



# A Long-Term Perspective on the Chinese Communist Party

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## Abstract

By tracing the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 100 years, this special issue brings to light the organisation's contradictions, setbacks, and changes in direction, together with its long-term evolution. Taking a step back from the current focus on the historical juncture of the twentieth CCP Congress, and on Xi Jinping himself, our long-term approach contextualises recent developments. Looking at the CCP's evolution over time shows how the founding structures and objectives of the CCP have had a long-lasting impact on its future developments as well as how they have been tweaked and rearranged to adapt to the new economic and social environment the party contributed to creating. Our long-term historical approach stresses impermanence beyond the apparent permanence of the party's concepts (e.g. "loyalty" and "democratic centralism"), discursive tactics (e.g. the mobilisation of emotions) and on-the-ground practices (e.g. grassroots party building), while also bringing to light the mere recycling of past practices and strategies.

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## The Centenary of the Chinese Communist Party

The small grouping of intellectuals who gathered on 23 July 1921 in the French concession of Shanghai has magnified into one of the largest and most formidable political

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parties in history. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) now numbers more than 96 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 Western imperialism, to the second-largest world economy and a global superpower. The party survived not only more than a decade of civil war, despite being repeatedly driven close to extinction in the second and third decade of the twentieth century, but also the end of the revolutionary process. It endured self-inflicted disasters, ranging from the Great Famine (1959–1961) to the destructions of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and overcame the transition from a planned to a market-based economy. The economic reforms initiated in 1978 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 Organisation in 2001 and the surge of outgoing investments that followed the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013.

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, has contributed 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 the party-state's growing resources, facilitate the CCP's monitoring of citizens, now technologically enhanced, to ensure it remains the only game in town.

Against this background, adopting a dichotomous perspective that contrasts a vibrant liberalised economy with an ossified Leninist state, and 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" (Barmé, 2022). 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 it has also provided the ideological and organisational bases for the continuation of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) power since then, surviving the "Leninist extinction" of the last decade of the twentieth century (Jowitt, 1992).

The structures that permitted mass 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 popular unrest to global epidemics (Heilmann and Perry, 2011). It translates into an extraordinary capacity to experiment, learn from the West and the collapse of other communist regimes (Shambaugh, 2008), adapt, and systematise what works on the ground.

With branches extending to every corner of Chinese society, the CCP has not only an extraordinary monitoring capacity, but also greater exposure to society than most political parties. Reflecting the evolution of Chinese society, the CCP organisation 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 (Dickson, 2003; Gore, 2011). 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 third decade of the twentieth century, it has become an institutionalised platform allowing it to co-opt social forces while always refusing them an equal standing.

This fluidity of the CCP is also evident on the ideological front, by 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" (Xinhua, 2021). 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." Similarly, after presenting itself as a break from the past, the CCP draws more and more on continuities with imperial repertoires (Shue, 2022). It presents itself as the political embodiment of the "excellent Chinese culture" in an effort to harness nationalism to fuel its legitimacy (Brown, 2019).

The centenary of this changing political organisation has prompted vivid discussions, with several books by veteran analysts of CCP politics greatly enriching our grasp of what holds the CCP together and explains 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 broadly 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).

In addition to these monographs, two collective endeavours are also particularly worth highlighting. The collective volume edited by Timothy Cheek, Klaus Mülhahn, and Hans van de Ven, traces the CCP's history in ten lives – ten biographies illustrating the many perspectives that can be found in and on the CCP (Cheek et al., 2021). Also, the special issue published by *The China Quarterly* and coordinated by Patricia Thornton brings together veteran and more junior scholars of Chinese politics to explore how the party's earliest commitments and practices continue to influence its functioning today, but also how the party has adapted to a changing environment, with an emphasis on the Xi Jinping era.

The present special issue aims at contributing to this ongoing discussion. It brings together six authors' perspectives and different disciplinary lenses (political science, history, anthropology, and Chinese studies) to explore the evolution of the CCP, focusing on its two pillars as a political entity: its organisational framework and its ideological transformations (Schurmann, 1968). Earlier versions of these papers were presented at a conference convened in June 2021 by Inalco University, the European Institute for Chinese Studies, and the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies. Among the aforementioned literature, the present special issue stands out for its long-term approach, each paper exploring specific elements of the CCP's organisational and ideological features in a historical context.

## **The Added Value of a Long-Term Perspective on the Party**

As we write this introduction in the aftermath of the CCP's twentieth National Congress of October 2022, Xi Jinping's accumulation of power is saturating all analysis of the party's current state. Instead of making way for a new generation of leaders, Xi Jinping is staying on after two terms as General Secretary of the CCP, challenging the succession norms put in place during the early reform era, and is promoting a team of loyalists to the Politburo Standing Committee. The twentieth National Congress is the culmination of years of political centralisation around Xi's person. As soon as 2016, he was designated as the "core" of the CCP's leadership by the propaganda machine, an honour that his predecessor Hu Jintao never obtained, and in 2017, the "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" was included in the CCP's constitution. His two predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, had to wait for the end of their second term in office to see their theoretical contributions included in the CCP's constitution, and never with their names attached to them. This personalisation of power was accompanied by a strengthening of the CCP's oversight and control over society, business, but also over the state. In order to set in stone this centrality of the CCP, and of Xi Jinping within the CCP, the party constitution, amended in October 2022, now calls for the implementation of the "Two Safeguards" (两个维护, *liang ge wei hu*): to safeguard the "core" status of General Secretary Xi Jinping within the CCP and to safeguard the centralised authority of the party.

This overall picture of an always more powerful Xi Jinping and CCP fits well with the party's own triumphalist narrative on its history. The resolution on the major

achievements and historical experience of the party's 100-year struggle, issued by the CCP's Central Committee in 2021, is a good illustration of this view of history (Xinhua, 2021). This was the third historical resolution issued by the CCP after the ones from 1945 and 1981. The first unified the party around "Mao Zedong Thought," and the second solidified Deng's position as the paramount leader of the reform era by maintaining a balance between criticising and preserving the Maoist heritage. While it does not aim at closing a period of internal struggle for power or revising previous official views on history, the 2021 resolution likewise contributes to solidifying Xi's power. According to the 2021 Resolution, the PRC's history is divided into three "eras": the first (1949–76) laid the foundations for socialism with Chinese characteristics under Mao Zedong's leadership; the second saw the reform and opening of China under Deng Xiaoping and his successors; the third 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."

This view of the party's history is deterministic and highly simplistic. Not only it erases the price paid by the Chinese people for these transformations, but, at the level of the CCP itself, it presents its trajectory as proceeding from one victory to the next, downplaying trials and errors, setbacks, and contradictions. By tracing the party's 100 years, this special issue brings to light the organisation's contradictions, setbacks, and changes in direction, together with its long-term evolution. Against this background, the five papers explore different aspects of the CCP's adaptation and expansion since the second decade of the twentieth century. Taking a step back from the current focus on the historical juncture of the twentieth CCP Congress, and on Xi Jinping himself, our long-term approach contextualises these recent developments. Looking at the CCP's evolution over time puts the division into clearly defined "eras" in perspective. It shows how the founding structures and objectives of the CCP have had a long-lasting impact on its future developments as well as how they have been tweaked and rearranged to adapt to the new economic and social environment the party contributed to creating. The long-term historical perspective developed in this special issue hence stresses impermanence beyond the apparent permanence of the party's concepts (e.g. "loyalty" and "democratic centralism"), discursive tactics (e.g. the mobilisation of emotions) and on-the-ground practices (e.g. grassroots party building), while also bringing to light the mere recycling of past practices and strategies. Together, the five articles contribute to a better understanding of what is really new about the current "era," allowing us to draw more informed comparisons between historical periods that may seem similar at first glance, such as the Mao and Xi eras.

## **Emphasising the CCP's Hegemony Over the Power of One Man**

While the personalisation of power and its concentration in the hands of Xi Jinping is beyond doubt, this special issue draws attention to the fact that, unlike what happened during the Cultural Revolution when Mao Zedong's power was at its height, this move has not taken place at the expense of the party. Right the contrary: the CCP has never been so powerful and pervasive. Its Leninist nature has been clearly reassessed to the detriment of bottom-up practices that used to be promoted under the label of "intra-party democracy" from Jiang Zemin's rule to the first mandate of Xi Jinping (see Jean-Pierre Cabestan's article in this issue). Once referred to as the "lifeblood of the Party" by Jiang in his report to the sixteenth Congress in 2002, intra-party democracy is only mentioned once, in passing, in Xi's report to the twentieth Congress. This closing of the CCP's internal governance goes hand-with-hand with an expansion of the party's understanding of political loyalty that encompasses not only its members' political views and behaviour but also how they act in their private life (see Jérôme Doyon and Long Yang's article in this issue). It aims to ensure their complete dedication to the organisation and that their behaviour aligns with the image of itself the party wants to propagate.

The party's hegemony is growing, including at the expense of the Chinese state. Under Xi Jinping's rule, the CCP operates through the state rather than substituting for it as was the case during the height of Maoism (see Patricia Thornton's article in this issue; also, Snape and Wang, 2020, Zhu, 2019). The scope of the state has not only been reduced to clear the way for the party's advance, but its role is now entirely dedicated to serving the party's omnipotence and omnipresence. Such reconfiguration of state and party relations has also translated into an unprecedented expansion of the party within the social sphere, and vastly increased its ability to homogenise social organisations. By so doing, the CCP threatens to erase them as entities distinct from itself. This reconfiguration of party-state-society relations is accompanied by new discursive strategies, embodied by the China Dream narrative. This discourse combines methods of emotional mobilisation that existed in the Mao era with an individualist outlook, as each Chinese's individual dreams should coincide with the party's dream (Kerry Brown's article in this issue). Finally, the expansion of the party's reach also goes beyond China's borders through overseas party building (Frank Pieke's article in this issue). Yet, this global outreach is intrinsically an inward rather than outward move: while at times during the Mao era the CCP sought to export the revolution to consolidate its own, it is now going abroad to strengthen itself on its soil.

## **Detailed Outline of the Special Issue**

The special issue starts with an article by Jean-Pierre Cabestan (Hong Kong Baptist University), titled "Organisation and (Lack of) Democracy in the Chinese Communist Party: A Critical Reading of the Successive Iterations of the Party Constitution." Through an overview of the successive versions of the party constitution since the

second decade of the twentieth century, Cabestan traces a trajectory of the CCP's understanding and limited appropriation of democratic principles. The party constitutions are a great indicator not only of the party's founding principles but also its changing priorities. The article sheds light on the CCP's own multiple definitions of democracy, and what it means by "democratic centralism" and (since 1949) the "people's democratic dictatorship." It also highlights how these concepts permeate the party's organisational practices, leading, or not, to forms of collective leadership, intra-party elections, as well as wide-ranging co-optation and consultation. In particular, the paper highlights the under-studied venture under Hu Jintao to introduce more "intra-party democracy" through the, albeit limited, expansion of internal elections and competition. These reforms were eventually rolled back by Xi Jinping. Overall, Jean-Pierre Cabestan highlights the permanence of the CCP's Leninist political structure despite the many internal debates and reformist pushes it experienced. He shows how the CCP's pre-1949 organisational practices, centred around secrecy and discipline rather than internal democracy, have permeated the functioning of the Chinese party-state since. In that context, the multiple contradictions between the leading role of the party and the principle of democracy, as well as between top-down leadership and intra-party democracy, have prevented the CCP from profoundly renewing itself. The party has adapted to a new economic and social environment without overcoming these contradictions, and while they seem to fade away under Xi Jinping, as centralism and party unity trump even more clearly than in the past few decades any democratic elements, they may very well come back in one form or another.

In their article, Jérôme Doyon (University of Edinburgh) and Long Yang (University of Freiburg) also point to the CCP's internal contradiction and, in particular, how 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. While changes in CCP recruitment are generally described as different phases focused on recruiting either "reds" or experts, giving more or less weight to political or technical criteria, Jérôme Doyon and Long Yang instead stress the importance of changing understandings of political loyalty to comprehend these evolutions. Their article "Shades of Red: Changing Understandings of Political Loyalty in the Chinese Communist Party, 1921–2021," relies on a corpus of documents, which includes all regulations, orders, and directives issued by the CCP Central Committee focusing directly on issues of organisational development, to show that what "red" means has repeatedly changed over the party's 100 years. The CCP has alternatively approached loyalty in ascriptive terms based on class background, and behavioural ones based on active displays of loyalty or passive obedience. Early on, the CCP became reliant on an ascriptive understanding of loyalty based on class labels to ensure its survival as a small, clandestine group in a hostile environment. Yet, this ascriptive definition of loyalty was superseded by a behavioural one when the party needed to expand its recruitment beyond the so-called revolutionary classes of workers and peasants. The level and form of activism expected from party members and cadres have also changed dramatically over time. Activism took the relatively narrow form of a personality cult under Mao, but also more



encompassing ones, in particular with the CCP's understanding of politically virtuous behaviour expanding to personal and family ethics in the later reform era as corruption rose. Relying on CCP recruitment data, this paper also shows that, while in some cases a heightened focus on activism may be accompanied by extreme rectification campaigns and a decrease in party recruitment, overall it is paradoxically at the outset of periods of party expansion that the CCP becomes more demanding. Challenging the literature that sees the changes in party recruitment only through the lens of how meritocratic it is, this paper shows that far from relying on a purely ideological and unchanging concept of political loyalty, the CCP has demonstrated its ability to rethink its relationship with its membership in response to the evolving political, social, and economic circumstances.

The CCP's capacity to adapt is also central to Patricia Thornton's (University of Oxford) article titled "From Frame of Steel to Iron Cage: the CCP and China's Voluntary Sector." Relying on a wealth of official documents on the management of social organisations, Thornton highlights how the party's role in the voluntary sector can be read as a function of its efforts to negotiate the shifting power dynamics between the CCP and the state apparatus. The party's role towards social organisations has changed course as the CCP's relationship with the state moved from an "integrated" party-state model under Mao, to an attempted disaggregation under Deng Xiaoping, to its current "embedded" form. Focusing on the recent "decoupling" reform of professional associations and chambers of commerce as a bellwether for future trends, the author argues that the party's continued advance under Xi is occurring at the expense of both the autonomy of the state administration and social forces at the grassroots. It translates into a rolling back of direct state control to clear the way for the party's advance and a hollowing out of social organisations, reducing not only the scope for autonomous action but also heterogeneity in objectives and modes of action across the voluntary sector. While there are some parallels, the "embedded" party-state model under Xi should not be construed as a simple re-adaptation of the "integrated" party-state model under Mao. As it peaked in the sixth decade of the twentieth century, this integrated model led to the institutional absorption of state and social forces by the party. Under Xi, the CCP relies on organisational and legal means to limit the scope of state and social organisations' actions, but without formally substituting itself for them. By putting at the centre of the analysis the "party-state-society" trichotomy, this article contributes to a better conceptualisation of state-society relations in contemporary China, but also unpacks the category of party-state which can obscure the tensions and changing relations between these two entities.

The parallels and differences between the Mao and Xi eras are also central to Kerry Brown's (King's College London) article, "Knowing and Feeling the 'China Dream': Logic and Rhetoric in the Political Language of Xi's China." Brown explores the role played by the expression and articulation of emotions in the rational, calculating function of party discourse. Relying on key statements by the most important leaders, he compares, in particular, the Mao and Xi eras, both characterised by high aspirations. The author documents the return of emotional mobilisation in nowadays China, by opposition

to the technocratic and cold language that dominated the reform era. While the social and economic transformation of Chinese society has changed the ways in which feelings are expressed between the Mao and Xi eras, the political utility of deploying emotional language remains a strong feature of public discourse. The terminology of dreaming that emerged under Xi Jinping 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 to be a great, rich country, but also grants space to individual subjectivity. While Mao spoke to the masses, as individuals could then hardly dare to dream, the "China Dream" discourse, since it appeared in 2012, has targeted the hope and aspiration of individual Chinese people. The party cannot command as easily as in the Mao era and must, therefore, to some extent, persuade a diverse society of its legitimacy. In that context, deploying the language of dreams goes some way towards solving the tension between the rise of individualism in society and the need to have an official language that can arouse people's feelings in a way which is controllable by the party. This paper by Kerry Brown hence contributes to the rich literature on the performative and propagandistic functions of language in contemporary China by looking at the emotional elements of this discourse, beyond a content-based analysis of "officialese" or slogan politics (Link, 2013).

Coming back to the idea that the CCP's basic organisational features and practices, structured in the second decade of the twentieth century, have a long-term effect on its development today, this special issue's final article by Frank Pieke (Leiden University) explores how Leninist principles of party building, party discipline, and democratic centralism shape Chinese globalisation. In his paper titled "The Chinese Communist Party as a Global Force," Pieke highlights how the CCP expands its "organising power" beyond China's borders and how, as it sets up cells abroad, the party is echoing the trial-and-error tactics and the covert practices it deployed in its early days. But despite interesting historical parallels, the overseas extension of the party remains a new phenomenon. Not only can the CCP's organisational development relies on much more resources and professional staff than 100 years ago, but also its purpose is different. Rather than aiming to take power, or to spread communist revolution across the world, the CCP's organisational power follows the globalisation of Chinese capital. In contrast to the current much-maligned strategy of influencing and interfering in the society and politics of other countries, Pieke hence argues that 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 Party's domestic system and strategy. By exploring the CCP's effort to redefine itself as the dominant political force of global China, Pieke underscores that the party is both transformed by and actively shapes China's emergence as a superpower.

## **Taking Party Documents Seriously**

Taken together, the five articles in this special issue show how the party, while not fundamentally transforming its core Leninist structure, has been able to adapt and expand its organisation throughout its 100 years of history. Pre-1949 legacies provide an overall

framework for the party's functioning and references to which it can appeal as a source of legitimacy. Still, within this frame, the party is learning by doing. This implies: adapting to new socio-economic circumstances, changing its relationship of infiltration or imbrication with the state, and managing internal contradictions. The result is that liberalising tendencies towards more transparency, diversity, and democracy within the CCP have co-existed and alternated with tightening tendencies in favour of widespread control and centralised governance.

Beyond this shared perspective on the malleability and impermanence of CCP politics, this special issue's articles also share an empirical approach that puts official party documents, and leaders' speeches, at the centre of the analysis. Far from dismissing the party's discourse about itself as mere propaganda, the authors take it seriously. While they only provide an institutional and incomplete picture of the party's activities, which can sometimes differ drastically from localised realities, party documents give us to see its own idealised view of its functioning, how it changes over time, and the obstacles it aims at overcoming. In the current period of difficult access to China, and the CCP's structures, for researchers, this collection of essays provides a welcome illustration of the insights into Chinese politics a careful and thorough analysis of official documents can provide.


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