

Review Essay

Through the Mirror of CCP History: Four Perspectives

Patricia M. Thornton* 

From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party

TONY SAICH

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021

ix + 560 pp. \$39.95; £31.95

ISBN 978-0-674-98811-8

China's Leaders: From Mao to Now

DAVID SHAMBAUGH

Oxford: Polity Press, 2021

xiv + 416 pp. £25.00; \$29.95

ISBN 978-1-509-54651-0

The Chinese Communist Party: A Century in Ten Lives

TIMOTHY CHEEK, KLAUS MÜHLHAHN and HANS VAN DE VEN

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021

xxi + 302 pp. £59.99

ISBN 978-1-108-84277-8

The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century

BRUCE DICKSON

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021

xvi + 328 pp. £25.00

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Perhaps the most oft-quoted part of Xi Jinping's defiant 1st July speech marking the Party's centenary was his warning that any external forces attempting to "bully, oppress or subjugate" China will "dash their heads against the Great Wall of steel built with the flesh and blood of more than 1.4 billion Chinese people." Foreign news organizations covering the ceremony also noted the "visual trick" of Xi's donning of a grey Mao suit identical to the one worn by the Great Helmsman in the portrait that hangs on Tiananmen, just feet below the rostrum from which Xi delivered his address; others doubted the functional significance of the five identical microphones, ascribing to them a very different significance. Xi's repeated references to the importance of Party history, however, drew far less attention in the Western press, although Xi gravely warned a cheering and flag-

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waving audience of more than 70,000 that while the CCP's original mission "is easy to define, ensuring that we stay true to this mission is a more difficult task."

By learning from history, we can understand why powers rise and fall. Through the mirror of history, we can find where we currently stand and gain foresight into the future. Looking back on the Party's 100-year history, we can see why we were successful in the past and how we can continue to succeed in the future.¹

Indeed, in the months leading up to the centennial celebration, the Party launched a comprehensive campaign requiring CCP members to study the Party's past closely; *A Short History of the Chinese Communist Party* was revised and updated, eliminating a previous discussion of the consequences of the Great Leap Forward, which had concluded with the open acknowledgement that "This bitter historical lesson shouldn't be forgotten." Also expunged was a frank evaluation of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, which was replaced with an account that restricted its focus to highlighting various industrial, technological and diplomatic advances made over the course of that period, without acknowledging the social and political turmoil that accompanied those developments.²

These four new volumes collectively offer a far more richly balanced account of Party history than that which appears in contemporary CCP-sanctioned narratives. They include various analyses of its undeniable successes and historical missteps, by senior scholars hailing from different disciplines and taking divergent approaches. As such, they provide a unique – and fresh – perspective on the CCP at the 100-year mark. Tony Saich's magisterial chronicle, for example, offers a sweeping historical narrative that seeks to outline how a small but committed band of activists formed in the ruins of the Qing empire and the shadow of the First World War "set in motion a movement that would create the most powerful political organization in the world." Saich describes it as "an extraordinary story of survival, disaster, and resurrection" and opens with the observation that, "[g]iven the conditions under which the movement laboured, the CCP should never have come to power" (p. 17). The most comprehensively historical of the four books, Saich's also offers an impressively documented analysis of key debates in the field that contests some of the received wisdom on CCP history. He begins, for example, with the collapse of the empire, and the legacies it bequeathed to the contemporary Party-state, including that of the Confucian moral order, which Mao himself famously placed under attack. Unlike Western states, "its role as moral arbiter was not challenged by other organizations, such as organized religions" (p. 31). The resulting system thus "did not expect critical participation from its citizens; instead it required calm obedience, and it did not see the need for a loyal opposition" (p. 31). Indeed, a major theme of the book is that the CCP's structure, partly as a result of such legacies, "tends toward one-person dominance" (pp. 272–273). Saich deals deftly with the

1 Xi Jinping, "Speech at a ceremony marking the centenary of the Communist Party of China" (1 July 2021), available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm.

2 Chun Han Wong and Keith Zhai, "China repackages history in support of Xi's vision," *The Wall Street Journal* (16 June 2021), p. 1A.

question of the CCP's respective Soviet and indigenous origins, noting that while Marxism enjoyed widespread appeal among activist intellectuals, "when combined with the organizational power of Leninism [it] appeared to provide a pathway to redemption that neither anarchism nor liberalism could offer" (p. 44). The organizational impetus provided by the early Bolshevik advisors in China thus proved determinative: "although it might be true that the CCP could have developed independently of Moscow ... it would not have been established so early and would not have been able to continue without Soviet financial, logistical, and organizational support" (p. 157).

Along the way, it faced numerous challenges. The invasion by Japanese forces "certainly saved the Party from extinction," and helped to "lay some foundation for success in the civil war" (p. 161). Even so, Saich finds that the CCP struggled to mobilize social support, including in establishing an effective connection with its natural base – the peasantry and the working classes (p. 163). In assessing the relative weights of ideology and organization in predicting the Party's success in 1949, Saich quotes Li Rui's astute observation that "a Communist Party needs only two departments: organization and propaganda. I should know, as I have headed both" (p. 169). Ideology served to unite and to elevate; but it was the Party's highly disciplined mode of operation that anchored the membership to the centre's shifting ideological agendas: its "Leninist organizational structure ensured that most Party members followed the prevailing Party line," despite its serpentine shifts (p. 168). In the end, Saich argues, the adaptive and persevering Party organization that resulted benefited from the incompetence of the Kuomintang, the lack of viable alternatives, and a hefty dose of good luck, dispensed at a few critical turning points.

Saich interrupts his historical narrative with a useful fifth chapter summing up key debates in the scholarly literature regarding the CCP's success in 1949, in which he addresses questions such as "Was victory the consequence of nationalist resistance to Japan?" and "Did the socioeconomic policies rally support?" Unfortunately, he does not offer a corresponding chapter analysing various key debates of either the early or later post-Mao periods. Nevertheless, Saich's account of the CCP in power is as rich and complex as is his work on the Party's early history. He highlights the problematic created by the CCP's need to develop "more methodical, planned approaches to policy making and implementation" rather than resorting to the techniques of mass mobilization it had honed in the rural base areas. This in turn sparked rising tensions within the Party leadership between what Saich dubs the "managerial modernizers" who favoured a more measured approach, and the "revolutionary modernizers" like Chairman Mao himself, who sought "to push ahead as swiftly as possible to reach the end goal of the revolution" (p. 207). These internal divisions roiled through the 1956–69 period, inflamed by increasingly difficult relations with Moscow. By the end of Mao era, Saich posits, it was increasingly clear to most in the CCP's leadership that "the type of mass mobilization that was unleashed could not be regularized and was not beneficial": during the Great

Leap, it had not delivered the promised economic breakthrough, and during the Cultural Revolution, it proved unable to build a stable organizational form capable of leading the process of economic development. To the contrary, it had proved a major hindrance by fomenting intense factional conflict within Chinese society, requiring a dramatic shift in direction (p. 272) that the hastily assembled leadership coalition formed in the wake of Lin Biao's death was not equipped to provide. In a chapter entitled "Charting a way forward, 1969–1981," Saich does not simply follow the general consensus characterizing the Cultural Revolution period as an unmitigated "ten years of turmoil," and instead charts how the leadership coalition after Lin Biao's demise, composed of die-hard Leftist radicals and rehabilitated cadres, frayed rapidly after the Tenth Party Congress in 1973, thereby setting the stage for Deng's upstaging of Mao's immediate successor only a few years later.

Much to Saich's credit, his account sheds helpful light on the circuitous route of political – as opposed to simply economic – reform during the post-Mao era. The ill-fated Hua Guofeng's "tricky task" when he assumed power in 1976 "was to rebuild trust in the broken administrative system without undermining all the gains of the Cultural Revolution" (p. 272). Hua was unsuccessful, but Deng's self-proclaimed "administrative revolution" is accorded as much time and attention by the author as the economic opening with which he is popularly associated. Nonetheless, Saich records how he defended vigorously economic opening against the coalition of "conservative reformers" who gained the upper hand after 1989 (pp. 311–312). This split was managed, but by no means eradicated, by Jiang Zemin, whose leadership is credited with laying the foundation for China's unprecedented economic growth in the mid-1990s, and the even more rapid development after it joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Jiang, "a buffoonish figure who liked to cite from American and Western classics and to burst into song," is depicted as a surprisingly "shrewd politician, adept at maneuvering his way through the bureaucratic apparatus" (p. 331) around powerful rivals, both internal and external to the CCP. Hu Jintao is portrayed as having largely continued the core trends of the Jiang years, although Saich credits him with promoting a variant of populist authoritarianism, refocusing the CCP's attention on sustainability and high-quality growth, and expanding China's global partnership beyond that of its heavy reliance on the US (p. 357). Xi Jinping, by contrast, "exudes confidence and has rebuilt the system to strengthen his preeminent position," centralizing and concentrating "power not only at the center but also around his own person in a way that has not been seen since Deng Xiaoping and perhaps even since Mao Zedong" (p. 391). Xi's China Dream and other major initiatives – like, for example, the much-celebrated Belt and Road Initiative – signal a watershed in the history of the Party and the nation: "We cannot be a bystander," Xi insists, "but must be a participant, a leader" (p. 419).

In the context of its century-long struggles, Saich concludes with some observations on the nature of CCP rule overall: that it lost effective contact with the

working class in 1927 and has never fully regained it, propelling it to rule in an “extreme form of trustee relationship” characteristic of Leninist parties (p. 436). Xi’s extreme centralization of power cannot endure without significant costs: Saich observes that the CCP has been most “successful where it was good at micropolitics” (p. 449) and admitted ample room for local experimentation and variation. Despite the fact that its “tendency to cut with one knife” has correlated with periods of slowed and even stagnant economic growth, the “struggle between local adaptation and central imposition continues to this day” (p. 451) and is arguably more salient under Xi than it has been in several decades. However, whether this style of leadership and organizational structure can endure over an increasingly diverse society with its rising middle class and vibrant consumer-driven economy remains to be seen. By all accounts the CCP enjoys high levels of popular support, but, as Saich points out, “support is distinct from legitimacy, and support can erode more easily” (p. 460). The Party has successfully navigated seemingly insurmountable challenges over the course of its long history, but in order to survive to see its next century, the CCP “will have to develop the kinds of institutions that can accommodate a pluralized and knowledgeable society” (p. 461), a task which thus far, Xi does not appear to be well disposed to take on.

Whereas Saich’s volume takes a broad view of the CCP, David Shambaugh’s *China’s Leaders: From Mao to Now* offers an analytical approach to the Party’s history from the lens of leadership studies. Shambaugh begins with the observation that whereas one might assume that continuity would be the norm in a Leninist political system, in fact, he finds “a considerable discontinuity of style” between the five principal Party leaders on whom he focuses: Mao (“a populist tyrant”), Deng (“a pragmatic Leninist”), Jiang (“a bureaucratic politician”), Hu (“a technocratic apparatchik”) and Xi (“a modern emperor”) (p. 1). His introductory chapter outlines some prevailing perspectives on political leadership, introduces basic taxonomies (the distinction between Weber’s charismatic, traditional and legal-rational leaders, and the contrast between “transformational vs. transactional leadership”), and offers a few general comparisons between them. Shambaugh observes, for example, that Mao alone can be said to have come to the Party with his worldview already formed independently of it, whereas Deng, Jiang, Hu and Xi were all to a significant extent forged by the Party, having had their professional personae shaped while in service to it (p. 11). Shambaugh places three of the five into the specific sub-categories of transformational leaders originally identified by Burns: *ideational* leaders (Mao, Deng and Xi); *reform* leaders (Deng, Xi), and *ideologues* (Mao, Xi). Only Mao belongs to the remaining two sub-types as both a *revolutionary* leader and a *hero* (p. 4). The history of the CCP as recounted in the chapters that follow is thus retold largely as a function of each leader’s style or governing approach, with the institutions and norms that characterize Party life serving as “imperatives” that each of the five men must work within and through.

Some readers might find Shambaugh’s lens of “leadership style” and personality traits to be reductive and more than a bit reminiscent of early political

psychology approaches (“Among the five leaders in this study, it is clear that Mao had a severe case of narcissism, Xi Jinping has a very strong case, and Jiang Zemin had a mild case” [p. 6]). However, Shambaugh’s comparative leadership lens nonetheless leads to some intriguing insights that reflect his long career as a keen and well-connected observer of CCP elite politics. Some of the most interesting analysis is to be found in the chapters devoted to the two presumably “transactional” leaders in Shambaugh’s study, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, whose contributions are often either overlooked or downplayed – or both – since they stepped out of the top role. Building on his earlier work on the Party’s patterns of adaptation and atrophy, in his chapters on Jiang and Hu, Shambaugh reprises the lessons drawn by CCP leaders in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. He argues that the Party’s diagnosis of the Soviet demise sparked the formation of two loose camps within the CCP. Party Conservatives coalesced under their collective determination that the adoption of proto-liberal reforms would sound a death knell for the Party, which they believed needed to rally to resist the West’s unrelenting efforts to peacefully evolve Leninist systems across the globe into democratic ones (p. 179). However, an alternative Reformist camp advocating “proactive and managed political reform” nonetheless also formed within the CCP, which took a rather different view. The Reformists attributed the Soviet collapse to the “decades-long atrophy of the Party apparatus itself” (p. 180). Their proposed cure committed the CCP to a decade-long course of “stealth” institutional reforms, Shambaugh notes, carried out under the guise of Party-building. These efforts were designed to increase transparency and introduce “three democracies” into Party life in the name of improving both its “governing capacity” and “advanced nature” (pp. 237–239).

Interestingly, Shambaugh’s intriguing and highly informative account of the abrupt end to political reform in 2008 implicitly flags up some of the limitations of his leadership politics model. As he notes in the chapter devoted to Jiang, and again in the Hu Jintao chapter, it was Zeng Qinghong’s retirement in 2008 that ended the Reformist reign, and not Hu Jintao who was decisive: Zeng’s departure left Premier Wen Jiabao as the only senior Party leader who supported continuing reforms (p. 244). Riots in Lhasa in March 2008 and in Urumqi in 2009 then strengthened a powerful coalition across the Party’s propaganda apparatus, internal security organs, the state-owned enterprise sector, and the military and paramilitary units (pp. 245–246), all more closely aligned with Party Conservatives than the Reformists. It was the constellation of these factors that cumulatively paved the way for Xi Jinping’s decidedly more “retrogressive” and “repressive” leadership, and the “rolling back [of] many of Deng Xiaoping’s core political reforms that have guided China and its leadership over the past four decades” (p. 282). In Shambaugh’s telling, Xi has returned the CCP to earlier Bolshevik-inspired models of rule: he “may preach Marx, but he practices Lenin and Stalin” (p. 283). Shambaugh opines that Xi’s “actions reveal not a secure leader, but a profoundly insecure one” who is “taking China

backwards politically precisely at a time when it should be moving forward through increased freedom of expression, political participation, and civil society” (p. 317).

Motivated by an opposite approach to Shambaugh’s elite politics perspective, Timothy Cheek, Klaus Mühlhahn and Hans van de Ven assembled a truly impressive team of senior scholars in the field to contribute “ten scenes, ten micro-histories” brilliantly emphasizing the internal diversity and “multiple storylines” of which the Party’s history has been made (p. 3). *The Chinese Communist Party: A Century in Ten Lives* explicitly rejects the “grand narrative” approach in order to assert that the Party is not – and has in fact never been – “one thing, wedded to a single dogma a set way of doing things.” Instead, the authors’ approach seeks to capture “people making sensible choices, taking chances, and responding to unanticipated events” (p. 3). They assert that the CCP has

contradicted by deed and achievement one of the most fundamental assumptions that Western social scientists, economists, diplomats, and statesmen held dear for decades. The belief was that a Communist one-party system robbed its people, but it was above all economically far inferior to the Western liberal system. That confidence is gone. (p. 4)

This deliberate de-centring of the Party’s history breaks with the CCP’s own profoundly nationalistic and patriarchal narrative, intently re-crafted most recently for Xi Jinping’s own Party history campaigns, not the least by highlighting two non-Chinese figures (Tony Saich’s chapter on Comintern agent and Dutchman Henricus Sneevliet, and Julia Lovell’s on Peru’s Shining Path leader Abimael Guzmán) and three women (Zhang Jishun’s chapter on Shanghai actress Shanggan Yunzhu, Elizabeth J. Perry’s on Wang Guangmei, the spouse of Liu Shaoqi and author of the famous report on her “Peach Garden Experience,” and Guobin Yang’s on the vilified Guo Meimei, the self-described general manager of an NGO who descended into infamy online after she posted photos of her lavish lifestyle on social media). Also captured are stories of several disgraced Party figures who ultimately ended up on the proverbial “wrong side” of Party history (Hans van de Ven on Mao’s erstwhile political rival Wang Ming, Timothy Cheek on dissident literati member Wang Shiwei, and Klaus Mühlhahn on the ill-fated CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang). In fact, the only chapter in the volume devoted to a paramount CCP leader is Jeremy Goldkorn’s contribution focusing on Jiang Zemin, which concludes with a discussion of the rise of so-called “toad worship” during the Xi era as an expression of nostalgia for that “apogee of possibility” that Jiang’s more liberal period of rule arguably now represents (p. 210). The individual chapters naturally vary with respect to how closely they focus on the CCP per se, as opposed to more broadly attempting to capture the gestalt of the decade they cover. Saich and van de Ven, for example, do tell us quite a bit about intra-Party debates and struggles in pre-1949 CCP history; whereas Lovell and Yang primarily address the impact of the CCP on social and political movements, both external and internal to the PRC. Critics might argue that this heterogeneity detracts from the overall

coherence of the narrative; but, actually, this is arguably one of the volume's strengths, capturing the nonlinear, subjective and multiplex dimensions of what is often cast as a more monochromatic and triumphalist epic tale. Collectively, these authors instead remind us – “[a]t a time when Beijing and Washington prefer to think of the world in terms of a bipolar, zero-sum, Darwinian struggle of the fittest” (p. 6) – that the Party's history does not, and in fact *cannot*, belong only to itself, but instead to a global community of activists, scholars, dreamers and entrepreneurs, to whom and for whom it simultaneously represents both the gritty realities and evanescent possibilities of China's past, present and future in the making.

De-centring CCP history in an altogether different way is Bruce Dickson's *The Party and the People*, which is organized not around major events or individual leaders, but instead around answering a series of “big questions in Chinese politics” (ix) for a general audience. By assuming the congruence of the Party with the state apparatus, and honing in more generally on basic political mechanisms of Leninist governance and how they function, the regime, and not the Party as such, is true focus of the book. Dickson's monograph sidesteps the institutional history model in favour of a more comparative analysis that contains some useful tables, statistical data and charts. The author begins with the observation that “the Chinese political system is best described as responsiveness without accountability”: in other words, Dickson argues, “the party is often responsive to public opinion on strictly material issues...[but] not responsive on political issues ... In short, the party may be responsible to the public, but selectively and on its own terms” (pp. 4–5). He addresses, in turn, the question of what keeps the CCP in power, how its leaders are chosen and its policies made; whether China has a civil society and whether political protests threaten the regime's political stability; and why the Party fears religion and how nationalistic China has become. His concluding chapter is more speculative, addressing the likelihood that China might one day democratize, and seems to conclude that it is just as likely to do so as not.

Along the way, Dickson provides “A short course on communism in China” recounting some major turning points in PRC history. He describes how the Party's paramount leaders, from Jiang to Xi, acceded to power in the absence of an institutionalized electoral system. In his discussion of policy-making, Dickson summarizes the model of fragmented authoritarianism and the important role played by local policy experimentation within the system. His discussion helpfully flags up the question of political representation, describing the respective roles of direct and indirect election for lower-level officials, and deliberative democracy or consultation for National People's Congress deputies. In his concluding chapter, Dickson sets forth both an argument for why China is likely to democratize in the future, and another addressing why it is not. He ends by enumerating factors that can currently be seen to contribute to the CCP's frailty overall, including Xi's increasingly autocratic style of governance, and the perceived policy stalemate on deepening economic reforms; but he also points out

that, “as a Leninist party it also has attributes that have allowed it to remain in power for more than seventy years” (p. 154).

Taken together, these four books provide us with a broad and expansive set of perspectives on the CCP’s past, present and future, pitched at a variety of audiences. Dickson’s volume provides a clear and accessible perspective on how the CCP actually governs for a general readership and could be considered for use in an undergraduate course on Chinese or comparative politics. Cheek, Mühlhahn and van de Ven would make a valuable and highly readable addition to a course aimed at either undergraduates or graduate students, providing a refreshing and much-welcome ballast to elite-focused narrative accounts, highlighting the richness of the CCP’s internal diversity over time. Shambaugh offers a provocative and highly informative comparative account of paramount Party leaders and factional divides within the CCP that a more specialist audience will appreciate; and Saich’s lavishly detailed tome provides a wealth of historical information that will no doubt delight history buffs as well as CCP and PRC specialists, who are destined to use it as an invaluable reference on the *longue durée* of the Party’s rule, and its internal dynamics across time.

Biographical note

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