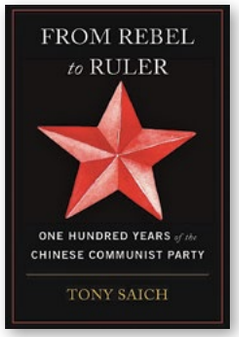
A Century of Trials and Transformation



From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party

By Tony Saich

Belknap Press, 2021, 560 pages, $39.95 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

AFTER THE FORMALITIES of presenting his ambassadorial credentials to the then Chinese President Yang Shangkun, the ambassador was asked to sit down. "You know China, but let me tell you what is essential to understand the country, " the president told this Mandarin-speaking European ambassador, addressing him like a child. Don't try to understand China through some Western ideas like Marxism-Leninism, he said: What matters in China is Confucianism. "Children obey the father, students obey the teacher, and citizens obey the emperor. And in today's China, the Communist Party is the emperor," the president summed up. I recalled the conversation from the 1990s where the ambassador recalled this and related it to me as I read Tony Saich's magisterial history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

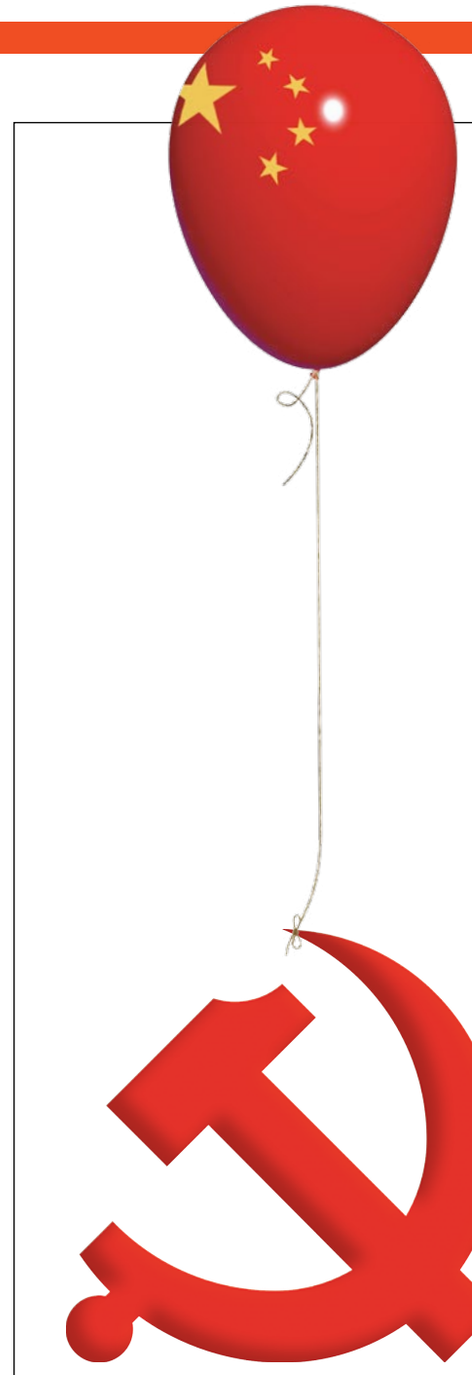
Of course, Marxism-Leninism was the inspiration when 13 young Chinese secretly gathered in a house in Shanghai a century ago to hold the first congress of the party. Researching in newly opened archives, Saich found that "although Chen [Duxiu] and Li [Dazhao] were key figures laying the theoretical foundations for the party, it was a Russian, Grigori Voitinsky, and a Dutchman, Henk Sneevliet, who brought to China concepts of Leninist organization." Their goal: Class struggle to defeat capitalism and set up a dictatorship of the proletariat.

In the hundred years since, the party has undergone remarkable transformations. The 92 million-member party (which accounts for only 7 percent of China's population) that now leads the world's second-largest economy and challenges the United States for world leadership is a very different beast. It has been forged by the Kuomintang's White Terror, the Long March, massacres during the Japanese occupation, the folly of the Great Leap Forward and the resultant famine, the mindless violence of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution's, the suppression of the Tiananmen uprising and then decades of transformation under Deng Xiaoping and his successors.

As someone who has followed the CCP for half of its life, Harvard historian Saich offers a superb account of the party's trials, tribulations and triumphs. It may be too detailed for a lay audience, but the anecdotes and wry humor that pepper the volume make it a fun read. He notes that the Long March that signaled Mao Zedong's rise to the top was marked more by suffering than heroism — only 5 percent to 10 percent of the 86,000 soldiers whom Mao led survived. For instance, Saich writes, accounts of the famous crossing of the Dadu River immortalized in films and posters have been questioned in later accounts given by survivors and locals.

A century of transformation, however, does not seem to have affected the millennial Confucian tradition that President Yang mentioned to the ambassador. Saich writes: "under Xi Jinping, the CCP has begun to promote itself as the successor to and inheritor of Chinese tradition — including the continuity of Chinese civilization, the tendency for autocratic rule, the importance of Confucianism, and the lack of strong civil society organizations to act as checks or to counter state power." In recent years, Xi Jinping has demanded absolute loyalty from the citizens, even encouraging them to report anyone entertaining "nihilistic thought" that contradicts the latest version of the party's history. Saich quips that Xi seems to have taken to heart George Orwell's adage that "who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." No surprise that Chinese journalists now have to pass ideological tests in order to renew their press cards. Those questioning Mao are threatened with "serious political consequences."

There has been political reform, Saich writes, but the core features of the Leninist party-state



remain essentially unchanged. Authoritarian control has grown as Xi decided by 2013 that the challenges facing China — rising levels of inequality, the depth of corruption, and environmental degradation — were so severe that drastic measures were required to maintain CCP rule: "Politics had to take priority over economics." His campaign against corruption and conspicuous consumption has been summed up in the slogan "four dishes and a soup" — a traditional reference to a meal that isn't considered extravagant. One consequence: a third of producers of the fiery liquor *maotai* — a traditional essential for fancy banquets in China — went bankrupt.

Xi has also continued to accumulate power. As well as chairing the powerful Central Military Commission, he has become the head of two newly created commissions on domestic reforms and security — earning him the sobriquet "chairman of everything." This accumulation of power has been accompanied by unprecedented expansion of social control through the Internet and mass media. The government has decreed that if "slanderous comments" on social media garner 5,000 hits or 500 reposts the poster could go to jail.

Saich wonders whether these are actions by a strong administration or one fearful of losing control. "The answer," he writes, "is a mixture of both." He details many of Xi's moves to strengthen his rule. In October 2016, he was named as the "core of the party leadership," a designation that not only raised him to the level of Mao, it granted him the power to bypass the need for collective decision-making and initiate policies on his own. It was followed by the purge of his political opponents and promotion of his allies, culminating in a change in the State Constitution that allowed Xi to remain president beyond the mandatory two five-year terms. By postponing the decision about succession, Xi may be creating a source of instability when the need finally arises. After all, only one leadership succession in the history of the party has so far been peaceful. The author speculates that Xi perhaps "intends to dominate the policy landscape until at least 2035 by which time he will be 82 years old. Clearly, this is Xi's future to shape."

How China's citizens view Xi's leadership? Does he have any opposition to fear? Sources of legitimacy are fragile, the author says. But surveys in recent years show a high level of satisfaction and trust in the central government, with the majority of citizens viewing abuses as local aberrations rather than the result of party policies.

In any case, as the party prepares a gala celebration of its 100-year anniversary, it would be wise to obey the emperor.

Nayan Chanda is founding editor of YaleGlobal Online and a *Global Asia* editorial board member.