

Life of the Party

How Secure Is the CCP?

By Orville Schell

July 23 marks the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, which was founded in Shanghai in 1921. The first party congress was attended by, among others, a 27-year-old Mao Zedong, who had made an arduous journey from his inland Hunan Province. This summer, China will hold an epic celebration to honor the occasion. Although the party will forgo a military parade in Tiananmen Square (lest it appear too militaristic), the jingoistic *Global Times* explained that “large-scale exhibitions will be held to display the glorious course, great achievements, and valuable experience of the CCP over the past 100 years.” There will be celebratory publications, seminars, commemorative stamps and coins, medals for “outstanding party members,” and a special hotline set up so that patriotic citizens can report any “historical nihilists”—miscreants who might deign to “deny the excellence of advanced socialist culture.” Xi Jinping, China’s president and the general secretary of the CCP, has, in rhetoric that would have pleased Mao, exhorted the party’s 90 million members to “vigorously carry forward the Red tradition.” Meanwhile, propaganda organs are bombarding the public with wordy slogans: “Adhere to Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important idea of the ‘Three Represents,’ the Scientific View of Development and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism With Chinese Characteristics for the New Era as the guide!”

Although such language is familiar to older Chinese who lived through the Mao era, many others are left wondering how such retrograde big-leader *Kultur* fits into a modern globalized world—especially one in which an autocratic latter-day people’s republic continues to astound analysts, with an economic growth rate of 18 percent in the first quarter of 2021. After all, didn’t Western theorists once insist that a growing economy was the companion to ineluctable democratic development?

Those of us who have long watched China’s progress—I first joined the China-watching fraternity at Harvard in the early 1960s as a student of John Fairbank and Benjamin Schwartz—now find ourselves entering an era hauntingly reminiscent of that earlier one when Americans were shut out of “Red China,” left to make sense of Mao’s tectonic revolution through Chinese newspapers and by peering through knotholes from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Now, after several decades of hopeful engagement, Beijing’s “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy is again souring relations with the United States. Chinese libraries and archives have closed their doors to scholars, the government is denying visas to foreign correspondents, harsh crackdowns are suffocating global civil society groups, and the COVID-19 pandemic has brought cultural exchanges to a standstill. And this time, the United States is jousting with a far more successful, powerful, and threatening adversary.

As the CCP marks its centennial with an avalanche of official party histories portraying China as a monolithic powerhouse, three recent books serve as reminders that Chinese communism has given rise to a surprising diversity of viewpoints and leadership styles. Although the country’s leaders have all shared a commitment to a one-party Leninist government, this fact masks deeper uncertainty. Despite nationalist bravado about China’s “rejuvenation” and success

at nation building, the party's ongoing obsession with control reveals a lack of confidence in the system it has concocted.

FROM ONE, MANY

Communist China's historical diversity is most evident in the volume edited by Timothy Cheek, Klaus Mühlhahn, and Hans van de Ven, which profiles a score of figures who played important roles in the CCP's contradictory development. They include the Dutch communist politician Henk Sneevliet, alias Maring, who helped organize the CCP in the 1920s; the outspoken intellectual leftist Wang Shiwei, who was beheaded for his candor in 1947; and the reform-minded CCP general secretary Zhao Ziyang, who was purged in 1989 for sympathizing with student protesters.

China's Leaders, by David Shambaugh, covers roughly the same broad period, with five essays on Mao and his successors: Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi. As Shambaugh skillfully demonstrates, Xi marks a sharp break with these other post-Mao leaders. By ending collective rule and crowning himself the unilateral leader, Xi has reincarnated China as a highly centralized, neo-Maoist techno-autocracy. By dashing the dream of engagement—an idea founded on the premise that increased trade, scholarly exchange, civil society interaction, and diplomacy would bridge the divide between China and the United States—he has thrown U.S.-Chinese relations into a death spiral.

The Party and the People, by the political scientist Bruce Dickson, drafts a helpful balance sheet of the party's strengths and weaknesses, giving readers a better understanding of how the CCP's versatility enabled it to become the longest-ruling communist party in history. Although Deng's exuberant reforms did start to bend China's Leninist metal, under Xi's tutelage, China has begun to snap back into its old Maoist shape. What is new, as Dickson hastens to note, is that the party's legitimacy is "based not on the consent of the governed, but on its ability to modernize the country."

Evident throughout these narratives of the CCP's history is the way dissident voices outside the party have repeatedly made themselves heard and shifted the party's direction. This tradition of diversity remains encoded in China's political DNA, like a recessive gene ready to express itself at any time. These shifts should prompt observers to remember that at any given time, China's posture is only a freeze-frame of that moment and should never be mistaken as constant.

So how should outsiders understand this endlessly morphing country that keeps surprising analysts with its extraordinary developmental acumen and self-wounding blindness? What Shambaugh calls the "operating software" of Xi's rule includes the feeling that China is constantly under siege by both internal and external enemies, a national fixation on secrecy, a desire to regulate everything, endless "reeducation" and "rectification" campaigns, and an insistence that "the Party control the gun" at all times. Above all, instead of subscribing to the view that human beings, like markets, are best given as much freedom as possible, the CCP contends that almost every aspect of human life may require oversight and intervention. As Dickson notes, it "will not tolerate demands that [will] challenge its monopoly on power."

The CCP's deeply rooted domestic impulse to control and constrain has a parallel expression in China's interactions with the outside world. While so-called soft power is something most democratic nations view as an independent, natural byproduct of their cultural and social activities, the CCP views it as something in need of careful management—even manufacture and

manipulation. To promote China's image abroad, the CCP maintains a massive, well-funded apparatus, the United Front Work Department, which runs global propaganda campaigns on behalf of Xi's version of socialism.

Beijing's international trade policy obeys similar incentives. The common wisdom among market economies is that global commerce functions best when left unrestrained, except when subject to the oversight of institutions such as the World Trade Organization. In China, however, the CCP views trade as a weapon that can be wielded to gain influence and geostrategic advantage.

China's recent trade policies echo an economic strategy pursued by Germany before World War II. In 1941, the economist Albert Hirschman described Berlin as neither a free trader nor protectionist but a "power trader." As the economist Robert Atkinson has more recently written, Hitler's Germany used global commerce "as a key tool to gain commercial and military advantage over its adversaries," turning "foreign trade into an instrument of power, of pressure, and even of conquest" to "degrade its adversaries' economies, even if that imposed costs on [its] own economy." Today, argues Atkinson, China has become just such a power trader, seeking to make itself such an important market for the export of raw materials that it turns others "into dependent vassal states, worried that China could cut off their exports at any time."

Beijing has already demonstrated its propensity to be a retaliatory and punitive trade partner. It cut Norwegian salmon exports after the dissident Liu Xiaobo won the Nobel Peace Prize; closed down stores run by the South Korean chain Lotte, halted tourism, and stopped K-pop exchanges after Seoul accepted a U.S. missile defense system; embargoed Canadian exports when the chief financial officer of the Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei was arrested in Vancouver; slapped tariffs on Australian wine, cotton, and barley exports when Canberra urged the World Health Organization to study the Chinese origins of the COVID-19 pandemic; and sanctioned a Berlin-based think tank and members of the European Parliament after they criticized China's treatment of its Uyghur population.

By Atkinson's account, China is not just another trader seeking larger markets and more profit but an authoritarian power set on mobilizing itself to become a global hegemon. As Xi himself has proclaimed, "Our responsibility is to unite . . . to work for realizing the great revival of the Chinese nation in order to let the Chinese nation stand more firmly and powerfully among all nations around the world." If Atkinson is right, the world confronts not only a formidable new trading, technological, industrial, economic, and military power but also a state willing to deploy all these forces to make the world a safer place for its form of autocracy.

BEIJING'S DIALECTIC

The German philosopher Hegel believed that history had an inexorable forward motion. Karl Marx borrowed this idea, concluding that history would inevitably lead to world socialism. Indeed, many other Western thinkers have fallen in thrall to a similar teleology, believing that history was inescapably moving toward greater freedom and democracy.

Martin Luther King, Jr., famously proclaimed that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." U.S. President Ronald Reagan told the British Parliament that Marxism-Leninism was destined for "the ash heap of history." President Bill Clinton made numerous references to autocratic countries—usually China—as being on "the wrong side of history."

President Barack Obama predicted victory in the war on terrorism “because we are on the right side of history.” He even had a rug made for the Oval Office with the King quote woven into it.

But did these idealistic Americans misidentify history’s direction? Does history even have a direction? With the United States awash in racial protests and mass shootings, with right-wing populists storming the U.S. Capitol, and with American conservatives refusing COVID-19 vaccinations in the name of liberty, might history end up favoring Xi’s form of dynamic Leninist capitalism instead of freedom and democracy?

The authors of these three centennial volumes claim no clairvoyance about history’s intention. Some of the figures they write about, however, give reason to believe that even if history lacks direction, it still brings change rather than constancy. Their profiles show that communist China’s odyssey has been riven by conflicting forces, clashing ideologies, competing factions, and colliding visions. Although the one-party system Stalin bequeathed to Beijing has remained essentially unchanged since 1921, the lives described in these three books have nonetheless helped Chinese politics swing between opposing poles ever since the end of the old imperial system. It is precisely this ever-fluctuating and unresolved state that renders Beijing so unpredictable.

Today, China’s tight social controls, impressive infrastructure, dynamic economy, and modernizing military may lend the appearance of a well-ordered, confident, and invincible nation united around an unchallengeable leader and a unified party. Its successes should not be dismissed. But when one factors in the party’s history of fratricidal struggle, fixation on control, obsession with ceremony, and mania for propaganda, a different picture emerges: of a system so uncertain and lacking in self-confidence that its leaders need to maintain an expensive simulacrum of national greatness to believe in their true prowess. Whatever history’s goal, its deterministic end state is unlikely to be the kind of insecure neo-Maoist techno-autocracy that needs state control and “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy to assert its greatness. Such a rigidly controlled, brittle, and belligerent system contravenes one of the most powerful of modern human urges: to enjoy as much liberty and freedom as possible within the constraints of any given societal context. It is hard to imagine Xi’s version of the CCP ever becoming comfortable enough with either itself or its restless people to allow Chinese citizens a meaningful quotient of political liberty and freedom.

Major challenges, moreover, have repeatedly ruptured communist China’s well-manicured surface to expose a molten core beneath. The recent essay in these pages by Cai Xia, a former Central Party School professor, is but one example. “Xi was no reformer,” she bluntly wrote. “Over the course of his tenure, the regime has degenerated further into a political oligarchy bent on holding on to power through brutality and ruthlessness. It has grown even more repressive and dictatorial.” After breaking with the CCP, Cai was hounded into exile.

Then there are the rapier-like missives of the Tsinghua University law professor Xu Zhangrun, who criticized Xi for his mishandling of the COVID-19 outbreak and for reviving Mao’s rule by personality cult. “Enough, the moldy campaigns of deification and personality cult,” he cried out. “Enough, the monstrous lies and endless sufferings; enough the blood-sucking red dynasty and greedy party-state; enough, the absurd policies and practices in trying to put the clock back over the past seven years; enough, the mountains of bodies and seas of blood resulting from the red tyranny over the past 70 years.” Xu was summarily cashiered from his university position.

This spring, even former Premier Wen Jiabao spoke out, marking the death of his mother in the obscure Macau Herald by describing his father's persecution during the Cultural Revolution. "He was often subjected to barbaric 'interrogation' and beatings," wrote Wen. "In my mind, China should be a country full of fairness and justice. There should always be respect for the will of the people, humanity and the nature of human beings." His oblique critique was quickly taken offline by censors.

ITS OWN WORST ENEMY?

The continual reappearance of such discordant voices throughout China's communist history hints that political control, economic growth, and infrastructure alone do not necessarily make a durable nation. What is missing? Those things that lie within the realm of what the economist Adam Smith dubbed "moral sentiments." It's here that China's stunning century of progress remains most underdeveloped, incomplete, and vulnerable.

As some of the figures profiled in The Chinese Communist Party show, China does have a long historical tradition of humanism and reform, which the party has now silenced. As Xi recently warned, "All the work by the party's media must reflect the party's will, safeguard the party's authority, and safeguard the party's unity. They must love the party, protect the party, and closely align themselves with the party leadership in thought, politics and action."

Although Shambaugh observes that "Xi Jinping has unleashed a sustained reign of repression and comprehensive controls on China not seen since the Maoist era," Dickson urges observers not to let Beijing's repression cloud the ways in which the party has been responsive. "There is no question that the CCP uses repression against its perceived enemies," he admits. But, he notes, "it also uses other tools to create popular support: rising prosperity, national pride, even responsiveness to public opinion to varying degrees." The editors of The Chinese Communist Party, for their part, counsel that because "the Party is dangerous to provoke," others must do "everything possible to keep China from becoming an implacable enemy." That may be true, but unless such efforts are reciprocal, they have little prospect of success.

These scholarly books leave the reader with respect for China's material progress but also a deep sense of alarm over the confrontational authoritarian gear into which Xi has now shifted his country. His imperial reign raises a question that hovers over each of these works: Can China continue to cohere and progress without a humanistic moral core? Lacking that crucial ingredient, China has become a giant social science experiment. Perhaps the CCP has managed to perfect an entirely new model of development that does not require such quaint values as freedom, justice, and liberty. But modern history suggests that the absence of these elements can imperil a country. Think of fascist Italy and Germany, imperial Japan, Francoist Spain, theocratic Iran, and the Soviet Union.

Yet even though it lacks such humanistic niceties, the CCP is now celebrating its centennial anniversary. Might the Chinese just be different from everyone else, especially those in the West? Perhaps, some say, Chinese citizens will prove content to gain wealth and power alone, without these aspects of life that other societies have commonly considered fundamental to being human. Such an assumption seems unrealistic, not to say patronizing. In the end, the Chinese people will likely prove little different in their yearnings from Canadians, Czechs, Japanese, or Koreans. Just because those outside China cannot see or hear a more fulsome expression of universal values right now does not mean that such desires do not exist. Stilled for the moment, they have appeared again and again in the past and are bound to reappear in the future.

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