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China's CCP 90 years old, faces hard road ahead

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In Chongqing, China students celebrate the 90th anniversary of the national Chinese Communist Party.

By Kerry Brown

In [The Fear of Barbarians](#) French writer Tzvetan Todorov divides the world's countries into four types: those led by appetite, those by resentment, those by fear, and those by indecision. In the camp of appetite sit the countries of the developing world, with their hunger for resources to push forward economic growth. In the resentment camp lie those who are motivated by anger over their treatment by the dominant powers like the US and Europe. The US and Europe, in fact, belong to the 'fear' camp – aware of the competition now coming to them from newly emerging countries. The final group, that of the indecisive, mops up those who have yet to decide which group of the above three they sit in.

China is an unusual country, and trying to fit it into Todorov's categories illustrates this. [While its appetite for raw materials is strong](#). China is also guided by historic grievances against the West for the ["century of humiliation"](#) and Japan for its devastating war with China from 1937. It might also be categorised as a country which, under its newly founded geopolitical assertiveness, is guided by fears over its own immense internal challenges. As one recent Chinese academic told me while visiting China, how can the country become a superpower when it is [running out of water](#), and is opposed by the rest of the world? China's anxieties run deep, and its experience of crisis leading to change is a long, and bitter one.

The Chinese leadership over the last three decades has radically reorientated their country. Out of isolation, it is now a member of almost all international treaties, membership bodies and multilateral agencies. Despite this, it remains an [object of suspicion](#). Does it harbour some deeper, longer term purpose beyond merely enriching its own people? Will it, when it has reached a level of [technical proficiency](#) and autonomy, turn on the countries around it and rectify some of the historic anger it feels as a great power brought low for too long over the last two centuries? Or, if we hold to this, are we, as [Julia Lovell](#) in an excellent new history of the Opium Wars, falling into the same trap as those in the 19th and early 20th century, who imputed to China any number of sinister intentions when, in fact, the country was struggling under the weight of its own complexity and inward turmoil. Lovell makes the powerful point that in the 19th century, China's most devastating encounters were not, finally, with western powers, but, through a series of massive rebellions internally, with itself.

On the July 1st, the Communist Party of China celebrated its 90th anniversary. From a few dozen members in 1921, it has grown now to over [80 million](#) (a landmark it passed in late June). Over 20 million applied to join it in 2010 alone. Only 2 million succeeded in getting in. In the last sixty three years in power, it has achieved three things: it won the war against the Japanese and then the Nationalists to create the People's Republic in 1949; it unified most of the country, and created a stable political entity; and in 1978, it started the reform and opening up process, which continues to this day.

Under the Party's rule, China has risen to the world's second largest economy. Since 2001, it has quadrupled the size of its economy. But two deep contradictions dominate the last three decades. The first is that at the heart of China's modernity lies the almost wholesale adoption of [western models](#). China's model of statehood, and its industrial, economic and social policy are almost wholly derivative of the developed countries in the west. Despite many attempts to outline an authentically Chinese version of modernity, this remains a resolutely stubborn fact.

The second is that, while maintaining the important ideological façade of being a socialist country, no population on earth has so energetically embraced the market, nor, for that matter, so successfully. As the great Chinese sociologist [Fei Xiaotong](#) wrote in 1947, the Chinese have an historic distrust of the central state and its administrative agents. They work in carefully delineated, flexible networks. The market in many ways has been a wonderful enabler of these, creating a massive parallel text of Chinese development beyond the very unified, political one. China may have one ruling party, but it has almost limitless

markets. And for the moment, these are enough to satisfy the aspirations of the majority of Chinese, for whom the market grants them increasing prosperity and, up to a point, autonomy.

As China has become rich, however, it has become more [complicated](#), and as it has become socially more complicated, it has also become more afflicted by contentious and internal [instability](#). The central leadership are serious when they talk endlessly about the need to [preserve stability](#), at any cost. They appeal to two things. A long historic memory of devastating crises wiping out whole dynasties; and events in living memory which showed China afflicted by internal division and conflict. The Communist Party, highly ironically, lives with the state-creation achievements of the expansionist Qing three centuries before. They are attempting to maintain balance and cohesiveness over a territory the size of Europe with immense ethnic, social and economic diversity. In many ways, it is a miracle that they have managed to maintain this balancing act for so long.

The party, in its 10th decade in existence, and 7th in power, is embarking on a treacherous journey. Its immediate challenge is to fulfil a [leadership transition](#) in late 2012, the first of its kind, where as many as 70 per cent of the elite will be replaced. Beyond this, it faces a series of major political and social decision points – about how deeply to embrace the rule of law and empower courts, how to engage with civil society and how to create a new united front. It came to power in 1949 leading a cross section of forces in Chinese society. Now it needs to recreate this for the 21st century. It needs to be the party of the rich, the poor, of a country divided almost equally for the first time ever between the city and the countryside, between the rich, outward looking provinces on the coast, to the impoverished, divided provinces further to the west. Its leaders need to speak out to a society which contains extremes of wealth, developmental levels, and aspirations, and at the same time to a world which is wary, and often does not understand what the Party, and the country it is, hopes to accomplish.

No country has ever engaged with so many challenges at one time. Their complexity and immensity is staggering. In terms of scale and speed, China is undertaking something unprecedented. There is no blue print. Others that have tried to carry a country towards middle income status, through similar transitions, have a bad record of failure. As the Party embarks on this massive challenge, it does so with limited time, and only the tools of economic growth, and entreating its people that they can be strong if they are unified, and that the party is the only good bet to deliver this.

The Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in his [June visit](#) to Europe talked of the need for [trust](#) between peoples. But perhaps he also meant that the world might trust the Party to be able to undertake this immense task of social and political and economic reform successfully. The most important steps in China's modernity may well lie not in the past, but in the short to mid-term future. And in this internal fight, it is not just the Chinese government and the Party that are the stakeholders, but the rest of the world.

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