



### **Communist Party in China**

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP, or Zhongguo gongchandang) was founded July 1, 1921, in Shanghai, and started with fifty-seven members. Eighty years later, in 2002, the CCP was the largest national Communist organization in existence, with over sixty-six million members.

The CCP has governed the People's Republic of China from the republic's founding in 1949 until today, undergoing leadership changes and significant shifts in its fundamental economic policies as well as its strategies for economic and social development. The party's ideological foundation is Marxism-Leninism, but as its leadership has shifted over the years, the names of the most

## Communist Party in China

significant Chinese leaders have been added to those of Marx and Lenin, and their theoretical formulations have been recognized in the party's constitution. In the most recent version of the party's statute, "Mao Zedong Thought," "Deng Xiaoping Theory," and the "Important Thought of the Three Represents" (Jiang Zemin) are all part of the CCP's fundamental doctrine, "socialism with Chinese characteristics." The 1982 statute, last modified in 2002, once more describes the CCP as a traditional Leninist party, modeled after the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The CCP's principal organizational principle is democratic centralism, and is administered by a hierarchical structure. Previous statutes, in 1969, 1973, and 1977, had instead placed Mao's thought, image, and ideal of the "permanent revolution" at their ideological core; among other things, this entailed limiting the recruitment of new party members to revolutionary classes only (workers, poor and fairly poor peasants, and soldiers). These statutes were brief and devoid of formal obligations to observe democratic procedures internally, resulting in the party's transformation into a flexible instrument, exposed to the arbitrary decisions of the central leadership—a fact that was reflected in the party's behavior during the years of Maoist radicalism.

The CCP represents itself as the vanguard of the Chinese working class, people, and nation, and therefore believes it is entitled to exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat on which the People's Republic of China is based. The CCP's ultimate goal is the creation of a Communist society, but today communism is formally defined as an ideal "that will only be achievable when socialist society will be fully developed and advanced." The development of the socialist system remains a "long historical process."

### History, 1921–49

Marxism was introduced to China by young intellectuals active in the nationalist movement, which reached its culmination in the demonstrations of May 4, 1919. The most immediate cause for the movement was a provision in the Treaty of Versailles that granted Japan sovereignty over part of the Chinese province of Shandong, but it became a means to diffuse the ideas of science and democracy as fundamental motors for the transformation of old China into a modern, powerful nation following the fall of the last imperial dynasty (1911). The first Chinese socialists were inspired more by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's and Mikhail Bakunin's anarchism and the utopian socialism of Charles Fourier than by Marxism. This was

a consequence of the places that these young Chinese individuals chose to study or live in exile—Japan, but most especially France, where many of the leading cadre of the future Communist Party were educated, including Zhou Enlai (who would become prime minister) and Deng Xiaoping (who would become general secretary). The First Congress in 1921 was the result of preparatory work by Comintern envoys in a Communist movement that was still extremely fragmented and immature.

During the CCP's first years of existence, the Comintern's main goal was the creation of a republican China. It therefore focused especially on a strategic relationship with the Nationalist Party (GMD, or Guomindang), a revolutionary party much larger than the CCP with a structure that its historic leader, Sun Yat-Sen (Sun Zhongshan), had transformed into one similar to that of the Soviet party. Under the Comintern's guidance, the Communists' actions were oriented toward mobilizing a tiny and fragmented urban working class. The CCP and the GMD formed an alliance with Moscow's support in 1924 known as the First United Front. The strategic collaboration between the two movements became more complex after Sun's death and Chiang Kai-shek's (Jiang Jieshi) rise to power as head of the GMD in 1925. The attempts by the new nationalist leader to reunite the country and Chiang's intolerance of an alliance with the Communists soon led to a confrontation with the CCP, and severe repression that decimated the Communist ranks and put an end to the United Front. Between 1927 and 1936 the two parties fought a civil war, until the Japanese invaders' advance (they had occupied Manchuria in 1931) and the military success of the Communist guerrillas in the countryside convinced the two parties to form a new alliance (the Second United Front). It lasted into the early 1940s, when hostilities broke out once more, and only concluded with the definitive seizure of power by the Communists in 1949, and the nationalists' escape to Taiwan.

In the 1920s, the party's failure to organize the working class in the cities led to a peculiar analysis of the class situation in the Chinese Socialist Revolution. The party's organizing and propaganda efforts were supposed to start in the country—where there was resentment toward not so much the local political powers but rather the "feudal" landowners—and not in the factories. This was the principle, together with the "need to understand the needs of the masses" (the "mass line"), that, based on organizational intuition, would allow the CCP to withstand numerous defeats, reunify the country, and finally

take its place in the Forbidden City, replacing the Qing emperors. This interpretation led to a split in the CCP between the “Bolshevik” and Maoist lines. Mao, who endorsed a rural strategy, successfully began to create Red bases in the mountains between the provinces of Jianxi and Hunan, where the first “Soviet Chinese Republic” was established in 1931. The Jianxi Soviet, which in the early 1930s had a population of about ten million, became a thorn in the side of the nationalist government, leading the government to intensify military actions. In 1934, the GMD’s military pressure was such that it convinced the Communist army, which was in bad shape, to abandon the soviet and march for a year and over eight thousand miles in order to escape encirclement. It was during this disastrous strategic retreat that Mao emerged as the supreme leader of the Communist movement. The political struggle between Mao and the group of young leaders who were faithful to Moscow, known as the “Twenty-eight Bolsheviks,” was resolved in favor of the former during the Zunyi political conference, held in the midst of the Long March in 1935.

Between 1937 and 1945, the party’s headquarters was located near the city of Yan’an, in northwestern Shaanxi Province. There, the CCP experimented with many developments that would later become characteristic of CCP government culture after 1949, from land redistribution to agrarian reform, from a leadership style based on the mass line and mobilization, to a strategy of guerrilla warfare and popular militias (which contributed to the success of the war of resistance against the Japanese and remained part of fundamental military doctrine after the liberation), to cultural policies and revolutionary art.

#### History, 1949–2004

From 1949 on, the history of the CCP and the political history of Communist China coincided to a large degree. From the creation of the People’s Republic of China until 1954, the country was governed without a constitution. The first party congress in the new era took place in 1956, when the process of nationalization of the economy was already in its final stages. The local leadership groups were often made up of the same soldiers who had freed the various areas of the country, and several years passed before the party was able to create a ruling class that was able to govern and a civil administration was installed. During those years, known as the period of “new democracy,” the CCP tried to gather all political and economic forces that were not hostile to the revolu-

tion around the reconstruction effort. On the basis of the errors of the Soviet collectivization effort, the economic reform policies were initially more gradual, both in the country and in the industrial sector.

In the country, for instance, the forced requisitions at first targeted only the lands of absentee landlords and rich farmers, while land belonging to small landholders (the “middle” farmers) was exempted. The land was redistributed to benefit the poorer strata, while maintaining the small landholders’ store of experience relatively intact, therefore helping to maintain a good level of productivity in the countryside. Starting in the mid-1950s, the process of collectivization continued with the creation of cooperatives and later people’s communes in 1958.

The influence of the USSR’s experience (and its substantial economic aid) on China’s first steps toward the construction of socialism was evident in the First Five-Year Development Plan—started in 1953, and inspired by the idea of accumulation and the priority of heavy industry—as well as the country’s first Constitution (1954), based largely on the Soviet one. (The Five-Year Development Plan concluded with the nationalization of all the remaining industrial firms in 1956.) The idyll between the two largest Communist parties of “real socialism” started to lose its luster in 1956 with the process of de-Stalinization, begun during the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s Twentieth Congress, and the gradual shifts in Chinese economic policies, which had become more radical and productivist under Mao’s leadership. The split concluded with the withdrawal of Soviet technicians in 1960, and had lasting consequences for the CCP’s economic strategies, since China was now isolated by both blocs and forced to rely on its own resources. Only in 1989, with Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit to Beijing, would the normalization of political relations between the two countries be complete. Mao’s distrust of Nikita Khrushchev’s new course was the flip side of Mao’s admiration for the USSR’s economic success, and the fundamental role Soviet experts and capital had played in the construction of China’s basic industry.

The Great Leap Forward’s failure (1958–61) upset political stability. Mao performed a rare act of self-criticism in front of the party. The “gradualists,” led by Liu Shaoqi, went back to balancing policies of moderate industrial growth with slowing down the collectivization process in the countryside (during brief periods there was even a return to family-based forms of agriculture). But the radicals’ leadership soon gathered strength, and between

## Communist Party in China

1962 and 1966, by means of a series of political education campaigns, Mao's supporters regained lost ground. Supported by a group of young radicals and using the population's dissatisfaction with an unbalanced process of development, in 1966 Mao launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, whose principal aim was to eliminate those in the bureaucracy who were "taking the capitalist road." The party leadership at all levels was decimated as a result, and during years of confrontations in the squares, universities, and factories, the CCP became more radicalized. The presence of soldiers in the party increased greatly (about 45 percent of elected members as against 19 percent in 1956), to the detriment of representatives of mass organizations and civil institutions. The Ninth Congress of 1969 brought about a split between the two main components of the radical wing that had dominated the most violent years of the Cultural Revolution: the army led by Lin Biao, and the so-called Group for the Cultural Revolution led by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing.

Following the death in 1971 of Lin Biao, who had been at Mao's side during the harshest phases of the Cultural Revolution, the party was prey to the clash between the radical Maoists and a bureaucratic apparatus that was being reborn. It was Premier Zhou Enlai's task to once again provide the CCP with credible leadership that would be able to stabilize the political and economic situation, in part by recalling Deng Xiaoping to lead the government after years of political exile. Only Mao's death in 1976 finally enabled Deng's faction to settle accounts with the radical faction, which from that moment on was known as the Gang of Four (in addition to Mao's last wife, Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen). The four, arrested only weeks after the death of their protector, became scapegoats for all the errors and violence of the preceding period, while a new leadership, with Deng at the rudder, rebuilt the party's institutions.

The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Congress in October 1978 marked the Maoists' final defeat and the beginning of a series of economic reforms partially inspired by those of the early 1960s. This line, which pursued reforms and was more welcoming to the outside world, resulted in the reopening of the Chinese market to foreign investments and the progressive introduction of market mechanisms in the economy's management. Deng became the incarnation of the new course, but his pragmatic style led to the emergence of collegial management in party matters, replacing the cult of personality that

had been so damaging under Mao. The party opened its doors to contributions from groups that had previously been victims of radical ostracism, like intellectuals, and Marxist doctrine began to adapt to the "material conditions" of contemporary China. In the 1980s the party was led by Hu Yaobang, a reformer and a follower of Deng's, who several times attempted to introduce programs for the reform of the political system. In 1986, Hu became a victim of his efforts to reform a party in which a conservative gerontocracy still had the ability to tip the scale in factional disputes. Student demonstrations favoring deeper political reforms during the last months of that year ended with Hu's removal from office. His successor, Zhao Ziyang, a member of the same faction, was subjected to the same fate in 1989. That year the demonstrations for democracy (which had begun precisely in order to commemorate Hu's death) led to clashes between demonstrators and the party's hawks, which finally convinced Deng that military repression was inevitable. Zhao and many of the men who had guided the era of reforms in the 1980s were removed from power. The rapid economic development that had characterized the 1980s was halted during a time of uncertainty about which faction would prevail during Zhao's succession. Jiang Zemin filled the position of general secretary, but it was another symbolic gesture by Deng that once more set the party on the reform path. In 1992, an aging Deng traveled to the special economic zones in the South and pointed to them as models for the future development of China.

The process of economic opening continued under Jiang's leadership. After 1989, and with Deng's death in 1997, however, the party maintained a clear distinction between economic liberalization and political power, still based in forms of democratic centralism. Even though Jiang was the secretary with the longest tenure in the CCP's history, his personal power never was comparable to Mao's or Deng's. While in the economic arena the party accepted a liberal framework for its policies, in which both the market and private property were granted more room as well as economic and legal protection, in the political arena the single-party structure remained unaltered as well as unwilling to undertake substantial political reforms. With the introduction of the "Important Thought of the Three Represents" (the party represents the advanced forces of production, advanced culture, and the interests of the majority of the population), Jiang also enlarged the party's potential base, thus recognizing that the economic transformations require

the party itself to adapt to a society whose interests have become more complex and contradictory.

In 2002 the Jiang cycle concluded with the selection of Hu Jintao as party secretary, a so-called Fourth Generation leader.

### Organization

The party's structure remained basically stable during its long history. It reproduced itself, moving from the center to the periphery, and was able to penetrate social and economic activities throughout the country. Party cells existed in each institution, company, residential neighborhood, and people's commune. Each one of them was a tool for popular mobilization that could be used by the higher levels (central, provincial, municipal, and district).

At the center, the party congress is the formally sovereign organ within the organization: composed of a variable number of representatives from around the country, its power is limited to the ratification of policies developed by the leadership and the selection of a restricted organ called the Central Committee. The CCP held its first six congresses between 1921 and 1928 (the last was the only one to be held outside China, in Moscow, after the bloody repression of 1927), the seventh in 1945, and the eighth, the first after the seizure of power, in 1956. The congress has met only eight times since then, but only recently with a certain regularity—about every five years. The Central Committee—formed by a number of members that grew from the initial 100 of the first period (1949–66) to 198 in 2002—meets more frequently (up to two or three times a year, as necessary) in what are known as plenums, or plenary sessions. Ordinary activities between two plenums are managed by the Permanent Committee of the Central Committee. The Central Committee has the powerful Central Committee for Discipline at its side. The executive organ is the politburo, with a variable number of members (the least numerous had 11 members, and the one selected in 2002 had 24).

Starting in 1956 the highest level of party leadership was restricted even further, with the creation of a politburo Standing Committee that at the time had five members and subsequently has always had an uneven number of members (between five and nine). Directly below this Standing Committee is the Secretariat, generally led by a member from the same body; this member receives the title of general secretary and is in charge of the party's policies. The position of general secretary, which is currently held by the person at the top of the

political hierarchy, Hu Jintao, never really was Mao's, who preferred to assign it to Deng starting with the Cultural Revolution in 1966, while he kept the position of president for himself. The position of general secretary was abolished during the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), and it was Deng who wanted to reestablish it in the 1980s, when it was first held by Hu Yaobang (until 1986), then by Zhao Ziyang (until 1989), Jiang Zemin (until 2002), and then Hu Jintao. The party also selects a Central Military Commission, in command of the People's Liberation Army. As a revolutionary army, it swears allegiance to the revolution and its guardian, the CCP, not to organs of state power. Control of the Central Military Commission is usually a sign of who controls power in the party and the country.

The party's base has continued to grow (from 60.4 million members in 1997, to 66.3 million in 2002). This growth in party membership notwithstanding, the party's ability to manage, control, and determine social change has decreased with the gradual privatization of both the labor market and the education, social services, and housing markets. Chinese Communists are prevalently men (women constitute 16.6 percent) and older (only 23.1 percent are less than thirty-five years old), with an above average educational level (about 47 percent have at least a high school diploma). Even though party affiliation does not have any practical benefits, the prestige associated with the party often guarantees special treatment. Belonging to the party is an advantage, especially for professionals who work for state organizations. A situation quite frequently occurs where in order to be guaranteed a promotion to higher levels of responsibility, employees will be explicitly required to join the party. Membership is not automatic and requires one to have no criminal record, a relatively long educational history, and to take an exam to test one's knowledge of the party's fundamental principles and history. During some periods, access to the party was reserved only for members of "good" classes, workers and peasants. Later, due to the more complex set of interests represented, the party allowed even elements considered bourgeois (especially private businesspeople) to become full-fledged members.

**See also** Chinese Revolution; Cultural Revolution in China; Deng Xiaoping; Great Leap Forward; Long March; Mao Zedong; Marxism-Leninism; Single-Party System; State, The.

### FURTHER READING

Lieberthal, K. *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform*. New York: Norton, 1995.

- MacFarquhar, R., ed. *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Saich, T., and T. Cheek, ed. *New Perspectives on State Socialism in China*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997.
- Saich, T., and B. Yang. *The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party: Documents and Analysis*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996.

**LUIGI TOMBA**