

INTRODUCTION

Telling the Story of the Chinese Communist Party

In July 2021 the Chinese Communist Party celebrates its centenary. The world will be offered a series of stories about China and the Chinese Communist Party, most notably by the Party itself. They will combine elements of a coming-of-age narrative with a biblical tale of sin, struggle, sacrifice, and redemption. The Party will tell us about its beginnings as a young, idealistic revolutionary party prone to ideological errors and heroic acts in the fight against the Japanese during the Second World War and the evil Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek in the subsequent civil war. In very muted tones, if at all, it will say something about the sins of the 1958–1961 famine of the Great Leap Forward and the torments of the Cultural Revolution decade, 1966–1976. It will then glorify the achievements of the post-1978 reform period, culminating in the wonders of the New Era under Xi Jinping. This narrative is meant to assure China's people that the country is well on the way to realizing the Chinese Dream.

Xi Jinping, Party General Secretary and President of the People's Republic of China, first articulated his Chinese Dream vision during a visit to Beijing's Museum of the Chinese Revolution in November 2012. The Chinese Dream, he explained in 2014, was the fulfilment of "four comprehensives." These were a strong China economically, socially, scientifically, and militarily; a highly civilized China with a culture built on rich historical traditions as well as Western science and modernity; a socially harmonious China; and a beautiful China with low levels of pollution. Xi set two milestones. In 2021 China was to achieve moderate prosperity,

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defined as per capita GDP reaching US\$10,000. By 2049, the country was to have become a fully developed, rich, and powerful country. Being largely an accounting challenge, the first goal will be achieved regardless of what happens, including the damage wreaked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The second is a smart move: it dampens expectations for the present but nonetheless promises a steadily accumulating better future. “Why question the rule of the Chinese Communist Party,” goes the message of the two milestones, “when the alternative is chaos, weakness, and backwardness?”

The Chinese media will be full of stories to burnish this image of the Party in 2021. But the stories in international media will form a counterpoint. They will focus on the cost of China’s revolution, the mistakes and tragedies of Party rule, and the dangers apparent in China’s current party-state. They will dwell on the price at which the Party achieved its victories on the battlefield, including the starvation of 300,000 people by a year-long siege at Shenyang in Manchuria in 1948 during their civil war. This served as a warning to others as the People’s Liberation Army began its march to national victory. It worked: subsequently cities preferred surrender to death. Much will be made of the Great Leap famine and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. After decades of cautious hope in Western halls of power around China’s entry into the WTO in 2001, expectations that China might become “more like us” have been dashed. At least some of the intensity of criticism of China today can be traced to the sense of betrayal by those who nourished such illusions – and made their careers from sustaining them.

In recent years things have become even worse. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China has seemed to behave in increasingly nefarious ways. Domestically, it has shifted from one-party to one-man rule and become a surveillance state using high-tech to monitor the public and lock up innocent people. Abroad, it spies, exploits, abducts, defrauds, pollutes, weakens, bribes, and strong-arms. Chinese “sharp power” is seen everywhere, from the South China Sea to Huawei cellphone systems in your neighborhood. Even more will be said about the concentration camps for Muslims in Xinjiang, the campaign to unmake Tibet by moving in tens of thousands of Han Chinese, the rebellion in Hong Kong, and Taiwan’s continued defiance of Beijing. Bolstered by this narrative

some will argue for the need to continue the trade war, decouple supply chains, and gird for a new cold war. This is the Chinese mirror reflecting our hopes, fears, and anxieties.

Both stories have some truth to them, but both serve contemporary power constellations and economic interests. Both obscure the complex history of the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese Dream narrative serves the current government in China which is “led” by the Party. The China Mirror/Foil narrative serves as a metaphor for our hopes and fears, but also specific national political and economic interests in North America, the UK, and Europe. Neither is all that interested in what the history of this century, from the 1920s to the 2020s, was really like for those involved in and living under its rule. This story is more complicated, refusing simplistic categorizations, easy heroes and villains, and blurring ideological storylines.

This book does not offer an alternative grand narrative, a third way of looking at a century of the Chinese Communist Party that mediates between the two positions. Instead, we present a mosaic, made up of ten scenes, ten micro-histories, from the century of the Party, as lived by particular individuals at particular moments. This is not a comprehensive history, but rather a series of snapshots to reflect how different the Party was in different decades and how different the Party could be for different Chinese people over the century. Our goal is to make the life of the Party more vivid, more understandable, and more varied than the grand master narratives on offer. We see successes and failures, hopes and regrets, and most poignantly the contingency of history – what happened was not inevitable but came about sometimes despite the efforts of loyal Party members or ambitious Party leaders. This history is not predetermined, but neither is it random. We see people making sensible choices, taking chances, and responding to unanticipated events. It is a living history that leaves traces of multiple storylines – some have come to dominate the public story, some have been submerged but reappear in different decades, some were plausible but have been crushed. Our goal is to leave the reader with a more intense, more nuanced, more human sense of a century of Chinese Revolution and state socialism under the Chinese Communist Party, and with sufficient information to assess grand narratives, whether of the Party as Savior or the Party as Demon.

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Of course, interest in the Chinese Communist Party is inseparable from the increasing power on the world stage of the People's Republic of China, a Leninist state run by the Party. Xi Jinping may be the President of China, but everyone knows that what matters is that he is the General Secretary of the Party. It is the anxieties that China's rise – its economic clout; its increasing assertiveness in multinational fora; and its military power on land, on sea, in the air, and in space – raises in Western capitals that drives much of the media narrative. As historians, we are committed to the idea that PRC state ambitions and Western national anxieties should not utterly cloud our understanding of the history of the Party in China. When the Party was founded in 1921, China was weak and divided. When it came to national power in 1949, China was a war-torn, impoverished nation. When Mao died in 1976, China had emerged from Cold War isolation to take its seat in the UN and join the United States in boxing in the Soviet Union. By 2001 when China joined the WTO, most Western leaders counted on Beijing's "peaceful rise" as an economic power and a "responsible stakeholder" in international affairs and expected that China was on its way to becoming "a normal nation"; that is, one congenial to Western interests and the international market system. Yet we find that in 2021 China has embraced capitalist economics but not liberal democracy, and to the amazement of many, it has prospered. Authoritarian China is not weak. It is able to project financial power through its Belt and Road Initiative and military power through a blue-water navy and advanced armaments, including cyber-warfare capacity.

This is important. The CCP has produced one of the greatest economic miracles of all time. It has contradicted by deed and achievement one of the most fundamental assumptions that Western social scientists, economists, diplomats, and statesmen held dear for decades. The belief was that a Communist one-party system not only robbed its people, but it was above all economically far inferior to the Western liberal system. That confidence is gone. So is the idea that underpinned the USA's containment strategy of the USSR, formulated in American diplomat George Kennan's 1946 Long Telegram. It held that the Soviet Union was expansionist but essentially weak, so all that needed to be done was to contain it where it threatened key security interests and wait for its

disintegration. Despite its many failings and shortcomings, the CCP is the most powerful political party in the world, with armed forces to match. US wargames suggest that the USA will not win a war with China in Asia. These are unprecedented challenges – the biggest that Western liberal systems have ever faced.

Nonetheless, and all the claims of the Party to the contrary, it does not control history. Other factors will be in play. China's economic miracle was based on a uniquely favorable demographic situation. It had a large working-age population that was well educated and that had few children or retired people to look after. Now China is rapidly aging. Cleaning up the pollution that China's economic takeoff produced will impose a heavy burden on future generations. It faces a uniquely difficult set of border issues that throughout history have imposed huge costs on China's rulers and not infrequently brought them to their knees. The USA will not leave China's challenge unanswered. There is also the truth that the Chinese Communist Party was designed as a tool for revolution, not as a tool for stable rule. The efforts begun by Deng Xiaoping to make it such have not borne fruit. It is not, or at least not yet, politically stable.

This book does not seek to provide an answer to these challenges. But this book does suggest that the Chinese Communist Party is not one thing, wedded to a single dogma and a set way of doing things. Xi Jinping represents a centralizing, dictatorial, nationalist, even militarist tradition. But our ten stories show that there were important alternatives. Two stand out. The first is a liberal Communist tradition. Its proponents believed that China needed change and that the Party was necessary to achieve it. But they also were committed to intellectual and moral autonomy, the right to criticize the Party, and the decentralization of power. Another was a cosmopolitan one. Its adherents drew from and supported international solidarities, from which the Party originated and from which it drew much strength and critical aid. To them, this was a dream for all people, not just a Chinese Dream. These traditions have been silenced for now. But they did exist. They are a source of inspiration and a font of alternatives for those who want change in China now. Lively Marxism societies on Chinese campuses today make the point. They have articulated stinging critiques of the post-1978 reforms.

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Excerpt

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The history of the Party in the last hundred years reveals above all one thing: an astonishing degree of determination and a relentless ability to recover from crisis. If there is a lesson to be learned then it is this: a China ruled by the CCP cannot be easily defeated, nor can or should it be isolated. It has been and can be a productive partner and even a leader in global affairs. When the Party leadership embraces its own liberal and cosmopolitan traditions, it behooves us to support it and work together as allies in the war on climate change, economic injustice, and pandemics. But the Party is also too ruthless to trust. When the Party chooses to be a rival pursuing its own narrow interests, which alas it has been doing under Xi Jinping, we should criticize its abuses of its own citizens and resist it internally when it tries to export its authoritarian ways. Yet the Party is dangerous to provoke. A prudent policy by the liberal democracies should treat the Party as the irreducible fact of political life that it is and pursue their policies informed by the whole of the Party's history. This requires us to do everything possible to keep China from becoming an implacable enemy. Managed rivalry is one thing, but intemperate, foolish leadership will end in war. Wise engagement requires knowing China and its dominant Party better. We need a deep historical approach.

The last three decades of engagement have produced an important difference between now and the Cold War. The Soviet Communist Party appeared strong, but was not able to manage its own internal contradictions or match the economic productivity of what was then called the West. The Chinese Communist Party has lasted thirty years longer and is an economic powerhouse. Containment is not an option. There was little contact between the Soviet Union and the West. Now China is connected, an integral part of the world. There is in place a rich, broad, and multifaceted tapestry of contacts between academics, business, journalists, students, families, diplomats, scientists, bankers, and manufacturers linking both sides. At a time when Beijing and Washington prefer to think of the world in terms of a bipolar, zero-sum, Darwinian struggle of the fittest, these diverse linkages will sustain co-operation in many areas. International relations are not made in capitals alone. This book is but one small product of this difference. It is a difference worth preserving.

Chapter 1 – 1920s

The 1911 Revolution in China overthrew the Qing Dynasty and ended two millennia of imperial history. Gone was the Emperor, the son of Heaven; gone were the Grand Council, the Grand Secretariat, the provincial governors, and the county magistrates; and gone were the Confucian classics on which elites had sharpened their minds. When the revolutionary Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), today still the “Father of the Country” on both sides of the Taiwan Straits, inaugurated the Republic, some were against it and many had doubts. Others, convinced that a republic was more progressive than a monarchy, were enthusiastic. China had stolen a march on Japan, the country that had inflicted a morale-busting defeat on China in 1895 in the First Sino-Japanese War.

The fate of the new republic was uncertain from the beginning. Its first president, Yuan Shikai, even tried to restore monarchical rule with himself as the new emperor. But the First World War of 1914–1918, the October Revolution in Russia of 1917, and the 1919 Paris Peace Conference were fatal shocks. The “Great War,” as it was then called, disillusioned many educated Chinese by showing the brutality of the so-called civilized nations of Europe that had set up treaty ports in China. The October Revolution in Russia showed that there were other paths toward the future than European liberal models, one involving mass mobilization, the violent seizure of power, and jumping over several stages of history straight into a Communist future. Finally, the decision of the great powers in the Treaty of Versailles to give former German concession areas in China’s Shandong Province to Japan rather than restore them to China incited mass protest. The republic, not a decade old, never recovered.

The Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921 against the background of these events and in the context of a worldwide revolutionary upswing against imperialism outside Europe and capitalism within it. In China, teachers and students, educated in a rapidly growing number of modern-style primary and secondary schools, as well as universities, read pamphlets and books penned by a wide range of progressives from around the world – democrats, anarchists, Communists. Nothing illustrates the international

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background of the origins of the Chinese Communist Party as well as the fact that the Party's first constitution was a translation of the constitution of the Communist Party of America. A variety of groups dedicated to joining the worldwide tide soon emerged in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and elsewhere. The Chinese Communist Party came into being when one revolutionary Dutchman, Henricus Sneevliet, traveled from Indonesia to Shanghai via Moscow and met up with Chinese Communists in Shanghai.

THE 1920s

1 A Dutchman's Fantasy: Henricus Sneevliet's United Front for the Chinese Communist Party

TONY SAICH

What on earth does a Dutchman, Henricus Sneevliet (alias Maring), have to do with the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)? Sneevliet was not an easy man to deal with. He was arrogant and certain in his beliefs, he spoke no Chinese, and he knew little about China. He nonetheless stamped his vision on young Communist activists in China in the early 1920s. Why were they willing to bend initially to his vision for China's future? Sneevliet's certainty derived from his prior experiences in the Dutch labor movement and the anticolonial struggle in the Dutch East Indies. His experience of making revolution, rather than reading about it, was impressive to a group primarily comprising young students. He was one of the mechanisms by which international communism entered China.

Sneevliet was dispatched from Moscow, the home of the Communist resistance to the traditional capitalist and imperial powers and the seat of the Communist International (Comintern), which was the main vehicle for promoting a radical alternative. The Comintern drew revolutionaries from around the world to the flame of revolution in Moscow and, in its early years, was open to all comers – assisting nationalists in Turkey and revolutionaries in Southeast Asia. Sneevliet's revolutionary pedigree caught Lenin's eye and he was duly appointed the representative to the Far East. Thus Sneevliet arrived with the authority of the revolutionary hero of the day and of the home of the international Communist movement. This authority Sneevliet wielded to knock heads together in China.

The China that Sneevliet entered in 1921 was in flux. The dynastic system of governance, which had persisted for thousands of years, had collapsed in 1911, leaving behind a political and intellectual vacuum. While there was a government in Beijing, which other nations recognized, real power lay with a motley crew of warlords, whose rule only reached as far as their military strength stretched. For young activists, it was a frustrating but exhilarating time as they explored different thought systems that might restore order and pride to the nation – anarchism, republicanism, militarism, and more. The 1917 Russian Revolution offered a path to redemption from the humiliation experienced at the hands of the Western powers and to rebuild an economy devastated by internal revolt and foreign incursions. The victorious Bolsheviks had no hesitation in exporting their revolution beyond their borders and China was viewed as a key country in the struggle between the old world and the bold and new.

Sneevliet proposed and had compelled acceptance of two key concepts that became crucial legacies for the CCP. First, the need for a disciplined, Leninist party was essential to guide activity. Second, for Sneevliet, the Party could not promote revolution in isolation and it was essential to ally with the broader nationalist movement that was stirring in China. Following the fall of the Qing Dynasty, Sun Yat-sen, the father of the nationalist movement, had set about building a force to unify China. With strong support from Chinese overseas, Sun formed the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT). This was the party that Sneevliet would pressure the Communists to join. He proposed that the alliance would take the form of the Communists joining the Nationalist movement as individuals in what was termed a “united front.” While Sneevliet got acceptance of these two concepts, despite his best efforts the comrades in Moscow and China never fully accepted his concept of the united front. Having planted the seeds of the Party, Sneevliet, like so many other foreigners, left China disillusioned, wondering why it could not be more “like us.”¹

A Resistant CCP

Sneevliet arrived in the bustling, cosmopolitan city of Shanghai just in time for the CCP’s foundational First Congress