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Document Version
Final published version

Published in:
China: An International Journal

DOI:
[10.1353/chn.2023.a898345](https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2023.a898345)

Publication date:
2023

License
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Citation for published version (APA):
Brødsgaard, K. E. (2023). Afterword and Reflections. *China: An International Journal*, 21(2), 136-140.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2023.a898345>

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China: An International Journal, Volume 21, Number 2, May 2023, pp. 136-140 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2023.a898345>



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Afterword and Reflections

Kjeld Erik BRØDSGAARD

In the wake of the Tiananmen debacle in 1989, many Western scholars believed that the Communist Party of China (CPC) had lost its legitimacy and would soon be relegated to the “dustbin of history”. This belief was reinforced by the collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. Scholars increasingly looked for signs of centrifugal forces that would weaken the Chinese political system. As a result, the focus of much research shifted to new social strata and groups, non-governmental developments and movements of dissent, tensions in central–local relations, fragmented policymaking and so forth.

However, the CPC did not wither away. Instead, it underwent a process of renewal and organisational reform, drawing lessons from studying what had gone wrong in the Soviet Union. Changes were introduced incrementally and were often informed by local experimentation. At the same time, the CPC continued to deliver economic progress and improved income opportunities for the majority of the Chinese population.

By the early 2000s, it had become clear that the CPC was not about to collapse. Scholars gradually realised that to do any in-depth study of the functioning of the Chinese body politic and its development trajectory, they had to include research on the CPC. In particular during the era of Xi Jinping, it has become abundantly clear that not only is the CPC at the centre of the Chinese political-economic system, but also that power and functions of the state are increasingly migrating to the Party.

In March 2018, at the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress (NPC), an institutional reform programme was adopted.¹ It followed the tradition of introducing major state and government restructuring in a five-year cycle. However, the 2018 programme was unusual as it also involved the Party organisation. For example, the State Administration for Public Service (*Gongwuyuan ju*) was transferred from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security to the Party’s Central Organization Department. The *bianzhi* administration, the office in charge of planning and allocating personnel and organisational resources, was also placed under this department. In combination with the Central Organization Department’s control of the *nomenklatura* system, these transfers of functions and institutions have considerably increased the

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¹ “Guowuyuan jigou gaige fang’an” (The State Council Institutional Restructuring Plan), Xinhua News Agency, 17 March 2018, at <http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-03/17/content_5275116.htm> [14 March 2023].

Party's key role in personnel appointment and management as well as the entire administrative layout of the state apparatus.

The Party's control over strategic policymaking and coordination was further enhanced and formalised by the upgrading of four important leading small groups into commissions following the 19th Party Congress. They include Leading Small Groups for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms, for Finance and Economy, for Foreign Affairs and for Cybersecurity. The change of status from leading small group to commission institutionalises them as parts of the formal organisation of the Party system and provides them with the authority to coordinate important policy areas. In addition, the change means that they will be allocated their own office and budget and no longer need to borrow human and material resources from other institutions.

At the most recent NPC meeting in March 2023, a further institutional reform programme was passed, which involved a continuation of the process of transferring functions and powers to the Party, this time within key areas of finance, technology and science. A particularly noteworthy development is the establishment of a Central Science and Technology Commission under the CPC Central Committee rather than under the State Council as had been the case in the 1980s and 1990s.² A recently published document, passed by the session of the Central Committee preceding the NPC meeting, names four additional new central Party organs: Central Finance Committee, Central Financial Working Committee, Central Social Work Department and Central Office of Hong Kong and Macao.³ The document underlines that institutional reform is no longer a state affair. The Party is heavily involved and will benefit by acquiring new functions and human resources.

Regarding the economy, the state is retreating from direct management of industrial enterprises. Instead, capital management and investment companies that focus on making investment decisions on behalf of the state have been set up. The emerging investor state is an indication of the state's withdrawal from direct involvement in the state-owned sector of the economy. The void created by a retreating state is filled by the Party. The Party committee and the company board must have an overlapping membership, and the Party secretary and the chairman of the company board must be the same person. Moreover, all major decisions must be discussed in the Party committee before being handled by the board. Since 2017, Party documents have demanded that these manifestations of intensified Party-building must be written into company charters. The new Central Department of Social Work has been established to strengthen and extend Party leadership and Party-building in civil society organisations and mixed-ownership and private enterprises as well.

² Xiao Jie, "Guanyu guowuyuan jigou gaige fangan de shuoming" (Explanation of the Institutional Reform Draft), Xinhua News Agency, 8 March 2023, at <http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2023-03/08/content_5745356.htm> [14 March 2023].

³ "Dang he guojia jigou gaige fang'an" (Party and State Institutional Reform), Xinhua News Agency, 16 March 2023, at <http://www.news.cn/politics/zywj/2023-03/16/c_1129437368.htm> [16 March 2023].

The economy is not the only area where the Party is moving out of the shadows. It happens in all corners of the Chinese political-economic system. In his article in this special issue, Daniel Koss argues that the Party and its organisation have always been available and in this sense there is nothing new. Koss mentions that “Party networks were available and could be reactivated with relative ease”.⁴ However, during the era of Deng Xiaoping, there was a focus on separation of the Party and the government. As Lance L.P. Gore remarks, in Xi Jinping’s China, this is no longer a popular slogan. On the contrary, Xi is pursuing a policy of merging the state and the Party in a new configuration of the Chinese body politic.⁵

As Schurmann has shown, ideology and organisation are the two pathways to an understanding of how the Chinese political system works and how it is holding together.⁶ Shan Wei, Gu Yongxin and Chen Juan’s analysis demonstrates that Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era is merely the most recent layer added at the top of the CPC ideological edifice.⁷ Underneath this layer we find Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” and Hu Jintao’s Scientific Development Strategy. These layers bolster the general re-ideologisation of Chinese society which Marina Svensson describes in her article.⁸

It is no longer possible to discuss Chinese politics without focusing on the key role of the CPC. Xi Jinping may be powerful, but it would be a mistake to focus on his personalistic or patrimonial rule. Xi is powerful because he is heading a potent political party. It is the CPC, China’s political sovereign, and not Xi Jinping that forms China’s new emperorship. As Pieke points out in his introduction to this special issue, the future of the present regime and the long-term goal of turning China into a “great, socialist country” are dependent on the Party’s organisational capacity, leading capacity and governing capacity. Xi’s place in the panoply of CPC leaders will depend on whether he succeeds in strengthening these capacities and in defining the necessary ideological superstructure.⁹ This is not to say that popular support and linkages to those he rules are not important, but as Wang Zhongyuan points out in his article,

⁴ Daniel Koss, “Discipline Inspections and the Transformation of Party Authority in China’s Banks”, *China: An International Journal* 21, no. 2 (May 2023): 92–113.

⁵ Lance L.P. Gore, “Leninism for the 21st Century: Xi Jinping’s Ideological Party-building”, *China: An International Journal* 21, no. 2 (May 2023): 8–25.

⁶ Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968).

⁷ Shan Wei, Gu Yongxin and Chen Juan, “Layering Ideologies from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping: Tracing Ideological Changes of the Communist Party of China Using Text Analysis”, *China: An International Journal* 21, no. 2 (May 2023): 26–50.

⁸ Marina Svensson, “Chinese Youth and the Communist Party of China: Cultivating a Loyal Generation through Ideological and Political Education”, *China: An International Journal* 21, no. 2 (May 2023): 72–91.

⁹ Frank M. Pieke, “Introduction: Ideology, Organisational Power and the Naturalisation of the Rule of the Communist Party of China”, *China: An International Journal* 21, no. 2 (May 2023): 3–7.

referring to Huntington and Moore, “the strength of an authoritarian regime, in large measure, depends on the strength of its party”.¹⁰ Li Lianjiang argues that popular support for the CPC is difficult to measure since China is a “non-democratic single Party-state” without multiparty electoral competition.¹¹ However, based on an analysis of the Asian Barometer Survey, he concludes that popular support is considerably weaker than the Party claims.

There is an urgent need to carefully study the CPC and analyse how it organises, manages and directs Chinese society. This research agenda includes, as one of the most pressing items, a thorough and comprehensive study of how the CPC organises itself: What are the internal rules and regulations? How is Party-building carried out? Such a project will involve a meticulous examination of Party documents in order to understand the organisational thinking of the CPC. Another inquiry of interest is: What are the implications of key administrative concepts and how are they to be translated into Western political language? Indeed, much can be learned from re-reading earlier studies of the CPC by scholars such as Franz Schurmann and John Lewis.¹²

Interesting work has been done on the CPC in relation, for example, to organisation, cadres and cadre management, recruitment, career advancement and training, ideology and propaganda, corruption, business and law. There are also several excellent studies on local Party work and Party-building. In addition, a number of studies focus on investigating part of the CPC’s organisational system, such as the important Central Committee departments and the Party school system. Nevertheless, the field still lacks an updated version of Schurmann’s magisterial work.

How do we conceptualise the reconfiguration of the state and the Party in China? Wang Hui’s concept of “staticization” of the Party (*zhengdang guojiahua*) seeks to conceptualise the extent to which the CPC has taken over state functions.¹³ Another interesting concept is “CCP Inc.” (i.e. Chinese Communist Party Incorporated) which has been put forward to replace “China Inc.”.¹⁴ The term “CCP Inc.” underlines that the Party, rather than the state, is the political sovereign in China. From an economic perspective, the concept of state capitalism no longer seems to describe Chinese reality

¹⁰ Wang Zhongyuan, “Remaking Bonds: Adaptive Party Linkage-building in Contemporary China”, *China: An International Journal* 21, no. 2 (May 2023): 114–35.

¹¹ Li Lianjiang, “Assessing Popular Support for the Communist Party of China”, *China: An International Journal*, 21, no. 2 (May 2023): 51–71.

¹² Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*; John Wilson Lewis, *Leadership in Communist China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968).

¹³ Wang Hui, “The Economy of Rising China and Its Contradictions”, introduction and translation by David Ownby, at <<https://www.readingthechinadream.com/wang-hui-the-economy-of-rising-china.html>> [14 March 2023].

¹⁴ Jude Blanchette, “From ‘China Inc.’ to ‘CCP Inc.’: A New Paradigm for Chinese State Capitalism”, *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 66 (Winter 2020): 1–13.

adequately and therefore “party-state capitalism” has been advanced.¹⁵ But perhaps we need to foreground the CPC even more and instead use the concept of “Party-led state capitalism”.

Chinese scholars and authorities avoid the epithet “capitalism” and use the phrase “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. The challenge to using this formulation is that it does not portray anything about the real processes taking place in the Chinese polity. Moreover, scholars must take appropriate precautions not to adopt the self-characterisations of the object they are studying *in casu* China. If anything, this is a lesson from the dominant Western China scholarship during the Cultural Revolution which uncritically adopted a two-line approach to the study of Chinese politics. Pieke’s concept of “neo-socialism” might offer an alternative, acknowledging both the uniquely socialist nature of China and the fundamental changes that 40 years of market reforms have engendered.¹⁶

The study of the CPC in both organisational and ideological terms enables one to steer clear of highly speculative factional studies and instead to focus on broader institutional and epistemic trends. The CPC is not an aberration of history or a glitch in a universal predetermined process towards modernity. With 97 million members, it is the world’s second-largest political party after India’s Bharatiya Janata Party, and has ruled one-fifth of mankind for more than 70 years. It must be studied in all its manifestations and with as much objectivity as possible, no matter who happens to be in charge.

¹⁵ Margaret Pearson, Meg Rithmire and Kellee S. Tsai, “Party-State Capitalism in China”, *Current History* 120, no. 827 (September 2021): 207–13.

¹⁶ Frank N. Pieke, *Knowing China: A Twenty-first Century Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).