

History of the Communist Party of China (CCP).

How 13 Men Were to Determine the Fate of the World?

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One hundred years ago, 13 men gathered for the secret foundation meeting of the Communist Party of China. Through many wanderings and adventures, the party has grown to become the largest political group in the world. It will undoubtedly and to a large extent determine the course of the 21st century. An analysis by China expert Marc Vandepitte.

Historical context

For centuries, China had been a leading and powerful empire. That situation changed dramatically after the opium wars starting in 1840.[i] The country was relegated to the status of a semi-colony. Large areas were occupied by foreign powers or fell under their sphere of influence. The imperialist countries destroyed the fledgling industrialization. The population was totally impoverished, riddled with famines.[ii] [Tens of millions](#) of Chinese perished during that period through deprivation and political violence. It was also during this period that the black slave trade was replaced by the yellow trade in Chinese people.

Repeatedly, the Chinese revolted against the poor living conditions and for national independence. In 1911 there was a revolution in which the emperor was ousted. The new president Sun Yat-sen was the founder of the Republic of China. However, he failed to get rid of foreign domination and the feudal structures of the country.

That was the context in which, ten years later, thirteen men met in secret to establish a new, Communist Party (CPC). One of them was Mao Zedong. Their great example was the Russian Revolution of 1917. At the time, the party had only 53 members.

A party focused on development

Political parties play an important role in the political life of modern societies. Historically, they originated broadly in two ways. In the center of capitalism, electoral or [“election-oriented”](#) parties emerged. After the nobility’s monopoly had been broken, the emerging bourgeoisie and later the labor movement set up their own parties to defend their own interests and facilitate participation in elections and state administration. In those countries, a strong and modern state structure had already been established.

The second type could be described as “developmental” parties. They originated in a very different context, more specifically in the periphery of capitalism. They usually grew in the womb of national liberation movements after World War II. They sought national independence and rapid development of their countries. They wanted to put an end to appalling living conditions and imperialist oppression.

In most of those countries there was no modern state structure yet. The creation of a strong and well-organized political party was necessary to achieve this.[iii] This type of political party was not created to realize political ideals through parliamentary competition. On the contrary, political parties like that strive for a new political and/or economic order. This often happens through a revolution. In order to overthrow the old systems and build a new order, development-oriented parties believed that they needed a strong organization and tight discipline.

One-party system

After the revolution in 1911, Sun Yat-sen opted for a multi-party system based on the model of Great Britain and the US. But as in most third world countries, that failed. It soon became clear to him that the model of the Russian revolution was more suited to advancing China. He organized his revolutionary party, the Guomindang (KMT), along the lines of a Leninist party.[iv]

In 1925 Sun Yat-sen died and Chiang Kai-shek became the new leader of the KMT. He was much more conservative and unleashed a veritable witch hunt against the communists, killing many. During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the KMT allied with the Communist Party to fight the Japanese occupation. At the time, Japan was a fascist empire, and one of the Axis powers, allies of Hitler Germany. The war became an important chapter of World War II. After the victory over Japan, the civil war between KMT and CPC started again.



The CPC had far fewer men and resources than the KMT, but was better organized and disciplined. The Communists were also much more in touch with the peasantry. It was the communists and not the KMT who were seen by the

people as the patriots and the standard-bearers of the struggle against the Japanese and for China's independence.[v] Eventually this civil war was won by the CPC in 1949 and Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China. The leaders and many supporters of the KMT fled to the island of Taiwan.

The CPC faced a [formidable challenge](#). The party had to cope with a broken state, a destroyed economy and a totally impoverished population. At that time, China was one of the poorest countries in the world. With more than a fifth of the world's population, the GDP was barely 4.5 percent of the world total. The standard of living, expressed in GDP per capita, was half that of Africa and one-sixth that of Latin America. Average life expectancy was 35 years.[vi]

Meeting those challenges required a strong, centralized and disciplined party. But that was not the only reason that it did and still does. The country's proportions are enormous. China has the size of a continent: it is 40 times the size of the United Kingdom and has as many inhabitants as Western Europe, Eastern Europe, the Arab countries, Russia and Central Asia combined. Translating that into the European situation would mean that Egypt or Kyrgyzstan would have to be governed from Brussels. Given these proportions, the very large differences between the regions, and the enormous challenges the country faces, a strong cohesive force is necessary to keep the country governable and to lead it vigorously. [The Economist](#) says about this: "China's rulers believe the country cannot hold together without one-party rule as firm as an emperor's (and they may be right)".

In short, the current system in China is appropriate to the scale of the country and has its roots in the struggle against the Japanese occupation, against the reactionary Guomindang and against the terrible misery and backwardness in which the country had been plunged. From that struggle, the CPC has emerged as the country's leading power, a power that has set itself the task of restoring dignity, preserving the sovereignty of the Chinese nation, lifting the country out of underdevelopment, and striving for a humane, socialist society.

The burden of history

To paraphrase [Marx](#), "parties make their own history, but they do not make it under self-selected circumstances." For the CPC, those circumstances were particularly harsh. The country was underdeveloped and the economy had been totally destroyed. The Cold War raged in full force, subjecting the country to a technological embargo from the West. This lasted until 1971, when relations with the US improved.

At the beginning of the revolution there was a lot of assistance from the Soviet Union, but in 1958 a conflict broke out between the two countries. All assistance was stopped and Soviet technicians were withdrawn. Mao had counted on revolutions breaking out in several Third World countries. Those countries could then form a front and strengthen each other. However, those revolutions did not materialize and China was on its own.

In the early years, there was also a real military threat from the US. Twice, in 1954 and in 1958, the US president threatened [to use atomic weapons](#) against China. Mao also saw how the Soviet Union under Khrushchev began to take an increasingly capitalist course.

Rushing ahead

In those circumstances, Mao increasingly felt the need to accelerate the country's

development and overcome backwardness in a short period of time. He launched the slogan 'let's overtake England in fifteen years' time'. He thought he could compensate for the unfavorable conditions by a massive and incessant mobilization of the population.

The short sprint to Utopia led to reckless and foolish experiments. The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) was a voluntaristic attempt to bring about the rapid industrialization of the countryside, without any serious study or preparation. The party was inexperienced and had insufficient knowledge of economic laws. The overoptimistic attempt failed completely and led to a famine resulting in millions of deaths.[vii]

Mao feared that China would follow the same path as the Soviet Union. That is why he wanted to do everything possible to suppress the pro-capitalist ideas within his own party. To this end he launched the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).[viii] This mass mobilization got completely out of hand and eventually led to an anarchy, the counteracting of which even the army had to be deployed. The Cultural Revolution was a tragic period and did much damage to the CPC.

However, Mao's rushing ahead was not a total failure. Despite the blunders of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, China managed to feed its population quite quickly, unlike India, for example.[ix] During the first thirty years of the revolution, the country experienced a more than decent annual economic growth rate of 4.4 percent. The foundation was laid for the rapid industrial development that was to follow. During that period, per capita income [tripled](#) and the Human Development Index[x] increased by a factor of 4.5.[xi]

Economic reforms

Yet by the end of the period, the insight had grown that economic policy was due for a change of direction. The West still had an overwhelming scientific and technological monopoly, which left China particularly vulnerable. And economically, the country lost ground to the four Asian Tigers: Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

On the path toward communism, socialism is a long transitional phase in the course of which one had better not skip any stages. At least that was what the debacles of the recent years had taught. It was, according to Marx, the "historical mission of capitalism" to develop the productive forces (mainly technology).[xii] That's what the Chinese were now fully committed to.

In the first thirty years the emphasis had mainly been on the relations of production (property relations) and class struggle. Everything had been collectivized as much as possible and the aim had been to achieve as much equality as possible. From 1978 the emphasis was placed on the development of the productive forces.[xiii]

To achieve this, two tracks were followed. First, the communists integrated the dynamizing effects of market forces into the country's economic development. Private capital was allowed. There was still firm planning at the macro level, drawn up under the direction of the central government and geared to global development goals. But the rigid and hyper-centralized planning of the initial phase was relaxed and decentralized. The metaphor of the "[bird in a cage](#)" was used for this purpose. The bird (market forces) has some freedom to fly around, but it cannot leave the cage (central planning). The future will show whether this controlled market-oriented dynamic can be kept in check.

A second track was to attract foreign capital. Foreign investors were welcomed on the condition that they made some of their technology and know-how available. In many Third World countries, opening up the economy to foreign countries – trade, investment and financial capital flows – has had disastrous consequences. In China, this opening has been successful because it was driven by domestic needs and objectives, and because it was fully integrated into a solid development strategy.[xiv]

Success story

This two-track strategy has paid off. From 1978 to 2020, the annual average growth was nearly [10 percent](#). That is the [fastest economic growth](#) ever recorded by a major country. In 75 years, China will have risen from being almost the poorest country in the world to a high-income economy. The country has also managed to keep its economy afloat in the storms of the last 25 years: the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the dot-com crisis in 2001, the homegrown SARS crisis, the great financial crisis of 2008 and now most recently the COVID crisis. Reflecting on the 2008 crisis, Richard McGregor, a former *Financial Times* journalist, wrote that “China was better equipped than just about anywhere in the world to handle the sudden downturn”.[xv]

Great strides have also been made in technology and science. Today, Chinese companies are widely recognized as [world leaders](#) in 5G telecommunications equipment, high-speed trains, high-voltage transmission lines, renewable energies, new energy vehicles, digital payments, artificial intelligence and [many other fields](#). In 2018, China overtook the US in the number of [scientific publications](#), in 2019 this was the case for the number of [patents](#).

Since 1981, 853 million Chinese have been lifted out of poverty, according to [the UN](#). That’s 76 percent of all people lifted out of poverty worldwide from 1981 until now. [Antonio Guterres](#), Secretary-General of the United Nations calls it “the greatest anti-poverty achievement in history”. The most important social development indicator of a country is child mortality. At 9 per thousand, China’s score is outstanding. If India, for example, provided the same medical care and social support to its citizens as China, 680,000 fewer Indian children would die each year.[xvi]

While wages are stagnating or declining in many countries, they have [tripled](#) in China in the last decade. Between 1978 and 2015, the income of the 50 percent poorest Chinese rose [by 400 percent](#), while in the US it fell by one percent during that period.

The resilience of Chinese society has clearly emerged during the past COVID crisis. The [WHO](#) describes the Chinese approach as “perhaps the most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history”. The important role of the communist party in this has not gone unnoticed by a magazine like [The Economist](#): “China’s efforts have involved not just mobilizing the obvious people like medical staff, community health workers, scientists and police. It has also made extensive use of the party’s network of branches to provide manpower and management expertise for a party-led operation on a scale rarely seen in the post-Mao era.”

Drawbacks

This success story also has important downsides. The introduction of market elements from 1978 onwards has reintroduced capitalist exploitation, albeit in a controlled manner. The existing gap between urban and rural areas has widened further. A huge group of 280

million “internal migrants” possess fewer social rights and are often discriminated against. Grandparents often have to step in to raise their grandchildren. The one-child policy (from 1979 to 2015) has led to illegal selective abortions and a male surplus of more than [30 million](#), with all the social consequences this entails.

Rapid economic development caused abuse of power and widespread corruption. The admission of private capital led to the creation of a top layer of capitalists. Both phenomena are difficult to reconcile with socialist ideals. Individualism and careerism, consumerism and the desire for luxury and glamour have affected the ideology of the CPC.

Great legitimacy

However, the downsides do not outweigh the upsides. The party can count on a broad popular support. Almost [three-quarters of Chinese](#) say they support the one-party system. In fact, support for the central government in recent years has been between [eighty](#) and [ninety percent](#). That score is head and shoulders above that in Western countries. According to [The Economist](#), anything but a friend of China, this should come as no surprise: “The Communist Party of China has a powerful story to tell. Despite its many faults, it has created wealth and hope that an older generation would have found unimaginable.” This also explains the great political stability of the past thirty years.

From a Western point of view this is too difficult to understand because in our view Chinese society is not democratic. But for most Chinese, democracy primarily means governing in the [public interest](#) and good governance.[xvii] We place much more emphasis on how and by whom decisions are made. The Chinese attach more importance to [the quality of their politicians](#) than to selection processes.

According to China expert Daniel Bell, the political system in China is a combination of meritocracy at the top, democracy at the bottom and room for experimentation at the intermediate levels. Political leaders are chosen on the basis of their merit and before they reach the top they go through a very tough process of formation, practice and evaluation. Direct elections are held at municipal level and for provincial party congresses. Political, social or economic innovations are first tested on a smaller scale (a few cities or provinces) and introduced on a large scale after thorough evaluation and adjustment.[xviii]

In addition, the central government conducts [opinion polls](#) on a very regular basis that evaluate government performance in the areas of social security, public health, employment and the environment, as well as polling the popularity of local leaders. Based on this, the policy is adjusted or corrected if necessary.

The political system certainly has room for improvement. Chinese leaders themselves explicitly acknowledge this. Nor are they afraid to openly admit their mistakes.[xix] The quest for a better decision-making system is far from over. But the current system has proved its worth. According to [Francis Fukuyama](#) “the most important strength of the Chinese political system is its ability to make large, complex decisions quickly, and to make them relatively well, at least in economic policy. China adapts quickly, making difficult decisions and implementing them effectively.”

Challenges

The list of challenges facing the CPC and the country is long. We limit ourselves to the most

daunting. At the social level, there is the necessity of redistributing wealth and the question of the “internal migrants”. In the economic field, there is the question of ageing, the transition to an internal market and the huge debts. At the political level, there is the harmonious coexistence of the various ethnicities, the suppression of nationalist resentments, the tackling of corruption, the further development of the rule of law, a further democratization of decision-making, keeping the capitalist top layer in check, restoring socialist morality and filling the ideological vacuum. On an ecological level, there is of course global warming, mainly to be coped with by the phasing out of coal, but also by the elimination of environmental pollution.

The clash of the century

The biggest challenge, however, is the growing threat emanating from the US. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dismantling of the Soviet Union, the US established itself as the undisputed leader of world politics. [The Pentagon](#) in 1992: “Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival. We must maintain the mechanism for deterring potential competitors from *even aspiring* to a larger regional or global role.” (o.c.) Thirty years later, China has become the main “rival” to be reined in. As Domenico Losurdo puts it, “China remains the last major area to escape US political influence, it is the last frontier to be conquered”.^[xx]

That’s why the US has identified the People’s Republic of China as its main enemy. As part of the 2019 budget talks, [Congress](#) declared that “long-term strategic competition with China is a principal priority for the United States”. This is about a comprehensive strategy that must be pursued on several fronts. The US is trying to thwart, or as they themselves say, to “blunt” China’s economic and technological ascent.^[xxi]

If necessary, this will be done by extra-economic means. The military strategy towards China follows two tracks: an arms race and an encirclement of the country.^[xxii] Five strategic themes are used by the U.S. to incite hostility towards China: Taiwan, the Uyghurs, Hong Kong, Tibet and the South China Sea. They serve on the one hand to weaken China internally and on the other hand to turn public opinion worldwide against China^[xxiii] and thus justify future aggressions.

[Warmongering](#) is in the DNA of the US. The Yankees have fought in 227 years of their 244-year history. Over the past twenty years, they dropped an average of 46 bombs a day. Obama, the president who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, bombed seven countries simultaneously in 2016. The last war China fought was in 1979 against Vietnam. Except for the border incident with India of 2020, the rise of China in East Asia has been remarkably conflict-free.^[xxiv]

Meanwhile, Trump’s unbalanced grandstanding on China has turned Joe Biden into a [well-thought-out doctrine](#). That is very disturbing. “The increasingly aggressive statements and actions being taken by the US government in regard to China (...) constitute a threat to world peace and are an obstacle to humanity successfully dealing with extremely serious common issues which confront it such as climate change, control of pandemics, racist discrimination and economic development” the [No Cold War](#) Declaration states.

Beyond the Western perspective

In his influential book *Clash of Civilizations* Huntington wrote, “if it occurs, China’s

emergence as a major power will dwarf any comparable phenomena during the last half of the second millennium”.^[xxv] It could not be otherwise. The emergence of the US as a superpower from 1870 already profoundly changed world relations. But China’s 1978 population was 24 times larger than the US then, and it had a growth path more than twice as high.^[xxvi] After a century of imperialist wars, occupations and humiliations, the country with a civilization that is thousands of years old is reclaiming its place on the world stage.

Until recently, the West had an absolute monopoly on technology, weapons of mass destruction, monetary and financial systems, access to natural resources and mass communications. With that monopoly it could control or subjugate the countries of the South.^[xxvii] The West, led by the US, is now in danger of losing that monopoly. A unipolar world is giving way to a multipolar world. China, and in its wake India and other emerging countries, are overturning world relations at an accelerated pace and transforming the world in a way never seen before.

For the first time in recent history, a poor, underdeveloped country has risen to become an economic superpower in no time. China has shown the world that the Western model is not the only way to modernize.^[xxviii] The 2008 financial crisis and the disastrous handling of the COVID crisis in the West has further challenged our capitalist model.

This is a confronting thought for us. That’s why we find it extremely difficult to look at China in an open-minded way. Martin Jacques puts it this way: “Any discussion is almost invariably colored by a value judgement that, because China has a Communist government, we already know the answers to all the important questions. It is a mindset formed in the Cold War that leaves us ill-equipped to understand the nature of Chinese politics or the current regime.”^[xxix]

Whatever the case, the Chinese project is far from finished. The communist ideal is far from being achieved; the system contains too many serious imbalances for that. It is a long process that is in full swing. Extraordinary results have been achieved, but there is still a long and difficult road ahead, full of contradictions, risks and challenges. It took the French Revolution more than eighty years of mistakes, experiments and bloody wars to form a [stable parliamentary republic](#). In any case, the Chinese leaders see their project in the context of a “[longue durée](#)”. For our judgments we had better take into account a similar long-term perspective.

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Notes

[i] Between 1839 and 1860, [two opium wars](#) were fought between Britain and China. Britain smuggled opium into China, causing millions to become addicted. When China took action against this, the British launched a war against China. The wars basically served to keep China in line and impose unfavorable trade terms.

[ii] *Sesam Atlas bij de wereldgeschiedenis, Deel 2*, Apeldoorn 1989, p. 91; Shouy B., *An Outline History of China*, Beijing 2002, p. 388v.

[iii] Yongnian Z., *The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor*, London 2010, p. 12-4.

[iv] McGregor R., *The Party. The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers*, New York 2010, p. 123; Yongnian Z., op. cit., p. 60; Chuntao X. (ed.), *Why and How The CPC Works in China*, Beijing 2011, p. 107

[v] Jacques M., *When China Rules the World. The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World*, London, 2009, p. 92.

[vi] Maddison A., *The World Economy. A Millennial Perspective*, OESO 2001, p. 263, 304 and 330; Hobsbawm E., *Een eeuw van uitersten. De twintigste eeuw 1914-1991*, Utrecht 1994, p. 540; Chuntao X. (ed.), op. cit., p. 72.

[vii] Losurdo D., *Fuir l'histoire? La révolution russe et la révolution chinoise aujourd'hui*, Paris 2007, p. 69-72 and 175-6; Chuntao X. (ed.), op. cit., p. 29-30.

With the Great Leap Forward, the [death rate in China](#) doubled from 12 per thousand to 25.4 per thousand in 1960, after which it fell back to 14 and 10 per thousand in 1961 and 1962 respectively. In the deadliest year, 1960, however, that death rate hardly differed from that of India. It was 24.8 per thousand, which was a “normal” for India.

[viii] Launched by Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution was a revolt by Chinese students and workers to preserve socialist gains. Targeted were some party bosses and executives in the state apparatus who had settled into a comfortable position of power and cared less and less about the communist ideals of equality and solidarity. This happened against the background of a growing (political and ideological) distance from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which was accused of pursuing a pro-capitalist course (“revisionism”).

Called “social re-education”, many intellectuals, executives and students were temporarily sent to the countryside to do physical labor and learn to show solidarity with the peasants or workers. The first years of the Cultural Revolution were particularly turbulent and at one point the army had to be deployed to restore order.

[ix] By 1976, food production had increased by half compared to 1965. Petroleum production increased sevenfold during that period. Chuntao X. (ed.), op. cit., pp. 34-5.

In India, the [Global Hunger Index](#) (GHI) is 27.5, placing it among the group of countries with a serious problem. There are nearly [200 million Indians](#) who are starving. China belongs to the category of ‘low problem’ countries (GHI < 5).

[x] The Human Development Index (HDI) is a measure of a country's development based on, among other things, GDP per capita, standard of living, education and health. The HDI is being developed by UNDP, the UN body that deals with development and poverty in the world.

[xi] Jacques M., op. cit., p. 99.

[xii] “It is the historical mission of the capitalist system of production to raise these material foundations of the new mode of production to a certain degree of perfection.” Marx K., [Capital III](#), p. 306. Marx elaborated on this theme in *De Grundrisse*.

[xiii] Thompson I., ‘China and the ‘socialist market economy’, in *China: Revolution and Counterrevolution*, San Francisco 2008, 87-97.

[xiv] Herrera R. & Long Z., *La Chine est-elle capitaliste ?*, Paris 2019, p. 29-30.

[xv] McGregor R., op. cit., p. 28.

[xvi] Calculated based on UNICEF, [The State Of The World's Children 2019](#), New York, p. 193-197.

[xvii] Shambaugh D., *China's Communist Party. Atrophy and Adaptation*, Washington D.C. 2009, p. 37.

[xviii] Bell D., *The China Model. Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton 2015, p. 179-188.

[xix] For example, before and during the [Eighteenth Congress](#), the country's major problems were listed one by one, discussed and turned into action items.

[xx] Losurdo D., op. cit., p. 18.

[xxi] Rush Doshi, the new China director on President Biden's National Security Council, describes this subversion strategy as "[asymmetric blunting](#)".

[xxii] For a more comprehensive treatment of this, see Vandepitte M., [Trump and China: Towards a Cold or Hot War?](#)

[xxiii] This objective has already been quite successful. According to a recent [Pew Research Center](#) survey in 14 countries, unfavorable views on China have skyrocketed in the past year. The five strategic points mentioned and the reporting about them play a large part in this.

[xxiv] Jacques M., op. cit., p. 315.

[xxv] Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York 1996, p. 216.

[xxvi] Maddison A., op. cit., p. 183, 262 en 292; Herrera R. & Long Z., op. cit., p. 53.

[xxvii] Amin S., *Obsolescent Capitalism*, London 2003, p. 63-4.

[xxviii] McGregor R., op. cit., p. 272

[xxix] Jacques M., op. cit., p. 206.

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