“In this brilliantly structured anthology, the past century of the Chinese Communist Party is told through the perspectives of ten individuals. Their stories are the perfect antidote to heated political rhetoric on China that can obscure the human cost of geopolitical conflicts.”

Joanna Chiu, Toronto Star

“This collection does something brilliant but increasingly rare in the present day – to treat the Chinese Communist movement not as an abstract to be glorified or condemned, but as a series of human moments: complex, sometimes contradictory, and always fascinating. Whether it’s a Moscow-returned activist in wartime China or the actions of a Mao-inspired fanatic in Peru, the extraordinary journey of this world-changing movement comes to life in this volume.”

Rana Mitter, author of China’s Good War: How World War II is Shaping a New Nationalism

“The rich and complicated stories in these ‘ten moments’ call into question the overly simplistic portrayals of the Chinese Communist Party that dominate our understanding. The erudite but eminently readable tales in this book make cutting-edge scholarship in PRC history and politics accessible to a broad audience.”

Aminda Smith, author of Thought Reform and China’s Dangerous Classes: Reeducation, Resistance, and the People

“Edited with care and creativity by a trio of accomplished historians, this well-paced anthology uses life stories to place the Chinese Communist Party’s first century in existence into a fascinating new perspective. An impressive volume.”

Jeffrey Wasserstrom, author of Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink
The Chinese Communist Party

Ten engaging personal histories introduce readers to what it was like to live in and with the most powerful political machine ever created: the Chinese Communist Party. Detailing the life of ten people who led or engaged with the Chinese Communist Party, one each for one of its ten decades of existence, these essays reflect on the Party’s relentless pursuit of power and extraordinary adaptability through the transformative decades since 1921. Demonstrating that the history of the Chinese Communist Party is not one story but many, readers learn about paths not taken, the role of chance, ideas and persons silenced, hopes both lost and fulfilled. This vivid mosaic of lives and voices draws together one hundred years of modern Chinese history – and illuminates possible paths for China’s future.

Timothy Cheek is Director of the Institute of Asian Research and Louis Cha Chair Professor of Chinese Research at the University of British Columbia.

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The Chinese Communist Party
A Century in Ten Lives

Edited by
Timothy Cheek
Klaus Mühlhahn
Hans van de Ven
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1. Henricus Sneevliet’s passport photograph in 1922. Sneevliet Archive at International Institute of Social History (with permission). [page 108]

2. A brooding Mikhail Markovich Gruzenberg, captured by an unknown photographer in spring 1925, described to British readers at the time as “Russian OGPU agent Borodin, AKA Comrade Lung Kwa Wah, sent to enflame Chinese mobs to attack Europeans during war in China.” Topical News Agency/Hulton Image Archive via Getty Images (with permission). [108]

3. A banner reading “Mobilize the power of the masses to defend Wuhan” hangs outside the headquarters of the France, Belgium, and Switzerland Returned Students Association in Wuhan, June 1938. Historical Photographs of China project, University of Bristol, collection reference Bi-s162. (with permission) [109]

4. In a photograph produced by a Soviet journalist in 1937, we see the front gates of Kangda, a “prototype of a revolutionised school of the proletariat,” the Chinese Anti-Japanese Military and Political College in Yan’an. Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images (with permission). [110]

5. Mao Zedong pauses from his work to pose for a photograph at his desk in the wartime base of Yan’an in 1937 or 1938, the tabletop hinting at hard-won intellectual labor—scattered pens, crushed packet of cigarettes, a battered enamel cup, loose
papers, and a stack of well-thumbed books.
Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images (with permission). [110]

6. Over a decade later, on October 1, 1949, Mao stands on the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Tiananmen Square and announces the founding of the People’s Republic of China. To his left and right we see early members of Sun Yat-sen’s Tongmenghui (Revolutionary Alliance) who later joined the Communist Party, Lin Boqu (1886–1960) and Dong Biwu (1886–1975). Arnoldo Mondadori Editore via Getty Images (with permission). [111]

7. Members of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (bottom row) receive delegates of the Third Congress of the China New Democratic Youth League at the closing session on May 25, 1957, just before the launch of the tumultuous Anti-Rightist Campaign. From left to right, leaders include Lin Boqu, Chen Yun, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Dong Biwu, and Deng Xiaoping. Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images (with permission). [112]


14. A sign of the times. Throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s, Western visitors flooded into China, with the Great Wall more often than not marking their obligatory first stop. Here George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley, of the British pop group Wham!, stand on the Great Wall in the spring of 1985 before their concert at the Workers Stadium in Beijing. Peter Charlesworth/LightRocket via Getty Images (with permission). [116]

15. Students gather at the monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen Square on April 19, 1989, following the death of General Secretary Hu Yaobang, a top leader widely seen as supporting greater economic and political reforms. The portrait of Hu, which echoes the more famous portrait of Mao on the Gate of Heavenly Peace opposite the monument, is paired with a couplet reading, “Where can [my] soul find peace?” (a line from the Nine Songs of Qu, by the ancient poet Qu Yuan, who famously drowned himself in protest at reckless policy); and “With deepest condolences, the Central Academy of Fine Arts” on the left. Unexpectedly, this impromptu memorial would soon transform into a nationwide protest movement, culminating in a violent crackdown in the early morning of June 4, 1989. Catherine Henriette/AFP via Getty Images (with permission). [117]
16. Zhao Ziyang, General Secretary of the Party, visits Tiananmen Square on May 19, 1989— one month after the death of Hu Yaobang—pleading with the students to end their hunger strike and leave the square. Behind Zhao is Wen Jiabao, then director of the Party General Office (and future premier).

Credit: Chip Hires/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images (with permission). [118]


18. East meets West in a 1998 photograph of the desk of United States labor historian and Party member Zhang Youlun, director of the Research Institute of History, Nankai University, in Tianjin. Like many intellectuals of his generation, Zhang spent a formative year as a visiting fellow abroad (in his particular case, at the University of Minnesota in 1983), laying the foundations for the unprecedented intellectual pluralism that has marked the Reform era. Rita Reed/Star Tribune via Getty Images (with permission). [119]

19. A bust of Communist hero Lei Feng stands before a newly opened Pizza Hut in Xiamen, 1996, while a street peddler walks past. On the plinth, in Mao Zedong’s calligraphy, “Study from Lei Feng.” Robyn Beck/AFP via Getty Images (with permission). [120]

20. Basketball superstar Yao Ming snaps a photograph of the closing ceremony of the Beijing Olympics in August 2008, an event which continues to carry symbolic significance for the Party up to the present day. Following a wildly successful run on the Houston Rockets, Yao has likewise emerged as a key figure in the Party’s soft-power initiatives. Robert Gauthier and the Los Angeles Times via Getty Images (with permission). [121]

21. Guo Meimei takes a selfie behind the wheel of a Mini Cooper in an image posted on the Internet, July
2011. Claiming to work for a company attached to the Red Cross Society of China, Guo ignited a firestorm of controversy online as an apparent example of corruption in a high-profile nonprofit organization. Guo Meimei’s materialist concerns reflected the larger shift toward “depoliticization” as championed by Deng Xiaoping and his supporters at the outset of the Reform and Opening Up period.

A widely circulated Internet meme from 2014 features Jiang Zemin and his avatar, an inflatable toad – a comparison which presumably arose due both to superficial resemblance and also to the former General Secretary’s penchant for yawning in meetings (“toad” in Mandarin puns with “yawn”). This and other memes (for example, Xi Jinping as Winnie the Pooh) reflect a thriving culture of irreverence toward the Party online – one which in earlier eras was expressed in the even more ephemeral media of jokes and doggerel poetry. Sup China (with permission). [122]

23. Taken in late February 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, a Shanghai street cleaner, wearing a surgical mask, fully absorbed with a cell phone walks past a bus stop, providing an ironic counterpoint to the television screen, which shows the current core leader of the Chinese Communist Party and nation, likewise wearing a surgical mask. The subtitle indicates that viewers should have “respect and gratitude” for Xi and the Party – alongside a timetable for the next two buses.

Yifan Ding via Getty Images (with permission). [124]
ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How to tell the story, or stories, of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the broader history of twentieth-century China of which it has been an integral part? What does that history tell us about the Party and China today? Over the past two years a group of scholars inside and outside China have come together to address these questions. Tim and Klaus brought together a dozen colleagues to review the scholarly field and to rethink our narratives at a workshop in Berlin in August 2018. We considered the flowering of serious academic scholarship on “the revolution” inside China over the past two decades and the availability of so many materials to consult. It was overwhelming.

This little book came out of these meetings as a way to speak to a broader audience. The looming centenary of the CCP gave us focus and a short deadline (for academics). Hans invoked the model of the BBC’s History of the World in 100 Objects. Instead of offering a comprehensive narrative history, we chose to focus on the experience of those who worked with, led, or had to live with the Party. Our goal has been to give a human face, necessarily partial, to the variety of experiences across a century of revolution and rule. We invited colleagues, with an eye to fine writers, who could meet the short deadline and reflect some different voices. In particular we are grateful to our two PRC-based colleagues, Zhang Jishun and Xu Jilin, who agreed to contribute. All of the contributors “exceeded the Plan” and drafted vivid stories grounded in their considerable research, in a remarkably short time.

It has been a pleasure as editors to work together. Our contributors, old friends and new, made this book a reality. We are grateful to the reviewers for useful comments and suggestions. Lucy Rhymer at Cambridge supported the project through the
peer-review process with her usual cheer and acumen, and graced the project with her own careful reading of the manuscript. John Gaunt once again provided excellent copyediting. Nick Stember, finishing his PhD at Cambridge, provided research and organizational help on the images and permissions above and beyond the call of duty. Nancy Hearst once again has saved us and the reader from myriad typos and slips. In all, this has been a collective effort and, we hope, a pleasure to read.
TIMELINE OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY

1911 Republican Revolution: fall of the Qing Dynasty.
1919 May Fourth Movement in Beijing opposes the Treaty of Versailles.
1921 Official founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Shanghai.
1923 The Communists and Nationalists co-operate in the first United Front.
1927 The First United Front ends in a bloody purge; Communists driven underground and to the countryside; Nationalists rule China from Nanjing.
1934–1935 Communists driven out of their rural base in southeast China and embark on the Long March.
1936–1947 Communists make their new capital at Yan’an, in the northwest province of Shaanxi.
1937 Japan invades central China, beginning World War II in Asia; the Communists join in a united front with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists.
1945 August. Japan surrenders, ending World War II.
1946–1949 Civil war in China between Nationalists and Communists.
1949 Establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC); Nationalists retreat to Taiwan.
1956–1958 Hundred Flowers campaign followed by Anti-Rightist Campaign.
1960 Soviet Union withdraws all experts from China; border skirmishes, 1969.
1964 China explodes its atom bomb.
Timeline of the Chinese Communist Party

1966–1969
The Cultural Revolution; first ended 1969, but policies continue until 1977.

1971
PRC takes the China position in the United Nations (replacing the Nationalists on Taiwan).

1976
January: Premier Zhou Enlai dies; September: Mao Zedong dies; October: purge of radical leadership as “Gang of Four,” rise of Hua Guofeng as Mao’s successor.

1978
3rd Plenum of 11th Central Committee in December confirms Deng Xiaoping and endorses reform.

1980s
China rejoins IMF and World Bank; allows joint ventures; sets up special economic zones; decollectivizes farmland; Hu Yaobang becomes General Secretary and Zhao Ziyang becomes Premier; leadership division over direction of reforms; Hu Yaobang resigns and top intellectuals purged, January 1987.

1989

1990s
Popular patriotic education drive; reforms resume 1992 with Deng Xiaoping’s “Southern Tour.” Double-digit GDP growth most of the decade.

2001
China joins the World Trade Organization (WTO).

2008
Unrest in Tibet; Beijing Olympics; global financial meltdown.

2012
Xi Jinping becomes new Party General Secretary at the 18th National Congress.

2018
Repressive measures under Xi expand: detention camps for Uyghurs in Xinjiang; independent intellectual outlets shut down; more lawyers arrested.

2021
July, one-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the CCP.