



The Chinese Communist Party at 100: adaptable and abiding

By Dr Holly Snape

The Chinese Communist Party [CCP] has set its sights on the great undertakings of the Chinese nation; at one hundred, it is in its prime.¹

This was the appraisal by Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CCP, at the launch of a campaign in the runup to his party's centenary, to be marked on 1st July 2021. That the CCP of today is strong is a hard contention to argue with. Defiant of perennial predictions of its demise, the CCP intends to be in it for the long haul.

Moreover, despite post-Mao attempts at incremental political reforms, the CCP's stark inversion of those efforts stands as a caution against unqualified optimism about its ability (or appetite) for such reforms today. Strategy vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China (PRC) must start from a clear-eyed understanding of the CCP and of what it is becoming. This requires us to resist distraction from musings on impending implosion, and to focus instead on building capacity to track the CCP's adaptations – of itself and the system it presides over – and to analyse those changes in a way which recognises the CCP's abiding nature.

¹ Xi Jinping, Speech: 'At the Mobilisation Meeting to Launch the Study Party History Inculcation' ('在党史学习教育动员大会上的讲话' / 'Zai dangshi xuexi jiaoyu dongyuan dahui shang de jianghua'), *Qiushi*, 20/02/2021, <https://bit.ly/3x2GF5A> (found: 29/06/2021).



The CCP's ability to adapt has long been understood to be a source of its resilience.² Its adaptations can be strikingly obvious, such as the opening of membership to businesspeople, the claim to have morphed from working class vanguard into a party also representing the 'fundamental interests of the vast majority of the Chinese people',³ and the project to build branches in enterprises and non-profit organisations in tandem with steps to streamline its government.⁴ Some adaptations are less easy to spot, and it is often those ones that matter.

Analysis of the CCP's self-contortions should not overlook those elements of its nature that proscribe, frustrate, or condition its adaptations. It relies, for example, on a highly organised Leninist-style system which, though is itself adaptable, cannot co-exist with and complement an apolitical civil service.⁵ It retains the right to demand that members obey 'The Organisation' and to adapt how and what they must obey (though whether members do is another matter).⁶ Most fundamental, and most conditioning, is its inability by nature to give up or to share power. This does not mean that power retention is its 'only aim' but that relinquishing power is irreconcilable with its nature.⁷

The highly adaptable and the abidingly present are inseparable. The 'Two Studies, One Be' campaign,⁸ one of the CCP's many under Xi to 'self-cleanse,

² David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press, 2009).

³ See: 'Report to the 16th National Party Congress [on] Comprehensively Building a Moderately Prosperous Society, Ushering in a New Scene in the Cause of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' ('全面建设小康社会, 开创中国特色社会主义事业新局面在中国共产党第十六次全国代表大会上的报告' / 'Quanmian jianshe xiaokang shehui, kaichuang zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi shiye xin jumian zai zhongguo gongchandang di shiliu ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao'), CCP Past National Party Congress Database (中国共产党历次全国代表大会数据库 / Zhongguo gongchandang lici quanguo daibiaodahui shujuku), 08/11/2002, <https://bit.ly/3y9IdLa> (found: 29/06/2021).

⁴ Patricia Thornton, 'The Advance of the Party: Transformation or Takeover of Urban Grassroots Society?' *The China Quarterly*, 213 (2003).

⁵ Jing Yuejin, Chen Mingming and Xiao Bin (景跃进, 陈明明, 肖滨), *Contemporary Chinese Government and Politics* (当代中国政府与政治 / *Dangdai zhongguo zhengfu yu zhengzhi*) (Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2016).

⁶ Holly Snape, 'New Regulations for the Central Committee: Codifying Xi Era Democratic Centralism', *China Law Translate*, 01/12/2020, <https://bit.ly/3w5TKKi> (found: 29/06/2021).

⁷ Daniel Tobin makes the important point that observers' claims about the CCP's 'primary aim as simply to stay in power' has led to a problematic agenda in research which, mistakenly, 'sees the party's rule as lurching from crisis to crisis.' See: Daniel Tobin, 'How Xi Jinping's "New Era" Should Have Ended US Debate on Beijing's Ambitions', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 08/05/2020, <https://bit.ly/3x2GPKe> (found: 29/06/2021).

⁸ Xinhua News, 28 February 2016, 'Central Committee General Office Releases "Plan on Launching among all Party Members a Study the Party Charter and Party Regulations, Study the Series of Speeches, and Be an Up-to-Scratch Party Member"' ('中共中央办公厅印发“关于在全体党员中开展“学党章党规, 学系列讲话, 做合格党员”学习教育方案”' / 'Zhonggong zhongyang bangongting yinfa “guanyu zai quanti dangyuan kaizhan xue dangzhang danggui, xue xilie jianghua, zuo hege dangyuan xuexi jiaoyu fang an”'), 28/02/2016, <https://bit.ly/3h2Pneu> (found: 29/06/2021).



self-perfect, self-update, and self-improve' serves as a basic example. The first 'Study' demanded that party members learn and internalise codified CCP rules as part of a now near-decade-long push to build the authority of party legislation; the second, falling back on a stubbornly rooted norm of leaders' words taking precedence over legal statutes, obliged party members to study the speeches of one individual (Xi Jinping). It was of no concern that doing one might undermine the other.

Over almost nine years under Xi, the CCP has adapted in many ways. Regardless of what happens at the 20th National Party Congress in 2022 these adaptations will have some staying power because of the depth and pervasiveness of the change that they have entailed. Through these adaptations, the CCP has worked to confound attempts from within to invert its illiberal trends and has been actively 're-revolutionising' the party. Below are two clear examples, chosen because they illustrate two issues that strike at the heart of the CCP: first, its own identity and, second, the way it relates to and operates through others, such as its government and state-owned enterprises.

The CCP's identity: From revolutionary to governing to reviving the 'revolutionary'

In the past the CCP has marked the anniversary of its founding by expounding on critical new issues or judgements about its future direction. This happens via the incumbent General Secretary's '1st July Address' (七一讲话 / qi yi jianghua). Thus on the 80th anniversary in 2001, Jiang Zemin introduced the adaptations of expanding the CCP's representative claim and welcoming entrepreneurs.⁹ In that same speech Jiang spoke of another important but lesser-known adaptation in the CCP's identity: 'our party has, from a party that leads the people in struggle to seize power nationwide, become a party that leads the people in holding power nationwide and that governs long-term.'¹⁰

⁹ See, respectively, Duan Demin, 'On authoritarian political representation in contemporary China', *Politics and Governance* 7:3 (2019); John Pomfret, 'China Allows Its Capitalists To Join Party', *The Washington Post*, 02/07/2001, <https://wapo.st/3y4dqQ3> (found: 29/06/2021).

¹⁰ This clunky translation attempts to capture the original wording. In Chinese this reads: '我们党已经从一个领导人民为夺取全国政权而奋斗的党, 成为一个领导人民掌握着全国政权并长期执政的党' / 'women dang yijing cong yi ge lingdao renmin wei duoqu quanguo zhengquan er fendou de dang, chengwei yi ge lingdao renmin zhangwozhe quanguo zhengquan bing changqi zhizheng de dang'. See: Jiang Zemin, Speech: 'At a Meeting Celebrating the 80th Anniversary of the Founding of the CCP', CCTV.com, 14/06/2001, <https://bit.ly/2SzM6tK> (found: 29/06/2021).



Pronouncements by CCP leaders, especially at grand occasions or in key documents, are carefully crafted. For almost two decades after the event, this one was rephrased as ‘[the CCP has] transformed from a revolutionary party to a governing party’ [从革命党向执政党转变 / *cong geming dang xiang zhizheng dang zhuanbian*]. This prompted a flurry of new research agendas and shifts in ‘thought work’ throughout the CCP’s study and training systems. It ignited a re-imagining of the respective roles of party and state. Some viewed it as a trigger for transforming the CCP’s approach to governing.¹¹ Party theorists and scholars used the phrase to apply their own interpretations and imagine policy possibilities. Top leaders too used this shortened phrasing. Jiang wrote to Hu Jintao, who was heading drafting work on the 16th National Party Congress report, telling him the report should ‘fully reflect’ the ‘important formulations and views already set forth in [my] 1st July address.’ Among those important formulations was, as he put it: ‘the challenges raised for us by the transformation from revolutionary party to governing party.’¹²

Fast-forward to today’s treatment of the CCP’s identity and the current leadership has clearly redrawn the parameters of debate. Criticism on that ‘important formulation’ has been attributed directly to Xi:

Some people say our party has transformed from a “revolutionary party” to a “governing party”. This way of putting it is incorrect. Our party’s formal formulation...does not differentiate between “revolutionary party” and “governing party”.¹³

This reproval proliferated on media platforms and the head of the Central Party School’s Party Building Department weighed in, calling the original expression ‘precise and prudent’ and its ‘casual shortening and changing’ a ‘violation of the

¹¹ Scholars in the CCP’s own central and local party schools published books using this phrase. Communist Youth League texts cited ‘the transformation from revolutionary party to governing party’ one of the three biggest challenges faced in its work. See: Huang Xiaobo and Liu Haichun (黄晓波, 刘海春) (eds.), *Introduction to New-Period CYL Work in Institutes of Higher Education* (新时期高校共青团工作概论 / *xin shiqi gaoxiao gongqingtuan gongzuo gailun*) (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2010). Such books were published by the People’s Publishing House and its local branches and by the People’s Liberation Army Publishing House. See: Holly Snape, *A Study on Discourse in Contemporary Chinese Politics* (六经注我, 我注六经 / *liu jing zhu wo, wo zhu liu jing*), Postdoctoral thesis, School of Government, Peking University, 2019.

¹² Jiang Zemin, ‘Instructions on Drafting Work for the 16th Party Congress Report’ (‘关于十六大报告起草工作的批示’ / ‘*guanyu shiliu da baogao qicao gongzuo de pishi*’), *The Selected Works of Jiang Zemin, Vol. III*, 18/02/2002, <https://bit.ly/3x8TNGi> (found: 29/06/2021).

¹³ Zhao Jianying (赵剑英), ‘The General Secretary Criticises the One-sidedness of the Notion of a “Revolutionary Party” Transforming into a “Governing Party”’ (‘总书记批评了“革命党”转变为“执政党”观点的片面性’ / ‘*Zongshuji piping le “geming dang” zhuanbian wei “zhizheng dang” guandian de pianmianxing*’), *Guangming Ribao*, 21/10/2019, <https://bit.ly/3xZomhQ> (found: 29/06/2021).



party's protocol and discipline.'¹⁴ By extirpating this expression and making its use a disciplinary violation, debate has been placed off limits and the CCP's identity as both 'revolutionary' and 'governing' has been vehemently restored.

Yet, this restoration does not mark a simple return to the CCP's past. It invokes the 'revolutionary'¹⁵ to invert, or otherwise undo, past reforms such as those to depoliticise the bureaucracy and separate the CCP from its government; it serves to re-politicise, to justify the CCP's appropriation of state functions, and to make the civil service more rapidly responsive to top-down CCP demands, ultimately with the aim, by 2049, of having the system it presides over 'fully display its superiority.'¹⁶

The CCP's own identity has a powerful bearing on its relationship to both society and state, and on the way it governs over and through them. How the CCP conceives of and conceptualises itself, its role, and its aims plays an integral role in real-world matters from agenda setting to policy design, from what and how it teaches its cadres to how it divides labour between itself and its state. The return of 'revolutionary' rhetoric has been paired with shifts in the CCP itself and in its relationships with others, one of which is examined below.

The lesser-known centenary goal: rewriting the rules governing the party

¹⁴ Zhang Zhiming (张志明), 'Why is it wrong to use the expression "transformation from revolutionary party to governing party" vis-à-vis the CPC?' ('为什么说中国共产党“从革命党向执政党转变”的说法是错误的?') / 'Wei shenme shuo zhongguo gongchandang "cong geming dang xiang zhizheng dang zhuanbian" de shuofa shi cuowu de?', Xuexi Daguo Public WeChat Account, 18/11/2019, <https://bit.ly/3jr6k3Q> (found: 29/06/2021). This was republished by the CCP's journal *Qiushi*, 18/11/2019, <https://bit.ly/3duIrEN> (found: 29/06/2021).

¹⁵ The speech given by Xi to launch a Party History Study Inculcation campaign in the run-up to the centenary called for the campaign to 'teach and guide the entire party to boldly champion the red tradition, to pass on the red genes, and never stop the spiritual blood stream of communists, always maintain the dauntless spirit of revolutionaries, drum up the new spirit of embarking on the new journey and advancing in the new era'. See: Xi Jinping, Speech: 'At the Party History Study Inculcation Mobilisation Meeting' ('在党史学习教育动员大会上的讲话' / 'Zai dangshi xuexi jiaoyu dongyuan dahui shang de jianghua'), *Xinhua News*, 20/02/2021, <https://bit.ly/2UMOKNr> (found: 29/06/2021).

¹⁶ Translations sometimes conflate (and replace) 'superiority' (优越性 / youyuexing) with 'strengths' (优势 / youshi). The CCP 'talks' of both and the distinction is vital. See: 'Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Major Issues regarding Upholding and Improving the Socialist System with Chinese Characteristics and Modernising China's System and Capacity for Governance' ('中共中央关于坚持和完善中国特色社会主义制度推进国家治理体系和治理能力现代化若干重大问题的决定' / 'Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jianchi he wanshan zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi zhidu tuijin guojia zhili tixi he zhili nengli xiandaihua ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding'), Government of the People's Republic of China, 05/11/2019, <https://bit.ly/3w4Rx1x> (found: 29/06/2021).

In 2012, before Xi was appointed General Secretary, activity was underway inside the CCP that would set the stage for a major initiative that followed. Unlike the tumult of the Bo Xilai affair, when a competitor for the top job suddenly fell from grace, this seemingly mundane activity progressed quietly away from media view. In May that year, the CCP passed its first ‘legislative law’ for formulating its internal regulations. This, and the CCP’s first ever comprehensive clear-out of existing regulations, which scrapped more than 58% of the documents reviewed, laid the groundwork for a sweeping overhaul of its formal rulebook.¹⁷

In the first ever ‘Five-year Plan’ on Central Party Regulation Formulation (2013–2017), the CCP set itself the goal, to be attained by its centenary, of completing work on building a ‘scientifically composed, procedurally strict, complementarily complete, and effectively operating system of party regulations.’¹⁸ This refashioning of the CCP’s piecemeal, patchy and overlapping rules is creating a tightly constructed, implementable law-like regulatory system.

Two things are remarkable about this goal. First, it has direct and lasting implications for the way the CCP operates via its state and other entities. Though technically called ‘intra-party regulations’ they do far more than regulate internal CCP matters; they also regulate the behaviour of CCP members and organisations within and through non-party entities. Among them, ‘leadership’ category regulations stipulate, for example, on the behaviour and duties of CCP bodies that sit within and lead government agencies.¹⁹ Other types of regulations seek to achieve ‘comprehensive strict CCP self-rule’ thereby making the CCP’s officials adhere more strictly to central commands. A stronger regulatory system is intended to make CCP personnel and organisations highly disciplined, reliably obedient, and easily mobilisable. This means that CCP organisations operating via government, for example, should do so in a way that is more effectively coordinated by and manipulable from the centre.

Second, it explicitly aims to make the CCP regulatory system an integral component of ‘socialist rule of law.’ The 18th Central Committee’s Fourth

¹⁷ Han Qiang (韩强), ‘New Thinking on Using a Combination of Thought to Build the Party and Institutions to Rule the Party’ (‘关于思想建党与制度治党相结合的新思考’ / ‘Guanyu sixiang jian dang yu zhidu zhi dang xiangjiehe de xin sikao’), Wang Zhenmin (王振民) (ed.), *Party Regulatory System Studies* (党内法规制度研究 / Dangnei fagui zhidu yanjiu) (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2018), pp. 67–75.

¹⁸ The goal was adapted in 2016. See: ‘The CCP Central Committee Releases “The Opinion on Strengthening Intra-Party Regulatory System Building”’ (‘中共中央关于加强党内法规制度建设的意见’ / ‘Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang dangnei fagui zhidu jianshe de yijian’), Government of the People’s Republic of China, 25/06/2017, <https://bit.ly/3w9kA45> (found: 29/06/2021).

¹⁹ See: ‘The CCP Central Committee Releases “The Communist Party of China Party Group Work Regulations”’ (‘中国共产党党组工作条例’ / ‘Zhongguo gongchandang dangzu gongzuo tiaoli’), 12371.cn, 19/04/2019, <https://bit.ly/3w7MAoO> (found: 29/06/2021).



Plenum Resolution on ‘ruling the country according to law’,²⁰ was path-breaking and when it came to paths being broken, a major one was to ‘integrate the party regulatory system into the Chinese socialist system of rule of law, [and] better meld together Party discipline and state law.’²¹ Three months later, at a meeting of high-level officials convened to study the ‘spirit’ of that Resolution, Xi flatly rejected a decades-old debate on the relationship between the CCP and law: “‘Party or law as supreme’ is a political trap, a false proposition.”²² Blunt and unequivocal, this deadened debate and reset the boundaries for understanding ‘rule of law’ under the CCP.

A small but significant example of this move’s potential ‘stickiness’ comes from the sixty or so CCP regulatory research centres newly established all over the country. Doctoral and masters’ courses on party regulation studies are already underway and the law schools the research centres sit within are beginning to make party regulatory studies an elective or even mandatory class for law students. The aim is to ensure that ‘law students are familiar with, accepting of, and guard Chinese rule of law.’²³

Returning to the need to understand the CCP’s ‘nature’,²⁴ Xi’s oft-cited desire to create more ‘fixed’ institutions is not designed to stop the Party Centre from suddenly instituting adaptations. Quite the contrary. Individual CCP members must abide by both law and party regulations, but the CCP leadership

²⁰ On other important implications of this Resolution, see: Neysun A. Mahboubi, ‘Zombie legal reform?: Judicial and Administrative Law Developments after the Fourth Plenum’, *YouTube*, 05/05/2021, <https://bit.ly/3h5vCTR> (found: 29/06/2021).

²¹ See also Xi’s explainer on the Resolution: ‘ruling the country according law must give shape to a setup in which state laws and regulations and the party regulatory system facilitate, promote, and guarantee each other.’ Xi Jinping, ‘Explanation on the Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Certain Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Advancing the Law-Based Governance of China’ (‘关于“中共中央关于全面推进依法治国若干重大问题的决定”的说明’ / ‘Guanyu “zhonggong zhongyang guanyu quanmian tuijin yifa zhiguo ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding” de shuoming’), *Xinhua News*, 28/10/2014, <https://bit.ly/2SHpoA8> (found: 29/06/2021).

²² Xi Jinping, Speech: ‘At the Meeting for Provincial/Ministerial-level Main Leading Cadres to Study the Spirit of the 18th Central Committee Fourth Plenum to Comprehensively Promote Rule of the Country According to Law’ (‘在省部级主要领导干部学习贯彻党的十八届四中全会精神全面推进依法治国专题研讨班上的讲话’ / ‘Zai shengbuji zhuyao lingdao ganbu xuexi guan che dang de shibajie si zhongquan hui jingshen quanmian tuijin yifa zhiguo zhuanti yantao ban shang de jianghua’), *People’s Daily Online*, 02/02/2015, <https://bit.ly/2UJ6ARu> (found: 29/06/2021).

²³ Ou Aimin (欧爱民), ‘On the Positioning of the Party Regulatory Studies Discipline’ (‘论党内法规学的学科定位’ / ‘Lun dangnei faguixue de xueke dingwei’), *Party Regulatory Studies* (党内法规研究 / Dangnei faguixue), 4 (2020).

²⁴ Xi later gave ‘instructions’ stating the initiative as being ‘in order to provide powerful institutional guarantees for raising the party’s executive capacity and leadership calibre, promoting the modernisation of the system and capacity for governance, and realising the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.’ See: Xi Jinping, ‘Uphold the Combined Building of Rule of the Country According to Law and Governance of the Party by Institutions and Regulations’ (‘坚持依法治国与制度治党, 依规治党统筹推进, 一体建设’ / ‘Jianchi yifa zhiguo yu zhidu zhidang, yigui zhidang tongchou tuijin, yiti jianshe’), *People’s Daily Online*, 23/12/2016, <https://bit.ly/3w3zitj> (found: 29/06/2021).

retains the prerogative to pursue adaptations. This ‘institution building’ facilitates stronger sporadic top-down interventions in state governance through Leninist organisational channels. This disregards the cautions of Chinese political scientists and public administration scholars who have long debated the pros, cons, and corrosive effects of frequent flash-flood-like top-down communication of ‘political’ goals as overriding and undermining the ‘normal’ functioning of the government bureaucracy.

What today’s CCP leadership means by ‘modernising’ governance – ‘basic completion’ of which is the main goal for 2035 – involves a system that the Party Centre can swiftly manipulate; that enables the rapid (re)calibration of government bodies’ foci in order to respond to problems and mobilise resources and actions toward achieving the centre’s goals and initiatives. ‘Comprehensive strict’ control over the CCP, which Xi has made it his mission to promote, attempts to strengthen the channels for the top leadership to quickly cascade down its demands and priorities.

Conclusion

The CCP today is, from its General Secretary’s perspective, ‘in its prime’. There is some truth to that. After all, under his watch, it has created a forbidding regime for ruling CCP organisations and officials; it has expanded its control over functions formerly left to the government such as civil service management, the press and publishing, and education; it has beefed up its capacity to demand that its bureaucracy is ever-ready to do the centre’s bidding; it has taken substantive steps to make its own rules integral to ‘rule of law’; and it is in the throes of creating an expanded supervision system covering both the CCP itself and its state. In society too, it has reached a point in its penetration into businesses and non-profit organisations where it now seeks not only ‘quantity’ but also ‘quality’, meaning achieving more substantive control through the branches and personnel that it embeds within such organisations.

The CCP is unlikely any time soon to implode, to overthrow its own leader from within, or to be uprooted through other interventions. Nor is it likely that, post-20th National Party Congress in 2022, it will comfortably shift back toward reforms of a past era to depoliticise its civil service and give greater autonomy to its government. While anything might be possible, basing strategy on a view of the CCP derived from such postulations is itself a dangerous thing.

It is crucial that Her Majesty’s (HM) Government, as well as the governments of other free and open countries, build a clear-eyed understanding



of the CCP and the ways it operates via government, businesses and other organisations. To do that demands a strong capacity to dynamically track the way the CCP is adapting. It demands a literacy in the CCP's own turgid, obfuscating language, to track what it is saying to and about itself, and to understand correctly what it means when it says it is pursuing 'rule of law' and 'governance modernisation' (both of which put the CCP front and centre). Finally, it demands a straightforward appraisal of what is known and what is not. None of these things can happen without investment. Understanding the CCP demands interdisciplinary, intersectoral work and dedicated long-term study and this rests on investment in teaching, learning, language-training, and research.



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