

# China: The centenary of the Communist Party

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July 1st is the date chosen by the Chinese Communist party to celebrate the centenary of its founding. In China, there will be no end of public celebrations as state and party officials bask in the glory of their achievements - in China the distinction between state and party is a hard one to draw. No doubt the great theme will be the contrast between then and now, both for the party and the country. The party was founded by a dozen, mainly young, intellectuals, representing a total membership of just 56, who were forced to meet on a boat in a lake to avoid surveillance. Today, it is massive organisation of 92 million that effectively controls all aspects of life in the country.

The party's role in the transformation of the country itself, from humiliated, occupied, dismembered semi-colony in 1921 to the second most powerful country in the world today will, of course, dominate the speeches. A few well-chosen milestones will be highlighted; the Long March, the anti-Japanese war, the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949 but, more particularly, the extraordinary economic growth of the last 30 years will be presented as proof of the legitimacy of the party's monopoly of power. All such reviews will conveniently overlook the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989.

Around the world, pundits and commentators who grudgingly admire China's economic prowess, will draw a similar picture of the last 100 years, consoling themselves with the explanation that China really only began to grow when it ditched ?communism? and opted for capitalism.

Disaffection

Nonetheless, despite all the official festivities and self-congratulation, not everybody in China will be celebrating. In previous years, the people of Hong Kong have used the anniversary of the return of the territory to China to demonstrate in their millions, demanding their democratic rights. Not this year. In Xinjiang, too, there will be nothing to celebrate.

Quite separate from those glaring examples of mass disaffection, there are others in China who oppose the whole policy of capitalist development. These include, for example, the student Marxists from Beijing university who travelled to Shenzhen, near Hong Kong, to support striking workers. (See <https://fifthinternational.org/content/100-years-chinese-revolution> <sup>[1]</sup>) Such activists, who bear a distinct resemblance to those who first founded the Communist Party, recognise that the economic policy introduced after 1992 was much more than just another ?reform?, it marked a qualitative change in the entire structure of the economy. With the dismantling of state planning and the ending of guaranteed wages, jobs and other rights, the "iron rice bowl", for urban workers, market relations were introduced, and labour power became a commodity to be bought and sold.

History

Among the opponents of party policy after 1992, certainly among those Beijing students, an "alternative"

history, produced and circulated rather like the "samizdat" literature of the old Soviet Union, is very influential. In its opening chapter it explains, " The history from 1919 to the present is divided into four distinct periods: 1919-1949, the period of the New Democratic Revolution; 1949-1978, the period of socialist construction and "continued revolution"; 1978-1992, the period of parallel reforms of planning and the market; and 1992-present, the period of market-oriented reforms." However, it limits its own analysis to the period 1949 - 1966, that is, up to the "Cultural Revolution".

Such a focus is understandable since Mao Zedong himself described the Cultural Revolution as his fight against the "capitalist roaders", one of whose leaders was Deng Xiaoping who subsequently oversaw the "market reforms" of 1992.

However, although it is right to begin such a history with 1919, the year of the May Fourth Movement, to present the years up to 1949 simply as the "New Democratic Revolution" draws a veil over crucial events and developments in the 1920s and 1930s that transformed the CCP from a revolutionary party into the representative of a bureaucratic-military caste prepared to take any measures to preserve its own power.

Although the Founding Congress of the party was able to do little more than adopt a set of principles, tasks and objectives, these alone tell us a great deal of the character of the party, and how its principles have changed. As well as confirming the intention to form a party on the Bolshevik model, the Congress committed itself to solidarity with Soviet Russia, for the organisation of the working class in trades unions and for self-determination for Mongolia, Tibet and .... Xinjiang, expressing the hope for a federation with China thereafter.

#### Communist International

As well as the 12 delegates, Henricus Sneevliet, alias "Maring", a delegate of the Communist International, CI, also attended the Founding Congress and this illustrates the close involvement of Moscow in supporting and guiding the young party. The International itself had only been founded in 1919 and had by no means completed the task of codifying the strategy and tactics of the Russian Revolution, integrating the theoretical advances made since the time of Marx and Engels, notably on the National Question and the analysis of imperialism, and developing an international programme to direct its still very heterogenous sections.

Differences at all levels of the CI and between the CI and the CCP were to play a crucial, and ultimately disastrous, role in the development of the Chinese party. On no question was this more true than that of relations with the main bourgeois party, the Guo Min Dang, GMD, of Sun Yatsen, who had briefly been appointed president of the Republic of China after the downfall of the Imperial Qing dynasty in 1911 but was now based in Guangzhou (Canton) in South China.

The leading figures of the CCP, Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, had a low opinion of all such figures, seeing the new party as a clean break from all their intrigues and wheeler-dealing. For them, the perspective was essentially one of following the path of the Bolsheviks, rigorous working class independence in the struggle for power and a soviet-style state. However, the previous year, the CI had adopted Lenin's position on the national question, which recognised that, in the struggle against imperialism in the colonial and semi-colonial lands, bourgeois nationalists could play a progressive role and that, therefore, alliances with such forces were in order.

In the light of that, and further discussions at the CI's third congress earlier in 1921, the CCP was advised to join the GMD, using Sun's networks and support to advance its own task of organising, and politicising, the working class. The advice was unwelcome but, under pressure from Moscow, it was agreed that

comrades would individually join the GMD. In reality, "joining" is a rather misleading term, the GMD was not a party in the modern sense, it was little more than a loose collection of supporters of Sun. The potential benefit of working with it, however, was shown by a seamen's strike in Hong Kong in early 1922 when financial support, organised by the GMD, was crucial to victory.

Over the next two years, the CCP clearly benefited from working in the GMD. After a brief exile in Shanghai, Sun was invited back to Guangzhou to form a government. In the meantime, there had been extensive contact with Moscow with plans made for both economic and military support for the GMD and it was agreed not only that the CCP would enter as a party but that it would also participate in the reorganisation of the GMD as a mass membership party.

At the founding congress of the GMD as a mass party in January 1924, its membership was registered as 11,000, with 500 of them members of the CCP as well. The role played by communists was recognised when 10 were elected to the party's Central Executive Committee.

The potential of the new party organisation was soon demonstrated both in terms of recruitment and the role of soviet support. Dozens of GMD members, not all of them also members of the CCP, were sent to Moscow for political and military training, among them was Chiang Kai-shek who was later to play a pivotal role in China's history. Within China, the establishment of departments for organising both urban workers and peasants not only raised membership but also expectations for rapid improvement.

Quite how explosive that combination could be became clear the following year in Shanghai. On May 30, British troops in the International Settlement there opened fire on a demonstration of Chinese workers protesting at the killing of a striker by a Japanese foreman in a Japanese factory - the circumstances alone say a lot about China at the time. Ten protestors died and 50 were injured. The next day, the Shanghai General Council of Labour was formed, led by Communists, and called a general strike, mobilising 160,000 for over three months. It was supported by a huge solidarity campaign coordinated by a broad alliance of unions, student associations and business groups, precisely the sections of society represented by the GMD.

## Hong Kong

Such a movement could not be contained. On June 23, in Guangzhou, British and French troops again opened fire on Chinese demonstrators, killing 52 and injuring 100. In response, a similar range of organisations called for a general strike against the British colony of Hong Kong. Thousands of workers left Hong Kong and were given lodgings in Guangzhou, but this was not just a withdrawal of labour. The elected strike committee organised a blockade of Hong Kong, complete with armed naval patrols to prevent supplies reaching the island and roadblocks across the province of Guangdong. As its activities expanded to include support for strikers and their families, and coordination of solidarity far beyond the territory of the Canton government, it came to be known as Government Number Two. The strike lasted until October the following year, making it probably the longest such strike in history.

In Moscow, these developments encouraged an opportunist trend that had developed after the defeat of the German revolution of 1923. Under Grigori Zinoviev, the Executive of the CI saw the alliance with the GMD as the key to a future pro-soviet, anti-imperialist China, a huge gain that would provide a model for similar alliances and victories elsewhere. When Sun Yatsen died, in March, 1925, they pinned their hopes on Chiang Kai-shek who, after all, they had trained and was now the head of the Whampoa Military Academy of the Canton government.

The sheer scale of the anti-imperialist movement did indeed raise the prospect of a reunification of China,

sparkling a revival of mass movements of both workers and peasants and encouraging Chinese business organisations to give their support to the GMD. The key role being played by the well-organised and more politically educated CCP members was reflected in the party's very rapid growth, from 1,000 before the Shanghai strike to 30,000 at the height of the Hong Kong general strike.

The mobilising ability of the CCP and the unions that they led was beginning, however, to ring alarm bells within the GMD. Increasingly, unions were being organised in Chinese-owned businesses with demands for wages, conditions and rights like those being fought for in the foreign-owned firms. Businessmen who had benefitted greatly from the blockade of foreign firms, and funded the GMD to support strikers, now began to direct their support towards GMD figures who were beginning to question the role of the CCP within "their" party.

Inevitably, the reality of opposed class interests began to make itself felt, Left and Right wings of the GMD formed not only over domestic issues but over the relationship to the Soviet Union and the Communist International. These tensions were also noted in Moscow and led to an internal dispute over future strategy, as early as May 1925, Stalin talked of transforming the GMD into a "workers' and peasants' party" within which the CCP could exercise leadership of the national revolution.

At the GMD's second congress, in January 1926, the pro-soviet elements were clearly still dominant, and the new Executive Committee went so far as to formally request admission into the Communist International. Although no definitive answer was given to the request, the very fact that it had been made encouraged soviet advisors and the CCP to strengthen their positions within both the Canton government and the GMD organisation. The speed with which events now seemed to be moving alarmed the right wing of the party, setting the scene for Chiang Kai-shek to make his bid to fill the vacuum left by the death of Sun.

On March 20, 1926, Chiang's troops arrested CCP activists in military units, disarmed the pickets of the Hong Kong strike committee and forced Wang Jingwei, the chair of the Nationalist government, to leave Guangzhou. In his place, Chiang established essentially a military government. This "March 20 coup" did not by any means bring to an end the mass mobilisations of workers and peasants across South China but it did pose the question point blank: who was to rule?

Part 2 of this article will be published tomorrow

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[1] <https://fifthinternational.org/content/100-years-chinese-revolution>