

Has the Chinese Communist Party transformed itself since 1978?

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STEVEN HAWKES, AUG 28 2011

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has ruled as the sole source of political power since founding the People's Republic of China in 1949. Since then, it has undergone significant transformation, as has the entire landscape of Chinese politics. This essay examines how the CCP has transformed itself since 1978 to overcome the legacies of the Cultural Revolution, which considerably undermined its legitimacy as the vanguard party of the revolution, and the all-encompassing impact of Mao Zedong. Central to the transformation of the CCP is that its rationale has shifted to the goal of political stability and regularity to facilitate economic development and modernisation, a pragmatic mindset inextricably linked to that of Deng Xiaoping's leadership. However, the CCP remains committed at least in principle to 'socialism', albeit 'with Chinese characteristics' and continues to emphasise this in official ideology as its source of legitimacy. By instigating huge changes in all aspects of Chinese society in the reform period, the CCP also inevitably transformed itself, and has largely proven to be adaptable to contemporary issues and capable of rising to the challenges of the modern world whilst maintaining its unrelenting dominance on the Chinese political system.

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP found itself in a state of organisational disarray, with weak discipline and a lack of unity compounded by the factionalism and arbitrariness that was rife in this period. The very legitimacy of the CCP had been undermined by the 'notion that the Party itself might endanger the continuation of socialist revolution' (Young 1989: 64) and the chaos and instability engineered by the omnipotent Chairman Mao's philosophy of continuous revolution. A need to restore stability was evident to Deng Xiaoping and the CCP leadership, culminating in the Third Plenum of the 11th CCP Central Committee in December 1978, which sanctioned a 'Shift in Focus' away from Mao's brand of politics (Schoenhals 1999: 598).

Perhaps the pursuit of stability, predictability, and regularity could be pinpointed as the defining feature in the transformation of the CCP since 1978. Political stability has been viewed as an 'intrinsic value' and an essential requirement for the economic progress that has become the central objective of the CCP since 1978 (Young 1998: 130). This stability is intended to strengthen its position as the ruling party and improve governing capacity in order to promote the 'developmentalist ideology' (115) of maximum possible economic growth and modernisation throughout China.

To this end, a decisive 'turn from class struggle to economic modernisation' occurred (Fewsmith 2001: 9) and the pervasive role of ideology declined with the 'Shift in Focus' after 1978. Many of Mao's ideas were repudiated, including that of the centrality of the class struggle and continuous revolution. The downgrading of class struggle for the CCP is evident in its 1982 definition change from the 'political party of the proletariat and its vanguard' to the 'vanguard of the Chinese working class', notably using a more neutral terminology (Saich 2004: 113). Furthermore, the 'deification of a supreme leader', referring to the personality cult of Mao Zedong, was heavily criticised (Blecher 1997: 125), despite allegations that Deng's authority later carried much the same power. Indeed, 'personality cults' are now banned by the CCP and the post of Chairman has been abolished. Focus has instead shifted to collective leadership and 'consultative mechanisms' such as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and think tanks (Harding 1986: 20) via democratic centralism within the CCP, rather than Mao's personalistic rule and the mass campaigns of the Cultural Revolution.

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The idea of 'managing the economy according to economic principles' (Schoenhals 1999: 599) is indicative of the focus on economic growth rather than ideological principles. This manifested in the 'hyper-pragmatist', concrete results-based orientation of the CCP after 1978 (Blecher 1997: 126). The idea of 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' largely served to legitimise economic liberalisation and reflected 'a definite commitment to modernisation and economic development' (Dreyer 2000: 331), whilst Deng's 'Four Cardinal Principles' and Jiang Zemin's 'Three Represents' reinforced CCP dominance. Increasingly, this 'Reconceptualisation of 'Politics'' has resulted in the CCP becoming 'an instrument of economics' (Young 1989: 66) by eradicating the practice of its revolutionary ideology. In contrast to the Maoist era, the CCP has restricted the sphere of 'politics' and permitted greater autonomy in the private realm in order to 'establish more ordered forms of political activity and create the environment of stability necessary for concentrating on the tasks of modernisation' (Mackerras 1998: 124).

A significant element of this transformation has been the institutionalisation of the Party, which sought to 'strengthen the Party organisation, to remedy deficiencies in the operational procedures, and to change the composition of both membership and leading bodies' (Mackerras 1998: 110). A variety of measures were introduced in order to achieve these ends, and they have been successful to a certain degree. The emphasis the CCP placed on the observance of internal rules and discipline magnified, as reflected in the establishment of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission in 1977 as a 'control device' to 'strengthen party discipline and internal party democracy' (Wang 2002: 78). Additionally, the revival of the Central Secretariat, destroyed by the Cultural Revolution, intended to improve efficiency and organisation by handling the daily affairs of the Party (Young 1989: 81). These developments show an attempt by the CCP to reinforce organisational structure, whilst also formally regularising certain procedures, such as the meeting of the National Party Congress every five years, in an effort to retain stability.

The general theme in personnel changes within the CCP after 1978, both for membership and leadership, has been the recruitment of 'those who have qualities useful in economic modernisation' (Mackerras 1998: 113) rather than the ideological and peasant-based focus during the Maoist era. New criteria for recruitment and promotion focused on the 'Four Transformations' aimed at creating a 'younger, better educated, more vocationally qualified, and revolutionised' CCP member (Young 1989: 78). Professional expertise and education have become regarded as virtues for the CCP, marking a significant shift from the anti-intellectual vigour of the Maoist period. Statistics seem to show the success of these attempted personnel changes. For example, within the CCP Central Committee delegates are more educated, more technocratic, and younger, with the average age dropping from 65.9 in 1977 to 55.2 by 1987 (Saich 2004: 99).

Furthermore, political participation by the private sector, such as by private entrepreneurs and capitalists, has been permitted as the CCP attempts to reflect its status as 'the faithful representative of the interests of all the Chinese people', adopted by Party Statutes in 1982 (Saich 2004: 113). Party membership has been opened up far more broadly than ever before, evident by the 'radical shift towards the highly educated in party recruitment' (Walder 2006: 23). The composition of the CCP today bears witness to this transformation, with the prevalence of educated professionals and experts bearing little resemblance to the peasant-dominated force of 1949. This 'infusion of youth and talent' is above all aimed at facilitating the ambitious economic development program of the PRC (Rosen 1990: 56).

Moreover, the post-1978 transformation also included mechanisms for enforcing the retirement of members in order to reinvigorate the Party, and term limits have been set for certain posts. The CCP has also 'institutionalised regular cadre rotations and exchanges' in an attempt to curb localism and corruption and increase central control and professionalism (Yang 2004: 5). In an attempt to coherently unite and standardise both present and future Party leadership, the Central Party School was reformed in 1982. This placed an emphasis on 'modern scientific culture and knowledge', marking a retreat from the solely ideological education of prior years (Wibowo 2006: 145) and links in with the post-Cultural Revolution 'rectification', which sought to improve both ideological and organisational coherence within the CCP (Mackerras 1998: 112). Furthermore there have been attempts to improve 'party style', such as the informal practices, norms and relationships that affect the functioning and actual work of the Party.

Further transformation occurred in the legal realm of the PRC, as it was deemed to be an urgent matter to rebuild and strengthen the legal system in order to 'restore and maintain social order and safeguard the economic reform' (Zou

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Keyuan 2006: 77). Reforms were aimed at moving away from the anarchy of the Cultural Revolution and providing protection for both cadres and the masses against arbitrary arrest and detention. However, although a 'Socialist legal system' does now exist, it does so in a manner that 'will not threaten the party's authority and political stability' (Wang 2002: 156-7). Indeed, the idea that 'the Party monitors itself' remains unchallenged, and the CCP continues to reject any idea of outside scrutiny (Rosen 1990: 85). The events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 provide a startling indicator of the Party's continued rejection of mass campaigns and democracy movements as political oversight.

The CCP's transformation from revolutionary party to ruling party in a stable and economically prosperous environment is also reflected in the changing dynamic with the People's Liberation Army. Whilst the PLA remains the Party's army, it has been 'visibly institutionalised and exercised prudently' to reflect the 'effort to establish a rulership based on rational-legal principles for the sake of generating greater predictability of governance' (You Ji 2006: 59). The relationship between CCP and PLA remains close, and it remains the army of the Party, but civilian supremacy over the generals has been strongly asserted in recent years.

However, there are reasons to suggest that the CCP is not as unified and stable as its transformation since 1978 makes it appear. Programs to reform 'party style' have largely failed, and personalistic ties (*guanxi*) are dominant, leading to outright corruption in many cases (Young 1998: 121). Meanwhile, localism remains an important limitation to centralised control, and party indiscipline is rife, as the CCP struggles to maintain stability in the face of the many consequences of socio-economic change. However, Hu Jintao's notion of 'Scientific Development' is aimed at toning down the relentless pursuit of economic growth and 'takes into account social development and environmental protection' (Brodsgaard 2006: 8), reflecting an adaptable approach on behalf of the CCP.

Overall, it seems clear that the CCP has undergone a significant transformation since 1978. Many aspects of the Party including its composition and the declining role of ideology would be unrecognisable to the Maoist era, whilst Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have emphasised 'absolute stability at any cost', a striking contrast from Mao's chaotic regime (Schoenhals 1999: 596). The importance of maintaining political stability in order to facilitate economic development has become central to the Party's role, and the declining significance of ideology has resulted in a 'shift in the party's fundamental legitimacy to its capacity to deliver the economic goods' (Saich 2004: 119). To a large extent, the institutionalisation and reform program has achieved this stability, but major problems such as widespread corruption remain. However, the Party has adopted a dynamic approach to development and appears flexible in dealing with the challenges of the contemporary world whilst still maintaining its iron grip on power.

Essentially, the CCP is 'continuously adjusting its institutional framework to guarantee economic reforms and political stability on one hand, and to accommodate drastic changes resulting from socio-economic development on the other' (Zheng Yongnian 2010: 43). The ultimate and all-important objective remains to maintain CCP rule over China, and it seems that the Party is adaptable on every other front in order to support this goal. Whilst still relying upon the rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong Thought, the reality bears little resemblance, and the implicit ideology of economic development directly contradicts the Party's roots in many ways. However, it remains important in legitimising the one-party rule that the CCP enjoys in China, although 'a mixture of more secular and pragmatic elements' (Harding 1986: 30) complements this. Overall, it seems that the CCP remains committed to maintaining stability and improving its governing capacity to facilitate economic development, and it has done this by means of both ideological and institutional change. Whilst for now this has proven sufficient in maintaining its dominance, it remains to be seen whether it can adapt to the ensuing socio-economic consequences of its own reforms in a society where it becomes less and less relevant.

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