



Introduction - The Chinese Communist Party: A 100-Year Trajectory

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Introduction

Jérôme Doyon and Chloé Froissart

Centenary of the Chinese Communist Party

The small grouping of intellectuals who gathered in July 1921 in the French concession of Shanghai has magnified into one of the largest and most formidable political parties in history. Created with fewer than 60 members, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) now numbers more than 95 million. From a revolutionary party that emerged in the aftermath of the collapse of the Chinese Empire and World War I, it became, in 1949, a political regime in its own right, a party-state dominating the world's most populous country. Almost every aspect of Chinese people's lives has changed under the Party's rule, and its influence is now global.

The CCP led China's path to modernisation from a rural and underdeveloped country torn apart by warlordism, civil war, and European and Japanese imperialism, to the second largest world economy and a global superpower. The Party survived not only more than a decade of civil war, in spite of being repeatedly driven close to extinction in the 1920s and 1930s, but also the end of the revolutionary process. It endured self-inflicted disasters, ranging from the Great Famine (1959–61) to the destructions of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), and overcame the transition from a planned to a market-based economy. The economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s brought new challenges linked to the urbanisation of a chiefly rural society, the privatisation of state resources that were the basis of social welfare for millions, and the globalisation of Chinese society and the economy, accelerated by China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and the surge of outgoing investments that followed the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013.

The Party adapted to the new social and economic environment its reforms created. Going counter to the idea that wealth brings democratisation, greater prosperity has strengthened rather than weakened the CCP's power. Its ability to modernise the country, rather than to represent it, contributes to its popular support. The Party's own narrative of China's path to modernisation, which is encapsulated today in the idea of a 'China Dream', also boosts nationalistic sentiments and contributes to holding the nation together despite the decreasing importance of Maoist ideals and the social changes brought by the reforms. Moreover, the country's modernisation, and enrichment of the party-state, facilitate the CCP's monitoring of citizens, now technologically enhanced, to ensure it remains the only game in town.

At the same time, adopting a dichotomous perspective that contrasts a vibrant liberalised economy with an ossified Leninist party-state, and, in-between, a society trying to find ways to resist or gain autonomy, misses the evolution of the Party itself and its interactions with social forces, which have oscillated between inclusive tendencies and 'totalitarian refluxes'.¹ For most of its history, the CCP has been an engine of change and cannot be simply seen as a relic of a foregone past. The Party not only made possible the triumph of 1949 but also provided the ideological and organisational bases for the continuation of the power of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since then, surviving the 'Leninist extinction' of the 1990s (Jowitt 1992). The structures that permitted military mobilisation during the civil war became the basis for its governing, monitoring and repression of the Chinese population after 1949. The CCP is the product of clandestine struggle and violence, which explains its hierarchical structure, its culture of secrecy and control, as well as its cohesion based on an 'us–them' logic (Saich 2021). This guerrilla heritage has also contributed to the CCP's decentralised and adaptive features, making it adept at embracing uncertainty and dealing with various challenges, ranging from widespread unrest to global epidemics (Heilmann and Perry 2011). It translates into an extraordinary capacity to experiment, learn from the West and from its own experience, and adapt and systematise what works on the ground. With branches extending to every corner of Chinese society, the CCP has an extraordinary monitoring capacity, but is also more exposed to society than most political parties. The CCP has learned from the collapse of other Communist regimes (Shambaugh 2008), approaching reforms gradually as well as developing, albeit constantly challenged, institutions of leadership succession.

1 Geremie Barmé, "Ugh, Here We Are"—Q&A with Geremie Barmé, *SupChina*, 8 April 2022, supchina.com/2022/04/08/ugh-here-we-are-qa-with-geremie-barme/.

Its adaptability, and ruthlessness, has allowed the CCP to maintain its power monopoly over a huge and diverse population. It has developed territorial policy experiments that can take many forms, ranging from the opening of coastal special economic zones to foreign investments in the 1980s, to the establishment in the 2010s of camps in the north-western parts of the country to forcibly re-educate millions of China's Muslim population. It has also made and unmade alliances depending on circumstances. The CCP organisation itself metamorphosed in the post-Mao period from a party of the revolutionary classes to a white-collar party, embracing the elite of the liberalised economy and broadening its social bases (Gore 2011; Dickson 2003). From making up the vast majority of the CCP's membership during the Mao era, workers and peasants now constitute only a third. The CCP's united front policy, which aims at cultivating allies among social forces outside the Party, has also transformed. From the partnership with the Nationalist Party that helped the CCP to present itself as a champion of the fight against Japan in the 1930s, it has become an institutionalised platform allowing it to coopt social forces while always refusing them an equal standing.

This fluidity of the CCP is also evident on the ideological front, in contrast to the sense of continuity that the CCP wants to promote about itself with the current leadership's call for members to 'remain true to the [Party's] original aspirations'.² After adapting the principles of the Soviet state economy to Chinese realities, the Party took advantage of market practices to 'let some get wealthy first', as was the stated goal in the early years of reform, and now aims at more redistribution and 'common prosperity'. A recent volume published by ANU Press, in the same series as the present volume, testifies to the malleability, as well as persistence, of the Maoist heritage (Franceschini, Loubere and Sorace 2019). Similarly, after presenting itself as a break from the past, the CCP draws more and more on continuities with imperial repertoires (Shue 2022).

It is impossible to encapsulate in one volume the essence of such a changing political organisation. Yet the CCP's centenary has prompted vivid discussion, with several books by veteran analysts of CCP politics greatly enriching our grasp of what holds the CCP together and explains

2 'Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century', adopted at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Nineteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 11 November 2021, *Xinhua*, 16 November 2021, www.news.cn/english/2021-11/16/c_1310314611.htm.

its longevity. Tony Saich's *From Rebel to Ruler* adeptly captures the tension between unity and diversity throughout the history of the Party, providing an outline to better understand its nature and trajectory (Saich 2021). Bruce Dickson's *The Party and the People* dives into the most recent discussions in understanding the CCP's relation to the Chinese people and how it can be responsive without being accountable to the population (Dickson 2021). David Shambaugh's *China's Leaders* traces the history of the PRC through its figureheads, stressing that despite largely sharing the common goal of making their country rich and powerful they had very different approaches to foreign policy, political language and institutions (Shambaugh 2021). Also focusing on elite politics, Joseph Fewsmith's *Rethinking Chinese Politics* introduces us to the tumultuous world of inner-party power struggles in the post-Mao period, challenging the commonly held view of a gradually institutionalising political process (Fewsmith 2021). Complementary to these works focusing on the organisation and its leaders, the collective volume edited by Timothy Cheek, Klaus Mülhahn and Hans van de Ven traces the CCP's history in 10 lives – 10 biographies illustrating the many perspectives that exist *in* and *on* the CCP (Cheek, Mülhahn and van de Ven 2021). In recent years, other edited volumes have also provided important discussions on various aspects of the CCP contemporary evolution, be they its practices of power (Shue and Thornton 2017), its modes of action (Zheng and Gore 2019), its operating methods and policies (Lam 2017) or the influence of its revolutionary origins (Franceschini, Loubere and Sorace 2019).

The present volume aims to contribute to this ongoing discussion by providing a thematic analysis of, and multidisciplinary approach to, the Party's trajectory over a century. It finds its origin in a conference convened in Paris and online in June 2021 by Inalco University, the European Institute for Chinese Studies and the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies. The conference brought together a team of scholars from different disciplines (history, sociology, political science, political economy, anthropology and Chinese studies) and continents (Europe, North America and Asia) with the aim of covering the many facets of the CCP's 100-year trajectory. Some of the chapters are revised versions of previously published journal articles.³

3 Previous versions of Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5 and 7 have been published by the *Journal of Current China Affairs* as part of a special issue titled 'The Chinese Communist Party at 100'. An earlier version of Chapter 15 was published by *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* under the title 'Deepening the State: The Dynamics of China's United Front Work in Post-Handover Hong Kong'. They are reprinted with permission.

The book departs from previous volumes by combining a level of historical depth mostly found in single-authored monographs with the thematic and disciplinary breadth of an edited volume. It attempts to grasp the CCP's trajectory through the development of its two core features – organisation and ideology – and also its two main historical missions: modernising the country and unifying it through a Party-led, nation-building project. This volume, hence, embodies a rare attempt at investigating the CCP's 100 years of existence, examining both the nature and functioning of the party-state, but also its relationship with society and its policies. Its originality lies in the diversity of its approaches, combining chapters offering synthetic overviews of the state of the art with others exploring new research perspectives. While far from comprehensive (we regret, in particular, not being able to include specific contributions on religion, gender or workers), the present volume stands out for its long-term and multiscale approach, offering complex and nuanced insights, eschewing any Party grand narrative, and unravelling underlying trends and logics, composed of adaption but also contradictions, resistance and sometimes setbacks that may be overlooked when focusing on the short term. Rather than putting forward an overall argument about the nature of the CCP, the many perspectives presented in this volume highlight the complex internal dynamics of the Party, the diversity of its roles in relation to the state, as well as in its interaction with society beyond the state.

Beyond 'Eras' and 'Resilience'

Pointing to the CCP's adaptability and resilience can become a cliché, and the CCP itself does not refrain from relying on that narrative. For the Party's current leader, Xi Jinping: 'A hallmark that distinguishes the Communist Party of China from other political parties is its courage in undertaking self-reform.'⁴ A specificity of this official narrative is to present this adaption in a linear and deterministic fashion, always going in the direction of the Party's betterment and China's rise.

The 'Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century', issued in 2021, is a good illustration of this view of

4 'Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the CPC', *Xinhua*, 1 July 2021, www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm.

history. This is the third historical resolution issued by the CCP after those in 1945 and 1981. While the first one unified the Party around ‘Mao Zedong Thought’, the second solidified Deng’s position as paramount leader of the reform era by maintaining a balance between criticising and preserving the Maoist heritage. The 2021 resolution likewise aims at solidifying the power of the leader in place, but without closing a period of internal struggle for power or revising previous official views on history. Contrary to recent propaganda materials targeting a broader public, such as the 2021 re-edition of the *Short History of the Chinese Communist Party*, which largely sanitises official history by removing discussion of the excesses of the Mao period, the 2021 resolution largely adopts the 1981 resolution’s language on the Mao era. While focusing on glorifying the current leadership’s successes and objectives, the resolution also solidifies the leadership’s role as the custodian of the *correct* historical view.

According to the 2021 resolution, the PRC’s history is divided into three ‘eras’: the first one (1949–76) laid the foundations for ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ under Mao Zedong’s leadership; the second one saw the ‘reform and opening of China’ under Deng Xiaoping and his successors; the third one paves the way for the ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ under Xi Jinping. This division is very much to Xi Jinping’s advantage, positioning him in the continuity of the two great men of the PRC, and relegating other leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao to secondary roles. The official narrative provides a sense of history underpinned by both the affirmation of the necessity of what happened and a constant sense of progress that eventually culminates in the epiphany of the Xi Jinping era. The current era, in fact, takes up more than half of the resolution’s text and is presented, in a Marxist view of history, as the synthesis of the previous phases and a ‘new breakthrough in adapting Marxism to the Chinese context’.⁵ This view is overall deterministic, presenting the CCP’s trajectory as proceeding from one victory to the next, downplaying trials and errors, setbacks, and contradictions, while overall erasing the price paid by the Chinese people for these transformations.

Scholarly research tends to share with this official focus on leader-centric ‘eras’ a tendency to overstress the unity within the eras, and differences between them, as well as the role of supposedly farsighted leaders. Many social scientists have described the evolution of Communist regimes as going

5 ‘Resolution of the CPC Central Committee’.

through phases, which include, paraphrasing Kenneth Jowitt's terminology, the *transformation* of the old society, the *consolidation* of the revolutionary regime and the *inclusion* of a diversifying society (Jowitt 1992; Huntington 1970; Dimitrov 2013). While presented as a logical evolution, these phases are also generally seen as brought about by the political decision of transformative leaders. This conceptualisation is very enlightening when it comes to comparing Communist regimes' trajectories and how they differ or not. Yet, such an approach may lead, sometimes against the authors' own warnings, to a linear and deterministic reading of history, with the demise of these Communist systems seen as the logical consequence of the *inclusion* phase, when the gap between the founding ideology and the pluralistic society they aim at embracing becomes too large to manage. The idea that demise is the natural horizon of Communist regimes remains central to the field of Chinese politics, feeding both the literature announcing the coming 'crackup' of the Chinese party-state⁶ as well as the research explaining the mechanisms behind its surprising survival (Nathan 2003). In both cases, the expected demise of the regime, or its current state of survival, then become a necessary *point of arrival*, from which everything that came before is reinterpreted (Dobry 2009).

Although its findings may prove relevant to this issue, this volume is not driven by the puzzle of the CCP's survival in the face of predicted demise. Rather, it highlights how the CCP concretely developed through leaps and bounds, setbacks and unexpected moves. Looking at a variety of institutions, policy areas, discourses and relations of domination and cooption, this volume stresses that (dis)continuities do not always follow the official division of history, and that change is far from linear: it takes many forms depending on the focus of the enquiry, sometimes echoing the successive fluxes of *fang* (letting go) and *shou* (tightening) characteristic of the early years of reform and opening (Shirk 1993; Baum 1996), or recalling a dialectical logic in which the CCP initiates transformations to which it then has to adapt, including to consequences that appear unexpected and beyond its control (Shue and Thornton 2017). The richness of this volume resides in highlighting this fluidity. Far from following a unified view imposed on them, this volume's different parts and chapters illustrate different forms of the CCP's mutations, hence offering a more complex and diverse picture of its resilience and adaptability.

6 David Shambaugh, 'The Coming Chinese Crackup', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 March 2015, www.wsj.com/articles/the-coming-chinese-crack-up-1425659198.

The CCP's Trajectory through Four Lenses

This volume considers the CCP's 100-year trajectory through four lenses. The first two parts focus on the two pillars of the Party as a political entity, respectively its organisation and ideology (Schurmann 1968). The first part examines the different aspects of the CCP's organisational adaption and expansion. The second part dives into the ideological tensions between the CCP's revolutionary heritage and recent developments, and the discursive bricolage the Party develops in an attempt to reconcile the two. The third and fourth parts explore two central historical missions of the CCP: modernisation and nation-building. While the third part explores the CCP's attempts to modernise the country, and how, in turn, it compels the CCP to adapt to a diversifying society, the fourth part delves into its efforts, from subtle cooption to forced assimilation, to build a unified nation despite ethnic and territorial diversity.

Organisational Trajectory

The three chapters of the volume's first section explore how the Party has been able to adapt and expand its organisation throughout its 100 years of history, without fundamentally transforming its core structure. Liberalising tendencies towards more transparency, diversity and democracy within the CCP have coexisted and alternated with tightening tendencies in favour of widespread control and centralised governance. The chapter by Jean-Pierre Cabestan highlights the permanence of the CCP's Leninist political structure despite the reformist pushes it experienced. In particular, it highlights the under-studied venture under Hu Jintao to introduce more 'intra-party democracy', which was eventually rolled back by Xi Jinping.

Permanence does not, however, equal stasis, and the contributions by Patricia M. Thornton and Frank N. Pieke show how the CCP has been able to rely on its basic Leninist structure to expand its reach towards society and the Chinese state, as well as globally. A century after the CCP's founding, its expanding role in penetrating, regulating and reshaping grassroots social organisations at the expense of the state embodies, for Thornton, a decisive shift in the balance of power within the 'party-state-society trichotomy'. Exploring the contemporary expansion beyond Chinese borders of the CCP's organisational power, Pieke stresses how it contrasts with both China's earlier efforts to export Maoist ideology and revolution as well as China's current much-maligned strategy of influencing and interfering in

the society and politics of other countries. The principal aim of the CCP's global extension is not to meddle in the affairs of other countries, but rather to tie Chinese people, goods, money, business and institutions that have ventured abroad back into the strategy and domestic system of China and the CCP.

Ideological Bricolage

This volume's second section highlights the Party's pragmatic efforts to rely on ideological tools and techniques to strengthen its esprit de corps as well as legitimise its rule over society. The continuous reliance on revolutionary references and agitprop practices appears contradictory to the impermanence of the CCP's proclaimed ideological goals, from Mao's continuous revolution to aiming for a moderately prosperous society. Emmanuel Jourda and Kerry Brown, in their respective chapters on the united front policy and the reliance on emotion as a mobilisation tool, show how such practices of power are recycled and revamped for new purposes. Emmanuel Jourda analyses how the concept of 'united front' was defined at different stages in the CCP's history, and shows how the evolution of this framework to handle alliances pragmatically reflects fundamental changes to the CCP's approach to society. This united front concept, initially imported to China by the Comintern, was transformed and repurposed by Mao in the late 1930s as a 'magic weapon' contributing to his power takeover. It then became an essential framework that helped the CCP meet various challenges, from building the PRC as a Communist yet semi-pluralistic regime, to avoiding the political banalisation of the CCP-led system of government by harnessing the Party to its revolutionary past. Kerry Brown explores the role played by the articulation of emotions in the rational, calculating function of Party behaviour, in particular the Mao and Xi eras characterised by high aspirations. As the social and economic transformation of Chinese society has changed how feelings are expressed between these two eras, the terminology of dreaming that emerges in the Xi era is particularly revealing of the CCP's evolving discursive techniques, in that it is part of an overall narrative linked to rejuvenating the Chinese nation and fulfilling its historic mission, but also grants space to personal agency and subjectivity.

At the same time, the emphasis on the proletarian and Leninist features of the CCP has repeatedly clashed with its need to become more inclusive and, in particular, to integrate the country's educated elite. This tension is central to Timothy Cheek's chapter as well as the one by Jérôme Doyon and

Long Yang. The relationship between the CCP and the intellectuals has been defined by a contradiction: the Party's enduring need for ideologues and the Party's suspicion that intellectuals cannot be sufficiently loyal to its goals. Timothy Cheek sheds light on this contradiction from the point of view of the intellectuals. Investigating the reasons why some of them, at various times, choose to join and speak for the Party, Cheek proposes a nuanced view: for some intellectuals, it was about serving the new regime, for others it was onerous subordination, and for yet others it was a noble vocation. Jérôme Doyon and Long Yang stress that, from the Party's perspective, these tensions led it to change its understanding of 'loyalty' throughout its 100 years of history. Detached from a purely ideological approach these evolutions accompanied changes in its recruitment needs, and, paradoxically, it is during periods of expansion that the CCP became more politically demanding with its members.

China's Path to Modernisation and Its Challenges

The CCP's success in retaining power is closely linked to its capacity to modernise China and overcome subsequent challenges threatening social stability. This section investigates the tension between the CCP's monopolistic and often top-down approach to governance, and its need for flexibility as it faces challenges such as the transition from a rural to an urban society, economic modernisation and their social and environmental consequences. Among these principles, the authors outline the enduring yet malleable Marxist core of its ideology (Breslin and Gabusi); the remarkable continuity of the discourse on modernisation underpinning the CCP's changing relation to the environment (Goron and Kotska); the local, functionalist and stratified social citizenship (Froissart), according to which no one has the same entitlements; and an adaptative form of governance towards entrepreneurs (Guiheux). In other words, whereas this part is the one in which we would have expected the most change, each chapter actually stresses continuities.

Following China's unique path to modernisation, the CCP has faced the challenge of forging a lasting alliance with an ever-changing society and, in turn, has been transformed by this endeavour. Three chapters (Day, Guiheux and Froissart) also address the consequences of modernisation on the CCP's alliances with its key social bases, be they peasants, capitalists or, albeit in a more allusive manner, the proletariat, as discussed in Froissart's chapter on migrant workers. All chapters point to the social heterogeneity

of these three categories and to the creation of new social classes within them, partly induced by Party social and developmental policies. Day and Froissart highlight the Party's alliance with the wealthy (those most able to contribute to economic development among peasants and migrants) and question the very existence of social policies to support the poor. At the same time, Guiheux stresses the party's instrumentalist approach, as the current development of Party cells in private enterprises is also meant to compel entrepreneurs to participate in philanthropic activities and become 'agents of social justice'. The CCP has moved away from its role as the vanguard of the proletariat and peasantry and now sees itself as representing the interests of the Chinese population in general, yet, as these three chapters reveal, this claim embodies contradictory trends in CCP policies.

Territorial Control and Nation-Building

This volume's last section focuses on what the CCP perceives as its national margins. Two chapters, by Vanessa Frangville and Rémi Castets, focus on the issue of national minorities and how the CCP has endeavoured to establish its authority over a country that is extremely diverse linguistically, ethnically and religiously. Examining key concepts and debates that have shaped the CCP's vision and construction of the Chinese nation over the past century, Frangville shows that different, and sometimes antithetical, visions of China's national identity have coexisted within the CCP, creating tensions and a longstanding oscillation between integration and assimilation. Considering recent developments in Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, the author argues that, even though the CCP's policy after 1949 tried to use a socialist affirmative strategy towards its minorities under Soviet influence, the legacy of China's imperial occupation of non-Han borders has remained its main drive. Rémi Castets analyses the range of strategies implemented by the Party in Xinjiang since the turn of the 1950s to eradicate forces antagonistic to its modernisation and nation-building project based on an essentialist and unitary Chinese nation. Those tactics have evolved with the political and ideological inflections that have marked the Party's history. Under Xi Jinping, the CCP increasingly approaches alternative worldviews through a security lens, and it now relies on a totalistic surveillance system to reshape representations of national minorities in Xinjiang into 'loyal' Chinese citizens.

Focusing on Hong Kong and Taiwan, the two remaining chapters by Samson Yuen and Edmund Cheng and by Gunter Schubert engage with the issue of the political expansion of the party-state. They highlight how, since 1921, the CCP's discourse and tactics have evolved in territorial matters as the party-state has reshaped the country's political map, re-established its political sovereignty over Hong Kong and Macau, and significantly increased its insistence on 'reunifying' with Taiwan. Samson Yuen and Edmund Cheng examine how the CCP has, since its foundation, been exercising political influence in Hong Kong through united front work. Previously based mainly on cooption tactics, its influence strategies have, in the post-handover period, involved a steady organisational proliferation of social organisations coupled with their increasingly frequent interaction with the mainland authorities and the Hong Kong government. United front work has become more decentralised and multilayered in its structure, including through the steady organisational proliferation of social organisations. Its objectives have diversified beyond elite cooption to include proactive counter-mobilisation against pro-democracy threats. Gunter Schubert seeks to explain China's fluctuating impatience towards reunification with Taiwan through two lenses: China's perception of both Taiwanese domestic politics and Taiwan's China policy, and, conversely, its perception of the US–Taiwan relationship. Taiwan arguably embodies one of the most severe contemporary challenges to CCP legitimacy, as the Party has failed to adequately understand and constructively respond to Taiwan's rising national identity. In the context of what Gunter Schubert terms 'China's neo-imperial rise', all the chapters point to a toughening of the CCP's attempts to establish control over its perceived margins, grounded in a more rigid and unequivocal conception of the Chinese nation under Xi Jinping that reflects the failures of the nation-building process launched after 1949.

As the next step to discuss the CCP's trajectory is set for 2049, for the centenary of the PRC's foundation, the editors of this volume, in line with their contingent approach to history, do not presuppose anything about China's political future. If change necessarily occurs, its nature and timing always remain uncertain. Another cycle of liberalisation/adaption may take place, or the regime may reach a breaking point, which will not necessarily lead to democratisation. To be sure, the CCP today faces new kinds of vulnerabilities. Just as the Party's shrewd play on its contradictory organisational and ideological principles has been a critical driver of its capacity to adapt, the current reabsorption of these contradictions and the emphasis on the Party's omnipotence may be signs of its atrophy. Likewise,

the diminishing space for the dialectical exchange between the party-state and the economic and social spheres also demonstrates its fragility. Finally, Xi Jinping's emphasis on his glorious successes may prompt the Party to seek to overcome too hastily the many challenges it still faces, at its expense.

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