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States often deploy public education to instill official ideology and advance state-building. Yet schooling can also enlighten and empower; when it reaches disadvantaged groups, it may nurture challengers to the state. This paper examines this paradox in the context of the Nationalist government's 1930s expansion of tuition-free secondary teachers' schools. Using a panel dataset covering 1,697 counties, we show that counties with more teachers' schools were more likely to establish Chinese Communist Party (CCP) county committees from March 1938 onward, when the CCP resumed mass recruitment and readmitted intellectuals. Two mechanisms account for this pattern. First, tuition-free teachers' schools created a pool of educated youth from non-elite backgrounds who, given their origins, were especially receptive to CCP appeals. Second, following the 1927 KMT–CCP split, many CCP intellectuals fled to the countryside and taught covertly, giving students at rural teachers' schools greater exposure to communism.

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Abstract

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Keywords: State Building, Teachers' School, Chinese Communist Party

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1 Introduction

Investment in public education is widely regarded as a core state-building strategy. By transmitting official ideology and codified knowledge, and by standardizing language and script, schooling fosters citizens’ identification with the nation, the state, and the prevailing social order (Aghion et al., 2019; Alesina et al., 2020, 2021; Cantoni et al., 2017; Clots-Figueras and Masella, 2013; Darden and Grzymala-Busse, 2006; Hobbsbawm, 1992; Paglayan, 2021, 2022; Ramirez and Boli, 1987; Tilly, 1975; Weber, 1976). Yet education also serves to enlighten and empower: it broadens horizons, fosters self- and class-consciousness, nurtures rational inquiry and critical thinking, strengthens social responsibility, and builds civic competence. When such enlightenment and empowerment extend to socially disadvantaged groups, they can enable collective mobilization, amplify claims-making, and even pose challenges to established authority (Almond and Verba, 1963; Barro, 1999; Glaeser et al., 2007; Kung and Wang, 2025; Lipset, 1959; Papaioannou and Siourounis, 2008; Randers-Pehrson, 2001).

Focusing on the Nanjing Nationalist government’s 1930s expansion of teachers’ schools (also known as normal schools), this paper examines how a state-building education initiative paradoxically facilitated the spread of the Communist revolution in China. After coming to power in the late 1920s, the Kuomintang (KMT) recognized that pervasive illiteracy, especially in rural areas, posed a major obstacle to effective policy implementation and modern state-building. To alleviate an acute teacher shortage for mass schooling, the KMT promulgated the *Teachers’ Schools Law* in 1932. The law separated teachers’ schools from the general secondary system, reinstated tuition waivers and standardized the curriculum with an emphasis on KMT ideological instruction. It also prioritized establishing “simplified (*jianyi*)” and “village (*xiangcun*)” teachers’ schools (hereafter, *SV teachers’ schools*) in small towns and villages, specifically to train rural primary-school teachers.

Teachers’ schools expanded rapidly in the early 1930s. Unlike other forms of secondary education that primarily served elites, tuition-free teachers’ schools opened access to high-achieving youths from non-elite rural households. Many of them had grown up in poverty. Their life experiences made them receptive to communist ideas that promised a radical end to class inequality. As secondary education deepened their political awareness and strengthened their organizational skills, they were especially likely to become potential revolutionary leaders.

Exposure to communist ideology was also important for alignment with the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter, *CCP*) (Bai et al., 2023). Following the 1927 KMT–CCP split and subsequent purges, many CCP activists relocated to the countryside, with intellectuals often taking teaching and school-administration posts as a cover for clandestine organizing. Conse-

quently, students at SV teachers' schools in remote rural areas, as well as village primary-school teachers, came into direct contact with communist ideas and were drawn into emerging revolutionary networks (Cong, 2007; Liu, 2008).

When assigned back to their home villages as primary-school teachers, these graduates were well positioned to organize local revolutionary mobilization. They combined intimate knowledge of local conditions with the prestige and wide social networks of the teaching profession. Routine classroom activities and school premises offered cover and provided venues for propaganda, organization, and mobilization. Archival records indicate that many early rural CCP organizations emerged from village primary schools (Ding, 2007; Liu, 2008).

Although the KMT's reform of teachers' schools created a local pool of such potential revolutionaries, their widespread rise as Communist leaders became possible only after a major demand-side shift within the CCP that began in March 1938, when the Party resumed mass recruitment and reversed its early-1930s marginalization of intellectuals. Exploiting this 1938 recruitment policy change, we use a difference-in-differences (DiD) design to examine whether counties with different numbers of teachers' schools—and thus plausibly different local pools of young intellectuals inclined toward communism—responded differentially to this shift.

We assemble a panel dataset of 1,697 counties spanning the 1930s through the end of Sino-Japanese War in 1945, tracking the establishment of teachers' schools and CCP county committees—the Party's core local leadership bodies. Baseline estimates show that one additional teachers' school in the early 1930s is associated with an 7.2 percentage-point increase in the probability of establishing a CCP county committee after the 1938 policy change, about 30% of the study-period mean. Combining yearly and monthly data, we find no pre-trends before March 1938. Furthermore, to assess whether teachers' schools cultivated local revolutionary leaders, we examine the relationship between the presence of teachers' schools and the number of locally born CCP cadres and members. We find that one additional teachers' school established in the early 1930s is associated with a 12.7% increase in the number of CCP cadres during 1937–1945 and an 11.1% increase in CCP membership by 1950. Individual-level evidence also shows that attending a Nationalist-era teachers' school significantly raised the probability of subsequent CCP entry.

There are two major concerns about our baseline findings. First, the estimated effects may not actually reflect the role of teachers' schools. For instance, the positive post-1938 correlation may be driven by the north-skewed distribution of teachers' schools and the simultaneous intensification of CCP expansion in northern China after the Central Committee relocated to Yan'an (northern Shaanxi) in 1937. We address this by controlling for distance to Yan'an and by estimating the baseline separately for counties in southern versus northern provinces.

We find no significant effect of distance to Yan'an, and the effect of teachers' schools remains positive and significant in both subsamples for the post-1938 period. These results indicate that our findings are not mechanically driven by northern concentration of teachers' schools and post-1938 CCP county committees.

Another concern is that the post-1938 impact of teachers' schools may reflect wartime patriotism rather than the CCP's recruitment shift. Students in Japanese-occupied areas might have joined the CCP to resist aggression irrespective of policy (Chen and Kung, 2024; Johnson, 1962). We address this by estimating a model that allows for a triple teachers'-school effect based on the post-1938 dummy and local invasion status. The results suggest that invasion-induced patriotism amplified the post-1938 effect; nevertheless, the post-1938 effect of teachers' schools remains statistically and economically significant even in unoccupied counties. By contrast, before 1938, when the CCP had not yet adjusted its recruitment policy, teachers' schools show no positive effect, including in areas already under occupation. These patterns indicate that the CCP's strategic recruitment shift, rather than wartime patriotism alone, was pivotal to the role of teachers' schools in expanding the Party's organization.

To address endogeneity from omitted factors whose influence may differ before and after 1938, we employ an instrumental-variables (IV) approach. We instrument a county's number of teachers' schools with its geographic distance to Ding County (Hebei), which was the demonstration site of the Mass Education Movement led by the Chinese Association for the Promotion of Mass Education (*Zhonghua pingmin jiaoyu cujin hui*; hereafter *CAPME*). CAPME's experiments in mass education and teachers' training in Ding County received official endorsement from the Nationalist Government; many local governments sent delegations to Ding County or invited reformers from there to assist with local initiatives, generating diffusion outward from Ding County. Consistent with this historical evidence, counties closer to Ding County were much more likely to host teachers' schools in the early 1930s. We also show that distance to Ding County is unlikely to influence CCP expansion through alternative channels. Using this instrument, our two-stage estimates corroborate the baseline DiD results.

Why did teachers' schools facilitate CCP expansion rather than consolidate KMT state power? We examine several mechanisms. First, tuition-free public teachers' schools broadened access to secondary schooling for non-elite youth, who were more inclined to challenge the status quo and thus more likely to align with the CCP. To assess whether the political consequences of secondary schooling varied by students' social origins, we contrast public teachers' schools with fee-charging general secondary schools and private teachers' schools, both of which primarily enrolled students from elite families. However, we find no comparable effects of these elite-serving institutions on CCP expansion. Moreover, we show that the number of teachers' schools

before the KMT's 1932 reform is not positively associated with CCP expansion after 1938. This suggests that, prior to the restoration of tuition-free policies in 1932, teachers' schools had not yet become a major channel for poor youths, and their students did not systematically exhibit stronger communist leanings. Additionally, we find that the effect of teachers' schools on CCP organizational expansion is stronger in poorer counties and in counties with higher shares of self-cultivator households. Taken together, these results provide strong support for the non-elite access mechanism.

A second mechanism posits that restricted career paths and low salaries bred grievances aligning teachers' school students with Communist ideas. Since tuition waivers carried service obligations, most graduates were assigned to village primary schools with modest pay. Yet, using county education spending as a proxy for compensation, we find no heterogeneous effect of pay on the relationship between teachers' schools and CCP expansion, suggesting that remuneration was not the main channel.

Third, we test whether greater exposure to Communist ideas among students and graduates of SV teachers' schools accelerated CCP organizational expansion. After 1927, many early CCP intellectuals retreated to the countryside to escape persecution and took rural teaching posts as cover. Empirically, we proxy a county's likelihood of sheltering such intellectuals by its proximity (inverse distance) to CCP branches established between 1921 and 1927 in secondary or higher schools, which were mainly located in major cities and had a high concentration of intellectual Party members. We find that greater proximity strengthens the positive effect of SV teachers' schools on post-1938 CCP organizational expansion. By contrast, proximity to these branches does not amplify the impact of provincial or non-SV teachers' schools, which were typically located in urban areas or county seats and were ill-suited to providing cover for persecuted CCP members. These results suggest that, after 1927, SV teachers' schools enjoyed a greater advantage than non-SV teachers' schools and other urban schools in exposing students to communist ideas and organizations.

Finally, we assess whether teachers' schools contributed to CCP organizational growth by expanding primary schooling and thereby raising political awareness among the broader population. The evidence does not support this channel: expansion of primary schooling does not predict CCP organizational growth, whereas the effect of teachers' schools remains robust after conditioning on primary-school coverage. The results suggest that teachers' schools advanced CCP expansion primarily by cultivating local revolutionary leaders, rather than by diffusing Communist ideology through primary education.

This paper advances our understanding of the relationship between education and state-building. A large body of scholarship argues that ruling elites expand education to instill

particular ideologies, thereby strengthening social control and consolidating political power (Alesina et al., 2021; Cantoni et al., 2017; Paglayan, 2021, 2022; Ramirez and Boli, 1987). In this perspective, education functions as a central instrument of state-building. By contrast, we argue that when the ideology that rulers seek to inculcate through schooling conflicts with recipients’ class interests and social ideals, it is unlikely to yield the intended consolidating effects. In particular, when high-ability youth from non-elite backgrounds gain access to elite schooling, which equips them with deeper political awareness and stronger social and organizational skills, they can become leading challengers to the prevailing political order. As Randers-Pehrson (2001) aptly noted, “If the revolution had a core, it was the young educated elite.”

Our study also sheds new light on why the communist revolution expanded and ultimately prevailed in China. While influential accounts emphasize peasant hardship, unequal landholding, or the Japanese invasion (Chen and Kung, 2024; Hofheinz, 1977; Huang, 1985; Johnson, 1962; Selden, 2016; Skocpol, 1979; Thaxton, 1983), large-scale mobilization and diffusion of revolutionary ideas required an infrastructure of intellectual leadership at the grassroots (Bai et al., 2023; Chen, 2002, 2021; Perry, 2012; Schurmann, 2022). Historians Cong (2007) and Liu (2008) argue that teachers’ school students and rural primary-school teachers were pivotal to the CCP’s grassroots expansion and provide rich qualitative evidence. Our paper is the first economic study to offer systematic empirical evidence on this hypothesis and to identify specific mechanisms. We also show that the contribution of teachers’ schools to the communist revolution depended critically on the KMT’s tuition-free reform and on the CCP’s renewed openness toward intellectuals. Our study helps explain why the Chinese communist revolution succeeded by highlighting the key agents who translated communist ideology into rural revolutionary practice.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides historical background. Section 3 describes the data and presents summary statistics. Section 4 reports baseline estimates, robustness checks, and instrumental-variables (IV) estimates. Section 5 examines mechanisms. Section 6 concludes.

2 Historical Background

2.1 State-Building and Teachers’ School Reform under the Nationalist Government

Following its establishment in 1928, the Nanjing National Government faced the urgent state-building tasks of curbing the de facto power of regional militarists and local strongmen and

consolidating central authority. Yet pervasive mass illiteracy sharply constrained the KMT’s efforts to expand party organization, disseminate party doctrine, and implement new national policies at the grassroots. As acknowledged at the *Second National Education Conference* (April 1930), “more than 80% of the national population was illiterate, and the majority of children lacked educational opportunities, posing substantial obstacles to political tutelage and national reconstruction” (Xiong, 1990, p. 138). Moreover, because teachers’ schools in the early Republican period were concentrated in urban areas, their graduates generally remained in cities rather than returning to the countryside, exacerbating rural teacher shortages (Tang et al., 1930). To expand the supply of qualified teachers for mass education and narrow pronounced urban–rural disparities, the Nanjing government initiated reforms of teachers’ training.

The enactment of the 1932 *Teachers’ School Law* formally ended the decade-long arrangement under which teacher training was integrated into general secondary schools, restoring secondary teachers’ schools as independent educational institutions dedicated to preparing primary-school teachers.¹ The law reinstated tuition waivers for teacher-training programs and extended support to cover room and board, textbooks, and athletics fees.² In addition, the law gave particular priority to training teachers for rural primary education: SV teachers’ schools were expressly created to rapidly prepare rural primary-school teachers and were typically sited in small towns and villages.³

As shown in Figure 2, the number of secondary teachers’ schools in our sample provinces rose rapidly, from 263 in 1928 to 712 in 1934.⁴ This growth was driven mainly by SV teachers’

¹At the time, only a small number of teachers’ colleges belonged to the higher-education system (e.g., Beijing Normal University). In this paper we focus exclusively on secondary teachers’ schools. These institutions primarily admitted graduates of higher elementary or junior middle schools; in particular, SV teachers’ schools targeted higher-elementary graduates aged 16 or above.

²Prior to the 1932 *Teachers’ School Law*, under the *Educational System Reform Act* promulgated by the Beiyang Government in 1922, teacher training was folded into general secondary education, and neither tuition waivers nor service obligations were stipulated.

³The 1932 *Teachers’ School Law* stipulated that “teachers’ schools should be established in accordance with local conditions, in either urban or rural areas, with a preference—where feasible—for rural locations” (Supplementary Provisions, Art. 9), and that “simplified teachers’ schools, wherever feasible, should be located in rural areas” (Supplementary Provisions, Art. 127).

⁴Our county-level school data draw on provincial surveys conducted in 1934 that recorded all secondary schools within each jurisdiction and their year of establishment. Consequently, we cannot capture teachers’ schools that were founded before 1934 but had already closed by the time of the survey. However, when we aggregate our county-level data on teachers’ schools for the 19 sample provinces year by year and compare them with the annual national school statistics published by the Nationalist government (Second Historical Archives of China, 1997)—which show that the nationwide number of secondary teachers’ schools increased from 236 in 1928 to 876 in 1934, without any major periods of decline in between—we find that the two series exhibit highly similar overall trends. Given the KMT regime’s strong support for teachers’ education and the relatively peaceful nationwide environment between 1928 and 1934, it is therefore unlikely that many teachers’ schools closed during this period.

schools, which by 1934 accounted for 60.4% of all secondary teachers' schools. In northern provinces such as Henan and Hebei, SV teachers' schools were often the sole providers of local secondary education.

The promotion of teacher training became an integral instrument of the Nationalist government's state-building project. Appendix Table A4 presents the curricula of regular secondary schools, general teachers' schools, and SV teachers' schools, standardized by the KMT in the 1930s. In both regular secondary education and teacher training, Civics (*Gongmin*), Chinese (*Guowen*), and History were compulsory. These courses were essential to cultivating national and state identity. In particular, the Civics curriculum centered on the Kuomintang's ideological canon, including the Three Principles of the People (*Sanmin zhuyi*), Sun Yat-sen's political testament, and directives issued by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, together with an emphasis on national rejuvenation and China's traditional moral ethics (Secretariat of the Zhejiang Provincial Government, 1940a,b). Teachers' schools additionally stressed professional coursework such as pedagogy and educational psychology to develop teaching skills. To align rural teacher preparation with broader rural transformation, the KMT mandated specialized offerings in SV teachers' schools, such as "Rural Economy" and "Cooperative Economy", to provide instruction in the theory and practice of rural reconstruction. Overall, the curriculum reveals the KMT's intent to use teacher education for ideological socialization and the consolidation of party authority.

Under the 1932 *Teachers' School Law*, the establishment and operation of public teachers' schools were the responsibility of local governments. Schools founded and run by different levels of local government were designated as provincial (*shengli*), municipal (*shili*), or county (*xianli*) teachers' schools.⁵ In our 1934 sample of 712 public teachers' schools, 80.3% were operated by county governments and the remaining 19.6% by provincial governments.⁶ As these teachers' schools were funded by the corresponding level of government, their spatial distribution could be influenced by local fiscal capacity.

Additionally, local governments' decisions to establish teachers' schools also responded to the mass-education movement launched by civic organizations in the 1920s and 1930s. By 1934, more than 600 social organizations across China had joined the Rural Reconstruction Movement to address the social crisis and build a modern nation, establishing more than 1,000 experimental areas (Zheng, 2000). Some of these organizations treated mass education as a key lever, with the Chinese Association for the Promotion of Mass Education (CAPME) particularly

⁵See 1932 *Teachers' School Law* Provisions, Arts. 4–5; Supplementary Provisions, Art. 17.

⁶At that time, there were three municipal teachers' schools nationwide, located in Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai. Because our sample area excludes these three cities, it contains no municipal teachers' schools.

prominent. At its headquarters in Ding County, Hebei, CAPME developed a comprehensive rural education system encompassing mass education, primary schooling, teacher training, and vocational education.

Endorsed and supported by the central government, the Ding County experiments became a template nationwide; local authorities studied the model and invited CAPME personnel to take charge of mass-education work. In 1929, Rui Feng, then CAPME’s director of vocational education, was invited by Liang Shuming to join a rural-education program in Henan and helped found the Baiquan Village Teachers’ School (Wu, 2000). In 1936, following CAPME’s recommendations, the Hunan Provincial Government designated Hengshan County as a mass-education experimental site and established the Hengshan Provincial Village Teachers’ School. The school aimed to “train elementary rural teachers and rural reform leaders who were familiar with rural conditions and agricultural practices, committed to lifelong rural service, and physically robust and resilient” (Li and You, 2008). Consistent with historical accounts of the Ding County model’s influence and diffusion, Figure 4 shows that counties located closer to Ding County tended to host more teachers’ schools in the early 1930s.

2.2 Teachers’ Schools and Communist Diffusion

Although the Nationalist Government expanded teachers’ schools to intensify political indoctrination, some features of the teacher-training system made it particularly conducive to the diffusion of communist ideology and the cultivation of communist revolutionary leaders.

First, relative to fee-charging regular middle schools, tuition-free public teachers’ schools disproportionately enrolled students from economically disadvantaged households. Appendix Figure B1 displays annual tuition and total educational expenditures across levels of public schooling in the early 1930s.⁷ Regular middle-school tuition was capped at 32 yuan—about 70% of national per-capita income⁸—and far exceeded fees for lower-elementary (2 yuan) and higher-elementary (4 yuan) schools. Including ancillary expenses (books, uniforms, room and board, etc.), the annual cost per middle-school student rose to roughly four times national per-capita income. As a result, regular middle schools were beyond the reach of most households.⁹ For these non-elite families, tuition-free teachers’ schools offered the only viable pathway to secondary education.

⁷Annual tuition from the *Compilation of Archival Materials of the Republic of China* (Second Historical Archives of China, 1991); total educational expenditures from Lu (1932).

⁸Liu and Wang (1989) estimate national per-capita income at approximately 46 yuan in the 1930s.

⁹A 1930s survey by the Statistics Bureau of the Ministry of the Interior reports that only 3% of the population had attained middle schooling (Yin, 2010).

According to Cong (2007), 70–90% of teachers’ school students came from rural areas, predominantly smallholder and poor-peasant households. These students generally had firsthand experience of poverty and strong aspirations for upward mobility, as well as a willingness to challenge social inequality. Secondary education further sharpened their sociopolitical awareness and cultivated leadership and organizational skills. As a result, they were particularly likely to identify with Communist ideals and had strong potential to become revolutionary leaders.

Moreover, in the early 1930s a distinctive conjuncture made students at SV teachers’ schools far from urban centers especially likely to meet teachers sympathetic to communism. After the 1927 KMT-CCP split, many communist-leaning intellectuals fled the cities to escape persecution. They sought refuge in the countryside and took teaching posts in rural schools. From these positions they disseminated communist ideas and built revolutionary organizations among students and staff. An illustrative case discussed by Cong (2007) and Liu (2008) is Wang Zhe, a 1919 Peking University graduate who joined the CCP in 1927 and later took refuge in Laiyang County. He recalled:

“I served as director of academic affairs at the Laiyang Village Teachers’ School and concurrently taught two courses: ‘Rural Economy’ and ‘Educational Psychology.’ Although the assigned textbooks were issued by KMT education authorities, I incorporated revolutionary material, such as ‘Revolutionary Political Economy’ and ‘Dialectical Materialism,’ into my instruction and, in a semi-open manner, propagated Marxism–Leninism.” (Wang, 1983)

The combination of a non-elite student profile and intensive exposure to communist ideas made teachers’ schools a cradle of young intellectuals inclined toward communism. Wang Ruowang, a senior Communist cadre who joined the Party after arriving in Yan’an in 1937, recalled his experience at Qixiashan Village Teachers’ School in Jiangsu:

“Students were all of impoverished origin and naturally inclined toward revolution. Among the senior classes, some engaged in clandestine CCP activity, while others propagated anarchism; secret organizations of various political hues were highly active. There were almost certainly no KMT supporters—any who were would not have remained.” (Wang, 1991)

Upon graduation, these students were typically assigned by local governments to serve as primary-school teachers under a statutory service obligation.¹⁰ Most graduates took posts in

¹⁰See 1932 *Teachers’ School Law* Supplementary Provisions, Arts. 90–92.

their home communities.¹¹ Statistics from the Henan Provincial Village Teachers' School in 1936 show that 81% of graduates from the previous five cohorts returned to teach in their home counties (Cong, 2007). With status and skills tailored to communication and organization, plus local knowledge and the prestige of teaching, these graduates had a clear advantage in disseminating ideology and mobilizing grassroots collective action.

Village primary schools then became hubs of early local communist organizing. They were gathering points for committed teachers' school graduates and rare public spaces in the countryside. Archival records from multiple local Party organizations show that many rural CCP branches first took root in village primary schools, which then served as bases for the formation of local Party committees (CCP Pujiang County Committee, 2005; CCP Yongkang Municipal Committee, 2002; CCP Zhejiang Provincial Committee, 1986; Wang, 2018). Ding (2007) reports that 70–80% of early CCP organizations in Anhui Province were established directly by village primary-school teachers.

Wan Li, an eminent CCP leader who would later chair the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and rank among Deng Xiaoping's "Eight Elders", illustrates the pathway by which teachers' school students entered revolutionary politics. Born to a poor household in Dongping County, Shandong, he entered the Shandong Provincial Second Teachers' School in 1933. At school he organized reading circles and anti-Japanese as well as anti-KMT mobilization and, on the eve of graduation, secretly joined the CCP. After graduation, he returned to Dongping as a village primary-school teacher and used that post as cover for underground Party work: recruiting colleagues into the CCP, organizing a Chinese National Liberation Vanguard cell among local teachers, establishing anti-Japanese associations, and mobilizing residents for united resistance. In October 1937, he established Dongping's first county-level Party organization—the Dongping County Working Committee—and assumed the post of secretary.

2.3 The CCP's Recruitment Shift After 1938

Although the KMT's reform and promotion of teachers' schools in the early 1930s created a large pool of potential revolutionaries, the broader rise of teachers' school graduates as local Communist leaders still depended on the CCP's own recruitment policy. This major demand-side shift within the CCP did not occur until March 1938, when the Party relaunched large-scale

¹¹Under the 1932 *Teachers' School Law*, locally run teachers' schools favored local recruits, who were commonly assigned by local governments to primary schools in their home districts. See 1932 *Teachers' School Law* Supplementary Provisions, Art. 10.

membership expansion and decisively reversed its earlier exclusionary stance toward intellectuals.

At its founding, the CCP was composed primarily of patriotic young intellectuals. Following the failure of the Great Revolution in 1927, however, Party leaders attributed the defeat to the “over-intellectualization” of both leadership and rank-and-file, and consequently adopted an exclusionary “closed-doorism” (*guanmen zhuyi*) that prioritized recruiting and promoting workers and peasants while restricting—at times barring—intellectuals (CCP Central Committee, 1987; Central Archives and CCP Central Committee, 1989).

In subsequent revolutionary practice, the CCP recognized that this exclusionary line undermined its capacity for leadership and governance (Sun, 2021). Especially as the Japanese invasion deepened the national crisis in the mid-1930s, the CCP increasingly needed to build a broad anti-Japanese coalition and therefore began to ease its class-based restrictions on admission and promotion. At the Wayaobu Conference (1935), the Central Committee declared, “Anyone willing to fight for the Party’s principles, regardless of social origin, may join the Communist Party.” After the Second United Front between the KMT and the CCP formed in September 1937, the Party could organize and mobilize more openly. It quickly adjusted its organizational strategy to expand Party organizations. In March 1938 it issued the “Central Resolution on the Mass Recruitment of Party Members” [*Zhongyang guanyu daliang fazhan dangyuan de jueyi*] (hereinafter, the *Resolution*), declaring that “expanding Party membership on a mass scale—ten or even a hundred times over—had become the Party’s most urgent and serious task” (Central Archives and CCP Central Committee, 1991).

The 1938 *Resolution* set out two policies that reshaped Party admissions. First, it moved attention away from “the narrow task of reviving and screening old ties and old leads,” which had preoccupied the Party since the late 1920s. It instead called for breaking with “closed-doorism” (*guanmen zhuyi*) and undertaking mass recruitment of new members. Second, it urged a bold opening to “revolutionary students and intellectuals” in both cities and the countryside, thereby eliminating within-Party discrimination against intellectuals in admission and promotion (Central Archives and CCP Central Committee, 1991).

The 1938 *Resolution* produced immediate and pronounced effects: it rapidly expanded Party membership and the cadre corps and drew large numbers of intellectuals into the organization. CCP membership rose from roughly 40,000 in late 1937 to about 800,000 by 1940—a twentyfold increase in three years (Organization Department of the Central Committee of the CCP, 2011). The renowned “Three-Eight Cadres” (*Sanba shi ganbu*) referred specifically to relatively well-educated recruits who entered the Party around 1938. A report to the CCP Central Secretariat in December 1943 recorded that more than 40,000 intellectuals arrived in Yan’an after 1937

to receive political and military training, 71% of whom had schooling beyond junior middle school (Hu, 1994). At the Chinese People’s Anti-Japanese Military and Political University in Yan’an, which was established to train the CCP’s military and political cadres, young students accounted for 83% of total enrollment in 1938, outnumbering both military personnel and underground Party cadres (Huang, 2016). At the grassroots, intellectuals quickly formed the leadership core across multiple tiers of the Party organization. A *1940 Report on CCP Work in Henan* shows that:

“All members of the provincial Party committee were intellectuals. On district committees, only one member was a worker; the rest were intellectuals. Even at the subdistrict level, peasants accounted for only 10–20 percent of members.” (Liu, 1992)

3 Data

To examine whether and how teachers’ schools influenced the expansion of CCP, we assemble a county–year panel dataset from multiple historical sources, covering 1,697 counties in 19 provinces.¹² We next describe the data and its sources.

3.1 Data on Teachers’ Schools

We draw data on secondary teachers’ schools and regular middle schools from the Ministry of Education’s 1935 *Directory and Address of Middle Schools in Republican China* [*Quanguo zhongdeng xuexiao xiaoming dizhi yilanbiao*] (hereafter, the *Directory*) (Ministry of Education of National Government, 1935). For each school in the *Directory*, we record the name, county location, founding year, and type (teachers’ school or regular middle school). For teachers’ schools, we also code ownership (public or private). For public teachers’ schools, we further distinguish between SV and non-SV schools and record their administrative level. Figure B2 shows a sample page from the *Directory* and the corresponding digitized entries.¹³

In our empirical analysis, the primary explanatory variable is the average number of county-level public teachers’ schools in 1932–1934, with a cross-county mean of 0.36. We focus on this

¹²During our study period, Northeast China was under Japanese occupation, and educational statistics for this region are unavailable. We therefore exclude Northeast China from our sample. Our sample also omits the regions of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Tibet, and Taiwan. In addition, to keep county-level units more comparable, we exclude urban districts under municipalities.

¹³When the *Directory* does not report founding years, we supplement them with county gazetteers, which provide detailed records on local schools.

time window for four reasons. First, the *Directory* published in 1935 was compiled chiefly from provincial secondary-school survey in 1934; accordingly, statistics on secondary schools are available only through 1934, and disruptions caused by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) thereafter precluded similarly comprehensive nationwide, county-level surveys. Second, only after the 1932 *Teachers’ School Law* recognized teachers’ schools as independent institutions and guaranteed tuition-free enrollment could these schools serve as a cradle for young intellectuals from non-elite families. Accordingly, the number of teachers’ schools after 1932, rather than before, can plausibly reflect the size of the potential pool of communist revolutionaries. Third, after 1934, and especially after the full-scale outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, many schools suspended instruction or even closed. The number of teachers’ schools in 1932–1934 therefore captures a relatively stable and peak level of development within our study period. This prewar window was the key phase in which a local pool of non-elite intellectuals was formed, and this pool was largely preserved rather than destroyed by the war, making the 1932–1934 distribution of teachers’ schools a suitable basis for examining their impact on subsequent CCP organizational expansion. Finally, by anchoring the explanatory variable to its 1932–1934 level and focusing our analysis on annual outcomes for the period 1934–1945, we reduce the risk that CCP expansion feeds back into the distribution of teachers’ schools.

3.2 Data on CCP County Committees and Cadres

We construct two county-level measures of CCP organizational expansion. First, we define a county-year indicator that equals 1 in years when a CCP county committee (*xianwei*) existed. County committees were the Party’s principal authority at the county level, which coordinated mobilization and directed revolutionary work. Establishing a committee typically required a core of capable cadres, a network of subordinate branches, and a sizable membership base. Accordingly, the presence of a county committee is a credible proxy for CCP’s county-level organizational capacity.¹⁴

The county-committee data come from the *Materials of the Chinese Communist Party’s Organizational History (1921–1997)* [*Zhongguo gongchandang zuzhishi ziliao*] (hereafter, the

¹⁴To ensure that this indicator reflects relatively stable local organizational capacity, we include only regular county committees, “central” county committees (*zhongxin xianwei*, which coordinate across multiple counties), and county working committees (*xian gongzuo weiyuanhui*). Temporary executive and special committees (*xian linshi zhixing weiyuanhui*, *tebie weiyuanhui*) are excluded. The number of Party members provides another measure of the CCP’s grassroots organizational strength. Unfortunately, there is no systematic panel of county-level Party membership before 1949, largely because wartime conditions made it difficult to maintain accurate membership records.

Materials) (Organization Department of the CCP, Party History Research Office of the CCP Central Committee, and Central Archives, 2000). The compilation of the *Materials* spanned half a century and was led by the CCP Central Committee, with Party committees at all levels and their Party history offices responsible for implementation. It is widely regarded as the most authoritative documentary record of the Party’s organizational history. Figure 5 maps the spatial distribution of CCP county committees from 1934 to 1945. In our sample, 928 of 1,697 counties established a county committee at some point during this period.

Second, we measure CCP organizational expansion using counts of locally born cadres and Party members. Cadre data come from the *Collection of Military Historical Materials on the Anti-Japanese War* [*Zhongguo kangri zhanzheng junshi shiliao congshu*] (Editorial Committee of Collection of Military Historical Materials on the Anti-Japanese War, 2015), which catalogs all CCP cadres at the rank of regiment commander (*tuanji*) or above during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). In total, we identify 5,366 cadres affiliated with the Eighth Route Army, the New Fourth Army, the Northeast United Resistance Army, and the South China People’s Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Force. County-level counts of CCP members by 1950, as a measure of local membership base accumulated during the revolutionary period, are drawn from county gazetteers.¹⁵ On average, a county had 1,839 CCP members in 1950.

3.3 Data on Other Variables

In our baseline specifications, we include four sets of county-level controls. First, because both the expansion of teachers’ schools and the formation of CCP organizations may be influenced by the KMT’s contemporaneous political reach, we control for each county’s distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to its provincial capital, using Harvard Yenching Institution and Fudan Center for Historical Geography (2016). Second, to capture the influence of demographic, socioeconomic, and transportation conditions on both teachers’ schools and CCP expansion, we control for the population size in 1920 (Stauffer, 1922), the 1930 share of rural households (Yin, 2010), and an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county (Li and Ding, 1935). Third, as discussed in the historical background, teachers’ schools under the Nanjing government relied primarily on local tax revenues, which largely derived

¹⁵Systematic and accurate county-level data on CCP membership are unavailable for the revolutionary period. The year 1950 provides the earliest county-level CCP membership data that are both closest to the revolutionary period and offer the broadest regional coverage available to us.

from the land tax throughout the 1930s.¹⁶ However, Republican-period fiscal data, which are available for 1935 in Zheng (2013), suffer from extensive missingness, and using them would entail substantial sample loss.¹⁷ Given that land productivity changed little from the late imperial period to the Republican era (Ma and Von Glahn, 2022, p. 92), we instead use the early nineteenth-century (1820) land-tax quota as a proxy for local fiscal revenue. These data are drawn from land-tax records compiled in Liang (1981).¹⁸ Finally, to capture pro-education cultural traditions that could raise demand for schooling and shape both the supply of modern human capital and openness to modern ideology, we control for the number of *jinsshi* degree holders in the Ming–Qing period (Chen et al., 2020), using the China Biographical Database (Harvard University et al., 2019).

For robustness and mechanism analyses, we also compile the following county-level data: (i) distances to Yan’an (Shaanxi) and to Ding County (Hebei) (Harvard Yenching Institution and Fudan Center for Historical Geography, 2016); (ii) the proportion of self-cultivators among rural households in the 1930s (Lu et al., 2018)¹⁹; (iii) county government fiscal revenues and expenditures in 1935 (Zheng, 2013); (iv) a yearly county-level indicator for Japanese occupation (from county gazetteers); (v) the presence of CCP branches established in secondary and higher schools before 1927 (Organization Department of the CCP, Party History Research Office of the CCP Central Committee, and Central Archives, 2000); (vi) the number of enrolled primary-school students around 1930 (from provincial education statistics)²⁰; (vii) distance to the nearest treaty port (Jia, 2014); and (viii) the population share of landlords and rich peasants and their share of landholdings before the land reform (from county gazetteers).

Descriptive statistics and data sources for all variables are reported in Table 1.

¹⁶Before the 1940s, the KMT assigned the land tax to local governments, while reserving industrial and commercial taxes and customs duties for the central government.

¹⁷County-level fiscal statistics for 1935 are available only for the following 13 provinces: Ningxia, Anhui, Shandong, Guangxi, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Henan, Zhejiang, Hubei, Gansu, Fujian, Shaanxi, and Chahar.

¹⁸Because the data are only available at the prefectural level, we proxy county-level land tax by the average land-tax quota per county within each prefecture.

¹⁹Lu et al. (2018) compile the prefecture-level share of self-cultivators from Feng (1935), Chen et al. (1985) and Buck (1937), which we use to proxy county-level conditions.

²⁰The data on the number of primary-school students around 1930 is collected from Department of Education of Anhui Province (1934); Department of Education of Fujian Province (1932); Department of Education of Guangdong Province (1934); Department of Education of Guangxi Province (1936); Department of Education of Hebei Province (1929); Department of Education of Henan Province (1931); Department of Education of Hubei Province (1934); Department of Education of Jiangsu Province (1932); Department of Education of Jiangxi Province (1934); Department of Education of Shaanxi Province (1932); Department of Education of Shandong Province (1931); Department of Education of Zhejiang Province (1931); Statistics Office of Shanxi Province (1928). These are, for each province, the county-level data on primary-school students closest in time to our study period that we could obtain.

4 Empirical Evidence

In Sections 4.1 and 4.2, we implement a difference-in-differences (DiD) design to estimate how the Nationalist government’s expansion of teachers’ schools affected CCP organizational growth. Section 4.3 presents two placebo exercises to test whether the baseline effect is truly driven by teachers’ schools and the shift in CCP recruitment policy. It also uses alternative proxies and individual-level data to assess how teacher education shaped CCP participation. Finally, Section 4.4 addresses omitted-variable concerns using instrumental-variables (IV) estimates.

4.1 Baseline Empirical Strategy

To motivate our empirical strategy, we split counties into two groups according to whether they had any public teachers’ schools in 1932–1934. Figure 1 plots, for each group, the share of counties with a CCP county committee from 1930 to 1945. Before 1938, both groups display low shares (below 20%) and no meaningful difference between them, providing little evidence of any pre-1938 association between teachers’ schools and CCP organizational expansion. In Appendix Table A1, we further exploit a county-level panel dataset to examine this relationship prior to 1938. The dependent variable is an indicator for whether a CCP county committee was established in a given year, and the key explanatory variable is a dummy for the presence of at least one teachers’ school in the preceding year. We include county fixed effects and province–year fixed effects, as well as interactions between the year dummies and the relevant socioeconomic controls. We focus on annual outcomes for the period 1930–1935. Columns (1)–(2) report panel regression results and show no statistically significant effect of teachers’ schools on CCP county-committee formation over this period. In Columns (3)–(4), we add an interaction between the teachers’ school dummy and a post-1932 indicator and again find no significant change in the effect of teachers’ schools before and after the enactment of the *Teachers’ School Law*.

These results suggest that, although the KMT’s teachers’ school reforms in the early 1930s created conditions for non-elite youths to receive secondary education, this latent pool of revolutionaries had not yet translated into CCP organizational expansion before 1938. As shown in Figure 1, it is only from 1938 onward—when the CCP relaunched mass recruitment and reopened admission and promotion to intellectuals—that this revolutionary potential began to be realized: the share of counties establishing CCP county committees rose in both groups, with a much steeper increase in counties where teachers’ schools were present, reaching nearly 60% by 1945.

These observations motivate the following DiD specification to estimate the effect of teachers' schools on CCP expansion:

$$CCP_{pct} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Teacher_{pc} \times Post_t + \alpha_2 X_{pc} \times Post_t + \nu_c + \delta_p \times \gamma_t + \epsilon_{pct} \quad (1)$$

Where subscripts p , c and t index the province, county, and year respectively. CCP_{pct} equals one if county c has a CCP county committee in year t . $Teacher_{pc}$ is the average number of teachers' schools from 1932 to 1934 in county c . $Post_t$ indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later. α_1 is the coefficient of interest, which we expect to be positive if teachers' schools had positive effects after CCP began to adjust the recruitment strategy in 1938. X_{pc} is a vector of controls capturing socio-economic conditions, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; level of urbanization, measured by the 1930 share of rural households; transport accessibility, indicated by whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; local fiscal capacity and land productivity, proxied by the log of the 1820 land-tax quota; and education-valuing traditions, proxied by the log of the total number of Ming–Qing *jinshi*. These factors may affect both the establishment of teachers' schools and the revolutionary activities of the CCP. We also include county fixed effects ν_i , controlling for county-specific time-invariant characteristics, and province-year fixed effects $\delta_{prov} \times \gamma_t$, capturing province-specific shocks that vary by year. Additionally, we restrict outcomes to period 1934–1945 to mitigate reverse causality whereby CCP expansion could feed back into the school measure.

We also examine the relationship between teachers' schools and CCP expansion year by year using the following dynamic specification:

$$CCP_{pct} = \beta_0 + \sum_{\tau=1934}^{1945} \beta_{\tau} \times Teacher_{pc} \times D_t^{\tau} + \nu_c + \delta_p \times \gamma_t + \epsilon_{pct} \quad (2)$$

where D_t^{τ} denotes a dummy variable that equals one in year τ for each $\tau = 1934, \dots, 1945$. We choose 1936 as the reference year. The parallel pre-trend assumption requires the coefficients on $Teacher_{pc} \times D_t^{\tau}$ for $\tau < 1938$ to be statistically indistinguishable from zero. Besides the parallel-trend assumption, identification also depends on the absence of omitted variables correlated with the establishment of teachers' schools that differentially affect CCP's expansion before and after 1938. We will address this potential omitted-variable-bias concern in Section 4.4.

4.2 Baseline Results

Table 2 reports the baseline regression results. Column (1) includes county fixed effects and provincial–year fixed effects. On average, one additional public teachers’ school in 1932–1934 increases the probability of CCP county-committee presence after 1938 by 8.3 percentage points. Column (2) further adds interactions between the post-1938 dummy and all socioeconomic controls; the marginal effect of teachers’ schools remains robust at 7.2 percentage points, equivalent to about 30% of the 1934–1945 mean (24 percentage points).

Figure 3 presents the dynamic effects estimated using Equation (2). The solid line represents the point estimates, and the dashed lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals, with standard errors clustered at the county level. Consistent with the patterns shown in Figure 1, we find no significant differences in pre-trends across counties with different numbers of teachers’ schools. The positive impact of teachers’ schools emerges in 1938, when the *Resolution* was released, and peaks around 1939.

Because several major political events clustered around 1938 (such as the July 1937 outbreak of the full-scale Sino-Japanese War and the September 1937 formation of the KMT–CCP Second United Front), we assess whether the *March 1938 Resolution*, rather than other contemporaneous shocks, activated the effect of teachers’ schools on CCP organizational expansion. Using a county–month panel with exact dates of county-committee establishment, Columns (3) and (4) of Table 2 report monthly DiD estimates that interact the number of teachers’ schools with an indicator for months from March 1938 onward. The results show that counties with more teachers’ schools were significantly more likely to establish a county committee after the *Resolution*. One additional teachers’ school is associated with a 6.1 percentage-point increase in the monthly probability of county-committee establishment (Column (4)), which is very close to the estimate based on the yearly data. We also show monthly dynamics in Figure 3, Panel B. There is no significant effect of teachers’ schools in the months around July or September 1937. The effect turns positive and significant only after the March 1938 *Resolution*. This suggests that demand-side changes in the CCP’s recruitment strategy—expanding Party intake and once again recruiting intellectuals on a large scale—were more decisive than other factors in bringing out the impact of teachers’ schools.

Additionally, we conduct a robustness check that replaces the main explanatory variable with an indicator for the presence of any teachers’ school. The regression results, reported in Appendix Table A2, show a consistent pattern: in the yearly data, counties with at least one teachers’ school have a 7.2 percentage-point higher probability of establishing a CCP county

committee after 1938 than counties without teachers' schools (Column (2)), and in the monthly data, the corresponding effect after March 1938 is 6.4 percentage points (Column (4)).

4.3 Robustness

In this subsection, we present several robustness checks for the baseline estimates. First, we examine whether the observed effect of teachers' schools is confounded by other factors. Second, we evaluate a competing hypothesis that CCP organizational expansion after 1938 was driven by the Japanese invasion (Chen and Kung, 2024; Johnson, 1962). Third, we re-estimate the effects using alternative outcomes of CCP expansion: counts of locally born cadres and Party members. Finally, using individual-level data from the *China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study* (CHARLS), we test whether attending a teachers' school during the Republican era increased the likelihood of being a CCP member.

4.3.1 The Influence of the CCP's Yan'an-based Leadership Center

After the CCP Central Committee and the Red Army's main forces moved from their southern bases to northern Shaanxi, Yan'an became the Party's leadership center from 1937 onward. It directed the expansion of the Party's military and political organizations nationwide, especially in Northern China. Meanwhile, as Figure 4 shows, many public teachers' schools in the early 1930s were also clustered in Northern China, close to Yan'an.

To address the concern that the post-1938 positive association between teachers' schools and CCP grassroots organizations is actually driven by proximity to Yan'an, Column (1) of Table 3 adds the interaction between distance to Yan'an and the post-1938 indicator. The interaction is not statistically significant, and including it does not attenuate the coefficient on teachers' schools.

Furthermore, Columns (2) and (3) estimate the model separately for northern and southern counties²¹. The results show that, after 1938, the effect of teachers' schools is positive and statistically significant in both regions. The northern effect is roughly twice that in the south. Thus the overall result is not driven by northern counties alone, though northern counties offered more favorable conditions for translating teacher education into CCP organizational expansion.

²¹Northern counties are those in Hebei, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Henan, Shandong, Gansu, and Ningxia; southern counties are those in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Fujian, Hunan, Hubei, Guangdong, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi.

4.3.2 The Influence of Japanese Military Occupation

Many studies argue that the surge in CCP organization after 1937 was catalyzed by the Japanese invasion, which generated strong nationalist, anti-Japanese sentiment. The CCP filled the political vacuum left by the KMT in rural China and emerged as the organizer of popular resistance (Chen and Kung, 2024; Johnson, 1962). To assess this competing explanation, Column (1) of Table 4 adds a county-year indicator for Japanese occupation. The results show that Japanese occupation significantly raises the probability of establishing a CCP county committee, but the positive effect of teachers' schools remains robust after 1938.

Because many counties were occupied by Japan only after 1938, one alternative interpretation of our baseline results is that teachers' schools nurtured patriotic youth, and that it was their nationalist response to the invasion, rather than the CCP's post-1938 recruitment shift, that drove CCP entry and local leadership. Column (2) tests this by adding a triple interaction (*Public Teachers' Schools* $\times$ *Post* $\times$ *Japanese Occupation*), along with all corresponding pairwise interactions, as regressors. The results indicate that the positive impact of teachers' schools on CCP grassroots expansion between 1938 and 1945 was amplified by patriotic sentiments triggered by the Japanese invasion (the coefficient on *Public Teachers' Schools* $\times$ *Post* $\times$ *Japanese Occupation* is significantly positive). Nevertheless, even in regions not occupied by Japanese forces after 1938, teachers' schools still had a significantly positive effect on CCP organizational growth (the coefficient on *Public Teachers' Schools* $\times$ *Post* is significantly positive). In contrast, prior to 1938, when the CCP had not yet adjusted its recruitment policies, teachers' schools exhibited no positive influence on CCP expansion, even in Japanese-occupied areas (the coefficient on *Public Teachers' Schools* $\times$ *Japanese Occupation* is significantly negative). These findings underscore that strategic shifts in the CCP's recruitment policies constituted the primary turning point for teachers' schools' contribution to Party growth. Given that the CCP was a highly centralized, hierarchical Leninist party, "demand-side" rather than "supply-side" changes played a decisive role in shaping its short-term organizational structure.

4.3.3 Alternative Measures of CCP's Expansion

In Table 5, we use alternative dependent variables to test whether teachers' schools helped cultivate local CCP leadership and build Party membership. Column (1) uses the log number of locally born cadres at or above the regimental level during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) across all CCP-led forces, including the Eighth Route Army, the New Fourth Army, guerrilla units, and the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army. Column (2) uses the log number of local CCP members in 1950. We estimate OLS regressions, using the average number of public

teachers' schools in 1932–1934 as the main independent variable, and include relevant socio-economic controls and province fixed effects. The results show that one additional teachers' school established in 1932–34 is associated with a 12.7% increase in the number of CCP cadres during 1937–1945 and an 11.1% increase in CCP membership by 1950.

4.3.4 Individual-Level Evidence from CHARLS Survey

Finally, we use individual-level data from CHARLS (2014, 2018) to test whether attending secondary teachers' schools during the Republican era raised the probability of joining the CCP. The 2014 *Life History Survey* records year-by-year schooling histories, which enables us to identify whether a respondent ever attended a secondary teachers' school. The 2018 wave reports Communist Party membership. We estimate probit models of CCP membership on an indicator for secondary teachers' school attendance, controlling for birth year, gender, and rural residence in youth. To ensure that schooling occurred in the Republican era, we restrict the sample to individuals born before 1932.

Table 6 reports average marginal effects. Column (1) shows that respondents who ever attended a secondary teachers' school are 33.2% more likely to be Party members than those without such experience. Column (2) adds a control for whether the respondent's highest attainment is primary school or lower. The reference group is therefore respondents with middle schooling or above but no secondary teachers' school experience, a group more likely to have advantaged family backgrounds. Relative to this group, those with secondary teachers' school experience are 34.5% more likely to be Party members, whereas respondents with only primary schooling or less do not differ significantly from the reference group. Overall, teachers' school training is associated with a higher probability of CCP membership than either peers from elite backgrounds or those with little schooling. This pattern is consistent with our hypothesis that modest socioeconomic origins, combined with relatively advanced schooling, made individuals more receptive to CCP appeals and placed them in a more favorable position for Party recruitment.

4.4 Instrumental Variable Estimates

Using a difference-in-differences (DiD) design, we can rule out omitted-variable bias only if unobservables do not differentially affect CCP expansion before and after 1938. However, other Nationalist state-building initiatives may have moved in tandem with the expansion of teachers' schools while either suppressing or promoting CCP organizational growth, especially after 1938. Omitting these co-interventions would bias our DiD estimates. To address this

concern, we complement the DiD analysis with an instrumental-variables (IV) approach. The instrument should (i) strongly predict the local presence of teachers’ schools (relevance) and (ii) be uncorrelated with other unobserved factors affecting CCP expansion (exogeneity).

As noted in Section 2.1, CAPME’s mass-education experiment in Ding County (Hebei) established a comprehensive model of popular education, including rural-teacher training. The “Ding County model” was endorsed by the Nationalist government and spread through intergovernmental, institutional, and civic exchanges. Accordingly, we expect counties closer to Ding County to have more teachers’ schools. Appendix Figure B4 visualize the relationship between distance to Ding County and the number of public teachers’ schools in 1932–1934 using the binscatter methodology of Cattaneo et al. (2024). The strong negative correlation between the two confirms our expectation.

Meanwhile, proximity to Ding County plausibly satisfies the exclusion restriction for the following reasons. First, Ding County had no special political or economic status: it was neither a KMT nor a CCP center, but one of many impoverished rural counties in Northern China. Second, its selection as CAPME’s headquarter was largely by chance. In 1926, at the invitation of an enlightened local notable, Y. C. James Yen (Yan Yangchu)—then Secretary-General of CAPME—selected Ding County as the site for rural educational reform experiments. Three years later, CAPME relocated its headquarters there (Jing, 2018). Accordingly, proximity to Ding County should influence the establishment of local CCP organizations only through the diffusion of the Ding County teacher-training model.

In Table A3, we also conduct several tests to assess whether the instrument operates through non-teacher-training channels. To address concerns about selection on pre-existing partisan strength, we regress pre-policy political measures on distance to Ding County: Column (1) uses an indicator for CCP county-committee presence in 1927–1934, Column (2) broadens the window to 1927–1937, and Column (3) examines county-level fiscal revenue under the KMT government in 1935, which captures a key resource underpinning the KMT’s local military and administrative power. None of these coefficients is statistically significant, indicating that the choice of Ding County was unrelated to prior CCP or KMT strength. Additionally, Columns (4) and (5) use, respectively, the pre-land reform population share of landlords and rich peasants and their share of landholdings to proxy local class conflict and inequality. Distance to Ding County is not significantly correlated with either of these factors. Although these placebo tests cannot rule out all alternative pathways, they suggest that major omitted variables are unlikely to pose a serious threat to our identification strategy.

Given the relevance of the instrument and the supporting exogeneity analysis, we proceed with the instrumental-variable estimations. The results are presented in Table 7. Column (1)

reports the reduced form and shows a large, statistically significant negative effect of distance to Ding County on the probability of establishing a CCP county committee after 1938. The first stage correlation in Column (2) is strong: proximity to Ding County predicts more public teachers’ schools, with a Kleibergen–Paap Wald rk F-statistic of 23.91. In the second stage (Column (3)), one additional public teachers’ school increases the probability of forming a CCP county committee by about 52.7 percentage points, and the weak-IV–robust Anderson–Rubin test rejects the null of no effect.

A potential threat to the exclusion restriction is that nationwide distance to Ding County (Hebei) may primarily proxy proximity to the CCP’s Eighth Route Army wartime theaters—concentrated in Hebei, Shanxi, and Shandong—rather than exposure to CAPME’s demonstration effect. To address this concern, we restrict the sample to these three provinces and continue to use distance to Ding County as the instrument. The last four columns of Table 7 report the baseline and IV estimates. Results remain robust. Quantitatively, the baseline coefficient implies that one additional public teachers’ school increases the post-1938 probability of establishing a CCP county committee by 7.7 percentage points in this three-province sample. The 2SLS estimate implies an increase of about 25.3 percentage points. The larger IV estimate likely reflects omitted-variable bias in the baseline, as discussed at the beginning of this section. It also accords with a local IV interpretation in which 2SLS recovers a local average treatment effect for counties whose teacher-training intensity was most responsive to proximity to Ding County.

5 Mechanisms

This section examines mechanisms through which teachers’ schools may have promoted CCP expansion at the grassroots. We propose four hypotheses. *Non-elite access*: tuition-free secondary schooling drew and cultivated students from non-elite backgrounds who were more receptive to CCP appeals. *Career frustration*: limited post-graduation options (most became low-paid primary teachers) fostered dissatisfaction with the existing order and openness to communist ideals. *Communist exposure*: many CCP-leaning intellectuals moved from cities to rural teaching and administrative posts, directly exposing students at remote teachers’ schools to communist ideas. *Mass education*: expanded teacher training strengthened mass elementary education and increased political awareness among rural residents.

5.1 Non-Elite Access

Tuition policies differed by school type, and so did students' social origins. Fee-charging secondary schools enrolled students from higher social strata, whereas tuition-free public teachers' schools enrolled a disproportionate share of poorer youth. The students from non-elite backgrounds were more receptive to egalitarian and revolutionary appeals associated with the CCP. We test this composition mechanism in Table 8.

Column (1) compares the effects of public teachers' schools with regular secondary schools, including their interactions with the post-1938 indicator as regressors. The coefficient on public, tuition-free teachers' schools is positive and statistically significant, while the coefficient on regular secondary schools is indistinguishable from zero.

To address differences beyond family background, such as curricula and post-graduation placements, Column (2) contrasts public (tuition-free) and private (fee-charging) teachers' schools. These two types share broadly similar curricula and post-graduation placements, but tuition policy sorts students by socioeconomic origin. We find that only tuition-free public teachers' schools expand grassroots CCP organization. Private, fee-charging teachers' schools do not. Column (3) further compares SV teachers' schools (typically more remote and serving poorer cohorts) with other non-SV teachers' schools. Both effects are positive and significant, whereas the effect is larger for SV schools (0.81 versus 0.64), underscoring the importance of student origins.

Moreover, Column (4) compares the coefficients on teachers' school counts across periods with different tuition policies. After the 1932 *Teachers' School Law* formally guaranteed tuition-free enrollment, teachers' schools became more accessible to children from poorer households. By contrast, before 1932—whether under the Nanjing government (1928–1931) or during the late Beiyang period (1922–1927), when there was no formal policy guaranteeing tuition-free teachers' education—the number of teachers' schools did not necessarily reflect the scale of non-elite students enrolled. We therefore expect that, when we interact the post-1938 dummy with the average number of teachers' schools in each of the three periods, only the 1932–1934 counts should matter for CCP organizational expansion. The results confirm this: pre-1932 teachers' schools, which remained largely out of reach for poorer households, did not significantly expand the pool of potential revolutionaries and thus have no detectable impact on CCP expansion after 1938, whereas the effect teachers' schools in 1932–1934 is still close to our baseline estimate.

We also examine heterogeneity implied by the non-elite access channel. If teachers' schools, especially SV schools, primarily enrolled less affluent rural youth, their effects should be stronger where these groups were more prevalent. Accordingly, Table 9 examines whether the post-

1938 impact of SV teachers' schools varies along three dimensions: (Column 1) urbanization, measured by the 1930 rural-household share; (Column 2) market access, measured by distance to the nearest treaty port; and (Column 3) the potential clientele for teachers' schools, measured by the share of self-cultivator households among rural households in 1930. The results show that SV teachers' schools had stronger effects on CCP expansion in less urbanized counties, in counties farther from treaty ports, and in counties with larger self-cultivator populations, consistent with our hypothesis about the student-origin channel.

5.2 Career Frustration

An alternative mechanism is a career-frustration channel: while secondary schooling generally raised human capital and expected returns, graduates of teachers' schools were often assigned to low-paid rural posts (Cong, 2007; Liu, 2008). The gap between heightened expectations and constrained payoffs could have fostered dissatisfaction with the status quo, increasing receptivity to revolutionary appeals.

We posit that remuneration for graduates of teachers' schools was primarily determined by local governments' capacity and willingness to invest in education.²² Accordingly, we divide counties into two groups that likely offered different levels of teacher remuneration. In Table 10, Column (1) classifies counties by whether their total education expenditure is above or below the county-level median, while Column (2) uses the median share of education in total expenditure. We then compare how the impact of teachers' schools on CCP grassroots expansion after 1938 differs between the high- and low-remuneration groups under each measure. However, neither the level of county education expenditure nor its share in total expenditure significantly alters the estimated impact of teachers' schools. This finding is not surprising. Under the Nationalist *Primary School Regulations* (1933; revised 1936), minimum salaries for primary school teachers were set at no less than twice the local cost of living, ensuring living standards well above those of other rural residents (Yu, 2000). It is thus unlikely that low remuneration drove graduates' participation in revolutionary activities.

5.3 Communist Exposure

Before 1927, CCP organizations were concentrated in urban areas, including modern schools and factories near treaty ports, with only a small rural presence. Following the KMT's 1927 anti-Communist campaign, however, many CCP-affiliated urban intellectuals retreated to the

²²Under the Republican-era fiscal system, funding for primary education was raised locally, mainly by counties and by townships/villages.

countryside to evade Nationalist persecution, often serving as village teachers or school principals. This increased exposure to Communist ideas among students in remote SV teachers' schools and among graduates who remained as rural primary teachers; by contrast, students at urban teachers' schools likely faced less exposure.

To investigate this mechanism, we proxy a county's likelihood of sheltering fugitive Communist intellectuals after 1927 by the inverse distance to the nearest pre-1927 CCP branch based in a secondary or higher school (larger values denote closer proximity and thus a higher likelihood).²³ These early CCP branches in upper-level schools were concentrated in major cities and were dominated by modern-educated intellectuals. We test whether proximity to these branches moderates the post-1938 effect of teachers' schools (by type) on CCP organizational expansion. The regression results are reported in Table 11.

The results show that proximity to early school-based CCP branches differentially moderates the effects of teachers' schools by type. SV teachers' schools have a markedly larger positive effect on the establishment of CCP grassroots organizations during 1938–1945 in counties closer to pre-1927 branches (Column 1). By contrast, proximity to these branches does not significantly amplify the effects of non-SV teachers' schools (Column 2) or provincial (*shengli*) teachers' schools (Column 3), which were typically located in urban areas. These patterns suggest that, relative to urban schools, rural schools were more exposed to early CCP intellectual influence in the post-1927 period, owing to their advantages as places of concealment. Consistent with this interpretation, historical evidence shows that village schools became key outposts as the CCP shifted its organizational focus from cities to the countryside (CCP Pujiang County Committee, 2005; CCP Yongkang Municipal Committee, 2002; CCP Zhejiang Provincial Committee, 1986; Ding, 2007; Wang, 2018).

5.4 Mass Education

Finally, we examine a mass-education mechanism: whether teachers' schools promoted CCP grassroots organization by expanding primary schooling and raising popular political awareness. In Column (1) of Table 12, we find no evidence that primary-school coverage, measured by the (log) county-level number of primary-school students in the 1930s, significantly affected CCP expansion after 1938. In Column (2), after controlling for primary-school coverage, the effect of teachers' schools on CCP expansion after 1938 remains robust. Together with our earlier robustness checks, these results suggest that teachers' schools advanced CCP expansion mainly

²³Before the 1927 KMT–CCP split, the CCP had not established independent local governing bodies such as county committees; local Party organization existed primarily as branches.

by cultivating local revolutionary leaders, rather than by diffusing Communist ideology through primary schooling. A plausible reason is that primary schooling focused on basic literacy and practical skills, rather than on shaping deeper political beliefs or ideological commitments.

6 Conclusion

Education is a powerful determinant of political attitudes and behavior (Alesina et al., 2021; Almond and Verba, 1963; Campbell, 2006; Gutmann, 1999; Nie et al., 1996). Yet it operates beyond indoctrination or “socialization.” It also equips individuals with the capacity for independent judgment and choice. In this sense, state-building through education is double-edged: it can embed the state’s ideals, but it can also cultivate its opponents, especially when the educated perceive a misalignment between the existing order and their class interests or social ideals. Under such conditions, the enlightenment and empowerment conferred by education can make radical collective action more likely and easier to organize.

From this perspective, we offer a fresh account of the KMT’s defeat in its competition with the CCP. The KMT’s state-building initiatives broadened access to elite education for high-ability youth from ordinary farming households. In doing so, they also exposed these students to ideas more consonant with their class interests and social ideals while strengthening their leadership capacities. Consequently, these efforts channeled talent into the CCP’s ranks.

Our analysis likewise reframes how the CCP achieved organizational penetration across rural China. Beyond policy levers such as land reform, the Party required suitable grass-roots agents: individuals embedded in local society and endowed with local authority, not the traditional landlord-gentry but a new cohort disciplined by Communist conviction and organizational norms. Locally rooted graduates of teachers’ schools fit this profile. They were from poor farming households, equipped with modern schooling, exposed to Communist ideas, and served as cultural authorities in their home communities. Consequently, they became pivotal agents of the CCP’s rural expansion.

Tables

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Min	Max	Std.Dev.	Obs	Data source
<i>I. Dependent Variable</i>						
Dummy for CCP County Committee (1934-45)	0.24	0.00	1.00	0.43	20364	A
<i>II. Measures of Education</i>						
Avg.# of Public Teachers' Schools (1932-34)	0.36	0.00	4.00	0.59	1697	B
Avg.# of Public Teachers' Schools (1928-31)	0.21	0.00	3.00	0.43	1697	B
Avg.# of Public Teachers' Schools (1922-27)	0.08	0.00	2.67	0.29	1697	B
Avg.# of SV Teachers' Schools (1932-34)	0.22	0.00	3.00	0.46	1697	B
Avg.# of Provincial Teachers' Schools (1932-34)	0.06	0.00	3.00	0.26	1697	B
Avg.# of Private Teachers' Schools (1932-34)	0.01	0.00	2.00	0.11	1697	B
Avg.# of Middle Schools (1932-34)	0.71	0.00	43.00	1.87	1697	B
# of Primary School Students around 1930	6975.90	94.00	69593.00	7457.72	1348	C
<i>III. Other CCP Indicators</i>						
CCP Cadres (Regiment Level or Above, 1937-45)	3.03	0.00	173.00	9.10	1697	D
Number of CCP Members in 1950	1838.67	0.00	30848.00	3404.39	1342	E
Dist. to Nearest School-Based CCP Branch (1921-27, km)	252.57	0.00	1467.34	212.94	1697	A
<i>IV. Japanese-Occupied Areas</i>						
Year of Initial Japanese Occupation	1939.58	1933.00	1945.00	2.91	939	E
<i>V. Education-Valuing Traditions</i>						
# of <i>Jinshi</i> (Ming-Qing)	24.25	0.00	771.00	47.52	1697	F
<i>VI. Geographic Features</i>						
Dist. to Provincial Capital (km)	207.22	4.52	959.61	122.18	1697	G
Dist. to Nanjing (km)	933.21	26.10	2414.98	483.69	1697	G
Dist. to Yan'an (km)	913.07	43.69	2023.17	431.70	1697	G
Dist. to Nearest Treaty Port (km)	360.13	7.85	1647.44	241.82	1697	H
<i>VII. Socioeconomic Conditions</i>						
Land Tax Quota in 1820 (taels)	17993.37	30.99	247995.88	19621.40	1672	I
Share of Rural Households in 1930	0.77	0.18	1.00	0.14	1653	J
Share of Self-Cultivators in 1930s	0.49	0.00	0.99	0.26	1410	K
Total Fiscal Revenue in 1935 (yuan)	132144.20	1220.00	2021865.75	199139.01	859	L
Population in 1920	246340.56	2607.00	3133038.00	237785.72	1667	M
Population Share of Landlords and Rich Peasants (%)	8.98	0.10	30.75	3.47	1162	E
Land Share of Landlords and Rich Peasants (%)	37.30	0.35	94.86	17.51	1124	E
Education Spending (yuan)	41302.57	0.00	565448.00	60352.03	859	L
Share of Education Spending	0.31	0.00	0.96	0.13	858	L
Dummy for Counties Along the Railway	0.15	0.00	1.00	0.36	1697	N
<i>VIII. Instrumental Variable</i>						
Dist. to Ding County (km)	1034.52	0.00	2331.90	566.36	1697	G

Notes: The data sources are the following: A, Organization Department of the CCP, Party History Research Office of the CCP Central Committee, and Central Archives (2000); B, Ministry of Education of National Government (1935); C, Education statistics compiled by provincial governments around 1930; D, Editorial Committee of Collection of Military Historical Materials on the Anti-Japanese War (2015) ; E, county gazetteers; F, Harvard University et al. (2019); G, Harvard Yenching Institution and Fudan Center for Historical Geography (2016); H, Jia (2014); I, Liang (1981); J, Yin (2010); K, Lu et al. (2018); L, Zheng (2013); M, Stauffer (1922); N, Li and Ding (1935).

Table 2: Baseline Estimation: Teachers' Schools and CCP County Committees

	Indicator Variable for CCP County Committee			
	Yearly Data		Monthly Data	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post	0.083*** [0.013]	0.072*** [0.013]	0.070*** [0.012]	0.061*** [0.012]
Distance to Nanjing (log) $\times$ Post		-0.038 [0.032]		-0.025 [0.029]
Distance to Provincial Capital (log) $\times$ Post		-0.008 [0.012]		0.008 [0.011]
Population (log) $\times$ Post		-0.015 [0.011]		-0.013 [0.010]
Share of Rural Households $\times$ Post		0.052 [0.054]		0.030 [0.046]
Railway $\times$ Post		0.042* [0.022]		0.021 [0.020]
Land Tax (log) $\times$ Post		0.026*** [0.007]		0.023*** [0.006]
<i>Jinshi</i> (log) $\times$ Post		-0.000 [0.008]		0.002 [0.007]
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes		
Province FE $\times$ Month FE			Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls $\times$ Post	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	20364	19788	244368	237456
R-squared	0.639	0.642	0.599	0.602

Notes: This table reports the impact of public teachers' schools on the establishment of CCP county committees. The outcomes are restricted to the period 1934–1945. Columns (1)–(2) are estimated on a county–year panel; Columns (3)–(4) are estimated on a county–month panel with the exact dates of CCP county-committee establishment. *Public teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools from 1932 to 1934. *Post* in Columns (1)–(2) indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later, and zero otherwise. *Post* in Columns (3)–(4) indicates a dummy variable that equals one if the month t is March 1938 or later. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in time t . Socioeconomic controls include log distance to Nanjing (*Distance to Nanjing (log)*) and to the provincial capital (*Distance to provincial capital (log)*); log population size in 1920 (*Population (log)*); the 1930 share of rural households (*Share of rural households*); the log 1820 land-tax quota (*Land tax (log)*); an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county (*Railway*); and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi* (*jinshi (log)*). Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table 3: Robustness I: Effects of the Seat of CCP Central Committee

	Indicator Variable for CCP County Committee		
	Full Sample	North	South
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post	0.072*** [0.013]	0.098*** [0.019]	0.040** [0.017]
Distance to Yan'an $\times$ Post	-0.003 [0.031]		
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls $\times$ Post	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	19788	7392	12396
R-squared	0.642	0.667	0.565

Notes: Each unit of observation is a county-year pair. The outcomes are restricted to the period 1934–1945. Column (2) restricts the sample to counties in 7 northern provinces: Gansu, Ningxia, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Hebei, Shandong, and Henan. Column (3) restricts the sample to counties in 12 southern provinces: Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Fujian, Hunan, Hubei, Guangdong, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. *Public teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools from 1932 to 1934. *Post* indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later, and zero otherwise. *Distant to Yan'an* is defined as the log distance between each county and Yan'an in Shaanxi Province. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in year t . Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jins*. Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table 4: Robustness II: Japanese Occupation

	Indicator Variable for CCP County Committee	
	(1)	(2)
Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post	0.068*** [0.013]	0.054*** [0.016]
Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Japanese Occupation $\times$ Post		0.092*** [0.035]
Japanese Occupation $\times$ Post		0.079** [0.040]
Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Japanese Occupation		-0.074** [0.031]
Japanese Occupation	0.102*** [0.016]	0.035 [0.037]
County FE	Yes	Yes
Province FE $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls $\times$ Post	Yes	Yes
Observations	19788	19788
R-squared	0.644	0.645

Notes: Each unit of observation is a county-year pair. The outcomes are restricted to the period 1934–1945. *Public teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools from 1932 to 1934. *Post* indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later, and zero otherwise. *Japanese Occupation* is an indicator variable that equals to one if a county c was occupied by Japanese army in year t . The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in year t . Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi*. Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table 5: Robustness III: CCP Cadres and Party Members

	No. of CCP Cadres in 1937-45 (log)	No. of CCP Members by 1950 (log)
	(1)	(2)
Public Teachers' Schools	0.127*** [0.037]	0.111** [0.051]
Socioeconomic Controls	Yes	Yes
Province FE	Yes	Yes
Observations	1649	1313
R-squared	0.283	0.705

Notes: County-level cross-sectional OLS regressions. *Public teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools in 1932–1934. The dependent variables are, respectively, the log number of locally born cadres at or above the regiment level in all CCP-led military forces during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) in Column (1), and the log number of local CCP members by 1950 in Column (2). Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi*. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table 6: Robustness IV: Individual-Level Evidence from CHARLS

	Indicator Variable for Party Membership	
	(1)	(2)
Teachers' Education Experience	0.332*** [0.111]	0.345*** [0.115]
Primary Education or Below		0.024 [0.071]
Birth Year	0.007 [0.007]	0.007 [0.007]
Male	0.228*** [0.034]	0.231*** [0.036]
Rural Residence	-0.109*** [0.040]	-0.112*** [0.042]
Observations	305	305
Pseudo R-squared	0.179	0.179

Notes: Cross-sectional probit estimates using individual-level data from CHARLS (2014, 2018). Average marginal effects are reported. The sample is restricted to respondents born before 1932. *Teachers' education experience* equals one if the respondent ever attended a secondary teachers' school. *Primary education or below* equals one if the respondent's highest attainment is primary school or lower. The dependent variable is an indicator equal to one if the respondent is a CCP member and zero otherwise. Controls include birth year, gender, and an indicator for rural residence at age 15. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the level of the municipality of residence at age 15. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table 7: Instrumental Evidence

	Full Sample			Hebei, Shanxi, and Shandong Subsample			
	Reduced Form	First Stage	Second Stage	Baseline	Reduced Form	First Stage	Second Stage
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Distance to Ding County (log) × Post	-0.136*** [0.029]	-0.259*** [0.053]			-0.069** [0.029]	-0.272*** [0.068]	
Public Teachers' Schools × Post			0.527*** [0.124]	0.077*** [0.020]			0.253** [0.104]
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE× Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls × Post	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	19788	19788	19788	3996	3996	3996	3996
Kleibergen-Paap Wald rk F statistic		23.905				15.995	
Anderson-Rubin chi2-test		0.000				0.019	
Anderson-Rubin CI		[0.319, 0.861]			[0.049, 0.515]		

Notes: Each unit of observation is a county-year pair. We use the $(\log)$ distance from each county to Ding County as an instrument for the county-level average number of public teachers' schools in 1932–1934, and report the corresponding reduced-form, first-stage, and second-stage regression results. The first three columns use the full county sample, while the last four columns restrict the sample to counties in Hebei, Shanxi, and Shandong, where the CCP's Eighth Route Army was most active during the Sino-Japanese War. *Public teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools from 1932 to 1934. *Post* indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later, and zero otherwise. *Distance to Ding County* is defined as the logarithm of the distance between each county center and Ding County. The dependent variable in Columns (1), (3), (4), (5) and (7) is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in year t . Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jìnshi*. Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table 8: Non-Elite Access: School Types

	Indicator Variable for CCP County Committee			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post	0.074*** [0.014]	0.073*** [0.013]		0.059*** [0.023]
Middle schools $\times$ Post	-0.002 [0.006]			
Private Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post		-0.015 [0.071]		
SV Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post			0.081*** [0.020]	
Non-SV Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post			0.064*** [0.017]	
Public Teachers' Schools (1928-31) $\times$ Post				0.050 [0.038]
Public Teachers' Schools (1922-27) $\times$ Post				-0.060 [0.038]
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls $\times$ Post	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	19788	19788	19788	19788
R-squared	0.642	0.642	0.642	0.642

Notes: Each unit of observation is a county-year pair. The outcomes are restricted to the period 1934–1945. *Public teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools over 1932–1934; *Middle schools* is the county-level average number of regular middle schools over 1932–1934; and *Private teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of private teachers' schools over 1932–1934. *SV teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public simplified/village teachers' schools over 1932–1934. *Non-SV teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public non-simplified, non-village teachers' schools over 1932–1934. *Public teachers' schools (1928–31)* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools over 1928–1931, when the 1932 *Teachers' School Law* had not yet been issued. *Public teachers' schools (1922–27)* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools over 1922–1927, when the Beiyang government did not provide tuition waivers for teachers' schools. *Post* indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later, and zero otherwise. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in year t . Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi*. Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table 9: Non-Elite Access: Heterogeneous Effects Across Regions

	Indicator Variable for CCP County Committee		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
SV Teachers' Schools $\times$ Share of Rural Households $\times$ Post	0.290** [0.121]		
SV Teachers' Schools $\times$ Distance to Treaty Port $\times$ Post		0.047** [0.022]	
SV Teachers' Schools $\times$ Share of Self-Cultivators $\times$ Post			0.149** [0.071]
Share of Rural Households $\times$ Post	-0.014 [0.056]	0.035 [0.054]	0.027 [0.059]
Distance to Treaty Port $\times$ Post		0.025 [0.016]	
Share of Self-Cultivators $\times$ Post			-0.020 [0.054]
SV Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post	-0.151 [0.097]	-0.186 [0.125]	0.000 [0.041]
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls $\times$ Post	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	19788	19788	16704
R-squared	0.642	0.642	0.632

Notes: Each unit of observation is a county–year pair. The outcomes are restricted to the period 1934–1945. *SV teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public simplified/village teachers' schools during 1932–1934. *Share of rural households* is the county-level share of rural households in 1930. *Distance to treaty port* is the distance to the nearest treaty port (log). *Share of self-cultivators* is the share of self-cultivators among rural households in the 1930s. *Post* indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later, and zero otherwise. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in year t . Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi*. Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table 10: Career Frustration

	Indicator Variable for CCP County Committee	
	(1)	(2)
Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Top-50% Education Spending $\times$ Post	-0.035 [0.049]	
Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Top-50% Education Share $\times$ Post		-0.010 [0.037]
Top-50% Education Spending $\times$ Post	0.008 [0.038]	
Top-50% Education Share $\times$ Post		0.023 [0.028]
Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post	0.099** [0.043]	0.078*** [0.028]
County FE	Yes	Yes
Province FE $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls $\times$ Post	Yes	Yes
Observations	10104	10092
R-squared	0.591	0.591

Notes: Each unit of observation is a county–year pair. The outcomes are restricted to the period 1934–1945. *Public teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools from 1932 to 1934. *Post* indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later, and zero otherwise. *Top-50% education spending* equals one if the county's total education spending in 1935 exceeds the median across all counties (23,826 yuan), and zero otherwise; *Top-50% education share* equals one if the county's share of education spending in total public spending in 1935 exceeds the median across all counties (0.302), and zero otherwise. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in year t . Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi*. Because the fiscal statistics published by the Nationalist government are available only for 12 of the provinces in our sample—Ningxia, Anhui, Shandong, Guangxi, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Henan, Zhejiang, Hubei, Gansu, Fujian, and Shaanxi—the number of observations is reduced. Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses.

*** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table 11: Communist Exposure

	Indicator Variable for CCP County Committee		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
SV Teachers' Schools $\times$ Proximity to CCP $\times$ Post	0.317*** [0.117]		
Non-SV Teachers' Schools $\times$ Proximity to CCP $\times$ Post		-0.043 [0.083]	
Provincial Teachers' Schools $\times$ Proximity to CCP $\times$ Post			-0.165 [0.124]
SV Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post	0.016 [0.029]		
Non-SV Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post		0.063** [0.026]	
Provincial Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post			0.106*** [0.034]
Proximity to CCP $\times$ Post	-0.016 [0.097]	0.083 [0.105]	0.131 [0.092]
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls $\times$ Post	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	19788	19788	19788
R-squared	0.642	0.641	0.641

Notes: Each unit observation is a county-year pair. *SV teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public simplified/village teachers' schools from 1932 to 1934. *Non-SV teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public non-simplified, non-village teachers' schools from 1932 to 1934. *Provincial teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools founded by provincial governments from 1932 to 1934. *Post* indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later, and zero otherwise. *Proximity to CCP* is defined as the inverse log distance to the nearest CCP branch (1921-27) established in a secondary or higher school. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in year t . Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi*. Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table 12: Mass Education

	Indicator Variable for CCP County Committee	
	(1)	(2)
Primary-School Students $\times$ Post	-0.011 [0.012]	-0.016 [0.012]
Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post		0.086*** [0.015]
County FE	Yes	Yes
Province FE $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls $\times$ Post	Yes	Yes
Observations	16152	16152
R-squared	0.625	0.627

Notes: Each unit of observation is a county-year pair. The outcomes are restricted to the period 1934–1945. *Public teachers' schools* is the county-level average number of public teachers' schools from 1932 to 1934. *Post* indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later, and zero otherwise. *Primary-school students* is the logarithm of the number of enrolled primary-school students around 1930. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in year t . Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi*. Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Figures

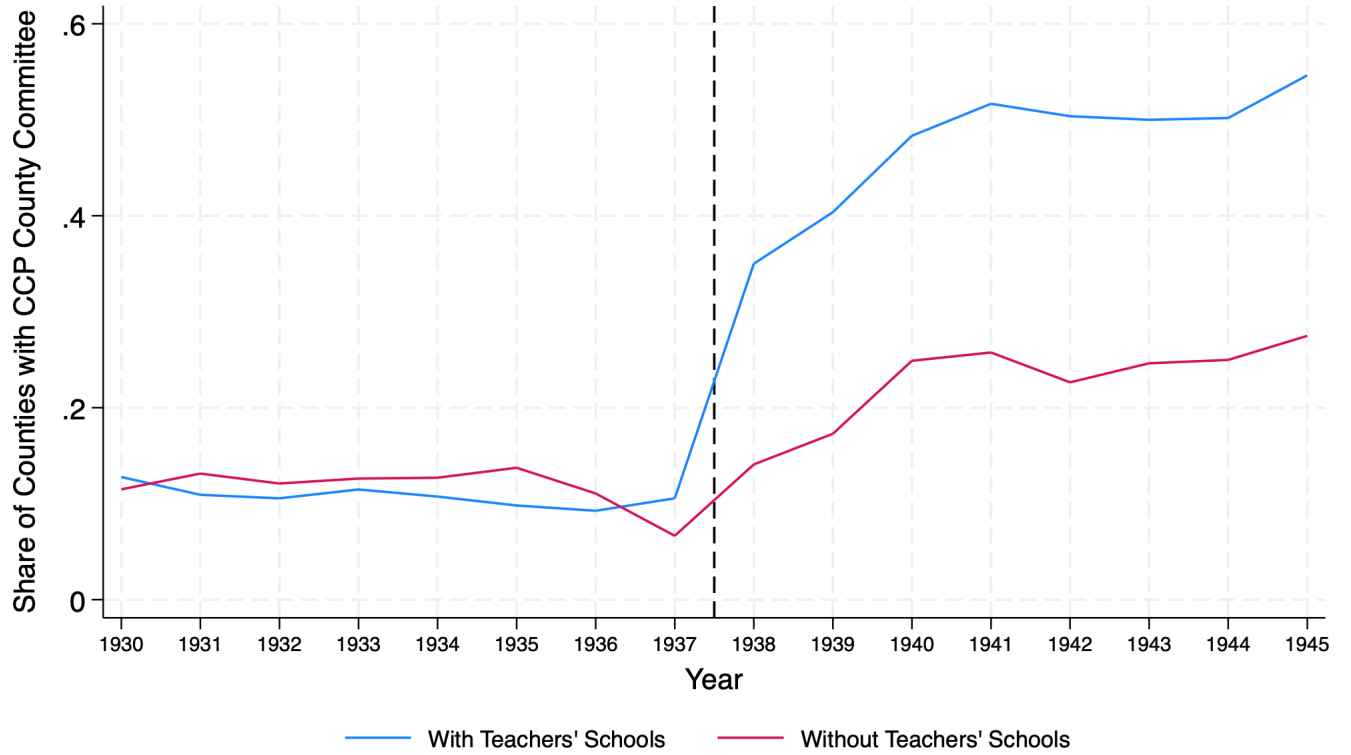


Figure 1: CCP County Committees: With vs. Without Teachers' Schools

Notes: We divide counties into two groups. One group comprises 540 counties with at least one public teachers' school during 1932–1934, and the other group comprises 1,157 counties without any public teachers' schools. The figure plots, for each group, the annual share of counties with a CCP county committee from 1930 to 1945. Data source: Ministry of Education of National Government (1935) & Organization Department of the CCP, Party History Research Office of the CCP Central Committee, and Central Archives (2000)

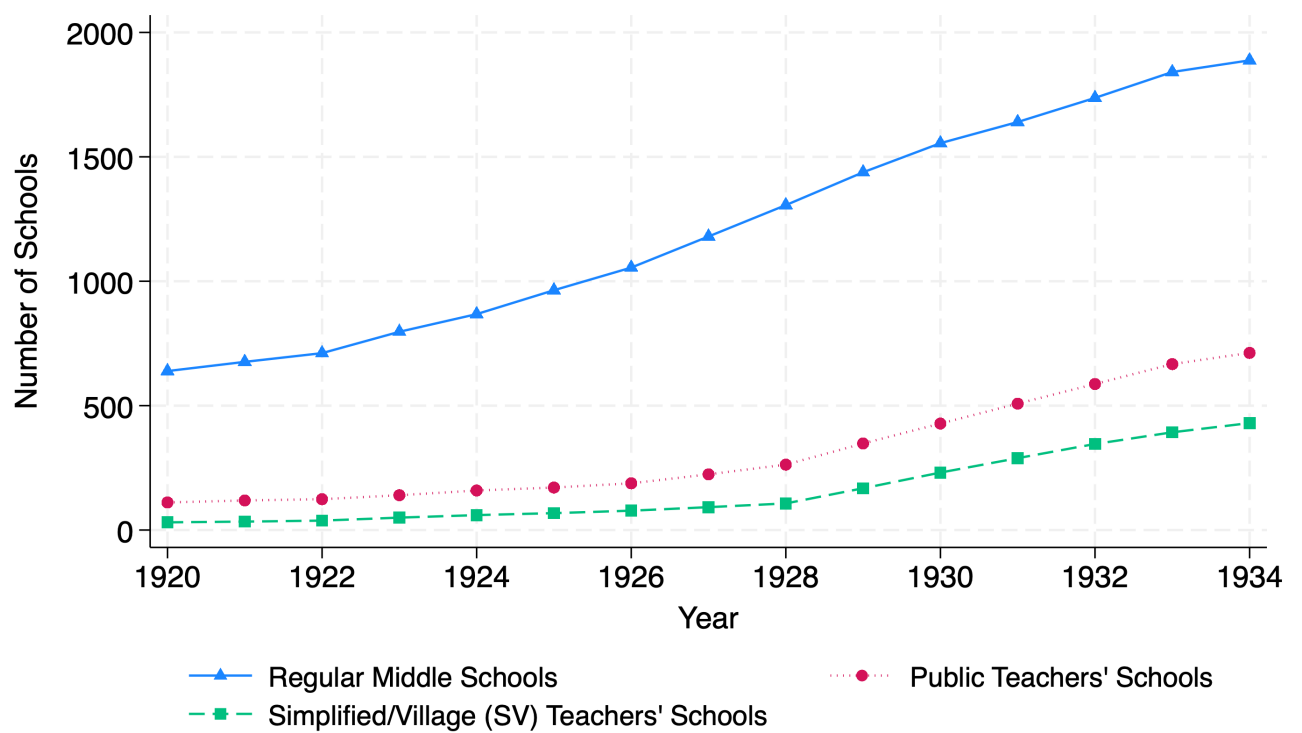


Figure 2: The Expansion of Secondary Education

Notes: The figure plots the annual numbers of regular middle schools, public teachers' schools, and simplified/village (SV) teachers' schools in our sample provinces from 1920 to 1934. Data source: Ministry of Education of National Government (1935).

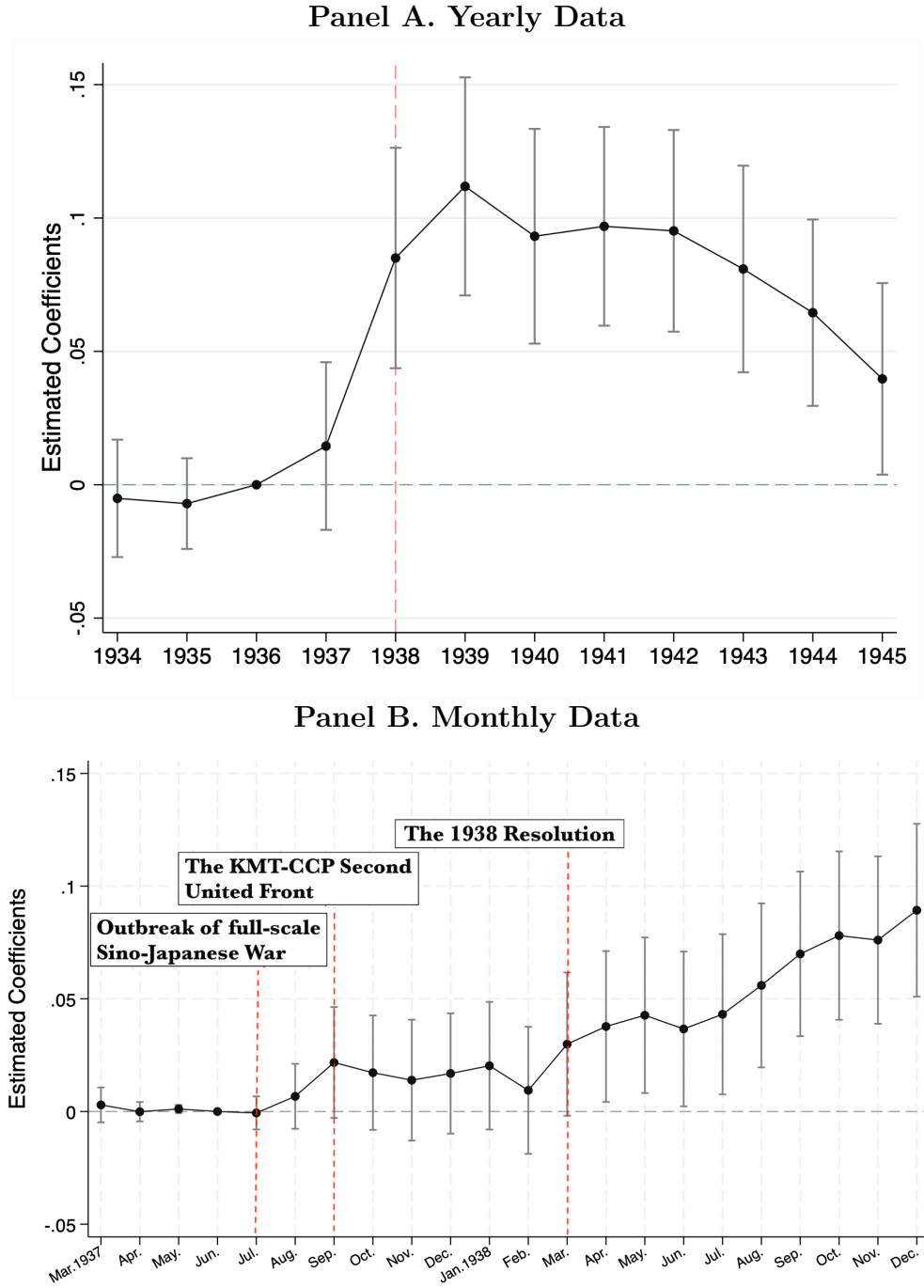


Figure 3: The Dynamic Impacts of Teachers' Schools on the Establishment of CCP County Committee

Notes: Panel (a) displays the estimated yearly dynamic effects of teachers' schools on the establishment of CCP county committees, together with 95% confidence intervals, taking 1936 as the reference year. Panel (b) displays the corresponding monthly dynamic effects from March 1937 to December 1938, with 95% confidence intervals, taking June 1937 as the reference month.

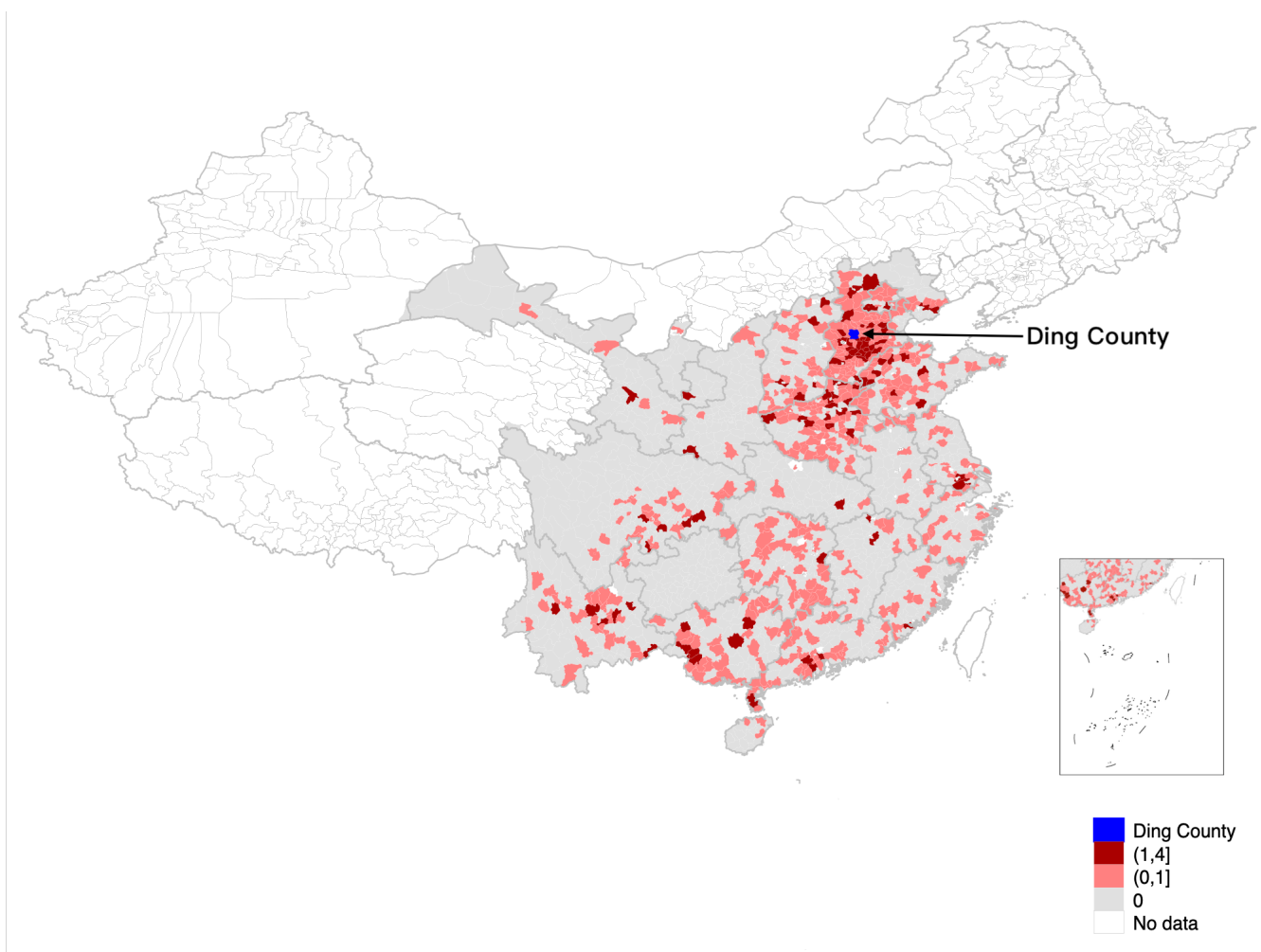


Figure 4: Location of Dingxian and Distribution of Teachers' Schools

Notes: This figure maps the county-level average number of public teachers' schools in 1932-1934. The blue color highlights the location of Ding County in Hebei Province. The average number of public teachers' schools in Ding county during this period is 2. Data source: Ministry of Education of National Government (1935).

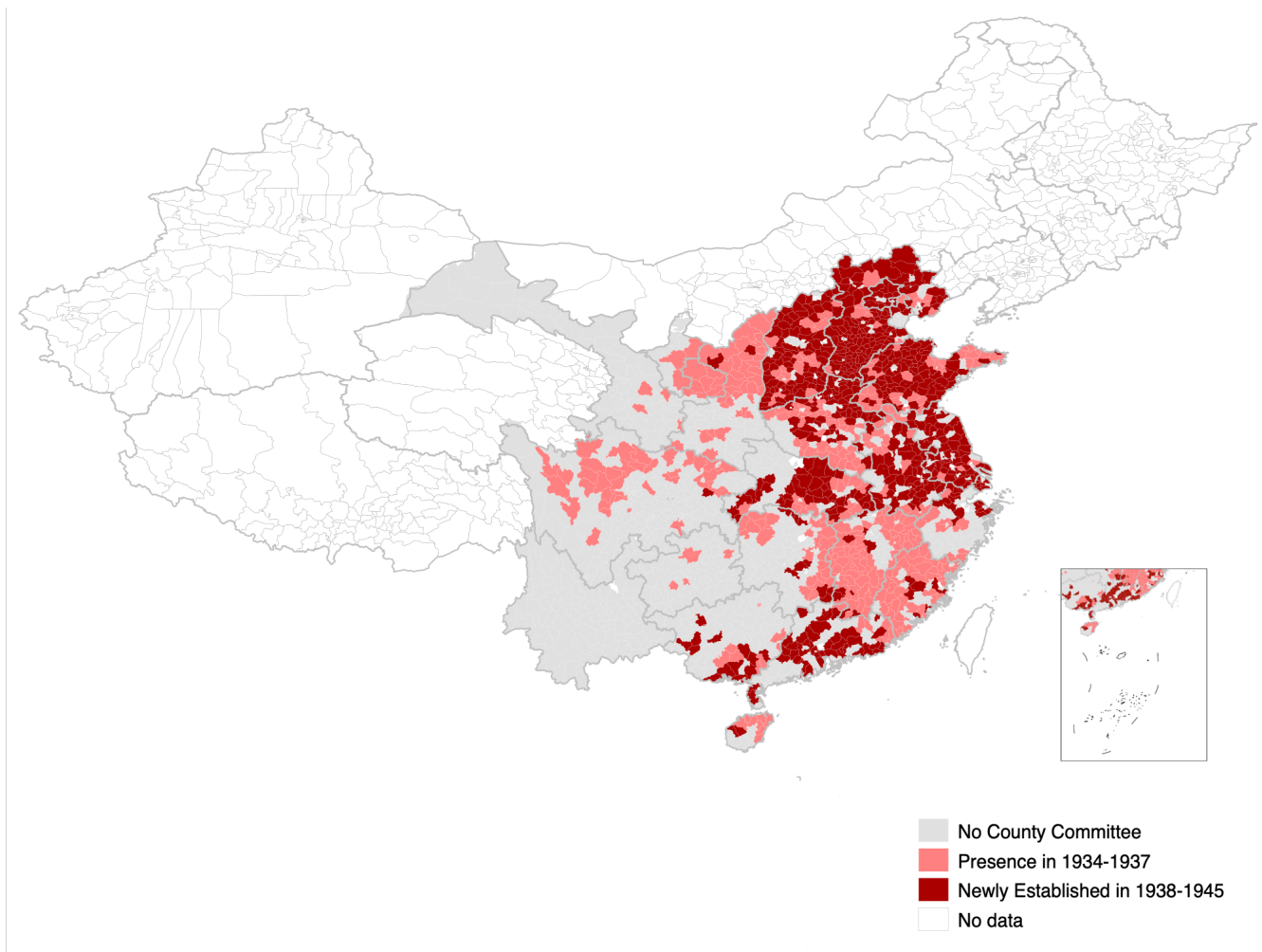


Figure 5: Distribution of CCP County Committees

Notes: This figure visualizes the distribution of CCP county committees across counties from 1934 to 1945. The light red shading denotes counties with CCP county committees in place between 1934 and 1937, whereas the dark red shading marks counties where CCP county committees were newly established between 1938 and 1945. Data source: Organization Department of the CCP, Party History Research Office of the CCP Central Committee, and Central Archives (2000).

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A Appendix Tables

Table A1: Teachers' Schools and CCP Expansion before 1938

	Indicator Variable for CCP County Committee			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Lagged Public Teachers' Schools	-0.001 [0.012]	0.005 [0.013]	0.009 [0.016]	0.009 [0.016]
Lagged Public Teachers' Schools $\times$ Post-1932			-0.013 [0.012]	-0.006 [0.013]
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls $\times$ Year FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	10182	9894	10182	9894
R-squared	0.583	0.589	0.583	0.589

Notes: This table reports the impact of public teachers' schools on the establishment of CCP county committees before the CCP's recruitment policy change in 1938. Each unit of observation is a county-year pair. The outcomes are restricted to the period 1930–1935. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in year t . *Lagged Public Teachers' Schools* is the county-level number of public teachers' schools in the previous year. *Post-1932* is an indicator equal to one if the previous year is 1932 or later, i.e., after the enactment of the *Teachers' School Law*. Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi*. Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table A2: Teachers' School Dummy and CCP Expansion

	Indicator Variable for CCP County Committee			
	Yearly Data		Monthly Data	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Public Teachers' School Dummy $\times$ Post	0.085*** [0.017]	0.072*** [0.017]	0.076*** [0.015]	0.064*** [0.015]
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE $\times$ Year FE	Yes	Yes		
Province FE $\times$ Month FE			Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic Controls $\times$ Post	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	20364	19788	244368	237456
R-squared	0.638	0.642	0.598	0.602

Notes: All specifications are the same as in Table 2, except that we replace the county-level average number of teachers' schools in 1932–1934 with an indicator for the presence of any public teachers' school in 1932–1934. The outcomes are restricted to the period 1934–1945. Columns (1)–(2) are estimated on a county–year panel; Columns (3)–(4) are estimated on a county–month panel with the exact dates of CCP county-committee establishment. *Public teachers' school dummy* is an indicator for the presence of any teachers' school in 1932–1934 at the county level. *Post* in Columns (1)–(2) indicates a dummy variable that equals one if year t is 1938 or later, and zero otherwise. *Post* in Columns (3)–(4) indicates a dummy variable that equals one if the month t is March 1938 or later. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if county c has a CCP county committee in time t . Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1820 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi*. Standard errors are clustered by county and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table A3: Placebo Tests of Instrument

	CCP County Committee (1927-34)	CCP County Committee (1927-37)	Total Fiscal Revenue in 1935 (log)	Population Share of Landlords and Rich Peasants	Land Share Owned by Landlords and Rich Peasants
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Distance to Ding County (log)	0.064 [0.060]	0.031 [0.075]	-0.170 [0.163]	-0.288 [0.486]	2.981 [2.000]
Socioeconomic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1649	1649	843	1145	1106
R-squared	0.312	0.280	0.702	0.165	0.224

Notes: County-level cross-sectional OLS regressions. *CCP county committee (1927-34)* is an indicator equal to 1 if a CCP county committee was present in the county at any time between 1927 and 1934. *CCP county committee (1927-37)* is an indicator equal to 1 if a CCP county committee was present between 1927 and 1937. *Total fiscal revenue in 1935 (log)* is the logarithm of total county fiscal revenue in 1935 (yuan). *Population share of landlords and rich peasants* is the share of the population classified as landlords or rich peasants in the land reform. *Land share owned by landlords and rich peasants* is the share of land owned by landlords and rich peasants before the land reform. Socioeconomic controls are the same as in Table 2, including log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital; log population size in 1920; the 1930 share of rural households; the log 1920 land-tax quota; an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county; and an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jingshi*. Because the fiscal statistics published by the Nationalist government are available only for 12 of the provinces in our sample—Ningxia, Anhui, Shandong, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Henan, Zhejiang, Hubei, Gansu, Fujian, and Shaanxi—the number of observations in Column (3) is greatly reduced. Standard errors are clustered by province and reported in parentheses. *** Significant at the 1% level; ** Significant at the 5% level; * Significant at the 10% level.

Table A4: Curriculum Overlap Across School Types: Common and School-Specific

Panel A. Common Curriculum (Shared by All Types)		
Civics; Physical Education; Hygiene; Chinese; Arithmetic; Geography; History; Biology; Chemistry; Physics; Ethics; Manual Work; Art; Music.		
Panel B. School-Specific Modules		
Regular Middle Schools	Teachers' Schools	Simplified/Village (SV) Teachers' Schools
English	<i>Teaching Methodology:</i> Education Theory; Psychology; Teaching Methodology	<i>Teaching Methodology:</i> Education Theory; Psychology; Teaching Methodology <i>Rural Practice:</i> Rural Economy; Agricultural Practices; Cooperative Economy, etc.

Note: Simplified/village (SV) teachers' schools are a subtype of public teachers' schools; both share the teaching-methodology cluster, while the SV track additionally emphasizes rural practice. Data source: Wang (1934).

B Appendix Figures

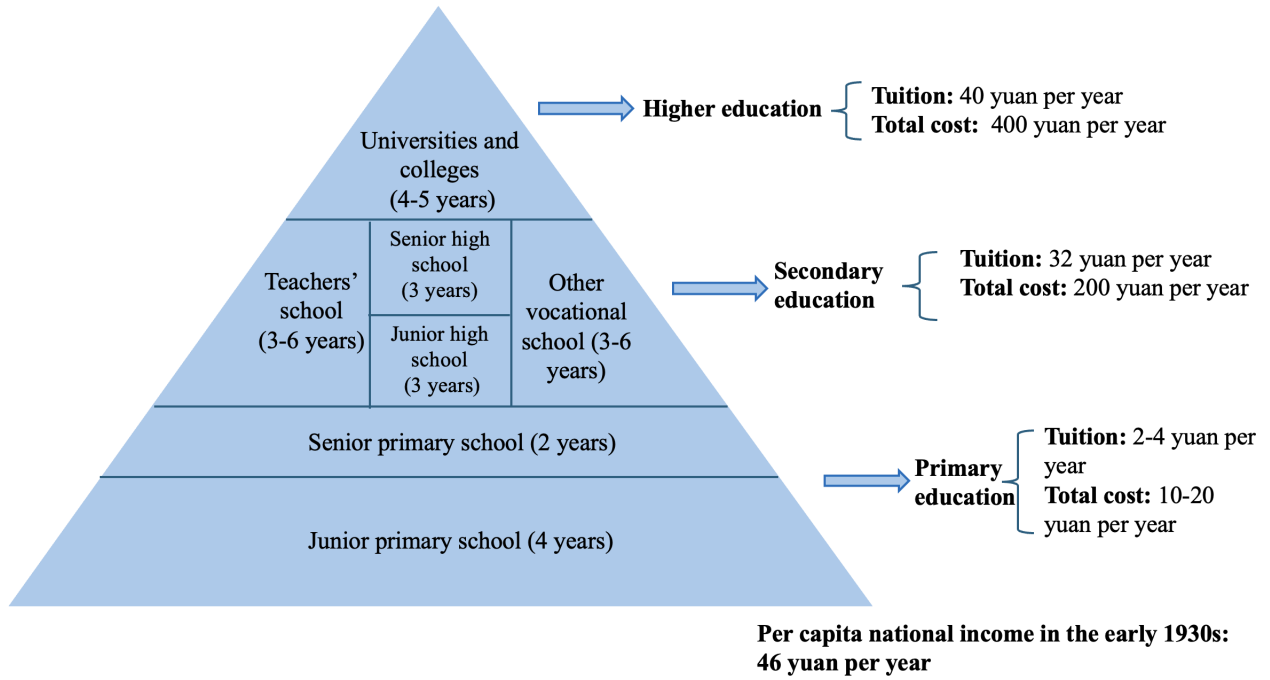


Figure B1: Educational Stratification and Expenditures

Notes: Tuition and total per-student educational expenditures are taken from (Second Historical Archives of China, 1991) and (Lu, 1932), respectively. Estimates of national per capita income come from (Liu and Wang, 1989).

黃巖縣立女子簡易師範學校	定海縣立簡易師範學校	鄞縣立簡易鄉村師範學校	孝豐縣立簡易師範學校	立別	縣立簡易師範學校	第九學區聯立師範講習所	第三學區聯立師範講習所	立別
縣立	縣立	縣立	縣立	立別	立別	聯立	聯立	立別
三年制師範	簡易師範	簡易師範	簡易師範	科別	科別	三年制師範	三年制師範	科別
黃巖	定海	鄞縣	孝豐	所在地	所在地	建德	吳興	所在地
民國十四年創辦	民國十九年創辦	民國二十年設立	民國二十二年四月創辦	沿革	沿革	民國二十一年七月由省立中代辦第三學區聯立師範講習所創設	民國二十一年七月由省立中代辦第三學區聯立師範講習所創設	沿革

Figure B2: Examples of School Records in the *Directory*

Notes: Data source: Ministry of Education of National Government (1935).

Year of establishment Location

(四)宁化中心县委员会(1934. 5—8)

1934 年 5 月,根据中华苏维埃共和国中央执行委员会人民委员会决定,中共宁化中心县委员会及所属清流、归化、彭湃、泉上 4 个县委和宁化县各区委从福建省委属下划归闽赣省委领导。8 月,闽赣省委机关驻地从宁化的里坑村迁到县城,决定撤销宁化中心县委,恢复宁化县委。后宁化县委及原中心县委所辖的 4 个县委皆直属省委。

书 记 刘祥文(1934. 5—8)

Figure B3: A Sample of Records on CCP County Committees

Notes: Data source: Organization Department of the CCP, Party History Research Office of the CCP Central Committee, and Central Archives (2000).

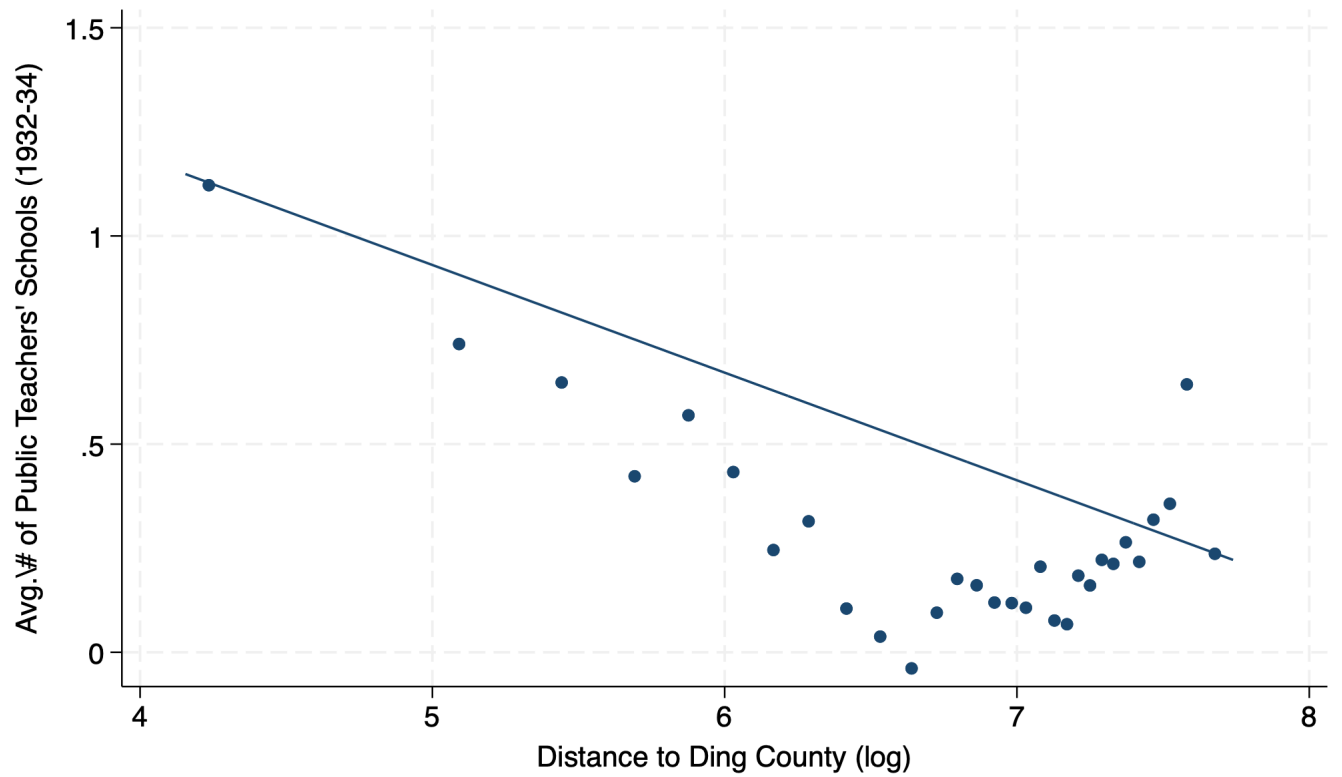


Figure B4: Distance to Ding County and the Number of Public Teachers' Schools

Notes: We use the binscatter methodology of Cattaneo et al. (2024) to plot the relationship between the average number of public teachers' schools in 1932-1934 and the distance to Ding County, controlling for log distance to Nanjing (then the national capital) and to the provincial capital, log population size in 1920, the 1930 share of rural households, the log 1820 land-tax quota, an indicator for whether a Republican-era railway line crossed the county, an education-valuing culture, proxied by the log number of *jinshi*, and province fixed effects. The fitted line in the plot is based on linear regression using the full sample.