

Research on the Political Function of College Student Party Branches from the Perspective of Systematic Thinking

Ruihong Lei

School of Education Science, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, Guangdong, China

Abstract: *As an important component of grassroots Party organizations in higher education institutions, college student Party branches shoulder the vital mission of determining for whom and what kind of people to cultivate. Guided by systematic thinking as an essential methodology, these branches must give full play to their political function. However, at present, the political function of student Party branches in some universities faces several challenges: inconsistency between inheritance and innovation, between theory and practice, between Party spirit and mass character, between mission orientation and problem orientation, and between focusing on the “key minority” and managing the “vast majority.” To fully leverage the student Party branch’s role as a fighting fortress, it is necessary to adopt a holistic perspective and implement a scientific strategic approach: adhere to historical thinking to continuously deepen the exploration of regularities in student Party branch construction; apply strategic thinking to align with the overall objectives of Party branch development; emphasize dialectical thinking to achieve self-adjustment in branch building; advocate innovative thinking to enhance the political vitality of student Party branches in the new era; follow rule-of-law thinking to improve their purity; and strengthen bottom-line thinking to shoulder the responsibility of preventing and resolving political risks.*

Keywords: *College Student Party Branch; Systematic Thinking; Political Function*

1. Introduction

The political function of grassroots Party organizations in higher education institutions refers to the positive effectiveness they exert in maintaining their own advancement and purity, resolving student conflicts, guiding campus cultural development, and consolidating the Party’s influence among students.[1] The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) adjusted the deployment of grassroots Party building to “strengthen the political and organizational functions of Party organizations.”[2] From the “emphasis on political function” proposed at the 19th Congress to the “strengthening of political function” at the 20th Congress, this change represents a shift from existence to reinforcement — affirming the positive achievements of grassroots Party building while setting higher requirements. Such adjustments and raised expectations necessitate new guiding methods, as the constituent elements and internal connections of political function determine that strengthening grassroots Party building in colleges is a vast and complex systematic project. The 20th CPC National Congress formally identified “adhering to systematic thinking” as one of the six essential worldviews, emphasizing that “everything in the world is interconnected and interdependent. Only by observing things from a perspective of universal connection, comprehensiveness, and dynamic development can we grasp the laws governing their development.”[3] As an important part of grassroots Party organizations in universities, college student Party branches “shoulder the significant task of studying, researching, and promoting Marxism, and cultivating builders and successors for the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics.”[4] Placing college Party building work under the perspective of systematic thinking and conducting a holistic analysis is conducive to deploying strategic tasks scientifically from multiple angles and in an all-round manner.

2. The Methodological Significance of Applying Systematic Thinking to the Political Function of Student Party Branches

China adheres to systematic planning and coordinated advancement in promoting the various undertakings of the Party and the nation. Based on new practical needs, it has formed a series of new

layouts and new strategies... In this process, systematic thinking serves as a fundamental ideological and working approach.[5] It is evident that systematic thinking holds significant methodological value. As an important platform for political education among student Party members in universities, college student Party branches require the guidance of systematic thinking to give full play to their political function. The methodological significance of this can be analyzed from the perspective of its constituent elements.

A system is “an organic whole composed of certain elements that interact, interrelate, and constrain each other to perform specific functions.”[6] Therefore, adhering to systematic thinking first requires analyzing the elements of a given matter; the same applies to examining the structural foundation of the political function of student Party branches. The key elements of the political function of student Party branches can be divided into four dimensions:

(1) Political Leadership. The Regulations on the Work of CPC’s Grassroots Organizations in Regular Institutions of Higher Learning (hereinafter referred to as the Regulations), revised and issued by the CPC Central Committee, stipulate that student Party branches should strengthen ideological and political guidance, solidify students’ ideals and beliefs, and guide them to study diligently, develop comprehensively, and grow healthily. The Regulations identify “publicizing and implementing the Party’s line, principles, policies, and resolutions of higher-level Party organizations” as the primary duty of student Party organizations. As the final link in implementing strict Party governance in colleges and universities, the foremost and core content of the political function of student Party branches lies in political leadership—upholding firm political positions, directions, principles, and paths within classes and student groups. They should play a gatekeeping role in class and student organizations, guiding them to advance along the correct political direction and ensuring that students consistently adhere to proper values.

(2) Political Education. According to the Regulations, Article 2 specifies that student Party branches should “strengthen the education, management, supervision, and service of student Party members,” while Article 5 states that “ideological and political education should be carried out in a targeted manner according to students’ characteristics.” As a bridge linking teachers and Party members, as well as Party members and non-Party students, student Party branches should take the initiative to thoroughly study, publicize, and implement the guiding principles of the 20th National Congress of the CPC. By organizing themed lectures, book-sharing sessions, and other activities, they can stimulate students’ intrinsic motivation for growth; by encouraging attention to current affairs and classical cultural works, they can broaden students’ horizons and improve their critical thinking and overall competence. Moreover, they should educate students to consciously practice the core socialist values and actively devote themselves to the grand cause of building Chinese modernization.

(3) Political Cohesion and Political Inclusion. Articles 3 and 4 of the Regulations stipulate that student Party branches should “organize student Party members to participate in student affairs management and maintain campus stability; support, guide, and assist League branches, class committees, and student associations in carrying out work according to students’ characteristics, and give full play to the exemplary role of student Party members who retain Communist Youth League membership;” and “cultivate and educate active applicants for Party membership among students and develop student Party members in accordance with standards and procedures.” For internal Party members — including active applicants, development targets, probationary members, and full Party members — branches should strictly uphold political standards, emphasizing the cultivation of political literacy and political competence. For non-Party students—including Youth League members, the general student body, and those in difficulty—the branches should leverage the advantages of the united front, using the power of role models to attract outstanding individuals and unite all reliable forces around the Party organization. By consolidating and attracting outstanding talents, college student Party branches can ensure lasting vitality.

(4) Political Supervision. Article 2 of the Regulations also requires student Party branches to “strengthen the education, management, supervision, and service of student Party members; hold organizational life meetings regularly; and conduct criticism and self-criticism. Student Party members should play exemplary and pioneering roles to influence and motivate the wider student body to clarify their learning goals and fulfill academic tasks.” Through organizational life meetings, Party branches can encourage members to engage in self-reflection and constructive criticism; by staying close to students and listening extensively to feedback from Party members, they can understand members’ political stance and work style; and through effective political supervision, they can foster a clean, upright, positive, and healthy political ecosystem within the student Party branch.

Adhering to systematic thinking means making the operational logic of student Party branch development visible through these four dimensions, ultimately achieving an ideal state characterized by order, coupling, coordination, and synergy.

3. Challenges in Enhancing the Political Function of Student Party Branches from the Perspective of Systematic Thinking

Under the guidance of systematic thinking as a scientific methodology, strengthening the construction of student Party branches requires a consistent commitment to analyzing and addressing problems systematically, comprehensively, and developmentally. Only in this way can fixed patterns of thinking be broken, work methods innovated, and the political function of grassroots Party branches effectively strengthened. At present, the enhancement of political functions in college student Party branches faces the following challenges:

3.1 Inconsistency between Inheritance and Innovation

All work results from the unity of inheritance and innovation — inheritance serves as the foundation for innovation, while innovation ensures more effective outcomes. In December 2016, at the National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities, President Xi emphasized that “ideological and political work in universities concerns the fundamental question of what kind of people universities cultivate, how they cultivate them, and for whom they cultivate them.” College student Party branches, as key platforms for ideological and political education, must always carry out work centered on the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, lead all Party members in studying the Party’s political programs, lines, policies, and disciplines, and disseminate the Party’s ideology among young student members. This enhances the political consciousness of all members and ensures that the Party maintains discourse power and initiative in the ideological field of higher education. However, from the perspective of innovation, some student Party branches currently exhibit issues such as superficial theoretical study, weak integration with career development, and disconnection from students’ academic majors. Organizational life within some branches remains overly monotonous, leading to low engagement and unsatisfactory learning outcomes, with little theoretical gain. In addition, deficiencies exist in the innovation vitality of management concepts, working methods, content design, and safeguard mechanisms.

3.2 Inconsistency between Theoretical and Practical Dimensions

Enhancing the political function of student Party branches is a systematic project that requires the unity of theory and practice. The logical process of “practice–understanding–re-practice–re-understanding” represents a scientific summary of work and serves as an action guide for rationalizing, standardizing, and professionalizing the political development of student Party branches. However, investigations show that many current student Party branches suffer from a disconnection between theory and practice. First, the learning materials are often complex and highly theoretical, requiring a solid foundation and proper study methods. Yet, many branch secretaries themselves lack sufficient theoretical grounding in political science, making it difficult to provide effective learning guidance. For student Party members with short Party tenure, abstract theoretical learning becomes even harder to comprehend. Second, many activities fail to integrate with the academic and professional realities of student Party members. University students primarily aim to pursue specialized knowledge and skills to realize their career aspirations; as advanced representatives within the student body, student Party members should prioritize academic excellence and play a leading role. However, many Party branch activities are limited to administrative Party affairs, with few opportunities for external practice. Even when external activities occur, they often focus solely on visits to revolutionary sites, making it difficult to establish meaningful connections between Party learning and professional development. Over time, student Party members may view Party activities as a burden, reducing enthusiasm and weakening their exemplary influence within their classes and student organizations.

3.3 Inconsistency between Party Spirit and Mass Orientation

Value orientation serves as a guiding force for all elements within a complex system, and the unity of Party spirit and mass orientation represents a core value concept embedded in the systematic

construction of student Party branches. All work of the Party “must closely align with winning the hearts of the people, which is the greatest form of politics.”[7] Therefore, the ultimate goal of enhancing the political function of student Party branches must be to serve and benefit all students. At present, the political function of some student Party branches faces issues of weakening, superficiality, and marginalization. First, the issue of weakening is reflected in the fact that many branches tend to focus more on being accountable “upward” than “downward,” paying insufficient attention to the learning and daily lives of the student body. Some Party members become detached from their peers, maintaining little contact with ordinary students in academic or daily settings, and even becoming “invisible Party members.” Second, the issue of superficiality manifests in inadequate political and ideological guidance for the broader student population. Some student Party branches devote more effort to guiding active applicants, development targets, and probationary members, while providing limited follow-up education for other students. This results in a situation where enthusiasm is high at the upper levels, moderate in the middle, and weak at the lower levels. Third, the issue of marginalization is evident in weak links between Party branch work and class or League activities. The integration between student Party branch initiatives and ideological-political education remains insufficient, failing to fully realize the synergistic effect of “Party building leading League building and promoting class development.”

3.4 Lack of Unity between Mission Guidance and Problem Orientation

Mission guidance serves as both the compass and the driving force for problem-solving, providing direction and defining the path forward. Problem-solving, in turn, acts as the touchstone and propeller for mission guidance. Upholding the organic unity between mission guidance and problem orientation is a vital means of strengthening the political function of student Party branches from a systems perspective. The original aspiration and mission of our Party — to seek happiness for the Chinese people and rejuvenation for the Chinese nation — require all members of student Party branches to possess a strong sense of mission, to face problems head-on, and to be courageous in overcoming difficulties. However, many Party branches’ mission guidance remains at the level of slogans and reports; they fail to identify and resolve real problems, and often shy away from tackling difficult issues. For example, in organizational life meetings held by student Party branches, several problems persist: First, the subject consciousness of student Party members is weak. They fail to recognize their role as masters within the organization, display ideological deviations, prioritize personal interests over collective interests, and rarely take the initiative to report personal or peer issues to the Party organization. Second, organizational life lacks sufficient pertinence and fails to serve its educational and guiding functions. As a result, many branch members perceive such meetings as taking away from their study or social practice time, leading to psychological resistance toward participation. Third, there is a lack of seriousness, especially in carrying out criticism and self-criticism. In some cases, criticism is performed merely to meet inspection requirements, rather than achieving the intended effect of “blushing and sweating,” which should be normalized in Party life.

3.5 Lack of Unity between Managing the “Key Minority” and the “Vast Majority”

Every system represents an organic unity of parts and the whole. To ensure effective system operation, it is necessary to coordinate the relationship between these two dimensions. Accordingly, the operation of the political function system of student Party branches requires both focusing on the “key minority,” who serve as exemplary leaders, and managing the “vast majority,” who embody the collective strength of all members. As the saying goes, “A single blossom does not make spring; a hundred flowers in full bloom bring spring to the garden.” The two aspects are complementary and indispensable. At present, some student Party branches excessively emphasize the “key minority” while neglecting the “vast majority.” Overemphasis on the “key minority” manifests in the continuous demands placed on diligent and dedicated Party members — urging them to “contribute” and “sacrifice” — while their individual needs, subject status, and democratic rights are often overlooked. Conversely, the “vast majority” of Party members receive lower expectations and unclear task assignments. This leads to a situation in which capable members are repeatedly overburdened, while less active members remain idle. In some student Party branches composed mainly of soon-to-graduate members, this imbalance is even more pronounced. When these graduating Party members leave for internships or job hunting, the branches are left with very few active members—sometimes only probationary Party members—making it impossible to carry out regular Party activities. As a result, such branches become hollow in structure and function.

4. Scientific Strategies for Applying the Systems Concept to the Political Function of University Student Party Branches

To solve problems systematically is to be scientific; solutions that are fragmented, even if correct, cannot be considered scientific.[8] We must “consciously break the mindset of being confined to our own ‘one mu and three fen of land,’”[9] and “grasp the relationship between the whole and the part, the present and the long term... constantly improving our capacity for strategic thinking, historical thinking, dialectical thinking, systematic thinking, innovative thinking, legal thinking, and bottom-line thinking.”[3] These important statements inspire us that strengthening the political function of student Party branches must begin from a holistic perspective. It is necessary to apply the systems concept to address various problems comprehensively, enabling the political function to extend to every “nerve ending” of the organizational body, thereby fully exerting the role of the Party branch as a strong fighting fortress.

4.1 Adhering to Historical Thinking to Continuously Deepen the Exploration of the Rules of Student Party Branch Construction

History possesses guidance, inspiration, and foresight; historical thinking directs the present, enlightens reality, and plans for the future. Strengthening forward-looking thinking is a primary requirement of the systems concept methodology. “History, reality, and the future are interconnected. History is the past reality, and reality is the future history.”[10] Connecting historical, present, and future development in thought provides an important guide for work. Continuously deepening the exploration of the rules of student Party branch construction requires adhering to historical thinking, applying a historical perspective, summarizing historical experience, and being adept at drawing political wisdom from it.

The construction of student Party branches is based on the political wisdom accumulated and condensed by young students across various historical stages of revolution, construction, and reform. During the May Fourth Movement, youth students played a vanguard role, risking their lives to save the nation and rejuvenate China, demonstrating noble patriotism and fearless revolutionary heroism. During the socialist transformation period, young people actively participated in all aspects of national construction, studying and publicizing the Party’s lines, principles, and policies, engaging in frontline industrial and agricultural production, and carrying out literacy campaigns and amateur cultural activities. These efforts greatly contributed to the smooth completion of socialist transformation and a stable societal transition. During the critical period of reform, opening up, and building a moderately prosperous society, young people upheld the shared ideals of socialism with Chinese characteristics, carried the banner of the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and inherited the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, guided by its theoretical system as the standard of truth and value.

The political wisdom accumulated by young people throughout these periods has effectively guided the construction of student Party branches. Currently, enhancing the political function of university student Party branches requires adherence to historical thinking — drawing nourishment from history, connecting the past, guiding the present, and serving the future. First, the political education function of red culture resources can be fully leveraged. “Red is the brightest foundational color of the People’s Republic of China. Across China’s vast 9.6 million square kilometers, red resources are distributed like stars, and throughout the century-long struggle to unite and lead the Chinese people, the red bloodline has been passed down through generations.”[11] Through field visits, storytelling of revolutionary history, and inheriting the red gene, students’ red cultural literacy can be enhanced through multiple channels, perspectives, and dimensions. Second, the political education function of the study of the four histories should be fully utilized. By learning Party history, the history of New China, the history of reform and opening up, and the history of socialist development, branch members’ historical thinking and theoretical literacy can be comprehensively improved. Third, the political education function of volunteer activities should be fully leveraged. By guiding student Party members to integrate their professional expertise in rural and community volunteer services—such as caring for the elderly, targeted poverty alleviation, rural technological support, and volunteer teaching—they can practice the spirit of volunteerism.

4.2 Applying Strategic Thinking to Anchor the Overall Development Goals of Student Party Branches

Strategic thinking is a crucial dimension of adhering to the systems concept. Its purpose is to arrange and coordinate all system elements to determine the positioning and trajectory of the system as a whole. “Strategic issues are fundamental issues for a political party and a country.”[12] In the work of student Party branch teams, strategic thinking should be fully applied to overcome short-sightedness, grasp the overall situation, and approach problems and solutions from a holistic and high-level perspective, thereby safeguarding the Party’s core leadership position within the student body and serving effectively as a bridge connecting faculty and students.

Fully applying strategic thinking requires both precise planning and long-term arrangements. First, it is necessary to base actions on the current status of student Party branch construction in the new era, enhance political functions, break through development bottlenecks, innovate organizational management strategies, and stimulate the branch’s management advantages in learning, education, publicity, service, cohesion, supervision, and innovation. This will promote the scientific and standardized development of Party branch construction and management. Second, it is necessary to consider the broader environment of the new era, integrating internal and external human, material, financial, and environmental resources of the Party branch, and optimizing their allocation. A clear organizational framework with defined objectives and responsibilities should be established to address problems such as weakened, superficial, and marginalized organizational functions, achieving balanced and coordinated development of the student Party branch. Third, precise planning and long-term design must align with the central work of higher-level Party organizations, consider the growth and development needs of students, and comprehensively plan the development blueprint of the Party branch. The management system of the branch should be flexibly improved to ensure the branch is guided in the right direction.

4.3 Emphasizing Dialectical Thinking to Achieve Self-Adjustment in Student Party Branch Construction

According to the systemic principle of process, the construction of student Party branches is also an organic process of self-adjustment for grassroots Party organizations. Dialectical thinking should be applied to properly handle various relationships. “The deeper our cause develops, the more we need to continuously strengthen our capacity for dialectical thinking.”[13] “When we consider issues, make decisions, or carry out work, we must not see things in terms of ‘either-or’; we must use dialectics, apply the principle of two points, and seek balance.”[14]

Applying dialectical thinking to enhance the political function of university student Party branches means identifying the principal contradictions and their main aspects, adhering to the principle of focusing on key points. The most critical factor in improving political function is people; addressing the “key individuals” and leveraging the role of leaders is a concentrated manifestation of dialectical thinking in political function enhancement. First, the student Party branch secretary serves as the organizational leader. Selecting and strengthening the branch secretary is key to enhancing the leadership of the Party committee. The branch secretary should be a counselor or full-time teacher with strong political quality, high theoretical level, and strong sense of responsibility. The deputy secretary should be an outstanding student Party member with strong learning ability, responsibility, and credibility. By utilizing the deputy secretary’s close contact with other student Party members and the wider student body, the branch secretary can understand overall ideological dynamics and implement ideological and political work in detail. Second, it is essential to continuously improve the personal qualities and theoretical level of the “key individuals.” Counselors should focus closely on the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, following the six requirements of “strong political awareness, deep sentiment, innovative thinking, broad vision, strict self-discipline, and upright character.” They should adhere to standards encompassing “political and academic rigor, value and knowledge integration, constructive and critical perspectives, theoretical and practical balance, unity and diversity, leadership and subjectivity, instillation and inspiration, explicit and implicit education,” continuously enhancing their persuasive communication, analytical, and organizational planning abilities. In turn, these abilities can be leveraged to improve the teamwork of the branch committee, strengthening the overall construction of the committee.

In addition to focusing on “key individuals,” dialectical thinking should be applied with a developmental perspective. Currently, student Party branches face severe social challenges, especially

with the increasingly complex international environment and significant penetration of Western ideological values, which can lead to issues such as impure thought, conduct, and organizational integrity. Therefore, Party branches must continuously reflect during the learning process, improving their capacity for self-purification, self-perfection, and self-renewal.

4.4 Advocating Innovative Thinking to Enhance the Vitality and Dynamism of Student Party Branch Leaders

Von Bertalanffy stated: “From the perspective of their true nature and definition, systems are not closed. Every living organism is essentially an open system.”[15] This indicates that all systems are inherently open. The construction system of student Party branches is also open, dynamically developing through continuous interaction with the external environment. This requires the use of innovative thinking to enhance the vitality and dynamism of the political functions of student Party branches.

The construction of a “three-type” student Party branch has always been our goal. First, it’s necessary to promote theoretical innovation in step with the times. Strengthening the construction of student Party branches is a process of constantly exploring new ideas and perspectives in work, which essentially constitutes theoretical innovative development. Second, it’s necessary to promote practical innovation in response to circumstances. Innovative student Party branches require student Party members to adopt innovative thinking, organically combining their professional knowledge with the thought of socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era, and transforming it into innovative scientific research outcomes. Third, it’s necessary to collaboratively advance mechanisms for coordination and innovation. Guided by the concept of all-around education, coordination involves relationships among student Party branches and teacher Party branches, student Party branches and Youth League branches, class collectives, dormitories, and student associations. Corresponding collaborative mechanisms for co-construction, linkage, and accountability should be established to truly “build the branch on the front line” and fully leverage the ideological and political education function of student Party branches. Fourth is positive incentives. It’s necessary to improve the reward and punishment system and establish a positive incentive mechanism. Considering the ideological and psychological characteristics of post-2000 students, multiple forms of motivation—goal incentives, achievement incentives, and identity incentives—should be applied to stimulate student Party members’ initiative, enhance their sense of identity, achievement, and belonging, and create a favorable atmosphere for striving to become qualified Party members.

4.5 Following the Rule-of-Law Thinking to Enhance the Purity of Student Party Branches

“All levels of leadership should improve their ability to apply rule-of-law thinking and approaches... and promote all work along the track of the rule of law.”[16] Therefore, strengthening the political construction of student Party branches must fundamentally follow rule-of-law thinking, guiding branch members to learn, abide by, and understand the law, strictly observe political discipline, and rigorously implement organizational regulations while emphasizing the seriousness of organizational life. First, it’s necessary to educate and guide each student Party member to respect and implement the Party Constitution, Party discipline, and Party regulations, leading them to internalize and externalize these principles, firmly establishing awareness of the Party Constitution and Party rules. Second, it’s necessary to strictly enforce the Party’s organizational life system, conducting “Three Meetings and One Lesson,” organizational life meetings, and democratic life meetings on schedule. Organizational life should focus on political learning and education, uphold political discipline, strictly implement the democratic evaluation system for Party members, timely recognize outstanding members, and correct those with weak Party consciousness, making “red faces and sweating” a regular practice to continuously improve member quality and enhance the purity of the Party organization. Third, it’s necessary to strengthen branch supervision and establish strict daily spot checks, quarterly inspections, and year-end evaluations to ensure standardized organizational management.

4.6 Strengthening Bottom-Line Thinking and Taking Responsibility for Preventing and Resolving Political Risks

Strengthening bottom-line thinking is an inherent requirement of adhering to a systems perspective. The report of the 20th National Congress of the CPC states: “China’s development has entered a period where strategic opportunities coexist with risks and challenges... it is necessary to strengthen risk

awareness, adhere to bottom-line thinking, remain vigilant in times of peace, and prepare for the unforeseen.”[17] Specifically, for student Party branch construction, it means being “adept at using the method of bottom-line thinking, preparing for the worst while striving for the best results,”[18] firmly grasping the initiative in preventing and resolving political risks.

First, it’s clarifying the bottom line. Political discipline and moral standards must be treated as inviolable “warning lines.” Students should view integrity and self-discipline as the foundation of self-cultivation and conduct, ensuring caution in thoughts, words, and actions. Second, it’s maintaining the bottom line. They should use advanced models as examples to identify deficiencies and address gaps, and learn from negative cases to recognize harms, draw lessons, and self-correct. By upholding political bottom lines, branches cultivate political resolve. Third, it’s striving for the high line. Some student Party members fear making mistakes and adopt a passive “do nothing, make no mistakes” mindset, which misinterprets bottom-line thinking and may serve as an excuse for inaction.

5. Conclusion

In summary, bottom-line thinking is a proactive mindset based on clearly defining the bottom line, adhering to it, and striving for higher standards. Student Party branches must endure tests while achieving progress, leading the branch to greater heights.

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