries to prepare. The ministries assemble the research teams and select the lecturers and main writers of the texts, who need to be approved by the General Officer before the preparation of the lectures can proceed. The research teams are usually given three months

² The only exception was the session on 28 April 2003 in which three people delivered lectures.

³ Ma Shiling, 1/3/2007, “Jiexi zhongyang jiti xuexi zhidu 6 mima: xian xuefa er hou zhiguo” [Decipher the 6 codes of the collective study practice: Learning the laws before governing the country], *Xiaokang*, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/5429770.html>, accessed on 22 September 2007.

⁴ Lin Chufang, 7/12/2004, “Zhongyang jiejian renlei wenming he wodang chuantong zhihui, yingde minzhong zhichi” [The central leadership draws inspiration from human civilisation and our party’s traditional wisdom, winning popular support], *Liaowang Dongfang Weekly*, <http://news.sohu.com/20041207/n223368573.shtml>, accessed on 22 September 2007.

⁵ Ma Shiling, “Jiexi zhongyang jiti xuexi zhidu 6 mima.”

to prepare. The final texts of the lectures need to be checked and approved by the General Office and the Policy Research Office. Before the actual lecture, two or three full-dress rehearsals are conducted, which are attended by officials from the relevant ministries, the General Office and the Policy Research Office. The rehearsals allow officials to give detailed advice to the lecturers on their delivery, including comments on their volume, tone, and speech pacing.⁶

Lecturers

- 4.1 Researchers chosen to lecture to the collective study sessions are considered top experts in their fields. Since most study sessions have focused on concrete policy issues, an analysis of the lecturers' affiliations can give an indication as to which research institutions currently have the most influence on policy-making in China.
- 4.2 Although lecturers have been selected from all over the country, nine Beijing-based research and academic institutions, including five government research institutes, the Central Party School, and three elite universities, contributed nearly 60% of the lecturers, which underscores the eminent status and influence of these institutions and their privileged access to central government policy makers. (See Appendix for the full list of the names and affiliations of lecturers.) Of the 87 experts who have lectured to the Politburo, 51 come from these nine institutions. The number of lecturers from each of these institutions is listed below:

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)	14 lecturers
Development Research Centre of the State Council (DRC)	6 lecturers
Renmin University	6 lecturers
Academy of Military Sciences (AMS)	6 lecturers
Central Party School	5 lecturers
Peking University	4 lecturers
Academy of Macroeconomic Research, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC)	4 lecturers
Tsinghua University	3 lecturers
Chinese Academy of Sciences	3 lecturers

- 4.3 Over half of the 87 experts are from government research institutes (including research institutes of the army and the CPC). Only 29 have come from universities. Furthermore, many of the government researchers are from research institutes directly under the central government (including the central military commission and the CPC's Central Committee) or its ministries. In addition to the DRC and the NDRC's Academy of Macroeconomic Research, whose researchers were chosen for most of the economic topics, and the AMS, whose experts covered all but one of the military topics, research institutes under the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Information Industry provided lecturers for issues overseen by these ministries. The prominent role of government researchers in the collective study sessions suggests that research units inside the government still play a vital role in informing decision-making, even though the government has sought to open up the policy process in recent years by soliciting inputs from independent academics in universities.

⁶ Ibid.

Functions of the collective study sessions

- 5.1 The study sessions no doubt serve as opportunities for members of the Politburo to obtain information, analyses, and policy recommendations on specific issues from leading experts in China, but the function of these meetings goes far beyond informing policy-making. They also serve a number of other objectives, including:
- 5.2 **Symbolic and demonstrational effect:** Symbolism has been an essential element of the collective study sessions from the very beginning. The topic of the first session was "studying the Constitution." By choosing this topic, the leaders sent out the message that they were determined to promote the rule of law and uphold the principle of "ruling the country according to law." In later study sessions, topics with symbolic significance were repeatedly chosen. For example, the session "making philosophy and social sciences prosper in China" is clearly designed to show that the leaders support and encourage social science research in China, while the session "persisting in governing the country scientifically, democratically, and according to law" serves to reaffirm the leadership's commitment to these principles.
- 5.3 The leadership also uses the study sessions to set an example for lower-level officials. The organisation of such study sessions itself is intended to signal to all officials that they must devote more time and effort to improving their knowledge and skills. As Hu Jintao said at the first study session: "We must make studying an important task for the entire Party. We should continuously strengthen and push forward our studies, and strive to improve all Party members' command of Marxist theories and level of scientific and cultural sophistication."⁷ Not only do the regular study sessions send the message that the top leaders attach great importance to studies, they also serve to demonstrate their respect for professionalism and specialised knowledge, their emphasis on collective discussions and decision-making, their determination to make the policy-making process more "scientific" and consultative, and their eagerness to learn useful lessons from international experience to improve domestic governance.
- 5.4 In a political culture where the example of top leaders is still considered as having real influence on the behaviour of lower officials and the society at large, the demonstrational effect of the collective study sessions has obviously been factored in by its instigators, while detailed media coverage of every session appears to be calculated to maximize that effect.
- 5.5 **Publicizing and promoting new policies and programmes:** Many study sessions have been used to promote new policies or programmes. All the new programmes of the current leadership, such as "building a new socialist countryside", "building a harmonious society", "maintaining the vanguard character of Party members in the new era", have been made the topics of study sessions. With every study session, including Hu Jintao's speech at the end summarising the actions to be taken and urging party and government officials to carry out their duties, making headline

⁷ Cao Yongming, *Nanfang Wang* (www.southcn.com), 14/10/2005, "Zhongyang zhengzhiju jiti xuexi zhidu jiedu" [Interpreting the central leadership's collective study practice], <http://www.southcn.com/nflr/lizhuanti/zhengz xuex/200510140267.htm>, accessed on 22 September 2007.

news, the leaders can be satisfied that their policies and programmes have received a further boost.

- 5.6 **Commemorating historical events:** To mark the 80th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) on 1 August 2007, the topic chosen for the study session on 26 July 2007 was the Nanchang Uprising, the event which resulted in the establishment of the Red Army, the PLA's predecessor, and history of the Jinggangshan base area, where the Red Army initially developed itself. A couple of other sessions have also been used to commemorate important historical events. The session on 25 July 2006 commemorated the Red Army's Long March 70 years ago, while a session on 26 August 2005 commemorated the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. To hear a lecture on a particular historical event is a clever way of commemorating the event. It can also help to demonstrate the Chinese leadership's attitude towards history: we will not forget the past and are trying to draw useful lessons from history for today.
- 5.7 **Forging consensus among the central leadership:** According to officials in the Party Central Committee's General Office, this is an important objective of the collective study sessions.⁸ Studying an issue together makes it easier for the central leadership to reach consensus on the issue and to agree on a course of action.
- 5.8 **Discovering talent:** From time to time, China's senior officials have picked aides and advisers directly from academia. Scholars who impress senior officials with their knowledge, analytical skills, and strategic vision have gained government posts or places on senior officials' advisory teams overnight. Several experts chosen to lecture to the collective study sessions have obtained senior government posts afterwards. For example, Jiang Xiaojuan, a CASS researcher who lectured at a study session in 2003, was later appointed to the vice ministerial post of deputy director of the State Council's Research Office. Wan Gang, who was President of Tongji University, now heads the Ministry of Science and Technology. Although the decision to promote any individual was probably not based on one lecture alone, the study sessions have allowed China's leaders to interact with talented scholars and form an opinion of their potential, with a view to putting their talent to better use.
- 5.9 **Facilitating policy implementation:** Although informing policy-making is one objective of the collective study sessions, as staff of the Party Central Committee's General Office told reporters, the study sessions are far more important as a tool for policy implementation. Ensuring that the centre's decisions are carried out accurately and efficiently is both a more important objective and a more important effect of the study sessions. "Their effect in enhancing governance capability far exceeds their value in raising the quality of decision-making."⁹
- 5.10 The process of preparing the study sessions bears witness to the truthfulness of this statement. As mentioned above, a number of agencies and a team of researchers are involved in preparing the lectures, which usually takes three months. Therefore, every study session is largely a carefully scripted event instead of a mere occasion for leaders to consult experts on policy or strategic issues. The central leadership has many

⁸ Ma Shiling, "Jiexi zhongyang jiti xuexi zhidu 6 mima."

⁹ Ma Shiling, "Jiexi zhongyang jiti xuexi zhidu 6 mima."

other formal and informal channels for consulting experts on specific issues. Senior officials can invite experts to one-to-one discussions at any time, or they can organise discussions and workshops to which a number of experts are invited. For China's top leaders, the collective study sessions serve a number of purposes, and they are not just there to hear a few lectures.

- 5.11 **Image building:** Finally, the study sessions also allow China's current leaders to build up a distinctive image of themselves which differentiates them from past and future leaders. After the current leadership assumed office, they needed to establish their credibility by articulating new visions for the country, introducing new policies and practices, and demonstrating new leadership styles. The study sessions are one of the new practices to establish the new leadership's distinctive style. One thing the new leaders have advocated is the need to move towards more scientific, democratic, and rule-based governance. The introduction of the collective study sessions serves to project a positive image of the new leaders as people who practice what they advocate. Since the sessions are used to set an example for lower officials, they can also be seen as an innovation in the method of leadership.

Conclusion

- 6.1 The Politburo's collective study sessions can serve a number of purposes for China's top leaders: they facilitate decision-making, consensus building, and policy implementation; they provide justifications for new policies; they establish links between top leaders and the intellectual circles; and they perform important symbolic and image-building functions.
- 6.2 Not only has China's central leadership used the collective study sessions to achieve a number of objectives, social forces have also used them to push forward their agendas. Because of the highly symbolic nature of the study sessions, social forces can interpret them as indicating the leadership's endorsement of policies or principles which they espouse. Consequently they can use the study sessions and their topics to legitimize their own agendas. For example, several sessions studied law-related topics. This gives social forces that wish to see faster progress towards the rule of law an opportunity to advocate more legal and political reforms, using the study sessions as evidence of the leadership's support for such an agenda.
- 6.3 Although the Politburo study sessions have performed some positive functions, it is also important to note their limitations. The study sessions are not designed to deliver immediate, concrete policy outcomes. They are more about symbolism than actual policy-making or implementation, therefore their effect tends to be indirect and hard to measure.

Appendix

Collective study sessions in chronological order

Date	Topic	Lecturers
26 December 2002	Studying the Constitution	Xu Chongde, Renmin University Zhou Yezhong, Wuhan University
28 January 2003	Global economic situation and China's economic development	Yu Yongding and Jiang Xiaojuan, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)
28 March 2003	Global employment trends and analysis of China's employment policies	Zeng Xiangquan, Renmin University Cai Fang, CASS
28 April 2003	Contemporary trends of scientific and technological development and China's scientific and technological development, and using science and technology to strengthen the prevention of SARS	Wang Enge, Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) Xue Lan, Tsinghua University Zeng Guang, China Center for Disease Control and Prevention
23 May 2003	Trends of military transformations in the world	Qian Haihao and Fu Liqun, The Academy of Military Sciences (AMS)
21 July 2003	A historical review of how the Party's ideology and theories have advanced with the times	Zhang Qihua and Zhang Shujun, Research Institute for the History of the CPC, CPC Central Committee
12 August 2003	Development of the cultural industry in the world and China's cultural industry development strategies	Zhang Ximing, CASS Xiong Chengyu, Tsinghua University
29 September 2003	Persist in ruling the country according to law, constructing socialist political civilisation	Lin Shangli, Fudan University Li Lin, CASS
24 November 2003	Examining the development of major countries in the world since the 15 th century	Qi Shirong, Capital Normal University Qian Shengdan, Nanjing University
23 February 2004	World order and China's security environment	Qin Yaqing, China Foreign Affairs University Zhang Yuyan, CASS
29 March 2004	Current agricultural development in the world and China's agricultural development	Cheng Xu, China Agricultural University Ke Bingsheng, Research Center for Rural Economy, Ministry of Agriculture
26 April 2004	Construction of the legal system and improving the socialist market economic system	Wu Zhipan, Peking University Wang Liming, Renmin University
28 May 2004	Making philosophy and social sciences prosper in China	Cheng Enfu, Shanghai University of Finance and

		Economics Li Chongfu, CASS
29 June 2004	On the issue of strengthening the Party's governing capacity	Huang Zongliang, Peking University Lu Xianfu, Party School of the Central Committee of CPC
24 July 2004	Adhering to the principle of pursuing coordinated development of national defence and the economy	Guo Guirong, General Armaments Department of the PLA Luan Enjie, Commission of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defence
21 October 2004	Several issues concerning the history of ethnic relations in China	Yang Shengmin, The Central University for Nationalities Hao Shiyuan, CASS
1 December 2004	A historical review of China's pursuit of socialism	Chen Xuewei and Liu Haitao, Party School of the Central Committee of CPC
27 December 2004	China's science and technology development strategy towards 2020	Sun Honglie, CAS Wan Gang, Tongji University
24 January 2005	Maintaining the vanguard character of Party members in the new era	Li Zhongjie, Research Institute for the History of the CPC, CPC Central Committee Wang Tingda, The National Society for the Building of the Party
21 February 2005	Striving to build a socialist harmonious society	Li Peilin and Jing Tiankui, CASS
15 April 2005	Some issues concerning China's economic and social development strategies	Liu Shijin, Development Research Center of the State Council (DRC) Chen Dongqi, Academy of Macroeconomic Research, National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC)
31 May 2005	Trends of economic globalisation and new characteristics of international trade	Huang Weiping, Renmin University Pei Changhong, CASS
27 June 2005	Situation of the world's energy resources and China's energy resources strategy	Zhang Hongtao, Geological Survey Bureau, Ministry of Land and Resources Zhou Dadi, Academy of Macroeconomic Research, NDRC
26 August 2005	Retrospection and reflections on the anti-fascist world war	Jiang Ying and Luo Yuan, AMS
29 September 2005	Urbanisation models of foreign countries and urbanisation with Chinese	Tang Zilai, Tongji University Zhou Yixing, Beijing

	characteristics	University
25 November 2005	International research on Marxism and the research and construction of Marxist theories in China	Yi Junqing, Heilongjiang University Li Jingyuan, CASS
20 December 2005	Administrative system reform and perfecting economic laws and related legal institutions	Ma Huaide, China University of Political Science and Law Shi Jichun, Renmin University
25 January 2006	On building a new socialist countryside	Qian Keming, Center for the Promotion of Agricultural Trade, Ministry of Agriculture Zhang Xiaoshan, CASS
21 February 2006	Trends of global economic restructuring and China's strategic choice in speeding up the transformation of our economic growth model	Lu Zhongyuan, DRC Wang Yiming, Academy of Macroeconomic Research, NDRC
27 March 2006	Systems and measures for ensuring production safety in foreign countries and intensifying the effort to construct a production safety system in China	Fan Weicheng, Tsinghua University Liu Yiemin, China Academy of Safety Science and Technology
26 May 2006	The protection of intellectual property rights internationally and the development of laws and institutions for IPR protection in China	Zheng Chengsi, CASS Wu Handong, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law
29 June 2006	Persisting in governing the country scientifically, democratically, and according to law	Zhang Zhiming and Zuo Zeyuan, Party School of the Central Committee of CPC
25 July 2006	Retrospection and reflections on the Red Army's Long March	Chen Li and Huang Xing, AMS
29 August 2006	Trends of educational development in the world and deepening the reform of China's education system	Xu Hui, Zhejiang Normal University Zhang Li, National Center for Education Development Research, Ministry of Education
23 October 2006	Health and medical systems in foreign countries and the development of China's health and medical system	Li Lin, Peking University Liu Jun, Chinese Medical Association
30 November 2006	The construction of grassroots democracy in China	Xu Yong, Huazhong Normal University Zhao Shukai, DRC
25 December 2006	On our country's effort to become resource efficient	Feng Fei, DRC Han Wenke, Academy of Macroeconomic Research, NDRC
23 January 2007	Development of internet	Li Wufeng, Internet

	technology in the world and the construction and management of internet culture in China	Communication Bureau, International Communications Office, CPC Central Committee Cao Shumin, China Academy of Telecommunication Research, Ministry of Information Industry
15 February 2007	Regional development in foreign countries and promoting the coordinated growth of different regions of China	Li Shantong, DRC Fan Jie, CAS
24 March 2007	Some issues concerning the drafting and implementation of the Property Law	Liang Huixing, CASS Wang Liming, Renmin University
23 April 2007	China's agricultural standardisation and food safety	Luo Yunbo, China Agricultural University Ye Zhihua, The Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences
26 July 2007	Nanchang Uprising and the establishment of the Jinggangshan base area	Qi Dexue and Huang Yingxu, AMS
28 August 2007	Global financial situation and deepening the reform of China's financial system	Ba Shusong, DRC Li Fu'an, China Banking Regulatory Commission