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Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers*, revised edition, London: Penguin Books, 2013, 302 pp. + xxiii.

The first to weaken was the Polish United Workers' Party. The next to fold was the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party.

As the late 1980s slipped into the early 1990s, communist parties around the world began to fall, one by one. From Africa to Asia, Eastern Europe to Latin America, communism was quietly abandoned or violently rejected by the masses, until only a smattering of holdouts were left. Of these, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was the most prominent, and all eyes turned to them in anticipation of their demise. Huge changes in China seemed imminent, even inevitable.

But that was not to be. Today, nearly a century from its birth, the Chinese Communist Party still reigns over one of the biggest, most populous and economically powerful countries in the world. Though it has evolved greatly in response to the challenges it faces, the CCP has, on the whole, exhibited a remarkable durability in the face of international disapprobation and territorial challenges, internal scandals and ideological differences.

How did this happen? What has enabled the CCP to survive and furthermore, thrive? These are important questions that must be answered if one is to understand China as it is and China as it will be.

These are the questions which are tackled in *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* (revised edition, 2013; original edition published in 2010).

The Party is the magnum opus of Richard McGregor, a political correspondent with nearly two decades worth of experience in reporting from North Asia. Drawing upon a range of historical anecdotes, current events, insightful interviews and personal observations, McGregor seeks to demystify the inner workings of China's secretive party leaders, and in doing so provides a valuable contribution to the field of Chinese politics.

The Party is organized thematically, with each chapter focusing on a different societal institution or worrisome social issue. It starts with a description of the CCP, follows through with an exposition of the booming Chinese economy, the secretive party personnel department, the leashed military, the powerful but limited anti-corruption commission, the disconnected local government, before wrapping up with an exploration of Chinese communist history and censorship. The relationships between these social institutions and issues are investigated, with close attention being paid to the pervasive influence of the economy and corruption upon all levels of modern Chinese society.

Delicate power dynamics are a running theme in *The Party*. The CCP derives strength from a strong economy and a strong military, but cannot tolerate them being stronger than the hand which holds their reins. The CCP gives the anti-graft commission great powers to root out and heavily prosecute individual corruption, but not enough power to actually change the easily-gameable system. The CCP will allow and even respond to public critique and dissatisfaction, but only so long as that does not facilitate collective action that might result in another Tiananmen-esque crisis. The CCP thus vacillates between tightening and loosening its political grip upon Chinese society, and the resulting

ambiguity and inconsistencies both strengthens and endangers the CCP.

The scope of *The Party* is well-defined in accordance to its thesis and main objectives. McGregor focuses strictly upon Chinese domestic politics; international relations issues such as the global financial crisis and hostilities with Taiwan are mentioned only in passing. This is because McGregor's argument is that the CCP's biggest challenges come from within rather than without. China is a dangerous country to cross, as its global economic influence, intimidating military potential and status as a rising superpower mean that other countries, even those with superpower status, would risk losing more than they would gain in a hostile relationship with China. Thus, it stands to reason that the biggest threat to China is China itself – that its huge population and corruption-threatened institutions may be a ticking time bomb for the CCP.

The Party's stated objectives are to explain how the CCP has survived and prospered until today, and to place the CCP “back at the heart of the modern Chinese society”. This it successfully does by providing a detailed exploration of the CCP's adaptability and pragmatism. It clearly explains the factors – fear of collective action, determination to stay in power – which influence how the CCP operates. However, readers are left to ruminate upon why these factors are so important. What makes the individuals leading the CCP so desperate for power? Is it a matter of greed, of ideology, of inertia? These are admittedly difficult questions to answer, but the ensuing result is that the secret world of the Chinese Communist Party still remains, for the most part, disappointingly secret.

It is always interesting to observe how authors' professional background guides the tone and arguments formed in their work. The first key point of note is that McGregor is writing *The Party* from a journalistic, rather than academic perspective. Thus, the target audience of *The Party* is the general public rather than the academia, and *The*

Party does not directly acknowledge or reference alternative works or academic theories about Chinese politics. The second key point to keep in consideration is McGregor's previous service as the China bureau chief for the *Financial Times*, a paper with a focus on business, financial and economic news. Consequently, it stands to reason that he has a particular interest in the role and impact of the Chinese economy.

These two points bring both advantages and drawbacks to the table. As *The Party* is aimed at the edification of the wider populace, McGregor uses a lively, engaging writing style which renders the complex subject of Chinese politics easily understandable to the average layman. As a journalist, his investigative style, resources and informant network may be markedly different from those of academics, and so the anecdotes and observations he recounts are a unique, compelling source of primary data. His in-depth explanations of the role and impact of the Chinese economy – not just in relation to CCP leadership decisions, but also in relation to corruption, personnel selection and the military – add value to mainstream beliefs that say economy is a key factor in influencing Chinese politics.

On the other hand, *The Party* lacks academic objectivity. An academic work of quality would have gathered both supporting and opposing literature on the subject and presented it alongside its own argument. This would have allowed readers to place the book in the wider context of China studies. As it is, readers for which *The Party* is their introduction to understanding China would be hard pressed to evaluate its argument, question its assumptions and notice its limitations.

On the whole, however, *The Party* provides a convincing, consistent and coherent argument that still appears to be relevant through the half decade past its first publication. A 2013 Harvard study on Chinese censorship, for example, supports McGregor's observations that Chinese censorship is fueled more by fear of collective action than worry about

governmental criticism.¹ The emphasis upon individual prosecution rather than systemic changes in the recent scandal about improperly stored vaccines parallels *The Party's* recounting of the Sanlu 三鹿 milk scandal.²

Thus, on the surface, very little seems to have changed; the CCP appear as powerful and durable under Xi Jinping's leadership as it did under Hu Jintao's. One contemporary feature which might prove a game-changer, though, is the Chinese economic slowdown. As fresh data show a marked deceleration in China's current economic growth, we are left to speculate on how this might intertwine with its demographical, environmental and energy problems to impact Chinese society, the CCP and the world at large.

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Notes

1. Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts (2013). How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 2, May, pp. 1-18. <<http://j.mp/LdVXqN>>
2. China's Vaccine Scandal Reveals System's Flaws. *The Wall Street Journal*, 25th March 2016. <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-vaccine-scandal-reveals-systems-flaws-1458906255>>

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