

BOOK REVIEW

The Chinese Communist Party: A Century in Ten Lives

Edited by Timothy Cheek, Klaus Mühlhahn,

and Hans van de Ven

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Coleman R. Mahler, University of California, Berkeley

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has consistently attempted to write its own past as the history of modern, progressive China (as the song, and official historiography goes, “Without the Communist Party there is no New China”). This is a song of triumph at overcoming political, economic, and social oppression stemming from the imperialist powers and pre-modern forms of social organization, and it is partly true. But it also overlooks the human detritus left behind in the CCP’s large and turbulent wake. This counter-narrative—the revolution as brutal, inefficient failure—has found many advocates among Western scholars.¹

In the gulf between these two narratives emerge overlooked stories, including subjects more mundane, topics not considered by grand political narratives, and lives under socialism that resist easy interpretation.² But another possibility is to rewrite the history of the CCP itself, and to show that the Party, its history, and its relationship to modern China have never been monolithic.

In *The Chinese Communist Party: A Century In Ten Lives*, the editors and contributors attempt to do just that. It is a unique work: part postmodern textbook, part revisionist history, part conference edited volume. It is also an invitation to a larger dialogue. In 2018, a group of senior scholars attended a workshop in Berlin convened by Timothy Cheek and Klaus Mühlhahn, with the goal of updating CCP historiography. This led to rethinking these dominant narratives of “the Party as Savior or the Party as Demon” (3). Their alternative history of the entire life of the CCP was written with the centenary of the Party’s founding in 2021 on the immediate horizon. Composed of ten chapters, each contributor has taken a decade and written about the life of an individual whose biography reflects some important facet of the CCP in those ten years. At 282 pages including the index, it is a sprightly, lean, fast-reading volume.

Written with a broader audience in mind, with a brief forward to each chapter contextualizing the biography, one could certainly read this single book and gain a good sense of the life of the CCP and its vicissitudes. Composed of “a series of snapshots” (3), it is a revisionist project in which the editors attempt to tell a hidden, human side of the CCP. But this is not the story of the subaltern subject who lived under the Party’s

policies—as other authors reviewed in this journal have told³—but voices of the “liberal” and “cosmopolitan” traditions the editors claim have always co-existed with (and been suppressed by) the “centralizing, dictatorial, nationalist, even militarist tradition” represented today by Xi Jinping (5).

This book is not only a work of quality, accessible scholarship on the CCP; it also offers a political statement on the part of the authors. By including two historians from the PRC (Zhang Jishun and Xu Jilin, both professors at East China Normal University), the book itself is the material product of an attempt to create the kinds of open, critical dialogue, and cross-national relationships that appear in the volume’s biographies, and the suppression of which the editors lament. This provides an overall orientation for the biographies, and a different kind of history of the CCP.

The theme of cosmopolitanism dominates the first two chapters, both of which provide vivid biographies of two advocates of “United Fronts.” These were two separate instances in which the CCP joined with the Nationalist Party (KMT) in alliance, both times ultimately breaking down in the face of mutual suspicion and violence. The first chapter, written by Tony Saich, describes the CCP in the 1920s through the life of the Dutch national Henricus Sneevliet, sent by the Comintern to aid the Chinese Marxists. Sneevliet’s life shows the importance of internationalism to the Party’s origins, and how the tension between (supposedly) superior foreign knowledge of Marxism and domestic knowledge of local conditions was present from the Party’s inception. Impressed by Sun Yat-sen, Sneevliet demanded the CCP form a United Front with the KMT, which garnered opposition from “left” Marxists such as Zhang Guotao (23). Even in its opening movement, the CCP was forced by circumstances to accept international advice and aid and make decisions about with whom to cooperate. The failure of this first United Front in 1927 (after Chiang Kai-shek’s sudden bloodletting of his allies) led to the political fall of those affiliated with it.

The second chapter, written by Hans van de Ven, uses the biography of CCP leader Wang Ming as a lens to describe the 1930s and the second United Front. Wang Ming is shown not to be a dogmatic lap dog of Stalin, but someone committed to

cooperation with the KMT—and national solidarity in general—as key to winning the war against Japan. Wang’s fate was tied to the city of Wuhan, which in 1937-38 was a base of CCP-KMT joint military operations, as well as a cultural hub. When it fell, so did the dream of a joint military leadership, and Wang’s influence dimmed over the coming years, with the CCP becoming increasingly isolationist.

The third and fourth chapters tell the tragic stories of intellectuals and artists who tried—and failed—to create spaces for themselves within the CCP-led social order. In chapter three (the 1940’s) Timothy Cheek tells the story of Marxist writer Wang Shiwei, who famously challenged Mao’s vision of art, argued for the correctness of public critique by Marxist intellectuals, and was ultimately crushed. This was the test case that would determine how intellectuals were to be treated until 1978: kept on a short leash and under constant check, with the threat of political labeling never far off. Wang himself was executed in 1947 (68).

Film star Shangguan Yunzhu is the subject of the fourth chapter (1950’s), by Zhang Jishun. Shangguan Yunzhu was a film star in Shanghai in the 1940s, who like many others attempted to make a life for herself in “New China.” She acted in socialist movies, and became an admirer of Chairman Mao, only to be cast aside and to have seemingly committed suicide in 1968 after persecution by Red Guards (86). Her life reveals how “metropolitan” links to sophisticated urban culture were both a source of cultural capital in the early PRC, but also a potential danger that those associated with them had to convert into a new socialist identity.

Wang Guangmei, the subject of chapter five (1960s), by Elizabeth Perry, is another case of a metropolitan intellectual whose quest to make herself into a socialist ended in tragedy. Wang was a brilliant person: she received a graduate degree in atomic physics and could have pursued doctoral studies at Stanford or the University of Chicago (93). Instead, she became a communist and married future chairman of the PRC, Liu Shaoqi. This chapter focuses on her drafting of an influential treatise on a “model” experience in the mid-1960s and provides a brief and excellent overview of one aspect of the policy-making process in Maoist China. In the end, Wang was both an oppressor and victim: the same form of mass struggle she advocated for was used against her and her husband by the Red Guards. Such examples show the complexity of the lives of actors in this period.

Chapter six (1970s) by Julia Lovell shows a different kind of internationalism from that of Wang Ming and Sneevliet: the export of Maoist guerilla warfare. Lovell describes the life of Chairman Gonzalo and his Shining Path in Peru in the 1980s, when they terrorized the Andean countryside, referencing Mao’s works for guidance. Striking a slightly different note from other chapters, it reveals that at times the Party was involved in forms of socialist cosmopolitanism, although not in ways conducive to international cooperation.

Chapters seven (1980s) and eight (1990s) reveal the liberal tradition that resurfaced after the Cultural Revolution. Klaus

Mühlhahn presents the familiar story of General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, whose desire for political—in addition to economic—reform led to his being placed under house arrest. One of his intellectual counterparts was Wang Yuanhua, whose life is described by Xu Jilin, and who emerged as a prominent liberal individualist in the 1990s. Like Zhao Ziyang, he had been a relatively standard Marxist until the Cultural Revolution, showing how catalyzing this moment of supreme violence was for the rethinking of core political principles.

Chapters nine (2000’s) and ten (2010’s) tell us of a buoyant moment of unrealized potential for openness in Chinese society. In the 2000’s General Secretary Jiang Zemin oversaw China becoming a “Wild West boomtown” (194), when the unthinkable became possible: the publishing of gay magazines and listing of state-owned advertising companies on the stock exchange (201). This “golden age of Chinese liberalism” (202), described by journalist Jeremy Goldkorn, was rolled back in 2009, partially due to increasing Party confidence in its own path, and fears of a color revolution (206). However, as Guobin Yang shows in chapter ten, Chinese citizens continued to create new online communities dedicated to public power and political transparency, with diverse actors coming together to investigate high profile cases of suspected political corruption. One of these was that of blogger Guo Meimei, whose displays of ostentatious wealth and apparent employment at a state-backed charity became an internet sensation in 2011. This “zenith of public engagement” for the Chinese internet soon passed however, as draconian laws made themselves felt (223).

The afterward by Philip Bowring recapitulates these themes and provides a good overview of the history of Chinese geopolitics and its present situation.

For lay readers, this work offers an accessible introduction to and overview of the CCP, with a series of connected, well contextualized, and engaging biographies. Academic historians will likely find useful the stories of lesser-known individuals (such as Shangguan Yunzhu and Wang Yuanhua), but also be interested in the fresh way that canonical figures are situated historically, as part of an inchoate liberal tradition within the CCP. The volume does not focus in particular on the major events that dominate standard histories (the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution), nor on figures such as Mao Zedong or Liu Shaoqi; but does provide a helpful list of additional works to consult for those readers interested in learning more about them.

Reading this volume also provides the opportunity to reflexively engage with the question of our positionality as scholars of China located in Europe and America. The editors here labored to create a concise volume that speaks to an unrealized potential, a suppressed historical reality, that the authors wish might arise once again in China. The editors desire to see moderation in politics, a care for individual human dignity, and the upholding of international solidarities emerge once again. They have excavated discarded voices in the CCP that once supported such values in the past. This linkage of the past to present is what makes the work so rich and thought provoking. The bringing together of Chinese, American, and

European voices in “worrying about China” is a thing to celebrate.⁴

The volume does not speak in a single voice, however; the style and background of each author comes through. Nor is there one single kind of suppressed voice: there existed many forms of liberalism, cosmopolitanism, metropolitanism, and many of the actors would likely have disagreed with one another. Readers should thus be prepared to follow multiple threads. But the chapters still reinforce one another and create an overall direction. It is this overall direction that provides the main points that might broke contention, as well as numerous questions.

One of these questions is historical: why is it that these voices have had to be recovered in the first place? Why is it the case that the “centralizing, dictatorial, nationalist, even militarist tradition” in the CCP has consistently prevailed? What relative weight should be given to material factors (such as the inevitable bureaucratic overreach of a forced economic modernization), versus idealist ones (Wang Yuanhua’s theory that the CCP’s dogmatism originated in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* [180])?

Another question has to do with the future of China. Klaus Mühlhahn surmises that “...political institutions in China remain brittle. Hence the CCP’s survival inevitably hinges on political reform and liberalization. When and how China will embrace a more participatory and legitimate system, and whether the Party will survive that process, are the main questions that need to be asked about China’s political future” (171). Though I share the hope for greater political participation

and transparency in China, these predictions might be considered by some to be pollyannish. China is currently building up new forms of social control (such as social credit), and it seems more likely that in the near future it will become a new kind of surveillance-state the likes of which has never been seen. Should we not consider that the CCP is attempting to build a new kind of legitimacy and social order not based on liberal democracy, and that this could possibly be successful (although not necessarily a place we might want to live)? What do the editors think about the idea of a pragmatic, resilient authoritarianism?⁵

A final question is how the authors envision this book might be used in the classroom. One could see it as either the sole, lead, or supplementary textbook for a course on the PRC, CCP, or twentieth-century China. It could accompany a more standard textbook such as Mühlhahn’s recent *Making China Modern*, so as to highlight the CCP’s liberal tradition;⁶ teachers could alternatively weave individual chapters into their courses. It would be interesting to know how the editors plan to use the volume in their own teaching.

This book is a pleasure to read, and invites reflection. The chapters are concise, but reveal the deep knowledge of the distinguished set of contributors who produced them. This should be recommended to anyone looking to become acquainted with the history of the CCP, or anyone who would like to discover an unfamiliar and intriguing side of that story.

¹ The work of Frank Dikötter might be considered representative. See Frank Dikötter *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62* (Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2010).

² This has often manifested in the form of cultural histories, such as Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012).

³ Yujie Li, Review of *Eight Outcasts: Social and Political Marginalization in China Under Mao*, by Yang Kuisong, translated by Gregor Benton and Ye Zhen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), *PRC History Book Review Series* Number 26 (June 2021):

http://prchistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Yang_Kuisong_review.pdf

⁴ Joining in the conversation described by Gloria Davies. See Gloria Davies, *Worrying about China: The Language of Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁵ Hongyi Lai, *China’s Governance Model: Flexibility and durability of pragmatic authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁶ Klaus Mühlhahn, *Making China Modern: From the Great Qing to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

Response

Timothy Cheek, University of British Columbia

Coleman Mahler has provided us with an author's or editor's dream: a lucid summary of the contents and purposes of the book that encourages readers to go have a look and a set of challenging questions that take us usefully beyond the book to issues of concern for scholars interested in modern China. Along the way he accurately "outs" our politics and 'subject position' as liberal, Western scholars. Guilty as charged.

Mahler succinctly describes the book's genesis. More strictly speaking, we might say it is part edited volume 'inspired by a conference': not all contributors to the book were able to attend the 2018 Berlin meeting and not all attendees took part in the book (which demanded a quick timeline for submissions). But the fact remains that *Ten Lives* is defined by its status as a collective project. This is one of its strengths, particularly keeping scholars inside and outside of China in conversation. It is, however, neither comprehensive in its coverage nor in the participation of scholars. There are scholarly voices not included, particularly those on the progressive left whose scholarship we would expect to see in *positions* or on Duke University Press. This reflects the intellectual interests and networks of the editors. *Caveat lector*.

It is true that Hans, Klaus and I found two key themes in this mosaic of microhistories: the liberal and cosmopolitan traditions in the CCP's history. However, one could just as accurately note the "internationalist" (as in Socialist, not liberal cosmopolitan) themes in the stories of Sneevliet (ch. 1) and Wang Ming (ch. 2). Likewise, Wang Guangmei (ch. 5) and Shining Path's Chairman Gonzalo (ch. 7) were hardly "liberal" in any sense of the word. Rather, Zhao Ziyang (ch. 7) and the society under Jiang Zemin's continuing political influence in the 2000s (c. 9) were examples of a different kind of liberalization, a sort of reform Leninism. Readers, we hope, will be able to see and find reliable information to document further themes beyond the ones dear to the editors or individual chapter authors.

Mahler sets three good questions. I cannot answer them fully, but they are worth thinking about for more than a quick response. Why has the dogmatic version of CCP policy and history prevailed? Why have liberal, moderate, humane versions of the Chinese Communist tradition instead reduced to being "recovered"? We can all think quickly of the role of power, of the *force majeure* of war and international pressures (economic as well as geopolitical), and the vagaries of contingency and the agency of individual leaders. But Mahler's question deserves more, it is in fact, a *keti* 课题 worthy of sustained research. What does this question suggest about the promises and failures of Socialism?

Indeed, Mahler's second question extends his challenge to our consideration of the role and historical fate of liberalism in the sense of Western liberal democratic political order. He rightly takes us to task for assuming that political legitimacy comes only through liberal democratic institutions, full and free elections. He confronts us with an inconvenient question: what if the illiberal, surveillance-state stability that Xi Jinping seems to be building works? Our political media is replete with prognostications of the Party's immanent fall—they might be right, but these doomsday prophets have been wrong for the past three decades since Tiananmen and the Beijing massacre in 1989. Perhaps we need to face this question with a few less preconceptions—and what does that suggest about the promises and failures of Liberalism?

His third question, on classroom use is relevant for readers of *The PRC History Review*, as so many of us are teachers as well as researchers. Our press won't love me for suggesting this, but Cambridge University Press makes its library e-book editions available by a set of chapter PDFs. This makes selective use of one or two of the ten chapters handy (if your library subscribes) without dunning your students for yet another supplementary text. For use as one of the core texts of a modern China course, well, that was our "yangmo 阳谋".

Finally, our goal and Mahler's review reflect a shared professional goal: that careful and contextual reading of primary sources can enrich and challenge our view of a topic (or worldview) rather than simply confirm it. To misquote Hu Shi, we need more raising of questions and less declaiming of answers.