

Outliving the Leninist Extinction: The Curious Case of the CCP's Longevity

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Twenty years ago, many observers were confident that the days of Communist Party rule in China were numbered. The main PRC political question of the day for them was not whether the CCP would survive for another twenty or fifty years, and if so how it would adapt and change to do so but when exactly and via what chain of events the CCP would be forced to share power or be toppled.

The main reason for this was that 1989 had witnessed a major challenge to the CCP that many thought it had only barely managed to withstand. This came in the form of a protest wave that brought a million people into the streets of Beijing and onto the capital's biggest plaza, Tiananmen Square (hence one shorthand for the struggle became the "Tiananmen" uprising), and tens or hundreds of thousands into the central districts of scores of other cities. The Party survived, but only after Deng and the other oligarchs of his generation (most, like him, survivors of the epic Long March of the 1930s that Mao had led) took a series of drastic steps. Most notably, they ordered troops to use force to quell the protests, triggering an early June massacre in Beijing (this earned the struggle its other best known appellation, the Chinese one of "Liu Si," meaning "6/4," for the date that saw the most bloodshed in the capital) and a campaign of mass arrests and some bloodshed in other cities (Chengdu was the metropolis with the second highest death toll), and they stripped Zhao Ziyang of his official posts and placed him under house arrest (due to his favoring of a soft line toward the protests).

It is also important to stress, of course, that 1989 saw Solidarity rise to power in Poland (winning its first election on the very day, June 4, that PLA soldiers were firing into crowds in Beijing), the Velvet Revolution take place in Prague, and the Berlin Wall crumble. Communist regimes fell that year in Budapest, Bucharest, and other European capitals as well. And though the Soviet Union would remain united and stay a Communist Party-run country until 1991, the events of 1989 had made it seem very likely that something was sure to give there in the very near future as well, though whether implosion or radical reform was on the horizon was unclear.

In the wake of these domestic and international developments, it became the conventional wisdom outside of China in the wake of the June 4th Massacre that the group responsible for this brutality (officials who immediately asserted that the only martyrs worthy of the name on the date in question had been soldiers who had shown great restraint when dealing with a “counter-revolutionary riot,” only to be slain by members of unruly mobs) could not possibly hold onto power for long. It could not last, commentators claimed, due to the magnitude of the legitimacy crisis it faced and the tidal wave of movement away from all forms of Communist Party rule that was sweeping the globe. The notion that the CCP was unlikely to endure was not just commonplace in 1990 but remained an article of faith for many Western journalists, academics and policy makers alike through to the turn of the millennium, though there began to be more and more dissenting voices during the first years of the new century.ⁱ

The persistence of the assumption that the CCP was sure to fall is demonstrated by the amount of attention generated by a pair of high profile books, lawyer and pundit Gordon G. Chang's *The Coming Collapse of China* and longtime *Far Eastern Economic Review* correspondent (and now political scientist) Bruce Gilley's *China's Democratic Future*. These books have often been described as delineating the boundaries of a major Western debate about the PRC—perhaps even *the* major one.ⁱⁱ But actually both authors had much in common, as each took it for granted that dramatic political change was in the offing—they just expressed diametrically opposed views on whether China's impending move away from Communist Party rule would be traumatic or smooth.

The tide has shifted recently, however, as many now agree that, barring unexpected events, the CCP is likely to be with us for some time to come. It has, in fact, become a Party that can claim, playing on a famous phrase attributed to Mark Twain, that reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated.

There is no one factor responsible for the surprising longevity of the Beijing regime. A complex mix of developments lies behind its ability to endure so long after influential publications appeared in the heady aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall that proclaimed the arrival of the “End of History” (meaning the disappearance of all state socialist regimes) and the “Leninist Extinction” (a term that needs no special gloss).ⁱⁱⁱ At the very least, a full account of the ability of this particular alive and kicking Leninist regime to prove so many pundits wrong needs to take the following four things into account:

1) *The efforts the regime has made since the Tiananmen Crisis to co-opt potentially restive groups.* The decision by China's leaders to let entrepreneurs join the Communist Party is one example of this sort of co-optation. Post-1989 moves to allow intellectuals to buy a greater range of books and travel abroad more easily has likewise contributed to minimizing, though not completely doing away with, disaffection with the Party in an important social group. There are also important ways in which the Party had tried to minimize discontent among college students, such as backing off from micromanaging everyday campus social life.

2) *The Party's historical ties to anti-imperialist struggles and skill at making the most of this connection in propaganda drives.* This is something that holds equally true for the other enduring Communist Party regimes—those of North Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba. These organizations all make overstated claims about their roles in saving their countries from imperialists, but all are justified in asserting ties to independence movements. In the Chinese case, the Party's role in anti-Japanese resistance battles is celebrated whenever the regime's legitimacy needs burnishing, and China's role in the Korean War (presented as an effort to free a neighboring government from foreign domination) is also commemorated.

A converse point is worth stressing to draw attention to the importance of this factor. Namely, most of the Communist Party regimes that fell late in the 20th century, such as those that had held sway in Poland and Hungary before 1989, were thought of as outside impositions, governments that were beholden to a foreign power. Their rise was widely understood as having undermined rather than bolstered the cause of national independence.

3) *The CCP has managed to dramatically raise the standard of living and availability of consumer goods within its leading cities—something none of the Communist Party regimes that fell late in the last century managed to do.* Purely political concerns, including frustration relating to issues of freedom speech, contributed to dissatisfaction with the Communist regimes that fell in 1989, as did a sense that these governments were foreign impositions, but so, too, did materials issues. People living in East Berlin, for example, knew that on the other side of the Berlin Wall, those residing in what had formerly part of the same city could shop at much more attractive department stores and supermarkets. Comparable things could have been said in 1989 about the contrast between Guangzhou and Shenzhen and the nearby city of Hong Kong (then still a Crown Colony of Britain), but the difference has grown much subtler. State socialist regimes in Europe claimed that they were not only morally superior to capitalist ones but could compete in material terms. They could not, and this contributed to their fall.^{iv} China's regime has done a better job at quite literally delivering the goods, and this contributes to its longevity.

4) *The government's flexible response to protest.* The post-1989 period has seen the Chinese authorities use harsh measures to deal with some kinds of unrest and use extraordinary measures to limit awareness of what has occurred, but taken a less draconian and more open stance toward others sorts of resistance, even at times punishing local officials singled out for criticism by protesters.^v This point deserves particularly close attention, given how much attention the Western press gives to patterns of dissent and moments of upheaval in the PRC, and the fact that

according to the Chinese government's own figures, there are tens of thousands of crowd actions ever year, including many that involves large groups and violence.

The way that the regime responds to challenges from below is clearly important, and the calculus that can tip the official response toward or away from naked repression is complex, as is that which determines whether there will be a complete or merely partial effort to stem the flow of information about what has occurred. One thing that clearly matters in determining official responses is the social composition of struggles: protests involving member of more than one occupational or economic group are seen as particularly dangerous. Another thing that makes a difference is how widely dispersed dissenting actors are: tightly localized events tend to be treated more leniently. A third thing that can move the regime toward cracking down harder, both on protesters and on the ability of domestic and foreign journalists to cover events, is how well organized the participants in an outburst seem to be. The less evidence of careful coordination there is, the more likely that efforts will be made to mollify rather than strike terror into crowds, and the more likely that reporters will be able to cover the event.

This breakdown provides part of the explanation for one of the regime's campaigns of repression that has most baffled foreign observers: the quick moves it took to crush the Falun Gong sect just over a decade ago, and the resoluteness of its policy toward the group ever since. When the crackdown began, the group in question had never engaged in a violent protest, and seemed to outsiders at least to be simply a spiritual movement that was led by a man named Li Hongzhi, who had some admittedly unusual ideas (claims to powers that many Westerners would

consider akin to the magical) but did not have a political agenda. The fact that the Chinese government viewed Falun Gong as a threat is easy to understand, however, if the statements above are taken into account. This is because its adherents came from all walks of life (even officials had joined it), were spread out throughout the country (there were cells in many cities), and showed a capability for coordinated action (as witnessed by 10,000 protesters appearing, seemingly out of nowhere, to hold the 1999 sit-in demanding an end to official criticism of the group).

Other reasons have been given for the ruthless campaign against Falun Gong. A leading scholar of the subject, historian David Ownby, for example, stresses the ideological challenge that Falun Gong posed to the CCP, even before it began to present the Party as an evil organization (something that took place after the crackdown against its members began). Ownby argues, convincingly, that the CCP was threatened by Li Hongzhi offering a novel fusion of Chinese traditions and modern “science” (what his critics call “superstitions,” Li insists are “scientific” ideas), for the Party claims a monopoly on bringing together what it means to be both Chinese and to be modern (defined via the “scientific” socialism of Marx).^{vi}

There is much to be said for Ownby’s argument, and there are also other ways in which the response to Falun Gong needs to be seen as a special case. For example, CCP leaders are well aware that during imperial times, Chinese regimes were sometimes weakened or overthrown by millenarian religious movements, including some that began as quiescent self-help sects. And the Party is especially concerned about protests that have ties with charismatic figures, a term that fits Li Hongzhi well. This said, the response to the group still illustrates the general

pattern described above of struggles being treated as most serious when they are multi-class, multi-local and organized.

Before leaving behind the subject of responses to protest, several additional things are worth noting. One is the significance of geography and ethnicity in determining whether a hard or soft line toward unrest will be taken. The other is that the regime's willingness to admit that tens of thousands of protests take place annually and to treat some of these with relative lenience could be interpreted as a sign not of the government's weakness but of its relative self-confidence.

The harsh measures used to quell upheavals in Tibet and Xinjiang (where disturbances and acts of state violence occurred in 2008 and 2009, respectively) illustrate the first of these two points. Force definitely tends to be used much more swiftly, and greater efforts made to limit freedom of expression and the easy flow of information, when unrest occurs in frontier zones where large percentages of the population do not belong to the majority "Han" ethnic group.

Turning to the second point, political scientist Kevin O'Brien has made a strong case for seeing the state's admission that many protests occur as a sign of regime strength. He argues that it is a mistake to treat reports that many Chinese have grievances and act on them to bring about the ouster of corrupt officials and the like as indicators of weakness. If, as sometimes happens, the government is ready to not just admit that protests are occurring but allow people to let off steam without responding harshly, this may be a sign of self-confidence.^{vii}

I have lingered so long on protest here because, while scholars outside of China have mostly moved away from predicting the CCP's imminent demise, and the

best journalists covering the PRC have done so as well, popular Western discussions of China often begin with the assertion that there is something unnatural about the Communist Party being in charge there, so long after the “End of History” (the phrase a popular 1992 book used for the close of the era of state socialist governments) was proclaimed.^{viii} The fact that crowds are continually taking action in varied parts of China is cited in such analyses as “proof” that the long-delayed end of CCP rule is finally about to arrive. I have tried here to reframe the issues, stressing that the many outbursts of collective action that take place each year are not all of a piece (they rang from rowdy small-scale, localized tax strikes to low key urban gatherings by neighbors concerned about new chemical plants); meet with varied official responses; and do not necessarily indicate that the regime is on its last legs or that China is about to democratize overnight—though they certainly may be moving the PRC toward becoming a different, somewhat more open polity, albeit in a slow and uneven manner.^{ix}

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There are four final points about the riddle of CCP longevity that I want to mention in bringing this draft to a close:

- 1) *Where this puzzle is concerned, analysts have sometimes tried to place the pieces into the jigsaw the wrong way around.* Consider, for example, the relevance of the events that took place in Central and Eastern Europe in the last years of the previous century. Even though many assumed in the late 1980s and early 1990s that the rise of Solidarity and related events that trimmed down the number of state socialist regimes in power made it *more*

likely that the CCP would fall, a good case be made for the idea that the opposite has actually been the case.

David Shambaugh and other scholars have stressed, appropriately, that we should be mindful of the seriousness with which China's leaders have studied developments in Eastern and Central Europe that ended with the fall of Communist Party regimes.^x The current residents of Zhongnanhai (the compound near Tiananmen Square where top CCP leaders continue to live in great secrecy, as they did in Mao's day) have looked long and hard at what happened elsewhere in 1989, and have had those working for official think tanks do the same. The goal of all this scrutiny has been to tease out lessons that will maximize the likelihood of a different outcome to China's legitimacy crisis than those that late in the last century brought an end to state socialism in Europe and the Soviet Union.

This learning process helps explain the way that the CCP has dealt with protests since 1989. It has often used the harshest measures toward precisely those struggles that seem to have potential to help the "Polish disease" (a catchphrase for a Solidarity-like movement, which is highly organized and bridges the divides between classes) take root in the Chinese body politic. It also helps explain why so much emphasis has been put on providing attractive consumer goods to potentially restive urban social groups. (Where this is concerned, though, a different sort of learning process has also mattered: the focus on raising living standards pre-dates the fall of

the Berlin Wall, and is link to Deng's admiration for and desire to learn from the successes of the long-lasting authoritarian regime in Singapore.

2) *The Party has gotten some lucky breaks when it comes to events in the world beyond the borders of the PRC.* It would be easy to assume that the international climate during the last years of the previous century and the first years of this one was not conducive to regimes that are linked to the ideas of Karl Marx. This is debatable, as the recent fate of the German philosopher has been complex: some have claimed that the events of 1989 proved him wrong, once and for all, but others, including some at the center or on the right of the political spectrum, have claimed to have been struck, upon reading or re-reading texts such as "The Communist Manifesto," by Marx's ideas about what we now call globalization.^{xi} What is clear, I think, is that recent trends in world affairs, even if bad for Marxism per se, have made it easier for the CCP to defend its distinctive current version of this creed.

Consider, for example, how well events of the 1990s fit in with the regime's assertion that China's national interest was best served by a strong state and emphasis on stability as something to be valued. Surely, the descent into chaos that Yugoslavia underwent in the 1990s was a godsend to any Beijing propagandist trying to argue for this point of view. The collapse of order in that part of Southeastern Europe and the intervention by NATO to protect Kosovo from Serbia in the late 1990s allowed the CCP to point out, indirectly if never quite in these precise terms, that no matter how dissatisfied someone might be to live in a *Communist* state, there was a less

appealing alternative out there: living in a *post-Communist* one like the unstable and war-torn regions that Tito had once governed. When NATO forces launched their strikes against Belgrade, this added a new twist to the situation, allowing the CCP to claim that a post-Communist era can involve not just economic collapse, domestic violence, and the breaking up of a country, but a loss of independence—something that is an especially sore point in a nation that suffered from imperialist encroachments between the 1840s and 1940s.

Other international developments of the past two decades have also made it easier rather than harder for the CCP to make the case for the continuation of its rule to the people it governs. The invasion of Iraq, for example, gave added support to official claims that the world is a dangerous place and that the U.N. is not always the ultimate power in determining whether international forces will move against a given state.

3) *The Party has a long history of experimentation, stretching back beyond the founding of the PRC in 1949.* There are long roots, in other words, to what some scholars are calling, usefully, the “adaptive authoritarianism”^{xii} of the contemporary regime—roots that go back to the era of Mao and his disciples, who tried many things in his day that departed dramatically from orthodox Marxist practice. During the worst periods of high Maoism (the late 1950s through mid-1970s), many insisted that a “bad” class status could be passed on from one generation to the next via bloodlines (something that defies the central tenet of Marxism that links class to one’s relationship to the means of

production), and well before that Mao had insisted that, in China's case, the peasantry, considered by Marx a conservative group, could serve as a radical vanguard one.

The fact that the Party, which for better and for worse was so ready to experiment in the past, is proving so ready to keep experimenting today, as it tries to stay in power, can thus be traced back to the Mao years and beyond. This is important to keep in mind, even if many of the specific experiments that the regime is trying now, such as treating Confucius as a hero worthy of veneration and claiming that "socialism with Chinese characteristics" can be achieved by expanding rather than limiting the importance of private property, are ones of which Mao would have thoroughly disapproved. So thoroughly that I would be tempted to describe these innovations as having set Mao turning over in his grave, in fact, but his preserved corpse remains on display in Tiananmen Square, and no one has reported seeing it spinning.

4) *The Party has raised not only standards of living (at least for those groups benefitting from as opposed to those being left behind by the economic take-off), but also the place of China within the global order.* This is a hard thing to calibrate (where exactly a country stands in the international pecking order) and it would be foolish to assume that it is something in which all citizens of the PRC take pride (some feel it insignificant). But there has definitely been a shift, which matters to some Chinese people, from China being viewed internationally as poor and weak to it being viewed as a place that must be

taken seriously, due to its economic clout, its regional centrality, and its increasingly important roles in global organizations.

Here, too, as with consumerism, the CCP benefits from being seen as a ruling group that can deliver the goods—in this case evidenced not by what is displayed at department stores but by the regularity with which the heads of state of the most powerful countries travel to Beijing and include PRC leaders in economic and political summits held abroad. International organizations also play a role in confirming a vision, which is based partly in official myth but also partly in tangible reality, that China is a once powerful country that was laid low for a time and has now risen again to a more natural status. The 2008 Beijing Games are, of course, the most significant example of this phenomenon, but the 2010 Shanghai Expo, though still under the radar screen in the West, is important too.

A little over a century ago, when international exhibitions and World's Fairs were still the most important mega-events (the Olympics back then was sometimes just a side show taking place in the shadow of a great exposition), China was seen as belonging to the category of countries that were not "advanced" enough to hold World's Fairs or to have their technologies displayed at them. It was seen, instead, as part of the coterie of countries of merely "exotic" interest, who would be represented at the event not by modern machines (big pieces of artillery were often popular in displays by advanced countries) but by their art, handicrafts, and even their people (World's Fairs often included "human zoo" effects, human being used as

objects). As art historian Lisa Claypool has noted, there was even a dispute at one 1903 International Exhibition held in Japan which had a hall devoted to displays of “primitive” culture that included a live man from China. This generated outrage on the part of some Chinese in Japan, who objected to the way their country was classified (though not to the idea of displaying people from what they saw as truly backward cultures).^{xiii} The early 1900s also saw the first works of fiction in which Chinese authors imagined a time in the future when China would be ready to host World’s Fairs.

One of the many things that the CCP can boast of is that under its watch, China has finally made the transition into the top tier of nations—the sort that can host events that involve state of the art technologies, not just be classes with the backward and “exotic” nations. By the end of 2010, moreover, the Party will be able to say that it has not just endured, but has been responsible for a two-part relay of prominent mega-events, one of which was the most technologically sophisticated Olympics (the most stunning venues and fireworks) and the other the most thoroughly wired Expo that the world has ever seen.

NOTES

ⁱ See, for example, Edward Friedman and Barrett L. McCormick, editors, *What If China Doesn't Democratize?* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), and Bruce Dickson, *China's Red Capitalists: The Party, Entrepreneurs, and Prospects for Political Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

ⁱⁱ Gordon G. Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001); and Bruce Gilley, *China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). For a work that describes these two books as setting the contours for the main American debate on China, see James Mann, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression* (New York: Viking, 2007). For of the *China Fantasy*, while claims that while it levels some appropriate broadsides at Chang and Gilley's viewpoints, Mann is wrong to suggest that only a very small number of clear-sighted individuals (himself included) were staking out other kinds of positions on the PRC, see Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "China Fantasies and China Policies," *World Policy Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Spring 2007), pp. 97-102.

ⁱⁱⁱ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992); and Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

^{iv} Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

^v For a typical recent case in point, see "China Dismisses Local Leaders after Angry Protest," a July 25, 2009, Associated Press report, accessed on that day at http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090725/ap_on_re_as/as_china_unrest.

^{vi} David Ownby, "China's War Against Itself," *New York Times*, February 15, 2001, which ends with the claim that Falun Gong's "evocation of a different vision of Chinese tradition and its contemporary value is now so threatening to the state and party because it denies them the sole right to define the meaning of Chinese nationalism, and perhaps of Chineseness." See also Ownby's book, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

^{vii} Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rural Protest," *Journal of Democracy*, 20 (3), July 2009, pp. 25-28.

^{viii} Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

^{ix} For a cogent argument for this vision of collective action, which also describes in detail some recent urban events, see George J. Gilboy and Benjamin L. Read, "Political and Social Reform in China: Alive and Walking," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 143-164.

^x David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

^{xi} For the recent rediscovery of "The Communist Manifesto" as a text that has prescient things to say about globalization, as well as citations to comments on this score by people such as Thomas Friedman not associated with the far left by any means, see "Afterword: Is the *Manifesto* Still Relevant?," in Philip Gaster, editor, *The*

Communist Manifesto: A Road Map to History's Most Important Political Document (Chicago: Haymarket, 2005).

^{xii} This term comes from the name given to a 2008 conference held at Harvard; for details, see http://www.wcfia.harvard.edu/conferences/08_china/overview ; a follow-up event is planned for the 2010 Association for Asian Studies conference that will take place in March in Philadelphia.

^{xiii} Lisa Claypool, "Sites of Visual Modernity: Perceptions of Japanese Exceptions in Late Qing China," unpublished paper, cited with author's permission; originally presented at a conference on "The Role of Japanese in the Institutional Development of Modern Chinese Art," held at the Academia Sinica, Taiwan, in October 2007.