Party Time: Who Rules China and How

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Two weeks ago I was sipping yak butter tea in the house of a herder in eastern Tibet. His had become a marvellous life, he assured me, since the People's Republic of China had conducted its "peaceful revolution" and not only chased out the splittist Dalai Lama, but removed the feudalism of which the discredited Dalai was at the pinnacle.

I was aided, everywhere I went on my visit to Tibet, by the helfpul comradeship of no less than 7 Chinese officials, 2 coming from the State Council in Beijing and the others from the Tibetan Autonomous Regional Government. They kindly identified that friendly bloke as the sort of yak herder I could really learn from. To demonstrate his credentials, he - like, strangely, pretty well everyone else we met on our week long visit - had a poster on his wall of four of the celestials: Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. He was unutterably grateful, he said, that he had 2 years earlier been invited to Beijing and been allowed even to view the remains of Chairman Mao in his "maosoleum" at the centre of Tiananmen Square.

I started to feel a sort of claustrophobia after half an hour of this, which was rather more distressing than the altitude sickness more usually associated with Tibet, and decided to cut to the quick. Have you been allowed to apply for party membership? I asked. He curtly nodded and turned away.

Even for a yak herder in remote Tibetan mountains, it's Party Time.

The pervasiveness of the Chinese Communist Party is extraordinarily impressive. This - reinforced of course by China's remarkable economic rise - is what makes it the single most powerful organisation in the world. Pope John Paul 2 had the measure of the Soviet Union, but his successors cannot emulate the authority of the CCP.

What prompted me to write this book?

Chiefly, the views I began hearing from Australians I met when I was living in Beijing. When I gave a couple of talks to visiting businesspeople, and to touring teachers, about what I was discovering about how China was run, I got the feedback: why are you even mentioning the communist party - when everything we've seen on our visit to Shanghai and Beijing has been so modern and capitalist, has looked so Western, when everyone we've met has spoken English and therefore been so Western-minded. Surely the picture of Mao in the Tiananmen Gate is just there for the tourists, like the horseguards outside Buckingham Palace?

Where to start, when seeking to converse with people whose understanding of China seems so inadequate?

There's only one place to start, I felt: with Chinese people. I started to interview people with a big range of voices, about how their country is run. This book is the outcome of those extensive interviews, and of my own attempt to arrange them in a coherent pattern.

What is it like to live in China today?

[edited book extracts follow]

Living in Beijing is like living in ancient Rome, or in London at the height of the British Empire. You feel that you are at the centre of things, that the world is coming to you, that the future is now. You are living in the present tense. The shopping malls are bigger and more glittering, the subway (hugely extended for the Olympics) larger and cleaner, the vast modernist apartment complexes more avant-garde, the nightclubs glitzier, the food more sumptuous, the art zanier than you can find anywhere else. Architects from the old European centres – French, British, Dutch, German – have been flocking to help construct the new Beijing, creating dramatic buildings they could only dream of back home.

Among them is Albert Speer Junior, the son of Adolf Hitler's favourite Architect, whose design for the new Public Security Ministry projects a suitably monumental image, just to the east of Tiananmen Square, opposite the Beijing Hotel. He was commissioned to create a master plan for the whole Olympic zone to the north of the city, connecting it to the heart of the capital. He devised a broad, green boulevard along the ancient north–south axis of Beijing. He claimed that his plan was "bigger, much bigger" than what his father had in mind for Berlin.

Chinese people prefer not to consider such comparisons with the faded empires of Europe. Since their civilisation – the world's oldest – began, they have sensed that they are themselves a very special group. During modern times they have used the Chinese characters *Zhongguo* – "central kingdom" – to describe their country. Influential ideological commentators denigrate the notion of "universal values" such as human rights, freedom and democracy, constitutionality and the rule of law, dismissing them as peculiarly Western. The core objective of Chinese modernity, they argue, should instead be to enhance the prosperity and capacity of the state.

But while China's physical landscape has been revolutionised in the twenty-first century, and while people's lifestyles, especially in the cities, continue to evolve rapidly, China's core institutions have remained almost unchanged since 1949. The five-yearly congresses are still crucial. The Politburo Standing Committee of seven men (no woman has yet become a member) remains the peak decision-making body. All government bodies – the ministries, the provincial governors, the mayors – are subordinate to the party policy makers. In official diagrams of the Chinese government, which can be found on office walls throughout the country – especially of foreign enterprises, as they puzzle over whom to

approach for approvals – the structure of the government itself, with the State Council at its pinnacle, does not make it to the top half of the page. The upper branches are reserved for the Central Committee of the CCP and its general secretary, now Xi Jinping.

It is an organisation that has become brilliantly adaptive. It is no longer the party of revolution, but of sound management and stability, the party of the middle class and of the ruling families, the party – it likes to think – of China.

In recent decades, Westerners have tended to view material, modernising progress as entailing an inexorable shift towards liberal democracy. But in China's case, no. Although it is shape-shifting to meet its own local challenges, it is not taking any steps towards becoming a liberal democracy that might be recognisable as such in the West. The party is driven to adapt, but it is driven as much by fear as by vision or even opportunism. The party is more in command of China's institutions than ever but it is less certain, in the Internet Age, of what is going on in people's minds.

The sound of distant thunder can be heard behind China's frequent national celebrations. Anxiety lurks in the minds of ordinary folk: what if we lose our jobs, or someone in the family becomes seriously ill, or inflation eats up our savings? And the rich and the ruling class also worry: where does our legitimacy come from in the absence of elections? What if our privileged access to wealth is proven corrupt? China's top leaders remain unconvinced about their capacity to retain the unmixed admiration of their own citizens. They fret endlessly about perceptions of the party's legitimacy, for all its recent economic glories.

The party takes care to associate itself with success of all kinds. This means, however, that it risks being implicated when things turns ugly. If it is all-powerful, then it must be responsible for what goes wrong as well as what goes right. And the internet has made it extremely difficult for the party to cover things up as once it could, despite its tens of thousands of "net police."

This change was underlined by the lurid melodrama that began to go viral16 months ago, first inside China and then around the world. Bo Xilai – a charismatic party leader on the verge of becoming one of the most powerful people in China – was stripped of all his party posts while his ultra-ambitious wife, characterised as a Chinese Lady Macbeth, was convicted of murdering an upper-class English businessman, Neil Heywood. This communist glamour-couple have a socialite son, educated at Harrow, Oxford and Harvard, with a penchant for fast cars. They epitomised both the glittering promise held out by this great new age of prosperity and that distant thunder which warns of troubles ahead.

After casting out Bo, the party leadership regrouped by reaffirming its core task of maintaining stability – *wei wen*. But even as it did so, some within its ranks were arguing that the best way to achieve this was by a fresh wave of reforms, while others insisted that it was time to return to the party's long-established policies, purging heretics to the right and left.

One Chinese academic describes his ambivalent feelings about communist rule thus: "It's as if a group of people seized control of the plane called China sixty years ago, and they're still flying it around. We're not all happy about how we're being piloted, but no one else on board knows how to fly a plane, so we just carry on looking out the window."

Is the destination of that flight still a nirvana named communism? If the Age of Prosperity has already dawned, some in China ask, does the country still need the Communist Party? What dreams remain for it to fulfil? To date, the CCP has shown an impressive ability to adapt to changing circumstances. But is it now reaching the limits of this capacity? How much longer can it sustain its core, apparently contradictory strategies of globalisation and nationalism, using the languages both of modern technocratic capitalism and of Mao-inspired socialism?

What is it like to be a member of the Chinese Communist Party? How do you join? What do you do at meetings? Answers are not freely available. The party holds its cards to its chest as closely as Freemasons once did – but with much more at stake. This is now the most powerful organisation in the world, and one of the least understood.

Let's meet Liu Meiling, a smart, ambitious woman in her thirties who is working for a foreign-Chinese joint venture in Wuhan, an ancient but dynamic city of 10 million people in central China.

Every month, she tells me, she and about a third of the forty colleagues in her section of the firm file into a special party meeting room, either during their lunch hour or just after work. When their general manager enters the room he is wearing, metaphorically, a different hat – as general secretary of the firm's party branch.

The primary business of these meetings is to relay instructions from officials higher up the chain of command. At many, perhaps most, companies, the general manager is also the secretary of the department's party branch. Meiling says: "You have to be careful because he is also your boss. He is judging you related to your work performance. Everyone becomes careful and wants to say something to make the boss feel you are special. You part-plan what you are going to say even in the most casual-seeming conversations. It's not like at uni, where you might become careless. You become careful. If you talk too much about your good deeds at meetings, people will think you are proud. Modesty is very acceptable in China."

Most of the foreigners working at Liu's company are not aware that their firm has a party branch. They would be even more surprised to discover that someone as modern-minded, fluent in English and generally savvy as Liu is a member. Why is the party still so attractive to aspiring young Chinese that, now 80 million strong, it can turn away would-be members? How does it lure people like Liu, whose Western counterparts are unlikely to join any organisation except a gym?

The main attraction is success, at both individual and national levels. Joining the party means joining a success story that opens the door to almost unlimited career opportunities. The party has placed itself in such a central role in so many dimensions of Chinese life that it now appears irreplaceable. And, being a jealous party that brooks no rivals, it has no

competitors. If you have ambitions in 21st-century China, you need to think very hard before passing up a chance to join the party. Being part of the select group, the chosen people who wield such extraordinary authority, is naturally attractive to ambitious young people. Party patronage provides a crucial stepping stone towards prosperity in China. Smart young people head for jobs in the government or in state-owned enterprises these days, not so much with international firms, unless they are thinking of shifting overseas. Foreign firms may pay more, but they cannot compete with the state in offering access to assets – to flats, say, or to big new share issues. The country's startling economic success has brought about a rejuvenation of the party, and an extension of its grip on China's burgeoning private sector.

When Meiling entered junior middle school, she was told she could join the Young Pioneers. She was among the majority who did so. Their first step was to wear the red scarves celebrated in communist propaganda posters since the party's early days in power. Her parents encouraged her, saying it would improve her career prospects, as well as demonstrating that she was a good person there and then. "Three things were required to prove you were a good student," she says. "To study well, have a healthy mind and body, and be politically sound. The few in the class who were left out without Young Pioneer scarves didn't really belong to the group. They were isolated."

Meiling became a party member in high school. Her parents were both already members. They had to be: her father worked in public security, and her mother, as a telephonist in pre-mobile days, had the opportunity to listen to important conversations. Both jobs could only be held by trusted party members. Liu's father still does not talk much about his job, amplifying her curiosity about it. Liu recalls that her mother often complained about having to attend monthly party meetings, viewing them as a waste of time when "they just needed your presence." She would have preferred to spend the time with her family.

When she was thirteen or fourteen, Liu graduated to junior party membership, slightly younger than most. She was a precocious young communist. She applied by writing an essay explaining why she wanted to join. "You have to self-criticise," she recalls. "You have to state your shortcomings. One is enough. Usually people will say something modest, like 'I'm not seriously minded.' The answer the party leaders give is usually to spend more time with classmates or help people more."

At both of Liu's universities, the branch secretaries were students, but a professor supervised meetings and would read news items or party documents and ask people to comment on them. "Nothing serious," she says. Meetings were held every month, in the office of a lecturer or professor or in a classroom. The party secretary of the department was always there. Usually the meetings were held in the evenings after class and lasted about an hour. Nobody asked questions. "We were all very passive," Liu says. Occasionally students would talk about politics. When officials read statements by party leaders, "We commented how wise they were. Always very wise. But they were very dull. No real business was conducted."

When Liu graduated from university, her father helped her to obtain her first job. "I knew he could do that," she says. "I was aware he did it for other people, but I didn't want that. I didn't like it." She wanted to rely on herself and had told her mother, even when she

was very young, that she would not use her parents' money. She says, "I read and re-read the novel *Jane Eyre*. Like her, I wanted to be myself."

By now, Liu's enthusiasm for the party had waned. At her first job, she told me, during a party meeting when party meeting when candidates were listed, "I sighed – apparently from the heat, but my ennui went deeper than that. I felt this was all removed from my everyday life. People separate this party involvement out from their understanding of the world. Their membership is like an altar with a Buddha on it. It looks good in its place, but for most people it doesn't penetrate into real life."

Mao was almost never mentioned at party meetings, she said. "We heard more of Deng. But we were trained to speak nonsense – that's one reason I didn't go to work for the government, where there would be even more of this." Members are expected to bring a notebook and pen to branch meetings, says Liu, but "Nobody knows what to do with them." Informally, just before or after meetings, there is naturally some discussion between members. Rumours of corruption are a favourite topic for gossip.

Whatever dirt might emerge about individual leaders, however, the first duty of members is to support the party and its theories. "Even if you don't care about your fellow members," Liu says, "you won't do something to hurt the party. You won't spread bad comments or gossip around. The secret is that it is actually well organised, even though that's not the adjective most people would ascribe to it, and even though it doesn't always feel that way when you're a grassroots member."

Most branch members no longer call each other *tongzhi*, the Chinese word for comrade. Originally introduced by Sun Yat-sen and adopted by Mao as an equivalent of the Soviet *tovarich*, in recent years *tongzhi* – which means "the same will" or "same inclination" – has been appropriated by China's gay and lesbian community. This prompts sometimes ill-concealed mirth when it is still used by po-faced party cadres on formal occasions.

Liu's view of her membership now is chiefly pragmatic. "I always thought I worked hard. I was not so stupid. I wouldn't just flatter the boss. It was simple: if they didn't like me, I would leave. There are other options in a big city like mine. You don't have to rely on the party." But membership certainly helps. And she has not, in the end, quit.

These days the party's priorities are consensus and continuity, goals best suited for the committee-men who rule, people whose skills prominently include holding the party together, keeping the system stable. But foreigners are fond of ascribing more marvellous powers of vision and historic purpose to China's leaders.

A widely repeated anecdote has Mao's urbane premier, Zhou Enlai, responding to a question during a visit in 1971 by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Asked what he thought of the French Revolution, Zho replied, "It's too soon to tell," apparently demonstrating the awesomely long-term nature of Chinese thinking.

Unfortunately, the evidence reveals that this story is apocryphal, inspired by a misunderstanding. Zhou was in fact answering a question about the wave of “revolutionary” student protests in Paris in 1968. As a veteran diplomat, naturally circumspect about pronouncing on recent events, he withheld his verdict.

As, perhaps, it would be wise to do about China’s own chances of pursuing its revolution to a successful conclusion in the decades ahead.

[book extracts end]

In imperial days, the emperor was the father who incorporated China. But his capacity to control events faded as the layers of government got lower. The communist party’s reach today is considerably greater. It insists on the capacity to approve or disapprove, to tolerate or silence, every organisation, every appointment, every decision made, even every message posted on the Internet in China today - whether it may choose to exercise that capacity or not. China does not even have a defence force of its own. The People's Liberation Army is the party's army. The name of the country, the People's Republic, is the party's name for it. The flag, the logo, the national anthem, March of the Volunteers, likewise. Last year the Fin Review interviewed a senior Chinese executive at the ICT giant Huawei which is based in Shenzhen next to Hong Kong. She said: "The relationship between Huawei and the Chinese government is just the same as the relationship between any Western private company with their governments. Huawei is outside the system." As anyone who knows China would attest, this sounds hollow. For an organisation, as opposed to an individual, to be outside the system means to be outside China. And sure enough, when I visited the Huawei HQ and asked questions about governance, corporate relations staff there eventually discussed the role played by the party committee within the Huawei structure, whose role includes a capacity to vet candidates for key positions on the board and in other top jobs. Ultimately, as Walter and Howie point out in their excellent book “Red Capitalism,” the party believes it is best placed to price risk.

What's happening today? Some people - including our own Lu Kewen (Kevin Rudd), who described Xi Jinping as "the man for the times" - have loaded expectations on to what is often called "the new leadership" in China. In fact, they're not really anything of the sort. Xi, and Li Keqiang were already on the Politburo Standing Committee, the 9 men – now 7 - who rule China, for five years before becoming the top and number 2 leaders at the party congress last November. They are ultimate insiders, perhaps with a slight twist; You Ji, from UNSW, has described them as essentially political leaders, while their predecessors over the 20 years or so that went before, were chiefly technocrats. They may be preparing for ground-breaking economic reforms, needed for the long postponed restructuring from a focus on manufactured exports and on state owned enterprises, towards domestic consumption, the services sector, and opening access to capital for the private sector. But there are no signs of interest in political reform. In fact, the opposite. We are seeing Xi's mystical concept, the Chinese Dream, being used as a counterpoint to the 7 perils recently outlined in the party's Document Number 9: universal values, the western principles of press freedom, civil society, civic rights, crony networks, judicial independence, and "nihilistic" criticism of the historical mistakes of the party. Xi is also seeking to reintegrate the bifurcated history of the People’s Republic, ushering the three Mao decades back into the fold. A major attack has been launched against "constitutionalism," the idea that the Chinese

constitution should have a status of its own that is not subjugated to party control and interpretation. People's Daily, the party paper, said "constitutionalism belongs only to capitalism."

Sometimes you hear people say that you have to give China more time. But it is over 100 years since the Qinghai Revolution that removed the last Manchu emperor Pu Yi. China did evolve in the ensuing decades towards a form of democracy, a form of rule of law – only to see that thwarted by the civil war and its outcome. Whereas Britain and the US developed as they industrialised, institutions to inhibit the power both of capital and of the modern state, in China it is the state and the capital it commands that drive development virtually unchallenged.

There are limits to the kind of institutional relationships that foreign organisations and states can enjoy with this unique polity.

A Chinese commentator, Wei Gu, points out that for many in the middle class today, the "squeezed" middle class as he calls it, "they have no appetite for outright revolution, but they are weary of injustice and unfairness, and the oligarchy provides a vanishingly small outlet for them to seek redress on the issues they care about most, the availability of safe food, fair access to good education and health care, and, more and more, safe air." China is continuing to grow rapidly, but some are calling it toxic growth.

A crackdown is under way in China's burgeoning social media world. Charles Chao, the ceo of Sina Corp, which dominates the weibo platform - China's version of twitter - said a fortnight ago that the government is working to make the internet a more carefully managed space. Ever since my sainted employer expressed optimism that China would be utterly changed by homes gaining access to satellite TV, instead the party-state has made good use of each technological advance to gain more knowledge about every individual and family in China, and a greater capacity to control them. Every blogger has to register her or his true name and identity card number with the ISP first. A campaign has been launched against rumours online, and arrests made of several of the so-called Special Vs, bloggers with verified followings, often of several million. The party journal Seeking Truth recently complained of "unhealthy sentiments" being communicated in the social media.

Arrests have been made around the country, including of a person described by the official media as "a self-appointed whistle-blower" - as if there could be any other sort. Another has even been charged with defaming China's most famous model worker Lei Feng, 50 years after he died, by claiming he wore a leather jacket and leather shoes, where his image has been one of thrift.

This brings me to a few final words about the cover of the book. The designer, Peter Long, just saw an image he liked, and I too feel it fits the theme well. But he didn't realise that the central figure in the appropriated propaganda painting is that of model worker Lei Feng, who was orphaned early, joined the People's Liberation Army, and at just 20 died when a truck he was directing backed into a telegraph poll that fell and hit him. A new video game enables players to be Lei Feng online and fight spies and defeat the enemy, and ultimately if you are victorious to be ushered into the presence of the Great Helmsman himself, Mao Zedong, a religious goal to which all may still aspire. Lei is on the cover here holding a story

called Red Crag set in Chongqing during the civil war against the Nationalists. On the table, treats in store for the children as they relish their party time with their age-defying model worker: Jiang Jiguang, about a volunteer in the Korean War, and the selected works of chairman Mao. Sadly, films recently released to honour the 50th anniversary since Lei Feng's passing were often screened to completely empty cinemas. Times, and heroes, have changed.

Modern celebrities include people like the alluring TV host, dancer, singer, model and designer Namu, who described herself to me as "half Mother Theresa, half Madonna." She is an example of the vivacity of the China beyond the party, which is the topic of my final chapter, which also features some wonderful philanthropists and founders of charities. They point to ways in which, although the party has zealously wrapped itself around the identity of the whole Chinese world, it has not succeeded in displacing China itself. Most Chinese people are essentially highly individualistic and resilient; the culture of the party is beyond them, albeit a given that for now appears irreplaceable.

A Hong Kong friend of mine sent me a message a couple of days ago, after reading a review of this book in the South China Morning Post, saying that I appeared to be one of the only Australians to have made money out of the Chinese Communist Party. I earnestly hope he'll be proved right. When Palgrave Macmillan planned to publish the book internationally, out of New York, they told me that they had to change the title - which was my title - because American readers "don't get puns," and would be confused, maybe expecting Party Time to comprise a celebration of fun with the Hiltons or Kardashians. So this is what they've come up with. I am not expecting the CCP, unlike the ALP, to lose office any time soon. I 'm looking forward to Royalties Forever.