

The CCP at 90

Written by Kerry Brown

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KERRY BROWN, JUN 26 2011

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrates its 90th anniversary this July. Founded with just 11 Chinese members present, plus two foreign observers, in Shanghai during its first congress in 1921, it was, at that time, representing only 54 full members. After the first few days of meeting, in a room still preserved in the old French Concession in Shanghai, it was broken up and had to convene for the final two days on a barge in neighbouring Jiangsu province.

None of the members who attended the first meeting would have dreamed that in only 27 years, it would be the political force at the head of the armies that won the Civil War and created, in 1949, the People's Republic of China. Nor would they have dared imagine that less than a century later, membership would stand at 80 million (according to Xinhua news agency it passed this mark in June this year), and the Party they were present at the birth of was in charge now of the world's second largest economy, and was poised to become one of the major forces of the 21st century.

The Party in its early days underwent radical transformations as it fought against both the Nationalists, the Japanese, and then, in the Maoist period, divisions within its own ranks. But its pragmatism, and its intense focus on maintaining power, showed when it made the most daring change of all soon after Mao's death in 1978, replacing its ideological commitment from Leninist style class struggle to taking economic production as the key task. The Party, and the rest of the world, are still dealing with the impact of this three decades later.

The CCP defines its own legitimacy as resting on three major achievements. It won the revolution, it restored unity and stability to China after over a century in insecurity and division, and it launched the Reform and Opening Up in 1978. That it has maintained unified, and in many respects, successfully centralised rule over a territory as vast as China is one of the Party's most remarkable achievements. It has done so while engaging in a process of profound marketization of the country's economy, allowing a non state sector to come into existence and flourish, and a number of administrative reforms, from the creation of village elections, to the establishment of the rule of law.

The Party today however, as it turns 90, is facing a new range of challenges, which are testing even its legendary capacity for adaptation and pragmatic change. Since 2001, and entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO), its economy has quadrupled in size. But this has brought with it a dizzying combination of good and bad effects. Wealth creation has continued apace. But contention in society has also shot up. Society's 'harmony' in the eyes of the Party with its love of stability and order, has been beset by challenges from media, newly empowered social groups asserting their interests, and environmental, political and social issues.

From 1978 to 2011, the key issue has been to develop society's economy. That has been successful, in terms of crude GDP growth. But the Party is now wrestling with far more complex issues of political and administrative change, attempting to encourage more public participation in decision making, and creating a more balanced, less unequal society, while still maintaining its monopoly on power. All potential organised political opposition has been crushed. Those that oppose the Party's political programme are branded as dissidents and troublemakers. Since 2008, there has been an increasingly intense campaign against rights lawyers, representing the most difficult cases in society in the civil courts, to those active in more contentious areas of civil society activism. To many outside and inside China, it looks like the state, under the orders of the Party, is sometimes at war with its own people. China's

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internal security budget in 2010 was more than its defence budget.

The CCP is a unique force, unlike any other major political party in the world. It is the sole entity that has cohesiveness in Chinese society, linking regions, levels of society and government, with the military and the security services, and major state owned corporations. It tries to be all things to all people, creating a broad church in which all shades of opinion can be accommodated. But it tries to do this while maintaining at least rhetorical commitment to the main ideological tenets of Marxism, and controlling key parts of the vocabulary of historic commitment to this. This is becoming an increasing tall order, in an age of rising fragmentation in Chinese society, where creating even the most bland common message is verging on the impossible. The Party's two great cards to play are nationalism, and the appeal to unity. But as Chinese people become more adventurous in their thinking, and more demanding of the quality of government they get, there is already acknowledgement in many parts of the party of needing something more sophisticated. The great problem at the moment is the lack of political will and consensus in order to deliver this.

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Dr Kerry Brown is a Professor of Chinese Studies and the Director of the Lau China Institute at King's College London. His areas of interest are on modern Chinese politics, Chinese political economic and Chinese relations with the UK and the EU. He is the author of over 20 books on contemporary Chinese politics and international relations, the most recent of which is *China: A Modern History* (Polity Press 2020).