

China's Communist Party at 100: From Revolution to Rule

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Introduction

The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 was a turning point in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which celebrates its hundredth anniversary this year.¹ Prior to 1949, the CCP was a revolutionary liberation movement, but since the founding of the PRC, its primary task has been to rule the country.² The death of Mao Zedong 毛泽东 in 1976 marked another turning point in the Party's history.³ During the period 1949–1976, it had consistently held on to a socialist model of development with a centrally planned economy, collective and state ownership of the means of production, and a Leninist political model of party rule.⁴ However, after 1976, Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 (1904–1997) modernization program of reform and opening up meant a radical departure from the Mao era. The earlier model of development, which had

¹ The literature on the history of the party has grown quite enormous. Professor Tony Saich's new book *From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party*, which has not yet come out when writing this, will no doubt be a major work on this topic. When this article gets published, Professor Saich's book will already have come out, published by Belknap Press/Harvard University Press. The sections on the party in Immanuel C.Y. Hsü's and Jonathan D. Spence's two seminal works on modern Chinese history offer excellent introductions. See Immanuel Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, fourth edition, and Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013, third edition.

² Already the title of Professor Tony Saich's forthcoming history of the party *From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party* draws attention to the significance of the difference between these two roles of the party.

³ Mao Zedong was born in 1893.

⁴ According to the official historiography, it was 1978 when the modernization program to bring about reform and opening up was enacted, rather than 1976, that marked the important turning point. Most independent scholars also seem adhere to this periodization. This is not wrong, but it easily serves the purpose of downplaying the significance of the death of Mao for the fundamental changes that the reforms enacted in 1978 implied and therefore I prefer to let 1976 rather than 1978 signify the turning point.

also gone through considerable changes over the years, was largely abandoned, except for the Leninist principle of one-party rule, in favor of a kind of state-capitalist system. The totalitarian governance that had prevailed under Mao was transformed into an authoritarian order. The ascent of Xi Jinping 习近平 (1953–) as the top leader in 2012 marks a third turning point in the Party's history. Under Xi, the Party is taking a new direction that in some ways points backward rather than forward. While undoing some of the reforms that Deng Xiaoping and others had introduced, he seems to be reinstating a more totalitarian order.

A Revolutionary Liberation Movement

The Party was founded on July 1, 1921, with the dual objectives of bringing about national salvation in the face of foreign threats and liberating the Chinese masses from domestic exploitation and oppression.⁵ In the course of the twenty-eight years that led up to the establishment of the PRC, it developed an ideology and a political practice with some oppressive and even totalitarian features. This became evident during the years in Yan'an following the Long March (1934–1935), if not earlier. From the time that the Party set up its main base in Yan'an, Mao Zedong was the paramount leader.

In a series of articles, Mao articulated the idea that the revolution required that all people should subordinate themselves to and follow the Party's central leadership.⁶ The Marxist Leninist ideological orthodoxy with Mao's own ideas at the center was presented as all-encompassing, totalitarian if you will. In Mao's own words, "Marxism embraces but cannot replace realism in literary and artistic creation, just as it embraces but cannot replace the atomic and electronic theories in physics."⁷ Using the word "all-

⁵ The date of the founding has been disputed. See, e.g., Didi Kirsten Tatlow's article "On Party Anniversary: China Rewrites History", in the *New York Times*, July 20, 2011. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/21/world/asia/21iht-letter21.html>.

⁶ Concerning Mao's ideas, see Stuart Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-Tung*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, and David E. Apter and Tone Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1994.

⁷ "Talks at the Yanan [Yan'an] Forum on Literature and Art", May 2 and May 23, 1942, revised version printed in *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 3:

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm.

embracing” was a call to always anchor one’s ideas and actions in the prevailing ideology as interpreted by the leadership, quintessentially by Mao himself.

Distinguishing between friends and enemies was a central ingredient of this orthodoxy. The first sentence of Mao’s first article to be included in *Selected Works*, “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society” from 1926, reads, “Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution.”⁸ Over the years, the notion of “people” came to play a key role in answering this question.⁹ Those who belonged to the people were friends and should be treated as friends; those who were not (landlords, reactionaries, etc.) deserved no mercy. To answer this question of first importance was the prerogative of the Party leadership and Mao personally.

In Mao, as in many other Chinese revolutionaries of the early twentieth century, one can see a kind of worship of strength and power coupled with contempt for weakness, which was seen as a major factor behind the inability of premodern China to resist the aggression of Foreign Powers. One of Mao’s primary ambitions was to be a strong leader, an ambition that now and then led to

Mao’s texts found in *Selected Works* have been edited and may differ from the earliest versions available. The earliest known version of Mao’s Yan’an talks has been translated by Professor Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on literature and art”*, Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan, 1980. The Japanese scholar Takeuchi Minoru 竹内実 (1923–2013) has collected and published early versions of Mao’s writings up to 1949 in his ten volume work *Mao Zedong ji* 毛澤東集 [Collected writings of Mao Zedong], Tokyo: Hokubōsha 北望社, 1970–1972.

⁸ “Analysis Of The Classes In Chinese Society”, March, 1926, revised version printed in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol. 1: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_1.htm.

⁹ Concerning Mao’s notion of “people” (*renmin* 人民), see Mao’s text from 1957, “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People”, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol. 5: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_58.htm.

For the original unrevised version of this text, see Michael Schoenhals, “Original Contradictions on the Unrevised Text of Mao Zedong’s ‘On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People’”, in *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 16, 1986.

outbursts of megalomania as when in his famous poem “Snow” from 1936 he seemed to compare himself and his comrades-in-arms with Genghis Khan:

And Genghis Khan,
Proud Son of Heaven for a day,
Knew only shooting eagles, bow outstretched.
All are past and gone!
For truly great men
Look to this age alone.¹⁰

During the Yan’an years, Mao and his closest associates implemented this totalitarian ideology while tolerating no dissent. People who expressed dissent were purged, and some, such as the critic and writer Wang Shiwei 王实味 (1906–1947) who dared to criticize Mao and other leaders for their lifestyle and for being responsible for “the growth of darkness” in China, were even executed.¹¹

Yet, all the way up until 1949, the pronounced aim of the CCP was to liberate the Chinese people from foreign threats and domestic oppression, and there can hardly be any doubt that this is also how it was perceived by millions and millions of people. In particular, the CCP was respected for its role in fighting the Japanese occupation, so much so that it is widely believed that this was a major factor behind their victory over the Kuomintang (KMT or Guomindang) in the civil war. It is notable that Mao Zedong himself, on more than one occasion, said that the Japanese

¹⁰ Quoted from the English translation of “Snow”, in Mao Tsetung, *Poems*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976, p. 24.

¹¹ See Gao Hua, Stacy Mosher, and Guo Jian, *How the Red Sun Rose: The Origins and Development of the Yan’an Rectification Movement, 1930–1945*, The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2018. See also the Chinese journalist Dai Qing’s extremely important book, *Wang Shiwei and Wild Lilies: Rectification and Purges in the Chinese Communist Party 1942-1944*, edited by David E. Apter and Timothy Cheek, translated by Nancy Liu and Lawrence R. Sullivan, Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1994.

invasion had actually been helpful in the CCP's struggle against the KMT.¹²

¹² For example, in his meeting with Prime Minister Tanaka, Mao said, "Those Japanese were real good. Without Japanese's help, China's [Communist] revolution would not have succeeded." See, e.g., *Historum*, Mao Zedong thanking Japan for invading China, May 22, 2015, <https://historum.com/threads/mao-zedong-thanking-japan-for-invading-china.90805/>.

A Ruling Party

From the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the CCP became the ruling Party, and in this role, it embraced the major task of safeguarding the prevailing political order. The significance of this change from rebel to ruler, to use the title of Tony Saich's recent book about the Party's history, can hardly be overestimated, and therefore, 1949 must be seen as a turning point in its history.

The Party now became the central force in the tripartite structure that would rule the country: the Party, the Government (called the *guowuyuan* 国务院 or in English the State Council), and the People's Liberation Army. During the revolution and the civil war, the Party and the Army had already developed a symbiotic relationship. In the words of Mao, "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun", and all subsequent CCP leaders have found the role of the army essential as a means to maintain party rule and realize their objectives.¹³ Post-1949, the government became the most important instrument to implement the Party's political line. At each level in the organization of the Government and the Army, there would be a Party Committee tasked with ensuring that the correct political line was followed. In the history of the PRC, the CCP has always played the leading role in this tripartite structure, but the precise relationship with the Government and the Army has varied. Especially in the post-Mao era, one could see the beginnings of a clear division of roles between the Party and the

¹³ These words of Mao can be found in his article "Problems of War and Strategy" from November 6, 1938, in *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 2,

https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_12.htm.

government, a trend towards a separation of powers which has stalled in tandem with Xi Jinping's ascent to power.¹⁴

Within the tripartite structure that has now governed China for more than seventy years, there has from the beginning been a strong emphasis on discipline and the need to follow the directives from the Party Center, but much attention has also been paid to educating Party members and making them understand and accept the party line as correct. To this end, study sessions at each level of the organization of important texts such as Mao's writings or the latest editorial have been a characteristic feature of the organization, although the frequency has varied greatly over the years.

The Party is an elite organization, and to become a CCP member, one must demonstrate that one has the necessary qualifications. If an application for membership is approved, an aspiring party member must first spend one year as a probationary member prior to becoming a full member. Although an elite institution, the CCP today is a huge organization with ninety-five million members, a massive increase as compared to the roughly four million members in 1949. There can hardly be any doubt that the Party derives a considerable portion of its strength from its tight control and efficient organization. At the same time, it should be recognized that its strength has varied quite a lot over the years, and no one can know how long it will last. Party leaders no doubt realize that the Party, just like a human being, cannot live on forever.

Having just moved into their new headquarters in Zhongnanhai, the imperial garden just west of the Forbidden City in Beijing, as the new rulers

¹⁴ Concerning the the organization and role of the Party up to the Cultural Revolution, see Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, second enlarged edition, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968. For the contemporary era up to Xi Jinping, see, e.g., Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers*, New York: Harper, 2010. Although not yet having read it, there is every reason to believe that Tony Saich's new book *From Rebel to Ruler* contains much interesting new information and illuminating analysis.

of China, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898–1976) and other leaders felt that they had now realized their first major objective. Now and then, they must have reflected on their long march to power from that first meeting in Shanghai in July 1921, twenty-eight years earlier.

A main priority for the new leaders was to make China independent and self-reliant. Never again would they allow the country to be humiliated by foreign powers. Therefore, they even refused to join the socialist camp headed by the Soviet Union on the same premises as the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In December 1949, less than three months after the establishment of the PRC, Mao, for the first time in his life, went abroad to visit Stalin and establish an alliance with the Soviet Union. On February 14, 1950, the “Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance” was signed, and on February 17, Mao returned to China. This treaty projected an image of mutual friendship, but from beginning to end, there was deep mutual mistrust.¹⁵ The American support of Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975), the Korean War, and other events on the international scene brought China closer to the Soviet Union than Mao would have liked. The close relationship was short-lived, and the diplomatic break in 1960 should not have caught western observers and politicians as such a surprise, but the myth of a monolithic communist bloc made it difficult to anticipate the incipient Sino-Soviet Split.¹⁶

Mao would under no circumstances compromise China’s national sovereignty. Well into the 1970s, China’s foreign trade was very limited, partly as a result of the attempt of the United States and other Western

¹⁵ Concerning Mao’s talks in Moscow, see Odd Arne Westad, “Fighting for Friendship: Mao, Stalin, and the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1950”, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 8-9, 1996, pp. 224-236 and Yuri Peskov, “Sixty Years of the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance Between the U.S.S.R. and the PRC, February 14, 1950”, in *Far Eastern Affairs*, 38:1, 2010, pp. 100-115.

¹⁶ On the Sino-Soviet split, see Donald S. Zagoria’s classical study, *The Sino-Soviet Conflict, 1959–1961*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962, and Odd Arne Westad, *Brothers in Arms: the Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945–1963*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

countries to isolate and contain the communist country, but also because of Mao and his regime's almost obsessive focus on sovereignty.

Domestically, beyond consolidating their own power, the leaders were eager to begin building what they called a socialist society. Important steps on this road were developing national infrastructure (transportation system, education, etc.), strengthening agriculture by means of land reform and gradual mechanization, and speeding up industrialization. This model of development was based on central state planning and self-reliance.

Agricultural reform was carried out step by step, beginning with land reform, followed by collectivization, and culminating in the setting up of People's Communes in 1958. Land reform meant taking land from landlords and rich peasants and redistributing it to the toiling peasant masses. The reform was carried out by teams sent out to the villages, and in doing so the notion of "class struggle" played a key role. The former landlords were identified as class enemies and punished. There are no exact figures of how many people were killed during the land reform, but serious estimates suggest that between one and five million people perished.¹⁷ The cruelty and brutality of this reform was one early factor behind the gradual erosion of support for the Party within the population.

The growing dissatisfaction with the Party worried Mao and other leaders and led to the launching of the Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1956, which encouraged people to voice their criticism of the Party openly.¹⁸ This campaign led to an outburst of criticism that probably shocked the leaders, and in June 1957, Mao ordered a halt to this campaign. No doubt, the criticism voiced in China was the main cause for the decision, but both

¹⁷ Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945-57*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

¹⁸ The classical study of the Hundred Flowers Campaign is Roderick MacFarquhar's *The Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Chinese Intellectuals*, New York: Praeger, 1966. See also his later work *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution 1: Contradictions Among the People, 1956-1957*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1973.

Nikita Krushchev's "secret speech" at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956, in which he denounced Stalin, and the insurrection in Hungary the same year contributed to Mao's decision.

The Hundred Flowers Campaign was followed by the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957–1959. This campaign is estimated to have resulted in the persecution of at least 550,000 people. This is the official Chinese figure, but independent scholars estimate that the actual number may have been between one and two million victims. In any case, there is no doubt whatsoever that this campaign further contributed to growing discontent with the Communist regime among the population.¹⁹

Land reform was followed by collectivization, which brought to the surface conflicting views within the Party. Conventional Marxist wisdom held that mechanization should precede collectivization, and many leading cadres in the Party held on to this conventional wisdom, arguing that it was still too early to carry out collectivization. However, Mao and other leftists among the Party's leading cadres held that collectivization would unleash revolutionary fervor and creativity, thereby promoting and speeding up socialist construction, including mechanization. Mao's article "The Foolish Old Man who Removed the Mountains" from 1945, which became one of his "three constantly read articles" (*lao sanpian* 老三篇), was used to show that miracles were possible in New China.²⁰

¹⁹ See Christine Vidal, "The 1957-1958 Anti-Rightist Campaign in China: History and Memory (1978-2014)", April 2016, halshs-01306892f, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01306892/document>. See also the two works by Roderick MacFarquhar referred to in note 15.

²⁰ See Mao Zedong, "The Foolish Old Man who Removed the Mountains" from June 11, 1945, in *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 3: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_26.htm. The other two "constantly read articles" were "In Memory of Norman Bethune" from December 21, 1939, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 2: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_25.htm and "Serve the People" from September 8, 1944 in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 3: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_19.htm.

This “voluntarism” was indeed a core aspect of Mao’s political outlook, an aspect with sometimes disastrous consequences. The commune reform of 1958 was part of Mao’s campaign, the Great Leap Forward, which aimed to achieve phenomenal agricultural and industrial growth. By means of small steel furnaces in the villages, the target was set to double the production of steel in one year, catch up with the Soviet Union in 1960 and surpass Great Britain in fifteen years. The effects of the Great Leap Forward were ultimately catastrophic. The campaign caused a terrible famine that impacted much of the country, and altogether more than thirty million people died as a result of Mao’s mistaken and reckless policies.²¹

The Great Leap Forward had disastrous effects on the population at large and also made manifest deep rifts among the leaders. The courageous Minister of Defense Peng Dehuai 彭德怀 (1898–1974) criticized Mao, albeit in cautious words, and demanded that the Party put an end to his adventurist policies and instead make decisions based on the hard facts of the actual situation in the country.²² For Mao, this was “revisionism” and a serious “rightist deviation” that paid too much attention to the “productive forces” (what readers today would call the level of technical and economic development) and underestimated the power of revolutionary thought.

In July and August of 1959, an extended meeting with the Party’s Politburo was held in the beautiful resort on Mount Lushan, at which Mao went on a fierce counterattack against Peng, who was ousted. The divisions within the CCP leadership which came to the surface at Lushan would define the main conflicts in the Party up until the death of Mao. While Mao gained the upper

²¹ Concerning the Great Leap Forward, see Frank Dikötter, *Mao’s Great Famine: the History of China’s most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962*, New York: Walker & Co., 2010; Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Untold Story of Mao’s Great Famine*, trans. Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian, London: Penguin, 2012; Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution 2: The Great Leap Forward 1958–1960*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

²² Concerning Peng Dehuai, see Jürgen Domes, *Peng Dehuai: the Man and the Image*, London: C. Hurst & Company, 1985.

hand at Lushan, it was clear that many of the top leaders shared Peng's concern that Maoist policies were reckless and dangerous.²³ In fact, Mao's position was weakened after the showdown. He had to step down from the position of president and was succeeded by Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 (1898–1969), who gradually emerged as his major political adversary. When the Great Leap Forward was launched, Liu and his associate Deng Xiaoping came out in strong support of this ideological adventure. But in contrast to Mao, they changed their views when they saw the incipient disastrous effects of the Leap. In the early 1960s, Liu and Deng outlined and implemented economic policies that implied a rejection of the core tenets of the Great Leap Forward. These reforms brought about tangible improvements in the livelihood of the peasants and were welcomed by large segments of the population.

During these years, one may speak about two major conflicting political lines, the “revolutionary” line of Mao, which emphasized ideological struggle and egalitarianism, while downplaying the importance of expertise and material incentives, and a more moderate (or in Mao's language “revisionist”) line represented by Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and others, which focused on economic development and creating a stable social order.

In the eyes of Mao, developments in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward indicated that the Party was going in the wrong direction. Even before, Mao had argued that class struggle continued in socialist China and that bourgeois thinking could also be found within the Party. The experience of the criticism that Peng and others directed at Mao drove the aging revolutionary to talk more and more about the importance of continued class struggle. His words “Never forget the class struggle” at a Central Committee meeting in 1962 became widely used as a directive of Mao's political line.

²³ See Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution 2: The Great Leap Forward 1958–1960*.

After his dismissal, Peng Dehuai was succeeded by marshal Lin Biao 林彪 (1907–1971), another top military leader in the CCP. It is said that Lin was against the ousting of Peng but was also ambitious and could not resist an offer to replace him. Lin became the primary architect of the cult of Mao Zedong. In 1961 he ordered the army newspaper *Jiefang Ribao* to come up with a daily Mao quote to underscore the meaning of the day's editorial. Later, in 1966 he wrote a preface to the second revised edition of Mao's Little Red Book, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*. This book came to play an enormous role in China, especially during the Cultural Revolution.²⁴ In a speech in 1966, Lin Biao said: "Each sentence of Chairman Mao is the truth, and each one of his sentences is worth more than ten thousand of our sentences."²⁵

Lin Biao also came to play an important role in articulating China's foreign policy doctrine. In his booklet *Long Live the Victory of People's War* from 1965, he described the "emerging forces" of the poor in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as the "rural areas of the world", while referring to the affluent countries of the West as the "cities of the world". Eventually, the "rural areas" would encircle the "cities", just as the countryside had encircled the cities during the Chinese revolution.²⁶

In 1961, the renowned Ming historian Wu Han 吴晗 (1909–1969) published the play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, which was an attack on Mao in allegorical form for his dismissal of Peng Dehuai. Hai Rui 海瑞 (1514–1587) was a Ming Dynasty minister imprisoned for criticizing the emperor. Peng

²⁴ The first edition was published in 1964. It has been estimated that as many as 6.5 billion copies of this book have been printed, and that over one billion were printed during the period 1966–1969.

²⁵ "毛主席的话·句句是真理·一句超过我们一万句。" This statement Lin made in a speech on 18 May 1966 to an extended politburo meeting. See "Misinformation about 'One Sentence Is Worth Ten Thousand Sentences'", February 23, 2017, *RedChinaCn*, <http://www.redchinacn.net/portal.php?mod=view&aid=32047>.

²⁶ For the full text of his booklet, see Lin Biao, *Long Live the Victory of People's War!*, September 3, 1965, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lin-biao/1965/09/peoples_war/index.htm.

himself wrote to Mao saying that he wanted to be a Hai Rui and asked to be allowed to return to political life. Many intellectuals and high-ranking Party cadres shared the view that the ousting of Peng had been unjust and admired Wu Han for the courage to write and publish his play. Mao saw Wu Han's play as an attack on his leadership that represented the views of his major political opponents such as President Liu Shaoqi, Beijing's mayor Peng Zhen 彭真 (1902–1997), Deng Xiaoping, etc. One may safely assume that this increased the pressure on Mao and his closest collaborators to launch a counterattack. As tension with his opponents increased, Mao also concluded that action was necessary to reassert his leading role and save the Party and China from the revisionist line of his opponents.

On November 10, 1965, the literary critic and ardent follower of Mao, Yao Wenyuan 姚文元 (1931–2005), published an article in the Shanghai-based national newspaper *Wenhuibao* entitled "On the New Historical Beijing Opera *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*".²⁷ This marked the beginning of a full-scale counterattack, which soon came to be known as The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.²⁸

On one level, the Cultural Revolution was a power struggle between Party leaders representing different factions. During the height of this movement from 1966 to the Ninth Party Congress in 1969, tens, not to say hundreds of millions of people, were mobilized, especially by Mao and his supporters,

²⁷ On Yao Wenyuan as a literary critic, see Lars Ragvald, *Yao Wenyuan as a Literary Critic and Theorist: The Emergence of Chinese Zhdanovism*, doctoral dissertation at the Department of Oriental Languages, Stockholm University, 1978.

²⁸ On the Cultural Revolution, see Michael Schoenhals ed., *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966-1969: not a Dinner Party*, Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996, Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006, and Yang Jisheng, *The World Turned Upside Down: a History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, translated and edited by Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021. See also the early and seminal work of Yan Jiaqi 嚴家其 and Gao Gao 高皋, *Wenhua da geming shinian shi 文化大革命十年史 [Ten Years of the Great Cultural Revolution]*, 1-2, Taipei: Yuanliu Chuban Shiye Ltd, 1990.

to “continue the revolution”.²⁹ Schools and universities were closed, and the young red guards could travel free of charge on the trains “to establish contacts” (*chuanlian* 串联) with other “revolutionaries”. Study and struggle meetings became a characteristic feature of working life in China. Class enemies were identified and struggled against, as were people with “bourgeois ideas”. Cadres and intellectuals were sent to the countryside for ideological reeducation, and young people, who under normal circumstances would have gone to middle school, were sent “down to the countryside or up to the mountains” (*xiaxiang shangshan* 下乡上山) to “learn from the peasants and workers”. Many of these young people had very tough experiences, but they also learned a great deal.

As a result of their experiences during the Cultural Revolution, many people in China, particularly the young, were familiarized with parts of the country and Chinese society that they otherwise wouldn't have been exposed to. This was reflected in the writings of many authors who emerged after the Cultural Revolution and also in the thinking of many later social critics and so-called dissidents.³⁰ This is not to justify the Cultural Revolution, which on the whole, was a disaster for China. It caused divisions within families; children and teenagers were told to look for “reactionary” or “bourgeois” behavior or thinking in their parents and other older relatives, etc. The economy stagnated, while culture, education, and research were severely disrupted. Central government organs no longer functioned in a normal

²⁹ The ideologues were careful to distinguish this from Trotsky's notion of “permanent revolution” which had long been banned.

³⁰ See, e.g., Michael S. Duke, *Blooming and Contending: Chinese Literature in the Post-Mao Era*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985; Bonnie McDougall and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, London: Hurst, 1997; Chen Sihe 陈思和. *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue shi jiaocheng* 中国当代文学史教程 [A course in the history of contemporary Chinese literature], Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2001.

way. Between half a million and two million people are estimated to have lost their lives as a result of the Cultural Revolution.³¹

The high tide of the Cultural Revolution lasted until the Ninth Party Congress in 1969, when Lin Biao was designated as Chairman Mao's closest comrade-in-arms and successor. After 1969 the worst turmoil seemed to be over, schools began to re-open, and the central administration began to function normally again. In short, life seemed to be gradually returning to a familiar pattern. But it was not until the death of Mao in 1976 that the Cultural Revolution was officially declared over.

In the autumn of 1971, Lin Biao disappeared from the scene. Lin, his wife and son, and some of their closest associates died when their aircraft crashed over Mongolia. The official explanation was that Lin had planned a coup and to have Mao assassinated. When his plans were exposed, Lin, together with his wife, son, and a few close collaborators, tried to flee to the Soviet Union in a small plane piloted by Lin's son, air force general Lin Liguo 林立果(1945–1971), but crashed killing all on board.³² The official version of Lin Biao's death has long been disputed. Today it seems clear that his cause of death was an aircraft crash over Mongolia, but there is still room for speculation as to whether he really had planned to assassinate Mao and what their conflict was all about. It is not possible in this short article about the CCP to go into the details of the Lin Biao Incident, though two aspects

³¹ See Tom Phillips, "The Cultural Revolution: all you need to know about China's political convulsion", May 11, 2016, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/11/the-cultural-revolution-50-years-on-all-you-need-to-know-about-chinas-political-convulsion>.

³² Concerning the Lin Biao affair, see Yao Ming-Le, *The Conspiracy and Death of Lin Biao: How Mao's Successor Plotted and Failed: An Inside Account of the Most Bizarre and Mysterious Event in the History of Modern China*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983; Qiu Jin, *The Culture of Power: the Lin Biao Incident in the Cultural Revolution*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999; Andrei Kozyrev, "Delo Lin Biao: Zagadka Pochti Razreshena" [The Lin Biao affair: the mystery is almost solved], in *Moskovskaya Pravda*, March 24, 1994.

of this surrealistic episode stand out as especially relevant for this discussion of the Party.

Disagreement over the rapprochement with the United States seems to have been a significant factor behind the rift between Lin and Mao. Indisputably, the rift developed between the Party Congress in 1969, when Lin was officially designated as Mao's successor, and Lin's death in 1971. Both Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai stood behind this reorientation of China's foreign policy, but this was a controversial decision. It meant a departure from the view of the US and the Soviet Union as two superpowers and the two major enemies of China, a view of the world that Lin had spelled out in his most important writing, *Long Live the Victory of People's War*. One reliable indication of the controversial nature of the rapprochement with the US was that the Party began to circulate documents emphasizing that improved relations with the US as a means to counter the threat from the Soviet Union was totally in line with "Chairman Mao's revolutionary line in foreign policy" (*Mao zhuxi geming waijiao luxian* 毛主席革命外交路线).³³

Another aspect, even more important for a discussion of the Party, is that this incident further eroded the Party's status among the Chinese population. How could Lin be designated as Mao's successor and closest comrade-in-arms and then, after only two years, turn out to be a traitor planning to stage a coup and assassinate the Great Leader and Helmsman?

"There is great disorder under heaven, the situation is excellent" (天下大乱, 形势大好), is a phrase that was often used in China in the early 1970s. This phrase has a typical Maoist ring to it and was also used by Mao himself. It was the antithesis of the traditional Confucian focus on order and stability,

³³ See *Chinese Communist Internal Politics and Foreign Policy. Reviews on "Reference Materials Concerning Education and Situation, issued by the Kunming Military Region*, Taipei: The Institute of International Relations, 1974. Cf.; Henry Kissinger, *On China*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2011, especially chapters 8–10.

which Deng Xiaoping was later to pick up as an obvious way to distance himself from Mao and the chaos that many people tacitly associated with him.

There is no reason to doubt that Mao really was of the opinion that some chaos and disorder could be “progressive”, both internationally and in China. The turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, which Mao at least to an extent deliberately instigated, was an example of this. But chaos could also reach a level where Mao found it threatening. During the Cultural Revolution, when the chaos seemed to reach dangerous levels, he seems to have seen the need to bring about some order. To do so, he largely relied on Zhou Enlai, his close partner for decades with whom he also had a complicated relationship. In the early 1970s, Zhou was diagnosed with cancer and is said to have persuaded Mao to bring back Deng Xiaoping to Beijing to help run government affairs. Zhou and Mao both knew Deng as an extraordinary administrator and problem-solver.

In the late 1960s, Deng was referred to as “the number two capitalist roader in the party”, Liu Shaoqi being number one.³⁴ Therefore, his rehabilitation and return to Beijing in the spring of 1973 must have taken some effort on Mao’s part (Zhou Enlai was probably positively inclined to Deng all along). It was an important event that ignited hope among many leading cadres that some order and stability would now be restored. Very soon, it also became obvious that he played a key role both domestically and for China’s role in world affairs. Internationally, his speech in April 1974 to the United Nations

³⁴ “Capitalist roader” (*zouzi pai* 走资派) was a Maoist concept used to criticize people in the party for having bourgeois ideas and for following a political line which would result in a capitalist restoration. The first documented use of this term was in a speech by Mao in 1965; see 走资派 [Capitalist Roaders], Baidu Baike, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/走资派>.

General Assembly, in which he expounded the theory of three worlds attributed to Mao Zedong, attracted worldwide attention.³⁵

Domestically, he worked efficiently together with Zhou Enlai to stabilize the situation and revitalize the work of the central government, but leftist politicians around Mao, such as his wife Jiang Qing 江青 (1914–1991), still regarded him as a capitalist roader and worried about his rise and the support he received from Mao and Zhou. At the Tenth Party Congress held in August 1973, the leftists seemed to strengthen their position. The young labor activist Wang Hongwen 王洪文 (1935–1992) from Shanghai, later to be known as a member of the Gang of Four, was elected second vice chairman of the Party and became third in rank among the leaders after Mao and Zhou. Still, it was Zhou Enlai who delivered the political report to the congress.³⁶

From this time and until the death of Mao three years later, the tension between opposing factions increased. In the day-to-day administration, Zhou Enlai, working closely with Deng Xiaoping and supported by many high leaders and younger cadres of different generations, seemed to be in control. They were intent on maintaining a stable social order and achieving economic growth. In his report to the Fourth National People's Congress held in 1975, Zhou Enlai focused on the four modernizations of agriculture,

³⁵For the English of the text of this report, see Deng Xiaoping, *Speech By Chairman of the Delegation of the People's Republic of China, Teng Hsiao-Ping, At the Special Session of the U.N. General Assembly*, April 10, 1974, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/deng-xiaoping/1974/04/10.htm>.

³⁶The other three members of the Gang of Four were Zhang Chunqiao 张春桥 (1917-2005) Jiang Qing 江青 and Yao Wenyan 姚文. For the English text of this report, see Zhou Enlai, *Report To The Tenth National Congress Of The Communist Party Of China*, August 24, 1973, https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/10th_congress_report.htm.

industry, science and technology, and defense as a priority for the government.³⁷

In the ideological and cultural fields, the leftists, with Mao's wife Jiang Qing as a leading figure, were more dominant. Strict and narrow demands rooted in the Party's ideological orthodoxy resulted in very limited cultural and intellectual diversity.

Scholars and intellectuals, as well as writers and artists, were mobilized for the different political campaigns. It was difficult to refuse to play this role of intellectuals in the service of the Party. Some set up writing groups that published articles in the most important newspapers and journals. Whenever one saw one of their articles, one knew that it was politically significant. There were several such groups, such as Liang Xiao 梁效, made up of scholars from Peking University and Tsinghua University, and Luo Siding 罗思鼎, which represented the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee and included some of the most prominent Shanghai intellectuals.

Several political campaigns that engaged large segments of the population were launched during the period of 1973–1976. They were seen as representing the Party, but they were actually launched by people who saw themselves as representing Mao's "revolutionary" line rather than the more pragmatic policies that Zhou and Deng were busy implementing. To what extent Mao himself launched these campaigns is unclear, but it seems likely that he gave them his support. People with opposing views also tried to modify the political tendency of these campaigns after they were launched. One example of this was the campaign to criticize Lin Biao and Confucius.

More than two years passed between the death of Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai's presentation of the official account of what happened in his report to the

³⁷ For the English text of this report, see Zhou Enlai, *Report on the Work of the Government*, January 13, 1975, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/zhou-enlai/1975/01/13.htm>. Zhou had talked about four modernizations already in 1964, but after that this notion had hardly been used.

Tenth Party Congress in 1973. At this time, it had become necessary to give an explanation of the shocking revelation that Lin had tried to carry out a coup and have Mao assassinated. This resulted in the Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius (*pi Lin pi Kong yundong* 批林批孔运动), which began in the autumn of 1973 and linked Lin to the pernicious influence of the reactionary ideas of Confucius. This must have come as a big surprise to many since, at least from the early 1960s onwards, Lin had been seen as representing the leftists in the Party. To Mao and the majority of Chinese radicals in the twentieth century, Confucius was considered the main symbol of reactionary thought in China. Hardly anything in the criticism of Confucius in this campaign was new, but the link to Lin Biao was sensational.³⁸

Confucius was not mentioned in Zhou Enlai's report, and the decision to make the link was not his. Mao himself must have sanctioned this connection and the launching of the campaign, which swept over the country and took the form of innumerable articles and books, not to mention meetings all over the country to criticize these two celebrities. It soon became clear that this campaign was also used to criticize, albeit obliquely, Zhou Enlai and his pragmatic policies. In the *Analects*, Confucius often praised the legendary Duke of Zhou, known in the traditional historiography as an exceptionally capable ruler who played a major role in consolidating the Zhou Kingdom established by his elder brother King Wu in the eleventh century BCE. The criticism of Confucius now often made references to this legendary hero, and people soon began to understand this as a veiled attack on Zhou Enlai.

Today, there is no doubt that politicians close to Mao, such as the Gang of Four, saw Zhou Enlai as the major obstacle to their agenda. Supported by

³⁸ Concerning this campaign, see, e.g., Paris H. Chang, "The Anti-Lin Piao and Confucius Campaign", in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 14, No. 10, pp. 871–886.

Deng Xiaoping, probably a majority of party veterans, as well as the leading cadres in the government apparatus, Zhou was a formidable enemy. Only Mao could match his power and influence, and even he was dependent on Zhou. These two leaders maintained a symbiotic relationship from the beginning of the Cultural Revolution to the end of their lives, a partnership that was characterized by mutual dependence but also contained much tension.

The criticism directed against Zhou mounted, but his position was sufficiently strong to prevent being openly criticized by name. Another example of the oblique attacks on Zhou was the criticism of Beethoven and Western classical “absolute music” or what in Chinese is called “unnamed music” (*wubiaoti yinyue* 无标题音乐). At Zhou Enlai’s invitation, the Philadelphia Orchestra visited China in September 1973. For Zhou, this invitation was first and foremost a gesture to show that China’s leaders really wanted to have more exchanges and promote relations with the United States. But his opponents in the Leftist camp seized on this as an opportunity to criticize him. Without mentioning him by name, they published numerous articles criticizing the bourgeois nature of Beethoven’s music.³⁹ The real intent of this criticism was to attack Zhou Enlai.

As Zhou’s health began to deteriorate, he withdrew more and more from active politics. This gave more space and influence to Deng Xiaoping, who tightened his grip over government organs and also began to outline a program for China’s future development based on his and Zhou’s common understanding of the need to focus on economic growth.⁴⁰ In the autumn of

³⁹ For a brief discussion of this campaign, see Huang Xiaohe, “Guanyu ‘wubiaoti yinyue’ da pipan de qianqianhouhou” 关于无标题音乐打批判的前前后后 [On the background and effects of the great criticism of “absolute music”], March 11, 2019, <https://www.wenmi.com/artide/po733600ng6a.html>.

⁴⁰ For an overview of Deng’s effort in 1975 to develop new policies, see Ezra E. Vogel, “Looking Forward Under Mao 1975”, in *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011.

1975, he published internally three programmatic documents for China's development, soon labeled "The Three Poisonous Weeds" (三株毒草).⁴¹ They were rooted in Zhou's Four Modernizations and anticipated the program of reform and opening up that he would launch three years later in a very different political context. To Deng's leftist opponents, these and other documents confirmed that he was still a "capitalist roader" intent on bringing about a "capitalist restoration" (*zibenzhuyi fubi* 资本主义复辟). As a result, the attacks on him masterminded by the circle around the Gang of Four mounted. In November 1975, the campaign to "beat back the wind of reversing the verdicts" (反击右倾翻案风运动) began, "the verdicts" referring mainly to the approval of the Cultural Revolution. This campaign would play a central role during the coming months.

Entering 1976, tensions in the Party were extremely sharp. Mao was both physically and mentally frail, increasingly leaning in the direction of the Gang of Four politically, but also not prepared to give them his full support and trust.

On January 8, Zhou Enlai died, and people all over the country showed their respect and grief. There was a widespread fear that with Zhou gone, the cautious reestablishment of order and stability was threatened. Mao did not attend Zhou's mourning ceremony, perhaps because of his poor health but probably also as an expression of his misgivings about Zhou's political role.

⁴¹ The titles of these three articles were "General Program for all Work of the Whole Party and the Whole Country" (Lun quan dang quan guo ge xiang gongzuo de zonggang 论全党全国各项工作的总纲), "A Few Problems Related to Speeding up Industrial Development" (Guanyu jiakuai gongye fazhan de ruogan wenti 关于加快工业发展的若干问题), and "Outline of the Report of the Academy of Science" (Zhongguo Kexueyuan gongzuo huibao tigan 中国科学院工作汇报提纲). For a critical analysis of the first of these three documents, see "A General Programme for restoring capitalism – dissecting 'On the General Program for All Work of the Whole Party and the Whole Country' (Yige fubi zibenzhuyi de zonggang – 'Lun quandang quanguo gexiang gongzuo de zonggang' pouxi 一个复辟资本主义的总纲-《论全党全国各项工作的总纲》剖析) in *Red Flag Magazine*, Issue 4, 1976, <http://marxistphilosophy.org/Hongqi/76/197604-12.htm>.

In the end, Deng Xiaoping delivered the key speech at the funeral. Then quite surprisingly, neither Deng nor a member of the Gang of Four but a relatively minor political figure, Hua Guofeng 华国锋 (1921–2008), was appointed acting premier after Zhou. This decision was taken by Mao as a compromise between the two major factions within the Party. Mao had again become critical of Deng as a capitalist roader, but he also refused to give his unreserved support to the Gang of Four. Now Deng also began to be criticized by name and soon disappeared from the scene, returning only in the spring of 1977.

In April, in connection with the Qingming Festival, sometimes also referred to as the Tomb-Sweeping Festival, people in Beijing took to the streets, gathering at Tiananmen Square to mourn Zhou Enlai and voice their resentment against the Gang of Four and, at least indirectly, against Mao. Deng Xiaoping was blamed for these massive demonstrations.⁴²

Having suffered a heart attack in March, Mao was now very ill, and it is unclear to what extent he was still really in charge.⁴³ On April 30, he received New Zealand Prime Minister Robert Muldoon in his residence in Zhongnanhai, and when Muldoon had left, Hua Guofeng stayed for a chat with the ailing Mao who told him, “With you in charge I am at ease” (你办事我放心). During the following weeks, these words were quoted again and again in the media. On May 7, the Party’s Politburo decided officially to appoint Hua Guofeng as premier and as first vice chairman of the Party, on the suggestion of Chairman Mao. According to the Constitution, it was the National People’s Congress, certainly not the Politburo, that had the authority to appoint the country’s premier, and according to the Party charter, the vice chairmen should be appointed by the Party Congress. Yet,

⁴² Concerning these protests, see David Bonavia, *China’s Warlords*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁴³ On Mao’s final year, see the relevant sections in Li Zhisui, *The Private life of Chairman Mao: the Memoirs of Mao’s Personal Physician*, New York: Random House, 1994, and Philip Short, *Mao: a Life*, New York: Henry Holt, 2000.

no objections against these decisions were heard. Mao stood above the stipulations of such documents as the Constitution and the Party Charter. Mao had himself said that he would be at ease with Hua as his successor, and accommodating the chairman was much more important than any procedural rules.

On May 27, Mao made his final appearance when he received Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan. Both when meeting Muldoon and Bhutto, Mao's speech was severely impaired. Soon after, on July 6, Marshal Zhu De 朱德 (1886–1976) passed away, and on July 28, a major earthquake devastated Tangshan, causing at least 240,000 deaths and entering the record as one of the worst natural disasters in human history.⁴⁴

That same month, Mao suffered a second heart attack, followed by further cardiac episodes on September 2 and 5, which led to his death. The long-serving Chairman's passing was announced just after midnight on September 9. The death of Zhu, the Tangshan earthquake, and finally the end of Mao together made 1976 an *annus horribilis* in the history of the CCP.

Few observers at the time predicted that Mao's death would lead to any dramatic changes in the immediate future. Less than a month later, on October 6, the members of the Gang of Four were arrested, and the most thoroughgoing political transformation since 1949 began to unfold. Mao's death marks a major turning point in the history of the Party.

At this stage, the characteristic features of the Party during the period from 1949 to 1976 can be summed up as follows. In 1949, the CCP established a one-party state that exercised "the people's democratic dictatorship" (人民民主专政).⁴⁵ This concept has often been used interchangeably with the 'the

⁴⁴ On the Tangshan earthquake, see James Palmer, *Heaven Cracks, Earth Shakes: The Tangshan Earthquake and the Death of Mao's China*, New York: Basic Books, 2011.

⁴⁵ This was the expression that Mao used in a speech on June 30, 1949, entitled "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship". It was later incorporated into the constitution.

dictatorship of the proletariat' (无产阶专政). The difference between the two terms is that the former includes all sections of the population and not exclusively the proletariat.

Since 1949, the classes have been defined primarily in ideological terms. To be proletarian has been to possess "proletarian consciousness" rather than having a role in production, and likewise, to be bourgeois has mainly referred to "bourgeois consciousness". Therefore, in practice, the meaning of these two dictatorships has not been very different. Interestingly, there are two words for "dictatorship" in Chinese: *zhuanzheng* 专政 is used mainly for dictatorship exercised by "the people" or "the proletariat", and most often has a positive connotation, while *ducai* 独裁 is used for fascist or rightist dictatorships and only has a negative connotation.

Many contemporary scholars use the term "party-state" rather than "one-party state" to refer to the system that the CCP established following 1949. More than a "one-party state", this term implies that the Party merged with the state as an integral and dominant part of it. When examining the period of 1949–1976, one can conclude that the idea of a party-state captures a characteristic feature of the political system. It is also important, however, to keep in mind that the relationship between the Party and the state has varied over the years.

The Cultural Revolution was, in fact, a mass movement directed, if not against the CCP itself, then at least against the Party establishment. One may also say that the term "one-party state" is not entirely appropriate, as there are eight political parties in addition to the CCP that make up the rather peculiar organization known as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). On the other hand, the existence of these parties does

not mean that there is a multi-party system in the common sense of the word, as they are all subordinate to the CCP.⁴⁶

Collective or state ownership of the means of production and state planning were characteristic of the economic system, while Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought held sway ideologically throughout the period as totalitarian orthodoxy and were described as relevant for all aspects of human and social life, underpinning all legitimate political actions.⁴⁷ One feature of this ideology was the focus on “contradictions” and “class struggle” as essential forces driving social development forward.

Conflicts between different leaders and factions haunted the Party throughout the period 1949–1976. Mao was the paramount leader, who often stood above the Party, especially during the Cultural Revolution, with the authority to make his own decisions without first going through the procedures prescribed in the Constitution or Party Charter. In the prevailing Maoist universe, procedural rules and even laws were regarded with great skepticism and often seen as serving bourgeois rather than proletarian interests. One appalling example is the criticism of the “bourgeois right” (资产阶级法权).⁴⁸

⁴⁶For an official description of these parties see “Political Parties and Social Organizations”, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China,

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ljzg_665465/zgjk_665467/3579_665483/t17851.shtml.

Notice that sometimes the acronym CPC (Communist Party of China) is used rather than CCP (Chinese Communist Party), which is more commonly used in the English-speaking world. CCP stands for “The Chinese communist Party”, CPC for The Communist Party of China”.

⁴⁷ Concerning the meaning and function of “Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zdedong Thought” in the PRC up until the first couple of years of the Cultural Revolution, see Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Ornaization in Communist China*, Second enlarged edition, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968, Chapter 1: Ideology, pp. 17–104.

⁴⁸ This notion was discussed now and then during the period and was brought to the foreground in early 1975 as a reaction against the report that Zhou Enlai had delivered to the Fourth National People’s Congress and the political line that he and Deng Xiaoping represented. The criticism focused on the importance of the dictatorship of the proletariat, for which suppression of “bourgeois right” was described as essential. See in this context two articles by two members of the Gang of Four, which

The rifts within the Party between adherents of different political factions were motivated both by ideological concerns and power struggles. There were certainly cases where conflict was primarily driven by a desire to attain power for power's sake: personal ambitions or expressions of conflicting interests between different groups (bound together by geographical or organizational belonging, friendship, or shared experiences, etc.) played an important role. However, it would be misleading to reduce the major sources of conflicts within the Party to sheer personal ambition. Major internal party disputes have also been rooted in fundamental policy disagreements.

At the time of Mao's death, conflicts between the factions associated with the Gang of Four and Deng Xiaoping, respectively, seemed to threaten the political system established twenty-seven years earlier. Popular support for the CCP had seriously eroded over the years, from the executions in connection with the land reform, the anti-rightist campaign and the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution, the Lin Biao affair, and the second purge of Deng Xiaoping. In addition, the economy seemed to be stagnating. Against this background, it is unsurprising that in the autumn of 1976, people in China with accurate knowledge of the situation felt that the country was on the brink of collapse and that drastic measures were necessary to save the Party. This was not a time when "resilience", now so much in vogue when describing the Chinese party-state, seemed to be characteristic of the CCP and the political system over which it presided.

attracted much attention at the time: Yao Wen-yuen [Yao Wenyan], "On the Social Basis of the Lin Piao [Lin Biao] Anti-Party Clique", in *Peking Review*, No. 10, 1975 and Chang Chun-chiao [Zhang Chunqiao], "On Exercising All-Round Dictatorship over the Bourgeoisie", in *Peking Review*, No. 14, 1975.

Farewell to the Revolution

Mao's successor, Hua Guofeng, belonged neither to the group of pragmatic politicians around Deng Xiaoping nor to the Leftist followers of the Gang of Four. Mao had likely hoped that Hua would remain loyal to the basic tenets of his legacy but also avoid deepening the conflict between these two factions. When Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four made clear that they wanted Jiang to succeed her husband as the paramount leader of the CCP, this was met with resentment among the top echelons of party and state leaders. Hua Guofeng was also against Jiang's appointment. With the support of some key party and military veterans, including Wang Dongxing 汪东兴 (1916–2015), head of Mao's personal bodyguard force on whose support the Gang of Four had counted, he took the decision to arrest the Gang of Four. During the months that followed, Hua together with the veteran leaders Ye Jianying 叶剑英 (1897–1986), one of Zhou Enlai's closest associates, Li Xiannian 李先念 (1909–1992) and Chen Yun 陈云 (1905–1995), who had both played leading roles in China's central economic planning, formed the core leadership of the Party.

Hua Guofeng attempted to define a political course firmly anchored in Chairman Mao's legacy and proclaimed, "We will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave". But he also realized the need to overcome some of the CCP's worst internal conflicts to establish the order and stability needed to promote economic growth and the modernization of Chinese society. Therefore, and probably encouraged by his veteran associates, he soon reached out to Deng Xiaoping, who returned to Beijing

to join the central leadership. In July 1977, Deng was restored to the posts of Vice-Chairman of the Central Committee, Vice-Chairman of the Military Commission, and Chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army. Deng at once got to work on his reform agenda. Already in 1977, he initiated what was referred to as the "Beijing Spring", which allowed criticism of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and restored the National College Entrance Examination. Then towards the end of 1978, he had gathered enough support to let the Party launch his ambitious modernization program referred to in terms of "reform and opening up" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放). The decision to do so was taken at the Third Plenary Session with the Eleventh Central Committee, which took place on December 18–22, 1978. This meeting would go down in Chinese history as one of the CCP's most important meetings ever. The modernization program was soon hailed as a "second liberation."

As far as economic policy is concerned, the reform program was a departure from the strict state planning, self-reliance, and total political control over investments and production that had characterized the earlier political line of the CCP. Now consumer demand was recognized as an important driving force to achieve economic growth. The earlier insistence on extreme self-reliance was abandoned, and the principle of comparative advantage was introduced. In agriculture, farmers were encouraged to do what was most advantageous in terms of natural conditions, competence, and popular demand.

Opening up to trade and other forms of exchange with the outside world was given a key role in promoting economic growth and modernization. Advanced technology from the Western world was to be imported on a large scale, while China would take advantage of its cheap labor costs and greatly increase its exports. Scholarly and student exchange was promoted

as a means to learn more about the outside world and acquire the cutting-edge knowledge needed to successfully modernize China.

Decision-making in industry became more decentralized, and experts were given a much greater say than previously. Private initiatives in the economy were welcomed. Already in the early 1980s, small private repair shops, barbershops, etc., were allowed to operate and mushroomed all over the country, especially in the cities. Soon even big private companies were authorized and came to form the most dynamic sector of the economy. The People's Communes were dissolved, and agriculture was effectively privatized, although land remained formally owned by the state or by collectives. The question of the proper role of private property became a topic of heated debate, and several steps in the direction of legally recognizing the importance of such rights were taken, culminating in the promulgation of the Property Law in 2007.

These and other economic reforms resulted in an annual growth rate of roughly ten percent. In 1978 the GDP per capita was roughly 300 US dollars; by 2012, the year Xi Jinping became the leader of the Party, it had risen to roughly 11 000 dollars and in 2020 to 17 000 dollars.⁴⁹ These figures are based on Purchasing Power Parity in current prices.⁵⁰

Achieving rapid economic growth and the modernization of China while keeping the Communist Party in power were the two major priorities for Deng Xiaoping. Exactly how Deng looked upon the relation between the two is hard to know: was it that he thought that only the Party could provide the political leadership needed to achieve economic goals, or was it rather that he saw economic growth as necessary for the Party to remain in power? While it is impossible to know for sure, it was probably a combination of the

⁴⁹ See *Knoema*, "China - Gross domestic product per capita based on purchasing-power-parity in current prices", <https://knoema.com/atlas/China/GDP-per-capita-based-on-PPP>.

⁵⁰ Concerning "purchasing-power-parity", see *Investopedia*, "What is Purchasing Power Parity?", <https://www.investopedia.com/updates/purchasing-power-parity-ppp/>.

two. Be that as it may, it is clear that he consistently worked towards both goals. He did his utmost to achieve rapid economic growth, and in this, he was successful while also seeming prepared to do whatever he deemed necessary to not give up Party rule.⁵¹

Deng saw much of Mao's ideology as constraining, holding back China's modernization. He wanted to get rid of dogmas and "empty talk" (*konghua* 空话) and base his policies on facts. The saying "to seek truth from facts" (*shishi qiushi* 实事求是) rooted in ancient Chinese history can hardly be uttered without evoking Deng's name in the minds of most Chinese people. In implementing these policies, he said, with another formulation that has become closely associated with him, that one should "cross the river while groping for stones" (*mozhe shitou guohe* 摸着石头过), that is, advance step by step and adjust one's policies as one learns more about the situation. In a language more familiar to contemporary readers, one could say that he advocated piecemeal reforms firmly anchored in a factual appreciation of the economic situation.

Deng consistently insisted that in economic policy, what is important are the result and not so much the means to achieve results. He is famous for saying, "it does not matter if the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice" (*heimao baimao, zhuazhu laoshu jiushi haomao* 黑猫白猫, 抓住老鼠就是好猫). In this spirit, Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳, at the time acting General Secretary of the CCP, went so far in his report to Thirteenth Party Congress in 1987 as to say that since China was still in "the primary stage of socialism" (*shehuizhuyi chuji jieduan* 社会主义初级阶段), "whatever is conducive to the growth [of the

⁵¹ For a rich study of Deng, see Ezra E. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011.

productive forces] is in keeping with the fundamental interests of the people and is therefore needed by socialism and allowed to exist."⁵²

Deng saw Mao's emphasis on class struggle as divisive and wanted to promote unity and stability. Mao's statement that "there is great disorder under Heaven, the situation is excellent" must have been abhorrent to Deng as diametrically to his own way of thinking. Deng wanted to eliminate the revolutionary rhetoric that focused on class struggle and unite as many people as possible in the quest for economic growth and modernity. The title of a famous book by two leading Chinese intellectuals, Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930–) and Liu Zaifu 刘再复 (1941–), *Farewell to the Revolution (Gaobie geming 告别革命)* from 1995 captures an essential aspect of Deng's vision.

While Deng would not question the one-party rule, he did advocate for a clearer separation of the roles of Party and state. He was convinced that China needed to build a judiciary with some relative independence that could meet the needs of a modern state in an increasingly globalized world. Considerable steps were taken in this direction, although he never developed this train of thought far enough to accept the idea that the government or the judiciary would have the authority to overrule the Party on important issues.

Having experienced the absurd cult of Mao, Deng sought to promote collective leadership and prevent anything similar from appearing again. He also wanted to see an end to the tradition that the top leaders stay in office until they died or were ousted. In 1982, the Constitution was amended so that the Chinese president could stay in office only for two terms of five years each. Interestingly, Deng himself never became Chairman or General Secretary of the Party, nor President or Premier, although he certainly could

⁵² Quoted from Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 218. For the English text of Zhao's report, see *Beijing Review*, November 9–15, 1987, pp. I–XXVII.

have secured these offices for himself had he wished to.⁵³ From 1981 to 1989, he did occupy the powerful position of Chairman of the Central Military Commission⁵⁴, but stepped down from this post in November 1989, probably in part as a result of his weakened standing after the June 4 massacre, but also to signal that the system of holding office for life should come to an end.

There are four top positions in the Chinese party-state: General Secretary of the Party, President (in Chinese called “state chairman” *guojia zhuxi* 国家主席), Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and Premier. Beginning with Jiang Zemin 江泽民 (1926–), the top leader has held the first three of these positions at the same time, and when term limits were set on the presidency, the idea was that in practice there would be term limits in place for the other key positions as well. Such limits were observed until 2018, when Xi Jinping had term limits on the presidency removed, thus opening up for him to stay in office indeterminately.

Deng’s modernization program triggered a revolution of rising expectations. If the reforms he advocated for were possible, some argued, why stop there – why not bring about more sweeping changes? Among many parts of the population, ideas about Chinese people deserving real freedom and democracy began to take hold. As early as on December 5, 1978, that is before the famous plenary session that formally adopted Deng’s modernization program, the democracy activist Wei Jingsheng 魏京生(1950–) posted his Big-Character Poster “The Fifth Modernization” on the Democracy Wall in Beijing, arguing that in order to complete the four

⁵³ The title “Party Chairman” (*dang zhuxi* 党主席) and from September 1982 this title was abolished and replaced by the title General Secretary (*dang zong shuji* 党总书记).

⁵⁴ This commission is both a Party and a State organ. The Chairman of the Central Military Commission is also the commander-in-chief of the Liberation Army. In the words of Mao, “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun”, and party control over the armed forces has always been considered essential.

modernizations that Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping had envisioned, a fifth modernization, political democracy, was necessary.⁵⁵ Such appeals for political reform, however, crossed a red line for Deng and the other CCP leaders. Wei was mercilessly arrested and imprisoned from 1979 to 1993, no doubt with Deng's personal approval. In a speech on March 30, 1979, Deng Xiaoping formulated "four cardinal principles" which the authorities would not allow to be violated: (1) the principle of upholding the socialist path, (2) the principle of upholding the people's democratic dictatorship, (3) the principle of upholding the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, and (4) the principle of upholding Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought.⁵⁶

The imprisonment of Wei Jingsheng and the introduction of the four cardinal principles can be seen as the beginning of a recurring pattern of alternating phases of "letting go" (*fang* 放) and "tightening up" (*shou* 收) or "reform" and "retrenchments", to use Richard Baum's terms.⁵⁷ Beginning in 1978–1979 and lasting until the crackdown on the Democracy Movement in 1989, there were at least six such cycles of letting go and tightening up.⁵⁸ After the 1989 crackdown, these cycles continued but not as regularly and clearly as during the 1980s. Beginning with Xi Jinping, these cycles appear to have faded out and to have been replaced by a continuous tightening up.

This pattern of recurring cycles can be seen as an expression of a fundamental dilemma within Deng's modernization program. On the one hand, "letting go" or liberalizing had a key role to play in achieving growth and bringing about the desired modernization. On the other hand, letting

⁵⁵ On the Wei Jingsheng Foundation's website much information can be found about him including the text of his essay "The Fifth Modernization" in Chinese and in English translation: <http://weijingsheng.org/doc/en/THE%20FIFTH%20MODERNIZATION.html>.

⁵⁶ For the text of Deng's speech, see <http://academics.wellesley.edu/Polisci/wj/China/Deng/principles.htm>.

⁵⁷ Baum, *Burying Mao*, p. 5 ff.

⁵⁸ Baum, p. 6.

go engendered calls for reforms that meant abandoning the one-party state, which was a fundamental threat to the Party, and therefore “tightening up” was regularly considered necessary. No doubt, Deng’s conservative critics viewed his reform policies as equivalent to sawing off the branch the Party was sitting on, while Deng and his followers held that without reform, the Party was doomed in the long run.

Beyond this pattern of recurring cycles of letting go and tightening up in the 1980s, one could also discern an underlying trajectory towards greater openness. The ideological landscape became more and more diverse, and even within the Party, voices could be heard that advocated democratic reforms. For example, European and especially Swedish social democracy was held up as a model for the CCP, and the question was raised whether the Party had now fulfilled its task as a revolutionary vanguard, now ready to be transformed into a socialist party inspired by European social democracy.⁵⁹

Reformist ideas were developed by a number of party intellectuals. One example was Su Shaozhi 苏绍智(1923–2019), who was the director of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). With impressive rigor and depth, he discussed party ideology and promoted a kind of reformist turn. He and his institute, not to say the Academy as a whole, were important advocates for more open and reform-oriented policies.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See Ma Licheng “Minzhu shehuizhuyi zai Zhongguo” 民主社会主义在中国 [Social democracy in China], in 马立诚, *Dangdai Zhongguo bazhong shehui sichao* 当代中国八种社会思潮 [Eight intellectual currents in contemporary China], Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2012, pp. 82–112.,

⁶⁰ Concerning Su Shaozhi’s views, see, e.g., his books *Democratization and Reform*, Nottingham: Spokesman, 1988 and in Chinese *Makesizhuyi xinlun* 馬克思主義新論 [New theory of Marxism], Taipei: Shibao Wenhua Chuban Qiye Ltd., 1996; *Shinian fengyu: Wenge hou de dalu lilunjie* 十年風雨: 文革後的大陸理論界 [Stormy ten years, the theoretical scene in Mainland China after the Cultural Revolution], Taipei: Shibao Wenhua Chuban Qiye Ltd., 1996.

Deng Xiaoping himself wanted to see political reforms and envisioned a new, more delimited role for the Party in the future, although his insistence on the four cardinal principles tempered the scope of his reformism. The top leaders, Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915–1989) and Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳 (1919–2005), who were promoted to their top positions thanks to Deng's support, both wanted to bring about a more clear division of labor between the Party and the state and to strengthen the role of the Constitution.⁶¹

The first ten years of reform and opening up marked a radical departure from the earlier the role of the Party. One may speak of a transition from totalitarianism to authoritarianism. Deng Xiaoping wanted to liberate the economy from many of the strictures of party control, which he realized had been pernicious. For research and development, too, he found strict party control to be detrimental. Therefore, the role of party committees shrank, and much of the dynamism in China occurred outside the direct control of the CCP. Politics began to be seen as but one sector among many in society. This was in sharp contrast to earlier practice, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, when there was no recognition of a legitimate private sphere outside political control.

In post-Mao China, Small Government and Big Society became a widespread slogan in the public discussion. Even CCP leaders recognized the need for both a private personal sphere and for sectors of society to have the right to operate free from party control. NGOs were slowly accepted, although often regarded with suspicion, and came to play an increasingly important role. Mao's words, "Marxism embraces but cannot replace realism in literary and artistic creation, just as it embraces but cannot replace the atomic and electronic theories in physics", were not much quoted

⁶¹ Zhao Ziyang's posthumously published memoirs offer unique insights into the politics of post Mao China. See *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2009.

anymore, and if they were, the emphasis was on “cannot replace” and not on “embraces”. By the 1980s, Mao’s Yan’an Talks became widely seen as legitimating political control and oppression. The Party leaders avoided discussing it explicitly because they shied away from openly condemning Mao.

There is no doubt that the political domain shrank in the 1980s as a result of the modernization program and that activities outside the Party became more and more important. Yet, for Deng Xiaoping and most other leaders, it was essential that the CCP remains in political control and that its ruling status is not questioned. This, in effect, encapsulates the argument that under Deng’s leadership of the CCP, China was experiencing a transition from totalitarianism to authoritarianism.⁶²

The reforms and opening up unleashed new expectations that were difficult for the Party to contain, despite the cyclical adoption of tightening up measures. Unnerved by developments towards the end of the 1980s, conservatives within the CCP began to feel that the economic and political reforms had gone too far. In 1987, widespread student protests erupted throughout the country, and conservatives felt that CCP rule was being threatened. They blamed, in particular, Hu Yaobang, a close associate of Deng’s who had been the top leader of the Party since 1981 and had played a decisive role in implementing the reform and opening up for the proliferation of dissent.⁶³ As a result of the criticism directed at him, Hu was replaced in 1987 by Zhao Ziyang, a reformist committed to carrying out the program of reform and opening up who in 1980 had replaced Hua Guofeng as premier. Zhao was succeeded as premier by the conservative Li Peng 李鹏 (1928–2019), a politician who had grown up in Zhou Enlai’s household.

⁶² Concerning the notions “totalitarian” and “authoritarian”, see, e.g., Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000.

⁶³ In 1981, Hu Yaobang had succeeded Hua Guofeng as Party Chairman (*zhuxi* 主席).

Hu Yaobang enjoyed great popularity both inside and outside the Party, owing to his championing of reforms as well as his personality. His ousting caused dismay among all of those who wanted to see continued and deepening reforms. When Hu died soon after his political career came to an end, in 1989, about 100,000 students in Beijing marched to Tiananmen Square to demonstrate their support for the late leader in the wake of his funeral. These students demanded that the CCP rehabilitate him and continue his reform efforts.

Over time, the demonstrations grew and became increasingly radical. Student demonstrators wanted to see strong measures taken against corruption among the leading party cadres and called for democratic reforms. Liberalizing measures in some sectors of the economy had not only stimulated growth but also brought with them new forms of corruption. Party cadres with access to cheap raw materials through state-controlled markets were able to take advantage of their position to resell goods in unofficial markets at significantly marked-up prices, pocketing the difference. Known in Chinese as *guandao* 官倒 (official profiteering), this form of corruption became a major locus of criticism in the 1980s and played a key role in motivating the student demonstrations of 1989.⁶⁴

Their demands, as far as democracy was concerned, may not have been very specific, but conservative leaders, such as Li Peng and the economic tsar Chen Yun, regarded them as dangerous threats to CCP rule and social stability. The new General Secretary of the Party, Zhao Ziyang, sympathized with the students and tried to persuade them to moderate their demands to avoid a catastrophic confrontation. But within the Democracy Movement,

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Andrew Wedeman, *Double Paradox. Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012; Xiaobo Lü, *Cadres and Corruption: Cadres and Corruption: the Organizational Involvement of the Chinese Communist Party*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000; Yan Sun (2004), *Corruption and Market in Contemporary China*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

which was led by young students who had little experience of practical politics, optimism was growing that China was now on the threshold of democracy. Most of the student protestors felt that with the great momentum the movement had now gained, they could not afford to retreat and so continued and even stepped up their demonstrations.

When Mikhail Gorbachev visited China in May 1989, this was the first Sino-Soviet summit in thirty years, marking the normalization of relations between the two countries. The Chinese leaders considered this visit to be very important, and therefore, it was a great embarrassment to them that the proceedings of the meeting were derailed by the demonstrations on Tiananmen Square. The welcome ceremony was moved to the airport, and the cars taking the foreign guests to the Great Hall of the People had to take another route than originally planned. This further aggravated tensions between the CCP leadership and the demonstrators. At this time, Deng had withdrawn from the daily affairs of government, but he was still consulted and had the final say on the most important matters, especially when opinions among the other leaders were divided.

As to how to deal with the demonstrations, opinions were divided between hardliners such as Li Peng, who advocated an uncompromising approach, and reformers such as Zhao Ziyang, who wanted to avoid bloodshed at all costs. Zhao tried in vain to persuade the demonstrators to retreat and urged the leadership to refrain from using violence. In the end, the final decision was left to Deng Xiaoping, who sided with Li Peng and the hardliners, saying that he had made a mistake when he nominated Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang as the two top leaders. On May 19, martial law was declared, and Zhao was removed from his post as General Secretary of the Party.

On June 2, the decision was taken to clear Tiananmen Square by any means necessary.⁶⁵ The operation to do so started on the evening of June 3. Residents were told to stay indoors, and troops from outside of Beijing began to advance towards the square. This was the beginning of “the June 4 massacre”. It is still unknown how many people were killed, but Beijing hospitals soon reported 478 dead. The Tiananmen Mothers, a group founded by philosophy professor Ding Zilin 丁子霖, aerospace engineer Zhang Xianling 张先玲, and other women whose children were killed during the crackdown, has identified 202 victims. Most were killed not on Tiananmen Square but in connection with the army’s march towards the square.⁶⁶

The effects of the crackdown were profound. Democracy activists were hunted and arrested, and many went into exile. Four million people were reportedly investigated for their role in the protests, and more than 30,000 officers were deployed to assess the “political reliability” of over a million government officials.⁶⁷ Confidence in the Party plummeted both in China and internationally. Especially in Beijing, large sections of the population sympathized with the demonstrators. China was subjected to disruptive sanctions, especially from Western countries. Within the CCP, the events of 1989 were a serious setback for reformers, including Deng, despite the latter’s choice to side with the party hardliners, a fact that has seriously tainted his historical image.⁶⁸ The program of reform and opening up was

⁶⁵ For fascinating but also terrifying insights into the decision-making process that led to the brutal crackdown, see the collection of internal documents translated into English and published under the title *The Tiananmen Papers*, edited by Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link, New York: Public Affairs, 2001.

⁶⁶ On crackdown on the democracy movement, see Timothy Brook, *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

⁶⁷ See James A.R Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen: China in Disarray*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, pp. 27–30.

⁶⁸ See, e.g. Fang Lizhi’s review of Ezra Vogel’s book on Deng, “The Real Deng: Do stability and economic growth justify lethal force of the kind used at Tiananmen?”, in *The New York Review of Books*, November 10, 2011: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/11/10/real-deng/>.

called into question for having paved the way for the demonstrations and the turmoil in Beijing.

The June 4 crackdown weakened Deng's position. The reform program essentially came to a halt, and both the economy and China's international standing suffered. In Beijing, the conservative hardliners seemed to have gained the upper hand. The Democracy Movement could not operate openly, and several of its leading representatives left China to live in exile. The new CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin, who would remain in his post until 2002, was nominated by conservatives Chen Yun and Li Xiannian, and initially seemed to be representative of their faction.

However, this impression would prove misleading. Jiang soon came out in support of the reform program and of Deng Xiaoping. In terms of leadership style, he differed from Deng, seemingly more inclined towards boosting his personal prestige. Although Deng had retreated from his official positions, he continued to enjoy great respect within the CCP and popularity among the general public for engineering the transition from Maoism to the program of reform and opening up, which brought about considerable improvements for the Chinese people. His standing in the Party was still very strong, probably second to no one else.

In early 1992, Deng undertook a trip to southern China. This famous "Southern Tour" (*nanxun* 南巡) came to mark the beginning of the resumption of the program of reform and opening up. During this tour, which lasted a little over a month, he gave talks and made remarks to emphasize the importance of continuing and deepening the reforms. On one occasion, he reportedly said, "those who do not promote reform should be brought down from their leadership positions."⁶⁹

⁶⁹ See the Liang Wei 梁为, "Deng Xiaoping 92 nian nanxun shi jianghua" 邓小平 92 年南巡时讲话 [Deng Xiaoping's speech during his southern tour in 1992], https://news.ifeng.com/a/20160724/49591447_0.shtml

Ideologically, the reform program marked a departure from much of the earlier ideological dogmatism. Marxism-Leninism and Zedong Thought remained the official ideology of the Party, but this convention was in name rather than substance. The only classical Marxist-Leninist principle that would be upheld at all costs was the idea that the Communist Party must remain the leading political force. Since the greater part of the ideology that had prevailed in Mao's time had, in fact, been rejected, and since this rejection was unquestionably popular, one may wonder why Deng and other reformers did not choose to reject Maoist ideology openly and without reservations. One may wonder why Mao was not condemned as Stalin had been in the Soviet Union. The choice to continue to lionize Mao likely stemmed from the CCP's commitment to stability and fears of disorder. To openly reject what had for more than half a century been the creed and foundational ideology of the Party, propagated to the population as "scientific" and "absolutely correct," would, many within the CCP believed, threaten social stability and the leadership's position of power.

The astrophysicist Fang Lizhi 方励之 (1936–2012), in the West often talked about as "China's Sakharov", was in the 1980s one of the most influential critics of the communist regime.⁷⁰ Professor Fang was well-known for saying that "Marxism is outdated" (*Makesizhuyi guoshile* 马克思主义过时了). On a visit to Beijing in May 1989, I had the opportunity to interview him. He shared an interesting experience with me, which was probably quite typical of how some top Party leaders at the time viewed the official ideology. He told me that the leading ideologist Hu Qiaomu 胡乔木 (1912–1982) had called

⁷⁰ On June 5, 1989, Professor Fang took refuge in the US Embassy, where he stayed for a little over a year until the Chinese authorities finally (probably after contacts between Henry Kissinger and Deng Xiaoping) allowed him to leave the embassy and the country. He spent the rest of his life in the US as a professor of physics and remained active in the democracy movement. Concerning his life, see Fang Lizhi, *The Most Wanted Man in China: My Journey from Scientist to Enemy of the State*, New York: Henry Hold and Company, 2016.

him and said something to this effect: "I understand that you think that Marxism is outdated. Many people think so, but you must consider the consequences of propagating this view in society. It may lead to dangerous consequences."⁷¹ In other words, the reason it could not be permitted to reject Marxism as outdated was not primarily that the ideology was necessarily correct, but that eschewing it would have dangerously destabilizing consequences for China.

The 1980s was a period of unusual cultural and intellectual vitality. The appetite for foreign intellectual currents, literature and art was enormous. Writings from other countries were translated and introduced with immense speed. Having been previously rather cut off from much of what was going on in the rest of the world, the cultural scene in China became quite cosmopolitan within a few years.

Yet, it was not only foreign culture but also China's indigenous traditions that attracted attention and interest. These traditions had previously been available only as presented through the lens of ideological orthodoxy. Literary works and paintings, not to speak of works representing classical Chinese philosophy, had been labeled as either reactionary or progressive. Many people felt that this ideologization of traditional Chinese culture gave a distorted picture and wanted to open up these rich traditions again to look at them with fresh eyes. The emphasis on "unity", be it cultural or political, was now dissected as an expression of ideological oppression. In the 1980s, many writers and intellectuals insisted that one should think not of China's cultural *tradition* in the singular but instead think of the country's different *traditions* in the plural.

⁷¹ Hu Qiaomu had served as Mao's secretary for more than twenty years until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. At this time he served as President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

The interest in foreign cultures as well as in indigenous Chinese traditions took expressions in calls for both “Westernization” (*xihua* 西华) and “returning to tradition” (*huigui chuantong* 回归传统). In literature, some of China’s best writers, such as the Nobel Prize winners Gao Xingjian 高行健 (1940–) and Mo Yan 莫言 (1955–), obviously drew inspiration both from Chinese and Western traditions.⁷² In general, those who represented the Democracy Movement turned to the West and tended to consider Chinese traditions as inimical to change. An archetypical example of this is the television series *Yellow River Elegy* (*Heshang* 河殇), which drew many millions of viewers when it was first broadcast in 1988.⁷³ This opening up of the cultural and intellectual scene was not only welcomed by culturally and intellectually interested people but was also consequential for the Party and its ideology.

The main ideological thrust of the modernization program was liberation from the shackles of dogma. This may be seen as part of a kind of “secularization” of the party-state. In many ways, Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought had played a role similar to the church in premodern Europe. It is perhaps part of the Party’s DNA to need a philosophically grounded ideology, and after getting rid of the major tenets of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, the CCP’s leaders felt that the Party suffered from an ideological void that needed to be filled. Perhaps

⁷² Concerning post-Mao literature, see Bonnie McDougall and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, London: Hurst, 1997, and Chen Sihe 陈思和. *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue shi jiaocheng* 中国当代文学史教程 [A course in the history of contemporary Chinese literature], Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2001.

⁷³ Concerning this tv series, in English also called “Deathsong of the River”, see Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader’s Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*, translated by Richard Bodman and Pin Pin Wan, Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1991.

traditional Chinese culture, and especially Confucianism, which had begun to attract interest especially among intellectuals, could fill this void.

In the 1990s, the Party began to encourage the study of what had largely started as expressions of genuine interest in traditional Chinese culture and Confucianism in particular. The state began to fund so-called “national studies” (*guo xue* 国学), with a primary focus on Confucian tradition, in universities and research institutes all over the country. It was still considered controversial whether Confucianism could somehow be incorporated within party ideology, but this was certainly the direction in which the CCP was moving. In 2011, a statue of Confucius was even erected on Tiananmen Square, although it was taken down again after only four months.⁷⁴ The Confucianism that began to play this ideological role represented a kind of Chinese cultural nationalism, and during the years that have elapsed since 1989, cultural nationalism has become an ingrained part of official ideology.

To preserve China from the threats of foreign powers by creating a powerful nation and fostering a splendid modern Chinese culture has been an essential part of the Communist Party agenda from the very beginning. This is something that the CCP inherited from the May Fourth New Culture Movement of the early twentieth century. But this nationalism initially implied Westernization and a rejection of much of traditional Chinese culture. The idea was that it was necessary to eschew ossified practices and embrace new ideas to save China.⁷⁵ On the contrary, the cultural nationalism

⁷⁴ “Confucius Statue Vanishes Near Tiananmen Square”, *The New York Times* 22 April 2011: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/23/world/asia/23confucius.html>.

⁷⁵ For an excellent overview of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, see Chow Tse-tsung’s classical work *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960. See also Vera Schwarz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, and Lin Yusheng, *Crisis*

that has evolved during the past decades relies on indigenous sources and focuses on the “specific characteristics” of Chinese culture. This signifies an important ideological transformation.

At least from the time of Deng Xiaoping’s southern tour in 1992, it had become clear that Jiang Zemin leaned more towards the reformists than the conservatives, especially as far as economic policy was concerned. When the pragmatic Zhu Rongji 朱镕基 (1928–), widely known for his determination and efficiency, replaced Li Peng as Premier in 1998, the focus on promoting trade and economic growth became even more unequivocal.

In 2001, one year before the end of Jiang’s term as General Secretary of the Party, China joined the WTO. This had been a very controversial issue for the CCP, with conservatives fearing that integrating China into the global economy would be going too far. Today, when many Western politicians and observers want to restrict trade with China because it is seen as politically threatening, it is interesting to recall that for a long time, it was the conservative hardliners in the CCP who wanted to restrict China’s international trade.

From the beginning, the reform program meant a departure from the idea of class struggle. This continued and became even more pronounced in the period after 1989. During his term as General Secretary of the Party (1989–2002), Jiang Zemin launched the theory of “three represents”, meaning that “the Party must always represent the requirements for developing China’s advanced productive forces, the orientation of China’s advanced culture

of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979. Concerning the much discussed topic “enlightenment and national salvation”, see Li Zehou’s seminal article 李泽厚 “Qimeng yu jiuwang de shuangchong bianzou” 启蒙与救亡的双重变奏 [Double variations of enlightenment and national salvation], in *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang shi lun* 中国现代思想史论 [Essays on the history of modern Chinese thought], Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1987, pp. 7–49 and Suoqiao Qian, “Enlightenment and National Salvation: The Politics of a Liberal Nationalist” in *Liberal Cosmopolitan: Lin Yutang and Middling Chinese Modernity*, Leiden, 2011, pp. 63–94.

and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.” The gist of this theory, ratified by the Party in 2002, was that the Party must represent not only the peasants and workers but a majority of the population, including capitalists and a new class of entrepreneurs. These ideas served to strengthen the ideological basis for the focus on economic development.

Jiang’s successor, Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 (1942-), continued on this path of toning down class contradictions by emphasizing the building of a harmonious society (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) free of social conflicts as one of his major priorities. Interestingly, this idea was often used ironically in everyday life and on the Internet; “to harmonize” someone came to mean “to subdue someone”.

Hu Jintao reintroduced more state control over some of the sectors of the economy. To what extent this move reflected a more conservative approach to governance or was a response to state needs that had emerged over time remains unclear. Deng Xiaoping’s reform program had led to unprecedented economic growth but had also resulted in an increasingly unbalanced development. Growth in the coastal areas and around some of the big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chongqing had been phenomenal, but huge areas in the West and the North were lagging behind. Party and state leaders recognized this uneven development as a growing threat to social stability and the CCP. Hu Jintao and his premier Wen Jiabao 温家宝 (1942-) found it necessary to adopt more interventionist state policies to bring about a more balanced economic development and decrease the differences between various regions in the country. This has since remained an important concern for the leadership in Beijing.

Another factor that affected the economic policies of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao was the realization that while economic growth had largely been export-driven, in the future domestic consumption would have to play an

increasingly important role. As the economy grew and became more sophisticated, the prices of Chinese products would go up, and it would become more difficult to sell goods at a consistent rate of profit. Moreover, the financial crisis of 2008 showed that international demand could suddenly decrease dramatically. The transition from reliance on exports to more emphasis on domestic consumption as an engine for economic growth has also remained a central concern for China's leaders.

Although the authorities were quite successful in 1989 in silencing the Democracy Movement or at least preventing activists from organizing large-scale manifestations, the ideals of freedom, democracy, enlightenment, etc., continued to live on, even among party members and theoreticians.⁷⁶ Also, many of the older democracy fighters outside the CCP, such as Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 (1955–2017), who in 2010 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, sought ways to argue for democratic reforms, whether living in China or abroad. The most important attempt by far to put democratic reform on the main agenda was the publication of Charter 08, a blueprint for building a democratic China that Liu authored together with some of his closest associates.

Charter 08 was published on December 10, 2008, the sixtieth anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and was signed by 303 people.⁷⁷ Since then, more than 3000 people have signed the document. This Charter recognized the fact that great progress had been made in post-Mao China and that the reforms had actually laid the foundation for democratization. The authors appealed to Party and

⁷⁶ Very interesting in this respect are the testimonials of Mrs. Cai Xia 蔡霞, formerly a Professor at the Central Party School in Beijing. See, e.g., Cai Xia, The Party that Failed, in *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2021: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-12-04/chinese-communist-party-failed>.

⁷⁷ For the full text of the Charter, see "Charter 08 (Chinese and English Text)", *Congressional-Executive Commission on China*, <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/charter-08-chinese-and-english-text>.

Government leaders to take up the discussion about building democracy in China. Regrettably, the CCP leaders refused to see this as an invitation to dialogue about China's future. Instead, Liu Xiaobo was arrested and, in 2009, sentenced to nine years imprisonment. Tragically he died in 2017.

Return to Totalitarianism? The Era of Xi Jinping

When in November 2012, Xi Jinping was appointed General Secretary of the Party, not much was known about his personal political inclinations.⁷⁸ He seemed qualified and smart, a result-oriented politician seeking consensus rather than conflict. Xi's father, Xi Zhongxun 习仲勋 (1913–2002), known for his moderate views, had held leading positions in the Party but had also suffered from Mao's autocratic rule.⁷⁹ The Cultural Revolution caused the whole family a lot of hardship. Xi Jinping's mother was forced to denounce her husband, and one of his sisters committed suicide. Xi himself also suffered considerable adversity. Against this background and considering his political record, observers generally believed that he was a reformist, although not clearly belonging to any faction.

After taking office, Xi soon showed that one of his major priorities, probably priority number one, was to strengthen the CCP and see to it that it would not follow in the footsteps of its Soviet sister party. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Soviet Communist Party had been in power for just over 70 years, and historically about 70 years seems to be the maximum life span for one-party regimes. No doubt Xi was cognizant of this fact when he became General Secretary in 2012. At that time, the CCP had ruled China for 63 years, and he likely felt what has been called the "70-year itch", that

⁷⁸ Concerning Xi Jinping, see, e.g., Elizabeth C. Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, and Willy Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping: Renaissance, Reform, or Retrogression?* London: Routledge, 2015.

⁷⁹ Xi Zhongxun had been appointed Vice Premier in 1959. In 1962, he was purged, accused of leading an anti-party clique. During the Cultural Revolution, he was jailed and spent periods in confinement in Beijing until he was freed in 1975 and then again appointed to important posts.

is, the worry that the Party's life span might be coming to an end.⁸⁰ Under no circumstances did he wish to become a Chinese Gorbachev and preside over the collapse of the party-state. This concern with the Party's survival can be seen as a thread that connects and explains much of Xi's rule during the nine years that have elapsed since his ascent as the paramount leader.

In his efforts to strengthen the Party's rule, Xi has in some respects reversed the political course that is associated with Deng Xiaoping's modernization program. For example, while the thrust of Deng's reforms was to separate the roles of Party and Government and to promote the rule of law by giving the judiciary increased autonomy, Xi has sought to centralize political control and dismantle bureaucratic barriers. Similarly, in order to stimulate creativity and economic growth, Deng and others wanted to free the economy from many aspects of party control, whereas Xi has consistently tightened the CCP's control over all sectors of the economy.

In terms of leadership, Deng had wanted to see a form of collective leadership rather than autocratic rule by one leader. By contrast, Xi has made himself the paramount leader who stands above all his colleagues. Deng had masterminded a new order of peaceful leadership succession. He wanted bureaucratic restrictions to set term limits for the highest government offices so that retirement would become normal even for the senior leadership. By contrast, Xi had the Constitution changed in 2018 so that the term limits on the president were removed, effectively making it possible for him to remain president for the rest of his life.

Another revision of the Constitution was to include "Xi Jinping Thought," thereby paving the way for elevating his own thought to an equal footing with "Mao Zedong Thought".

⁸⁰ See Larry Diamond, "Chinese Communism and the 70-year Itch", *The Atlantic*, October 29, 2013: <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/10/chinese-communism-and-the-70-year-itch/280960/>.

During the years after the death of Mao and up until Xi became the paramount leader, cultural life became much more diverse than it had been, and the scope for a free exchange of ideas within China and internationally broadened tremendously. However, under Xi, ideological control has been severely tightened. In July 2012, shortly after Xi became the General Secretary, the Party published internally the now infamous “Document No. 9”, which draws attention to seven “problems”:

1. Promoting Western Constitutional Democracy: An attempt to undermine the current leadership and the socialism with Chinese characteristics system of governance.
2. Promoting “universal values” in an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party’s leadership.
3. Promoting civil society in an attempt to dismantle the ruling Party’s social foundation.
4. Promoting Neoliberalism, attempting to change China’s Basic Economic System.
5. Promoting the West’s idea of journalism, challenging China’s principle that the media and publishing system should be subject to Party discipline.
6. Promoting historical nihilism, trying to undermine the history of the CCP and of New China.
7. Questioning Reform and Opening and the socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.⁸¹

Generally, this document has been interpreted as the seven “don’ts!”, which in effect ban the values that underlie these “problems”. From the beginning,

⁸¹ For the content of this document, see “Document 9: A China File Translation”, *The ChinaFile*, November 8, 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

these “don’ts” were not strictly enforced, but with time it has become more and more difficult, and even dangerous, to ignore them. The content of this document departs radically from the main ideological tendency of the reform and opening up program, pointing backward in the direction of the totalitarian ideological scene during the Mao era, albeit with some variations in regard to Marxist Leninist orthodoxy.

The space for criticism of the authorities and for expressing unorthodox views has shrunk dramatically under Xi. During the preceding era of reform and opening up, lawyers specializing in human rights were permitted to pursue their work, albeit with severe restrictions. In July 2015, the government launched a campaign to silence lawyers and other human rights activists through arbitrary arrests, detentions, convictions, and imprisonment. Over 300 lawyers and activists are reported to have been arrested during this campaign.⁸²

Even prestigious scholars have become subject to the risk of being sacked from their posts or imprisoned unless they refuse to bow to the present rulers. One example is the legal scholar Xu Zhangrun 許章潤 (1962–), who after being detained by the police for a week in 2020 was sacked from his post as Professor of Jurisprudence and Constitutional Law at Tsinghua University, had his pension confiscated, and is now living in relative isolation and under constant control.⁸³

Using modern digital technology, a system of surveillance of Chinese citizens has reached unprecedented levels, and a unique social credit system has been constructed. These measures can and are used to fight crime, but they certainly also serve to tighten political control. The harsh measures

⁸² See “5-year anniversary of the 709-Crackdown”, *Layers for Lawyers*, July 9, 2020, <https://lawyersforlawyers.org/en/5-year-anniversary-of-the-709-crackdown/>.

⁸³ See the “Xu Zhangrun 許章潤 Archive”, <https://chinaheritage.net/xu-zhangrun-許章潤/>. By providing admirable translations of some of the most important of Professor Xu’s recent writings, which require a very good command of written Chinese to understand, Professor Geremie Barmé is providing Western readers essential insights into intellectual life in China today.

adopted to “reeducate” Uyghurs and members of other minorities in Xinjiang, which have led to strong international reactions and protests, are a terrifying example of the extraordinarily oppressive apparatus the present CCP leaders are prepared to use in order to uphold its rule.

The crackdown on the democracy movement in Hong Kong, which nourishes hostility against Mainland China among many segments of the city’s population, also shows the lengths to which the present regime will go to protect its authoritarian rule. Far away from the harsh realities of Xinjiang or the politically sensitive Hong Kong, even in the relatively affluent big cities, the atmosphere is becoming more tense, and anecdotes of people hesitating to speak openly even to colleagues and friends for fear that their criticism be relayed to the authorities proliferate.

These few examples (many more could be found) are a sad reminder that in terms of openness, freedom of expression, and rule of law, much of the progress made during the preceding years has been undone and that China seems again to be heading towards totalitarianism. The anti-Western thrust of “the seven problems” is characteristic of the ideology that has emerged during Xi Jinping’s years as the highest party leader. In this regard, Xi has proceeded on the basis of the cultural nationalism that had become an increasingly central feature of the post-1989 ideological landscape.

To juxtapose Chinese and Western culture and values as mutually exclusive has been the rule rather than the exception in China during the past hundred years. But the degree to which so-called traditional Chinese values are eulogized and Western values, especially liberal values, are condemned is unprecedented. Sadly, this perspective of essential differences between Chinese and Western cultures and values is not only factually misleading but also tends to breed mutual mistrust across cultural boundaries.

Cultural nationalism is central to Xi Jinping’s political thinking. Just after he had taken up the position as General Secretary in 2012, he presented his

“Chinese dream” (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦) for China’s future development, and from the beginning cultural nationalism was a core component of this dream.⁸⁴

Since the famous third plenum of the Central Committee in December 1978, “reform and opening up” had been the hallmark of the CCP’s political program. After Xi’s ascent to power, the Chinese Dream replaced reform and opening up in this regard. This did not imply a rejection of Deng’s modernization program, but it overshadowed it as the primary designation of the Party’s agenda. During the years that have elapsed since Xi launched this concept, it has also become clear that this new “guiding ideology” (*zhidao sixiang* 指导思想), as it is often called, has contributed to boosting Xi’s image so that in the Party narrative, he has now overtaken Deng Xiaoping as the most important leader in post-Mao China and is almost placed on an equal footing with Mao Zedong.

The meaning of the Chinese dream is sometimes expressed in terms of two “centennial goals”: first, to eradicate poverty and double the GDP per capita of 2010 and build a moderately prosperous society by 2021, that is this year when the Party celebrates its hundredth anniversary, and second, become a “modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful” by 2049, when the PRC will celebrate

⁸⁴ Xi Jinping presented this notion for the first time in a speech on November 29, 2012, at the National Museum of China in Beijing, and in his programmatic speech to the National People’s Congress on March 17, 2013; the Chinese dream was his main theme. Concerning Xi’s dream, see, e.g., Graham Allison’s excellent article “What Xi Jinping Wants”, *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2017: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/what-china-wants/528561/>. The Swedish scholar and diplomat Dr. Börje Ljunggren has published a rich, 700 pages long book about the Chinese dream, which is available only in Swedish unfortunately: Börje Ljunggren, *Den kinesiska drömmen: Utmaningar för Kina och världen* (The Chinese Dream: Challenges to China and the world), Stockholm: Hermansson & Högberg Bokförlag AB, 2015.

its hundredth anniversary. The Chinese government has recently officially declared that the first goal has now been achieved.⁸⁵

Economic growth has indeed continued under Xi. GDP per capita (PPT) has risen from about 11,000 dollars in 2012 to about 17,000 dollars in 2020 (PPT).⁸⁶ Xi has also made it one of his priorities to decrease the economic disparities between different regions and achieve a more balanced development. An emerging middle class is growing day by day. There is no doubt that the continued improvement in the material living standards for many people tends to increase the support for Xi and his regime, even among people who maintain serious reservations about his heavy-handed methods. His fight against corruption, which has been one important characteristic of his time in office, has also, on the whole, been quite popular.

However, the ideological power of Xi's Chinese dream cannot be explained solely in terms of improved living standards. To a great extent, this power must be attributed to the fact that it is rooted in the narrative of the humiliation that China suffered beginning with the Opium War in the nineteenth century. Xi's vision of the Chinese dream foresees and concretizes the renaissance of a wealthy, powerful, and glorious China, which will play a central role in world affairs. At the center of this vision of a renaissance stands Chinese culture, especially traditional Chinese culture, as understood and propagated by Xi. No doubt, he is convinced that by virtue of its unique culture, China has a special role to play in the world, a kind of civilizational mission. Of course, China is not the first country in world history to develop this kind of self-image, which is ideological in the

⁸⁵ It has now announced that the first goal has been achieved. See Frida Lindberg, "China's Poverty Eradication: Through the Lens of Chinese Media <https://isdpeu/chinas-poverty-eradication-through-the-lens-of-chinese-media/> See also <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-28/How-far-is-China-from-a-moderately-prosperous-society-in-all-respects--RH5YiYHiNO/index.html>

⁸⁶ See *Knoema*, "China - Gross domestic product per capita based on purchasing-power-parity in current prices", <https://knoema.com/atlas/China/GDP-per-capita-based-on-PPP>.

sense that it rationalizes and legitimizes ambitions to extend its power and influence in the world.

Approaching the realization of his Chinese dream, Xi has made clear that China no longer needs to follow Deng Xiaoping's precept "to hide its strength and bide its time" (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦). In the words of his words at the Nineteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017, "It is time for us to take center stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind".⁸⁷

In line with Xi's vision of China's global role and mission, Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive than ever before. So much so that China is increasingly perceived as a threat in many parts of the world, especially but not only, in the Western world. Presently, the threat to Taiwan's *de facto* independence is particularly ominous. Another cause of concern is the determination the Beijing leaders show to maintain internationally contested claims to a number of islands in the South China Sea. A third cause for concern is the heavy-handed rule in Hong Kong, which not only seems to effectively be the end of "one country two systems" but also violates the Joint Sino-British Declaration of 1984. One aspect of the crackdown in Hong Kong which is a reason for concern as to the present regime's behavior internationally is that the Security Law for Hong Kong, which was adopted in the summer of 2020, even seems to make severe criticism of the Beijing regime's rule in Hong Kong made by non-Chinese citizens outside China liable to prosecution.

⁸⁷ For the full English text of this report, see "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress", *Xinhua*, November 3, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm

Conclusion

During its one-hundred-year history, the Chinese Communist Party has gone through a few major transformations. It was born in 1921 as a revolutionary liberation movement with two major objectives, to liberate the masses from oppression and recreate a powerful and wealthy state that could save China from the threats of foreign powers. In 1949, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, the Party established the People's Republic of China and set about building a socialist state, which involved carrying out a social revolution. After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the Party under Deng Xiaoping enacted a modernization program, which in effect meant a farewell to the revolution by shifting focus to material growth and further strengthening the Chinese state by carrying out far-reaching economic reforms. As a result, exchanges with the rest of the world intensified. One may argue that in this period, the totalitarian order of Mao's China with a single preeminent leader was replaced by an authoritarian order based on collective leadership, although undeniably there was always one leader who was the *primus inter pares*. Since 2012, when Xi Jinping became the top leader, the Party seems to be undergoing a third major transformation. The Party has reasserted its rule over all sectors of society and has again allowed for the practice of a preeminent leader, with clear signs of an emerging personality cult. One essential feature of this latest transformation is the reorientation of China's foreign policy towards greater assertiveness and more activism on a broader spectrum of international issues.

Apart from these three major transformations, one could easily identify several minor transformations and thus identify even more phases in the

Party's history. These are observations from a diachronic perspective. If, on the other hand, one considers the Party during only one phase or really at any given moment, we will find that there are always contradictions and conflicts between individuals, as well as between different factions. One could easily write a history of the Party as a history of continuous struggle, conflicts, and rivalry. Some of these conflicts have led to serious crises, such as the conflicts about the relationship with the Nationalist Party in the 1920s, the conflicts surrounding the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s or the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. It would not be an exaggeration to say that at least in connection with the Cultural Revolution, the Party was on the brink of collapse. But so far, it has managed to survive.

The Chinese Communist Party has now been in power longer than any other communist party in history. It seems clear that Xi Jinping, from the day he took office, has felt the 70-year itch and that this at least to some extent explains the autocratic course that he has chosen. He is probably profoundly aware of the Party's vulnerability and frailty in spite of its projected strength. In the West, many of the most insightful scholars and observers today emphasize the Party's resilience and ability to adjust to changing circumstances and describe it as stronger than ever. Maybe it is, and be that as it may, this is at least how the Party leaders want people in China and in the rest of the world to see it.

Scholars who emphasize the Party's remarkable resilience historically also tend to predict that it will continue to rule China for the foreseeable future. Nobody can know what the Party's future will be like, and a detailed discussion of the future of the Party would fall outside the scope of this article. Yet, it may be appropriate to end this brief discussion of the Party's now hundred-year-long history by raising the question of whether there is not a fundamental contradiction between one-party rule in China today and the emergence of an affluent consumer society and an enormous middle class. In order for the Party to retain its rule, will it not be necessary for it to

undergo one more major transformation and take the lead in building an open and democratic society? To embark on this course would require extraordinary courage, and it could lead to the end of the Party. But is there, in the end, really a viable alternative to this course?

Author Bio

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