

BOOK REVIEW

From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party, by Tony Saich. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021, 560 pp.

2021 was the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and consequently has yielded a plethora of excellent books by China scholars reflecting on the CCP's past, present, and future. One of the standout works is Tony Saich's *From Rebel to Ruler*. Saich is a professor of international affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School, and his expertise is evident. He has produced a work of both history and political science that tells the story of the CCP from its genesis in 1921 Shanghai to 2021 and beyond. Saich draws a line of the CCP in the past 100 years that is both straight and curved, though never broken. It is a CCP that still thrives where other communist parties have failed, and understands that the largest hurdles are self-created and the deepest wounds are self-inflicted. Yet the same qualities that cause these wounds also heal them and have maintained the CCP's rule, with no real threat to its continued rule for now.

Saich commences the book with a long historical account of the CCP, with a recurring theme of surviving against massive odds though aided by a lot of luck. For example, Saich asserts that Japan's brutal invasion of China in the 1930s was a gift to the struggling CCP: as the CCP withdrew into the countryside, it established itself as the grassroots, populist alternative to the ruling Nationalists, cultivating the support it would need to triumph in the upcoming civil war. Yet once in power, the CCP faced the difficult task of learning how to rule.

The CCP's ability to rule faced hurdles of its own creation, notably the devastating economic consequences of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward (GLF) and the political chaos of the Cultural Revolution, though survival came through the reforms of Deng Xiaoping. Much of these portions were studies of Mao and his politicking. Saich lays out that this skill in politicking (along with subtle blackmail) helped to politically protect Mao, even through the unequivocal disasters of the GLF and the Cultural Revolution. Mao suffered criticism from colleagues in 1959 for the famine of the GLF, but he was able to deflect some blame to local implementation, as opposed to his general plan. He was also able to compel the CCP to choose between him and his critics; he made subtle threats about leading peasant and military revolutions against CCP rivals. Mao had made himself indispensable to the point where he could not be removed in the same way that he had removed political rivals over the decades. The CCP had become Mao and vice versa by the 1960s.

It is here that Saich makes his primary points about the CCP's history and survival skills. Leninist systems are assumed to be brittle, yet the CCP has been remarkably adaptable. His first observation is that the CCP has been able to shed

and then reclaim the virtues of Chinese culture and historical legacy for its own benefit. To evolve from casting off Confucianism in the GLF to owning it in the twenty-first century is a skillful display of adaptability, and Saich's accounts lay this out. The CCP mastered continuity and change. Pragmatic adaptability was manifest in the way Mao was able to initially utilize, then vilify, intellectuals, writers, and artists for his own personal political gain.

Related to this dynamic is the unceasing and overriding control the CCP has maintained over the national narrative and national identity. Despite these self-inflicted catastrophes before, during, and after the Chinese civil war, CCP leadership—notably Mao—were able to rewrite history, whitewash if not blot out inconvenient facts, and curate the truth to justify all CCP actions and foster the belief in the inevitability of CCP rule. The CCP is a living case study of George Orwell's quote, "He who controls the past controls the future, and he who controls the present, controls the past." While this rule is in any dictator's handbook, the fact that the CCP has been successful despite China's long pre-CCP history and the many failures of the CCP itself make it remarkable that the party still flourishes. When the CCP has assigned blame, Saich tracks how it has usually targeted certain members of the CCP who follow the incorrect line and thus lead people astray, or "outsiders," particularly foreigners, who interfere with CCP affairs.

A second observation from the book is the role of elite politics. Saich's history of the CCP is a history of the party's most senior leaders, their political views, and the policies they advocated to support those views. Saich downplays the role of structural politics, economics, and foreign affairs, because his account clearly emphasizes the struggles among various leaders, particularly Mao's struggle to seize and maintain control throughout the CCP's history. He addresses factions in CCP political struggles as a historian but does not examine factionalism as a political scientist.

Moreover, there are certain raised-but-unanswered questions in the book. First, comparatively little space is spent on foreign affairs. Major events are touched upon but not explored in the same depth as most domestic events. Does Saich infer that foreign affairs did not have a major impact on the survival of the CCP or of certain key leaders? The implication is that foreign actors such as the United States have limited leverage over the ultimate health of the CCP, its key leaders, and its overall legitimacy to rule China.

Along those lines, the other open question is CCP legitimacy and survival writ large. As noted prior, Saich lays out how masterful the CCP has been at controlling the narrative surrounding China's past, its threats, and how the CCP is the sole entity that can protect China while also being truly Chinese. Saich outlines

clearly that the CCP still enjoys performance legitimacy and that reforms have vested peoples into the system, which did not happen in Soviet reforms of the 1980s. That, coupled with a weak civil society, reveals infertile ground for a removal of the CCP or any type of democratic transition. Saich implies that China will not collapse nor reform politically, though he is not that explicit. Lastly, there are portions of the book where Saich goes into such detail (e.g., land reform in the 1950s) that he belabors the point and can lose the reader in details that have dwindling relevance.

Overall, this book is a must-read for students of Chinese politics and history; it tracks how that history set a trajectory for current Chinese political dynamics and future Chinese political developments. There are portions where the details are dense, and the impact of foreign affairs could be examined in greater depth, but it is a shining example of history feeding current affairs, research, and usefulness to practitioner and scholar alike.

For those who will not read the book, there are several bottom-line findings that must be acknowledged. The first is we should not hope for change to the CCP from below. The party has been effective at co-opting the grassroots on the issue of CCP rule. Civil society is negligible at best; the general public still supports the CCP due to decades of growth and modernization. Potential opposition, most notably in the private sector, has been absorbed. A second is that foreign affairs have had only limited impact on CCP dynamics and internal churn; so, we must remind ourselves that most of Xi Jinping's statements and acts are usually directed at a domestic audience first and foremost. Certainly, international affairs matter to the CCP, particularly given how integrated China is in the world economy and how global its interests are, but the all-politics-is-local conventional wisdom is true with the CCP. However, a related conclusion to draw from Saich's work is that we should expect blaming of foreigners—particularly the United States—for ills both international and domestic. This is evident in Beijing's public comments about protests in Hong Kong. One major question inspired by the book to ask going forward is will Xi break or reinvigorate the CCP through his personalist rule? In other words, has Xi eliminated the factionalism and personal networks that were engines of the CCP? Although Xi enjoys the most unchallenged authority since Mao, I do not think Saich believes that Xi has ended these factional dynamics. When Xi dies or hands over power, we should expect CCP factionalism and personal networks to still drive domestic politics in China.

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