

A Most Adaptable Party

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The belief that history brought it to power is one of the few ideological constants in the Chinese Communist Party's hundred-year saga.

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Li Zhensheng/Contact Press Images

A celebration of the end of the Cultural Revolution, with a banner proclaiming the 'great victory of smashing the Gang of Four's conspiracy to usurp the power of the leadership of the party,' Harbin, China, October 23, 1976

In February the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, held a gala reception at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing to announce a momentous accomplishment: the elimination of extreme rural poverty in China. The grand event—in an enormous ballroom with hundreds of dignitaries flown in from around the country—was carefully timed to kick off a year of celebrations to mark the Chinese Communist Party's founding one hundred years ago. A country that many people once saw as synonymous with poverty had achieved the unattainable, Xi declared, creating a "miracle" that will "go down in history."

Evoking history was more than self-congratulatory. For a party that aims to guide China toward domination of the future—especially in crucial industries such as electric vehicles, renewable energy, and artificial intelligence—the first priority is controlling the past. In its telling, history brought it to power and, because it rules so well by doing things like eliminating poverty, history has decided to keep it there. For the Chinese Communist Party, history is legitimacy.

But just to make sure that history really appears to be on its side, the party spends an inordinate amount of time writing and rewriting it and preventing others from wielding their pens. Few Chinese leaders have done so with as much verve as Xi, who launched his reign in 2012 by making a major speech at an exhibition on Chinese history. Since then, he has waged war on “historical nihilism”—in other words, those who want to criticize the party’s missteps. Xi has many goals, such as battling corruption, fostering innovation, and projecting power abroad through his Belt and Road Initiative, but controlling history underlies them all.

This belief in the power of history is one of the few constants in the CCP’s hundred-year saga. Though based on one creed, its ideology has actually been a blunderbuss of strategies: it started as a group of orthodox Marxists who looked to the industrial proletariat to lead the revolution, lurched to a rural-based party that tried to foment a peasant rebellion, morphed into a ruling party dominated by a personality cult built around Mao Zedong, transformed itself into an authoritarian technocracy, and now presents itself as in charge of a budding superpower dominated by a strong, charismatic leader.

These stages are united by three interlocking ideas. One has been held by many Chinese patriots since the nineteenth century: that modernizing China means making it wealthy and powerful rather than free and democratic.

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Another, also shared by Chinese patriots, is that only a strong state can achieve this. And finally, that history anointed the Communist Party to achieve these utilitarian goals.

The Chinese Communist Party’s centenary coincides with unprecedented interest in how the country is ruled. After it took power in 1949, the CCP was seen by many as a Soviet Union copycat. In the 1960s, when ties between Beijing and Moscow unraveled, Western countries began to see China as an ally against the Soviets. When the party adopted capitalist-style economic policies in the late 1970s, China became a land of economic fantasies. Pathbreaking efforts to explain its governing structures remained mostly limited to a narrow field of Sinologists, investors, and activists.

That has changed over the past decade with China’s emergence as a nascent superpower. An early example of this popular interest in how China is run was Richard McGregor’s *The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers*, which gave an overview of the CCP’s widespread influence on Chinese society.

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McGregor's book was an important corrective to the dominant story—told by many foreign journalists, think tankers, businesspeople, and government officials—that China was becoming more and more like the West by adopting the West's own mystical forces: the marketplace and the Internet. McGregor countered this naiveté, showing how the CCP dominated not only politics but also academia, nongovernmental organizations, and the economy. In particular, its control of economic life has resulted in a hybrid capitalist state system rather than the neoliberal one imagined by many. Even private companies ultimately answer to the party: last year, for example, the government quashed the stock market listing of Jack Ma's Ant Group, in part because Ma was seen as too outspoken.

When McGregor wrote his book, the CCP had 78 million members—nearly the population of Germany—but it now has roughly 92 million. While large in absolute terms, it is still only 7 percent of China's population, allowing it to control politics, economics, and society without losing its exclusivity. Anyone can apply to join, but applicants are carefully vetted and huge numbers are rejected. That makes it similar to the Soviet Union's narrowly based Communist Party, and indeed the Chinese founders modeled it on the Soviets' Leninist system, making it hierarchical, disciplined, and mission-focused. But while the Soviet Communists lost power and were banned in 1991, the Chinese Communists have thrived by doing something rarely associated with an authoritarian system: adapting.

Marxism is not inherently adaptive, instead relying on historical determinism to analyze social development and chart a political path. Change was supposed to come via the industrial proletariat, which would realize it was being exploited, revolt, and set society on the road to communism. But by the 1930s China's Communist Party had found that this template didn't apply to a country with few industrial workers. Hounded by the armies of the ruling Kuomintang government and on the verge of extinction, the CCP began to improvise.

After much internal struggle, party leaders sided with Mao in acknowledging that the CCP had to be rural-based. They also forged alliances with non-Communist groups, such as religious believers, landowners, middle-class entrepreneurs, and freethinking writers. Once the party consolidated power, it was most successful when it applied the same flexibility in ruling China, such as adopting market-style economic policies and allowing non-party members a greater say in public life.

In *From Rebel to Ruler*, his new history of the CCP, Tony Saich of the Harvard Kennedy School argues that the party also owes its survival to two much more hard-edged institutions: its organization and propaganda departments. The first keeps detailed dossiers on all members, allowing it to vet them for reliability and weed out those who don't follow what the party euphemistically calls "correct behavior." And by tightly controlling who serves where and for how long, it prevents local leaders from building up fiefdoms that might foster bad governance or even challenge central control.

The CCP also keeps its millions in line through propaganda and indoctrination. It has more than three thousand “party schools” across the country. At times, foreign observers have written mirthful stories about how Milton Friedman was being taught at this or that party school, or made it seem as if one of them was China’s version of the Kennedy School. There is some truth to these accounts—market economics are taught, as are skills needed to be an effective civil servant. But the schools’ underlying goal is to make sure that party members know the priorities of whatever leader holds power.

As a longtime observer of the CCP—he first went to China in 1977 as a student from Holland and has returned regularly ever since—Saich is able to give a sweeping and cogent history of it. Some of the book might be too detailed for general readers, but the introduction and conclusion are highly readable, summarizing major themes of the party’s history. One is a belief in its infallibility, which partly stems from its improbable history. It was founded in Shanghai by a group of thirteen young Chinese men inspired by the Russian Revolution; Saich writes that the outcome

set in motion a movement that would create the most powerful political organization in the world, overseeing an economy that would come to rival that of the United States. It is an extraordinary story of survival, disaster, and resurrection. Given the conditions under which the movement labored, the CCP should never have come to power.

Saich gives a memorable account of a fellow Dutchman, Henk Sneevliet, who in 1921 was sent by Moscow to liaise with Chinese Communists. Sneevliet was present at the CCP’s first meeting and was singularly unimpressed by them—so much so that he advised against forming a full-fledged party. Instead, he argued that progressives should first pursue broader goals and link up with potential allies as a way to avoid destruction.

Over time, however, the CCP’s real challenge turned out to be less institutional than ideational: if the party is so great, why is its history littered with so many failures, such as policies that caused the world’s deadliest recorded famine, or purges and social experiments that wiped out millions of opponents—with almost no one held accountable? How could history have legitimized an organization with this patchy record?

Party leaders developed two tactics to make history appear to be on their side. One is to blame foreigners, a storyline that plays well in a country whose official national history is of foreigners humiliating it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, foreigners (often simplified as “the West”) are blamed for stoking tensions with Taiwan, encouraging opposition in Hong Kong, uncovering reeducation camps in Xinjiang, and trying to undermine CCP control by supporting nongovernmental organizations, academic exchanges, and other forms of “peaceful evolution.”

The other way the CCP explains problems is to blame members for following the wrong policies, even if at the time they were the party's official position. Hence when Mao died and his policies were overthrown, a group of leaders known as the Gang of Four was scapegoated and its followers purged, even though all were following Mao's ideas.

This whipsawing doesn't encourage the sort of inner-party democracy that is supposed to prevail. In theory, members are allowed to say what they want inside the party as long as they accept final decisions and loyally carry them out. In practice, the ever-shifting correct line means that it's best to keep one's mouth shut for fear that a statement that seems innocent now will become compromising later. This was especially true in the Mao era, when political rivals were purged and killed. But even in modern times, leaders who once were in favor are now sidelined or even jailed—for example, the onetime contender for the top position in China, Bo Xilai. As Saich notes, the concept of struggle permeates the party's language and actions:

This heritage created an especially violent language that was combined with the inability to accept criticism of the core concepts. Harsh rhetoric and even violence were deemed acceptable when dealing with critics—not only those who attacked the party from without but also often critics from within. The concept of loyal opposition was rejected.

Hence the party's history has been especially tumultuous, with really only one peaceful transfer of power—from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao in 2002. All others have been accompanied by purges and show trials, including Bo's dismissal from all his posts and expulsion from the party on the eve of Xi's elevation in 2012.

But as Bruce J. Dickson writes in *The Party and the People*, assuming that the CCP rules mainly through fear is a lazy way of understanding China. The adaptability that the party used to make broad shifts in policy also helps explain how it rules on a daily basis. Leaders are often hypercautious and fail to anticipate problems, but once they decide to react, they do so quickly and bring huge resources to bear.

One example that Dickson cites to good effect is the Covid-19 crisis. As is now well known, local authorities tried to cover up what seemed like a minor health crisis in Wuhan, but when it blew up, central party leaders came down hard. Local officials were switched out and the government launched a blanket shutdown of the region, and later of large swaths of the country. It mobilized doctors and nurses from all across China, built pop-up hospitals, and sent in the military. Within a few months, the CCP had Covid-19 largely under control.

As Dickson notes, the party's adaptability and responsiveness is conventional wisdom in serious China-watching circles.

It's just that this sort of nuanced understanding doesn't fit the dominant view today of China as a strategic threat that rules through brute force or big data. These caricatures are especially convincing from afar, which increasingly is how journalism and analysis are carried out. But they do little to explain how China has risen so quickly and why there is so little opposition to the party inside the country.

Dickson's book gives a useful overview of the various bodies that run China and the party's involvement in them. He also surveys a series of important questions, such as why the CCP doesn't like civil society or religious groups. He is especially strong on the issue of nationalism, which many foreign observers assert is growing in China, especially among young people. Dickson gives a sure-footed assessment of public opinion data to show that this is not the case, and that young people are in fact less nationalistic than their parents' generation.

As to why so little opposition exists in China, Dickson doesn't dispute that this is partly the result of public security—opponents are rounded up and frequently given draconian jail sentences. But at least as important is the fact that—according to surveys and anecdotal evidence—a huge proportion of the Chinese people appear to be fairly satisfied with how the CCP runs their country. Many critics might wish this weren't so, Dickson writes, but then how to explain why dissidents have so little following? China has no one like Andrei Sakharov or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn—opposition figures who commanded widespread respect among the population.

In a chapter asking the eternal question “Will China Become Democratic?” Dickson analyzes how most Chinese understand the term. Surveys show that few define “democracy”—*minzhu* in Chinese—as meaning elections, the rule of law, political freedom, and equal rights. Instead, most see it in terms of outcomes, especially ruling in the people's interest. That is *minzhu*, and that is what they favor.

This doesn't mean that Chinese people are passive—many do protest when they feel they are being treated unfairly. But, Dickson writes, “as long as incomes continue to rise, higher education is more accessible, health care more available and affordable, air more breathable, and so on, they are not likely to demand competitive elections, a multiparty system, rule of law, free speech, and other institutional features of democracy.” The difference in how democracy and good governance are understood helps explain why many outsiders see the CCP as repressive and authoritarian, while most Chinese have come to see it as relatively responsive and capable.

Over its long history, the CCP has had strategies other than adaptive authoritarianism, as Timothy Cheek, Klaus Mühlhahn, and Hans van der Ven demonstrate in another book published to coincide with the party's centenary, *The Chinese Communist Party: A Century in Ten Lives*. These poignant biographies include a liberal infamously purged by Mao in the 1940s, the wife of a deposed party secretary, an upright Communist who retreated to a hermit-like

existence after the 1989 Tiananmen uprising, and a 1940s movie actress who was later purged. According to the editors, these lives show that the party also encompassed a liberal, cosmopolitan strand that at times was central:

Its proponents believed that China needed change and that the Party was necessary to achieve it. But they also were committed to intellectual and moral autonomy, the right to criticize the Party, and the decentralization of power.

The person who best fits this description is not profiled in this volume but hovers over all these books like a patron saint: Gao Hua, a historian at Nanjing University who died of liver cancer in 2011 at the age of fifty-seven. Gao grew up during the Cultural Revolution and witnessed the violence that Mao unleashed, much of it announced in handwritten posters that were plastered along the streets of his hometown. Many of them made reference to a purge in the 1940s that was aimed at authors, artists, and thinkers who had traveled to a poor, mountainous region of western China to join the Communists in their wartime redoubt in the small city of Yan'an.

Gao was intrigued and wanted to learn more. That was difficult, because most books were banned during the Cultural Revolution. Then luck intervened. Several thousand books had been locked up in a warehouse near his home, and the kindly gentleman in charge let Gao and one of his friends borrow some. Gao read hundreds of banned books, including the novels of Ding Ling and the essays of Wang Shiwei, both of whom Mao had purged in Yan'an twenty-five years earlier.

By the time Gao entered Nanjing University in 1978 he instinctively knew that this purge held a key to understanding the traumas that his country had gone through. He began collecting memoirs, papers, documents, and other accounts. Twenty-two years later, he published his life's work, *How the Red Sun Rose: The Origin and Development of the Yan'an Rectification Movement, 1930–45*.

The Red Sun, of course, is Mao, and the answer is that he rose through bloody purges that destroyed lives and forced obedience. In standard Communist histories, the Yan'an Rectification Movement is portrayed as a great victory for the revolution, a harnessing of intellectuals to the sacred task of saving China under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party. Many official accounts put it on a par with the May 4th Movement, a genuine outpouring of creativity and energy in 1919 that launched the most fertile period of thought in modern Chinese history. What Gao showed, however, was that Yan'an was the opposite: a sterilization of Chinese intellectuals, who could avoid persecution only by becoming apparatchiks.

In a postscript to the book, Gao describes his upbringing, motivation, and research methods. He had to make do without access to official archives—from the start, his project was seen as too sensitive for him to be permitted to see government documents. He was regularly denied research grants, promotions, and the chance for a senior position at another university. Every book he bought

and photocopy he made was financed on his puny salary. He wrote his enormous work at his kitchen table, chain-smoking and drinking tea, his reputation growing until people made pilgrimages to Nanjing to seek him out.

His early death robbed him of the chance to write his next book, which his friends say was to have focused on what happened after the Communists, remolded by Mao into a tool of his control, assumed power in 1949. But in some ways, his life's work was finished. His book punctures what is perhaps the CCP's ur-myth—that it started as a pure, clean band of idealists fighting for China. Although never published in China, Gao's book was released by the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2000 and since then has gone through twenty-two printings. Two years ago it was masterfully translated by the veteran duo Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian.

The book is dense, long, and challenging. Professional historians have a hard time accepting all of Gao's efforts to psychoanalyze Mao and his motivations. But his achievement is overwhelming, calling into question the entire Communist project. Here was a Chinese historian, working in China, challenging the party on its most sacred soil.

Gao said that his goal was to follow the admonition of the great twentieth-century historian Chen Yinke, who died of heart failure after being persecuted during the Cultural Revolution: historians should "observe the ocean in a drop of water." In this, Gao succeeded. He didn't just reconstruct erased history but uncovered a pattern of how the CCP has controlled generations of novelists and poets, artists and bloggers, videographers and citizen journalists—the entire panoply of people struggling to make themselves heard, not just in the 1940s but for as long as the party has existed. While the CCP has succeeded in silencing most of them and convincing most others that they don't need to choose their leaders, Gao exemplifies an undercurrent of freethinking that remains alive one hundred years on.