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[An Interview with Richard McGregor, Author of *The Party*](#)

June 25, 2010 in [Interview](#) by [mcunningham](#) | [2 comments](#)

By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

Richard McGregor is the former Beijing bureau chief for the Financial Times and author of the newly released [The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers](#). I recently conducted the interview below with McGregor via e-mail; you can read excerpts from the book [here](#) and [here](#) and also find a ["Why I Write" profile](#) of McGregor at the Urbanatomy site.

What is *The Party* about? What new knowledge do you hope readers will come away with after they're finished?

My purpose was simply to describe the political system as it really is. I think few people, even foreigners living in China, appreciate just how vast and resilient the party apparatus that underpins the government in China is, and how deeply its tentacles extend into all manners of institutions, like universities and the media. And often people who do know a lot about the party will attempt to explain it away, as a product of Chinese culture or some such. I wanted to describe in an unflinchingly fashion a system that is the product of resolutely political arrangements.

The other major theme of my book is secrecy. Once you begin to describe bodies like the Central Organisation Department, which is really the world's most powerful human resources outfit, you can convey just how absurdly secretive the CCP is. This body controls the lives and careers of a vast elite in China, and it has no sign outside of its office and no listed phone number! To me, simple facts like this don't need dressing up. Just tell it as it is and hopefully readers will get a sense of what a strange pre-modern body the CCP is.

I think a lot of western journalists do have a sense of how pervasive the party is but it is quite a hard thing to explain in day-to-day news stories. Frankly, it is also hard to explain to editors back in head office at all. It is kind of like – "The Central Organisation what?!"

How did you penetrate "the secret world" of the CCP leadership? What kinds of sources did you draw on to write *The Party*?

I am not sure I did really penetrate it. A friend of mine once compared reporting on China as like knitting a sweater. You get one strand of wool here and one there. Eventually you have enough for a sleeve. A few years later, you have a full sweater. Once I settled on the topic, I discovered there was all sorts of strands of information out there but you rarely get to sit down with a government official who will give you box-and-dice about how the system works from the inside. There is lots of stuff, much of it new, in my book. But in truth, I think I have barely scratched the surface.

In a recent [Huffington Post](#) piece, you wrote that "the remarkable and largely overlooked truth about China is that it is still governed on Soviet hardware." What challenges do you imagine that might create in the years to come?

The system is both rigid and flexible. Rigid because of the party's insistence on a monopoly on political power. And flexible, because it is an administrative system, not subject to the law. The system has proved much more adaptable than many people thought it would, but I think the path has been made easier by the success of the economy. Once the economy slows and there is less money to pass around, it is not clear how the system will manage except by ramping up the repression. Expectations have been raised in China along with living standards. If the party has to fight to hang onto power, I think large sections of the population will push back.

In your opinion, what has held the CCP together in the face of massive social changes over the past two decades?

On top of economic growth, nationalism is the stickiest glue binding the people and powerholders together. The Chinese are quite rightly proud of what they have achieved in the last three decades.

They have a chip on their shoulder about the developed world, but equally, the way the imperialist west, and Japan, trampled over China in the 19th and 20th century gives the nationalist lobby lots of ammunition. The party has been very cynical and canny in the way they have used this to scrub up their own image. China gives free rein to anyone who wants to publicise Japanese wartime atrocities but heaven help anyone who turns the mirror of history onto the CCP's own record!

What is your sense about the relationship between the Chinese people and the CCP today? Do you think your book says anything that would surprise a Chinese reader?

I wouldn't pretend to know what the Chinese reader might think, except that a number of Chinese have been quite thrilled to read about their system in a way they are constrained from saying or writing themselves.

As to the relationship between the CCP and the people, it is a highly sensitive topic. In some ways, they have little to do with each other directly. People deal with the system through the government rather than the party. The party in turn has a rather patronizing daddy-knows-best attitude to the people. By and large, they leave each other alone in day-to-day life. But once anyone crosses that red line into organized politics, the party can turn into a very brutal beast indeed.

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