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The Rise of the Chinese Communist Party

Christian Hess

The rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is a dramatic tale, full of twists and unexpected turns. The storyline is compelling enough: a small, urban-based political party, led by intellectuals, is nearly wiped out by its domestic political rivals, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists, only to beat the odds by transforming itself from an urban to a rural-based movement that manages to successfully lead a social revolution in the countryside while fighting a guerrilla war against invading Japanese armies. The CCP not only survived in impoverished and isolated parts of rural China, it thrived. Tens of thousands of people flocked to its rural bases to be a part of this movement. After an intense civil war with the Nationalists following Japan's defeat, the CCP won control of China and founded the People's Republic in 1949. It is, of course, still in power today, and has further reinvented itself as the architect of the stunning economic growth we witness in China today.

Both the official, CCP-sanctioned history of modern China, and to some extent Western scholarship, tend to equate modern Chinese history with the successful rise of the CCP and its revolution. But we must be careful. This is but one of the major storylines in China's rise. The primacy given to the CCP's revolution and wartime experiences gives CCP victory an air of inevitability. Interwoven into this success story are some key misinterpretations, some of which have been created and circulated by the CCP as a means to legitimate their monopoly on power, while others are perpetuated by scholarly agendas from outside the People's Republic. This chapter examines three of the main misconceptions surrounding the CCP's rise to power with the aim of revealing how and why these notions were created, and that some of the Party's key victories were far from inevitable.

THE LONG MARCH: MYTHIC JOURNEY

One cornerstone of the CCP's origin myth involves their dramatic escape from Jiangxi in southern China and arrival at a new rural base in Shaanxi in the northwest, an epic event known as "The Long March." Following their near destruction at the hands of the Nationalists in 1927, the CCP had survived in the remote hills of Jiangxi, where they built a rural Soviet (a military-protected, Party-controlled base area). By the early 1930s, the Nationalist commander Chiang Kai-shek was determined to wipe them out completely. The Nationalists launched a series of "extermination" campaigns aimed at destroying the Jiangxi base. By 1934 the CCP's territory was surrounded by Nationalist troops. One night, in October 1934, eighty thousand people departed the Jiangxi base, breaking through the blockade under the cover of darkness. Few realized that this march would not last days or even weeks, but rather months. Their destination was unclear. When they finally made it to Yan'an, the survivors, now only ten thousand, had marched six thousand miles in just over one year through some of the most inhospitable parts of China, battling the Nationalist armies and various warlords along the way. In one famous story, the CCP reached a chain bridge high across a mountain valley. Under fire from Nationalist troops on the other side, a group of commandos crawled across, hand over hand, to lob grenades at the enemy. Their daring attack ensured safe passage for the marchers.

There were more mundane but no less important struggles within the CCP itself during the Long March. It was during the course of the march that Mao Zedong and a core of leaders emerged who would rule the Party and shape its future. When Mao finally arrived at Yan'an, he marshaled the few thousand with him and asked "Are we stronger or weaker? Stronger, because you who have survived are like gold."¹ Surviving Long March veterans did indeed possess a very real symbolic and political capital within the Party, and many remained in top leadership positions well into the 1980s.

In the official retelling of the Long March story, the CCP not only survives through unimaginable hardship, but emerges as a purified, unified force. Mao Zedong and other Long March leaders appear to possess an invincibility that makes them seem destined to rule. Moreover, through their hardships, according to the story, a unity is forged among the Party, in which serious factional divisions melt away, Mao takes the helm, and they march onward toward their new base at Yan'an. Shortly after arriving in Yan'an, Mao wrote of the march, "Let us ask, has history ever known a long march to equal ours? No, never. The Long March is a manifesto. It has proclaimed to the world that the Red Army is an army of heroes, while the imperialists and their running dogs, Chiang Kai-shek and his like, are impotent."²

Yet the event itself is slippery historical terrain. There is little in the way of photographic or documentary evidence from the march, and we have only fleeting glimpses into the factional struggles that surrounded it. This lack of clarity gives the event a malleability that makes for a good legend. What glimpses we do catch of the decision making during the Long March reveal that contingencies and conflict were the norm. We know that Mao became the main leader during the march, but the details of his rise remain hazy. Moreover, his power was not yet total. Even in terms of deciding the final destination of the march, there was considerable debate. While Mao favored moving northward to Yan'an, there were others within the Party who had plans for a move to Xinjiang in the far northwest or Sichuan in the mountainous center. Powerful military commanders like Zhang Guotao, in charge of a sizable military force, competed with Mao for political influence. Zhang, for example, had led his troops into Sichuan province and upon meeting up with the rest of the Long Marchers, Zhang challenged Mao in favor of setting up a federation of bases where Zhang was in Sichuan and the rugged lands adjoining it in northwest China. Such intraparty conflict between Mao and other key leaders continued even after their arrival at Yan'an.

In reality, the Long March was more a meandering retreat than a unifying quest. It resulted in the near destruction of the CCP, and tens of thousands of its followers perished on the road. Factional conflict at the top levels of the Party intensified as their desperate situation unfolded. Had it not been for Japan's all-out invasion of China, the Nationalists might have encircled the weakened CCP once again for a final battle. Yet, in part because of such contingencies, the CCP survived and turned the defeat into a mythic victory, with the reality of a fragmented retreat transformed into a symbol of unity and perseverance, key values of the new wartime base at Yan'an.

The Long March story was propagated shortly after arriving at the new base in Yan'an. It was written about by Mao and became one of the main narratives of the Party-sponsored history of the CCP's rise to power. It resurfaced prominently during the late 1960s, when, during the Cultural Revolution, millions of "Red Guards," radicalized youths empowered by Mao to attack the CCP, donned Yan'an-style uniforms and recreated their own "Long March" journeys from provincial cities and towns to Beijing. These young new Long Marchers hoped to experience their own daring adventures on the way to greet Chairman Mao. Even in the era of reforms after Mao's death, when much of the Maoist state has been dismantled and talk of revolution replaced by market concerns, there is still a place for the Long March. Chinese satellites and astronauts are blasted into orbit on "Long March" heavy-payload rockets. Thus, this narrative has quite literally reached new heights as a symbol of progress.

DESTINATION YAN'AN: MYTHIC SYMBOL OF REVOLUTION

From 1935 until the late 1940s, Yan'an, a former trading outpost on the old Silk Road in Shaanxi province, was the center of the CCP's political, social, and cultural activity. It was during this period that Mao Zedong rose to become the head of the Party and its revolution, and at Yan'an he produced many of his most important theoretical works and policies. Despite its remote location and extreme poverty, tens of thousands of people flocked to Yan'an to join the CCP's war effort and to help build a new society. Camaraderie, hard work, thrift, egalitarianism, patriotism, and a belief in creating a better future for China became part of a core set of revolutionary values that some scholars have referred to as the "Yan'an Way."³ Like the Long March story, there was some truth to this. At Yan'an and other rural base areas, the CCP rebuilt itself, and successfully implemented tax and rent policies with the goal of gradually increasing the wealth of the farming population. In a fractured country, scarred by incessant war, the CCP's inclusive grassroots politics, egalitarian social and economic policies, and message of unity was a powerful draw for people in China. By the early 1940s, just a few years after the Long March nearly destroyed the Party, CCP membership swelled to over 700,000.

Like the Long March, Yan'an became an instant and very potent symbol for the retooled CCP. It further refined the narrative of unity-through-struggle in the formative stages of the Party. It was the symbolic capital of the revolution, the final destination of the Long March saga. Because Yan'an was the main base where key leaders like Mao lived and operated, it tends to dominate the historical narrative of the CCP's revolution and war effort. There are several points to keep in mind when it comes to breaking through this image of centrality. First, Yan'an was only one among many rural base areas scattered throughout north China, each with its own diverse socioeconomic conditions. Second, Yan'an's symbolic power was under attack from elements within the Party shortly after the CCP's arrival there.

By the early 1940s the CCP controlled some nineteen base areas in central and north China. Within these bases, some counties were receptive to the CCP's efforts at social leveling through land reform and progressive taxation, while others were resistant, and even hostile, to these plans. For example, in the Taihang base, to the east of Yan'an, CCP leaders experienced firsthand a major uprising against their base-area government. The Party's initial, inclusive approach to building support and local governance here involved a large swath of rural society, including women and rural elites. However, after 1940, the Party switched tactics, removing many of these people from power and replacing them with CCP outsiders. Aggrieved former activists mounted an armed revolt by mobilizing an underground religious sect to take up arms against the CCP. Women comprised a large portion of the sect's membership, and captured female participants re-

sponded that they felt this organization allowed them greater freedom than the programs of the CCP. In the eyes of the local communities like this, the CCP was viewed as a political and military force made up of outsiders, strangers who believed their stay in these rural hinterlands was temporary. This was a major source of underlying tension between the Party and the people, which reached a boiling point on a number of occasions.

Some new arrivals to Yan'an were increasingly skeptical of the positive image of life in the base areas. Writers, artists, and urban intellectuals, many of whom had risked life and limb just to make the trek from Japanese-occupied coastal cities, were quick to criticize the less-than-egalitarian practices that they soon discovered characterized life there. Despite the talk of thrift and sacrifice, CCP elites, for example, enjoyed better access to food, better housing, and even enjoyed evening dance parties. Wang Shiwei, a translator who moved from Shanghai, penned a potent criticism of life in Yan'an that highlighted a darker side of authoritarianism, elitism, and the CCP's failure to truly capture the spirit of those flocking to the base. Another writer, Ding Ling, was no less critical. She had established her reputation as a leftist writer in the 1920s and was receptive to Yan'an's image as an egalitarian place. However, shortly after her arrival Ding Ling wrote a scathing critique of the CCP's policies for women, noting that in fact traditional attitudes toward women's roles continued. Both of these authors suffered during a major crackdown on dissent within the Party, launched by Mao in 1942. No sooner had the CCP built the Yan'an image than it was forced to crack down on those within the Party who sought to expose it.

Today, the Yan'an story survives and in some ways is stronger than ever. It is kept alive by television dramas that glorify the CCP's war and revolution, and in which the Yan'an days are recollected and recast as a time of past purity and unity in an age of rapid change. Occasionally, Yan'an creeps up as a story in state-owned media outlets. As part of the run-up to the gala celebrations of the PRC's sixtieth anniversary, the Xinhua News Agency ran a story in which some surviving revolutionaries and Mao's relatives visited Yan'an.⁴ Yan'an the place, ignored for decades after 1949, has not been left behind in China's economic boom. It is now a major site of patriotic "red tourism," where visitors can dress up in Yan'an-style uniforms and pose for photographs at Mao's old headquarters. Well-heeled tourists are treated to revolutionary songs in modern hotels with rooms that imitate the simple cave dwellings from Yan'an's glory days.

1949: BIRTH OF "NEW CHINA"?

In founding the People's Republic of China in 1949, the CCP accomplished one of its major goals. It had defeated its chief domestic rival, the National-

ist government, and was now in charge of a new nation. Its dramatic rise to power seemed complete. There is little in the way of mythmaking here. This was the CCP's triumph, but it was a victory that raised new questions for both the Party and the people of China. Was this the beginning of a new stage of politics and society for Chinese people? Was the revolution complete, or would it continue? Was everything from "old China" bad?

While 1949 is a watershed date in modern Chinese history, these questions remind us that dates are never perfect historical divides. The CCP did indeed usher in a new political, social, and economic system and carried out significant policies like land reform that fundamentally altered life in the countryside. However, the PRC's foundations were as much past inheritances as they were new creations. While the CCP may have reviled the Nationalist government, it inherited from them a legacy of centralized planning, a legal system, a transportation network, and so on. Even Japan, whose brutal invasion scarred Chinese society from the 1930s through 1945, left certain foundations upon which the CCP built its own programs. Japan had heavily industrialized parts of northeast China, and this area became the industrial heart of the new People's Republic. The imperialist factories of the enemy became the socialist factories of the people. Thus, not everything from "old" China could be swept away, or portrayed as bad.

Moreover the CCP's own policies had a history. For the first few years after 1949, a key challenge for Party leaders was how to carry their past policies, forged during wartime in rural bases, forward to all of China. An emphasis on these continuities and inheritances provides a more realistic picture of what the CCP faced in 1949. Party leaders confronted what recent scholarship on the early years of the People's Republic has characterized as certain "dilemmas of victory."⁵ How would it mask the legacies it inherited from its enemies? How could it refine its message of revolution and state building to fit urban areas that the CCP now controlled, to say nothing of places like Tibet and Xinjiang? The most significant of these dilemmas—the tensions between formal state-building and radical revolutionary change—would haunt both the Party and the people in the decades to come.

CONCLUSION

What do these narratives about the rise of the CCP tell us? They exist in most national projects, so it would be incorrect to assume that such mythmaking is unique to China. However, in the China case they do point to something quite significant. This is a party that survived against the odds. It is a political machine with decades of experience in fashioning tales about its origins. Its narratives have proven to be remarkably flexible in that they have managed to adapt through the phenomenal changes in China over

the past thirty years. When communist regimes around the globe were teetering on the brink of collapse in 1989, China too faced its own crisis. The Party acted brutally to suppress the democracy movement, headquartered at Tiananmen Square. But this was hardly a political machine about to fall apart. Rather, the CCP continued to orchestrate one of the most spectacular periods of sustained economic growth in modern history. This kind of flexibility is a recognized strength of the CCP, and has enabled it to survive for so long. But it is also a liability. There is a danger that its own narratives about sacrifice, thrift, people power, and egalitarianism might lead to increased questioning of the CCP's performance in an era when the gap between rich and poor has widened considerably. Or, such tales might reinvigorate the Party to reexamine its policies and reemphasize its role in providing broad welfare for the people. Now more than ever the world will be watching China to see how this plays out.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

On the Long March and Yan'an themselves, see Sun Shuyun, *The Long March* (Harper Perennial, 2007), Helen Praeger Young, *Choosing Revolution: Chinese Women Soldiers on the Long March* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), Chen Yung-fa, *Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937–1945* (University of California Press, 1986), and Mark Selden, *The Yen'an Way in Revolutionary China* (Harvard University Press, 1971).

Works that set these events in context include Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2004), Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (Free Press, 1999), Paul G. Pickowicz and Jeremy Brown (eds.), *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China* (Harvard University Press, 2007). Overt reappraisals may be found in Tony Saich and Hans van de Ven (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Chinese Communist Revolution* (M.E. Sharpe, 1995) and Jeffrey. N. Wasserstrom, *Twentieth-Century China: New Approaches* (Routledge, 2003).

NOTES

1. Quoted in Michael Dutton, *Policing Chinese Politics: A History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 75.

2. Mao Zedong, "On Tactics against Japanese Imperialism," December 27, 1935, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 1, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_11.htm.

3. Mark Selden, *The Yen'an Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

4. Du Guodong, "Marking Mao's Legacy in Yan'an," *China View*, September 29, 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-09/29/content_12124657.htm
5. Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz, ed., *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).