

The battle of the two lines: media comments on the Communist Party of China

by **Jocelyn Chey**

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Ongoing celebrations in China of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC) are crafted to build patriotism and national pride and are domestically focussed. Western press reports say that President Xi's speech and the 1 July parade demonstrate that China is threatening the rest of the world by demonstrating its growing might. The truth as usual lies somewhere in between. Alternative views are edited out on both sides.

At age 100, the CPC is by no means the oldest political party in the world. The British Conservative Party (and its predecessors) may hold the record, but when they clocked up a century in the 1930s, they were in no mood for a party. The centenarian Communist Party of the Soviet Union began life as the Bolshevik Party in secrecy and in exile. There were no anniversary commemorations in 2003. Putin also ignored the centenary of the October Revolution, fearing it might encourage renewed enthusiasm for revolutionary activities, as Masha Lipman remarked in a 2017 [New Yorker article](#).

The CPC anniversary promotional campaign features China's future as a great power and its success in dealing with domestic issues such as poverty and corruption. Its audience is the Chinese public, but Xi Jinping is also consciously drawing a distinction between the PRC and Russia. He has a message for the old party faithful who regret the old days of international solidarity. Xi wants them to know that the CPC and the Chinese state are united, and he is warning them against attempts to engineer internal division.

Western press reports of the CPC celebrations have been almost universally negative. One of the most egregious was a full-page [article in the Sydney Morning Herald](#) of 9 July by the international business editor of the UK Daily Telegraph, Ambrose Evans-Pritchard (best known for his conspiracy theories about the Clinton administration). Evans-Pritchard argues that Xi's "peak hubris" masks terminal problems of power struggle, corruption and demographic decline. The [ABC report](#) on Beijing's 1 July parade said it was a statement to the world that China would not be bullied, focussing on a minor reference to

international relations at the end of Xi's long speech. [Colin Heseltine](#) has ably dissected this reporting.

On 1 July I agreed to contribute to a news report on ABC TV. I was prepared to describe how the CPC had changed over the decades and how it continued to adapt, given China's growing international status. My remarks were edited down to make them sound more negative along the lines of "they still have much to learn."

I have been edited down also from the other side. The China Daily remove all hints of criticism from an interview I gave them. Of course, the China Daily's online presence as well as its many regional versions have always adhered to official Chinese government policy. In the past it was not closed to a variety of opinions, but in recent years its editorial policy has hardened. I was heartened when approached for comment as part of a survey of foreign opinion of the Party centenary, hoping that the wide-ranging questionnaire indicated a degree of returning openness.

The survey contained a number of questions. It asked for comment on how political consultation worked in China and on how the CPC had been able to endure over 100 years. Other questions covered China's ability to feed itself, the ongoing anti-corruption campaign, soft power outreach, the Belt and Road Initiative, how the Party might respond to future challenges and so on. I answered all these questions openly and factually to the best of my ability.

My responses can be read in full in the [6 July 2021 Hong Kong edition of the China Daily](#). Sad to say, some text was edited out before publication, for instance, my observation that China would never be able to rely solely on its own resources to feed its population.

The China Daily has published some interesting comments on the CPC centenary. One of particular interest was by former British Conservative government minister and banker Jim O'Neill, the Chairman of the Council of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. [His remarks](#) are worth reproducing in full:

"Other countries can learn from China's success in weathering challenges, whatever political system they may have. As the CPC celebrates its 100th anniversary, what can one say about China, from an economist's perspective?"

"Given my background in international finance, I have had a front row seat for many of the international crises and shocks, and somehow, despite them all being different, China has responded, seemingly appropriately to all of them. In

1997, despite currencies collapsing around it, China resisted the pressure and temptation for the renminbi to weaken, which at the time could have caused havoc. Similarly with occasional bouts of financial market pressures since, somehow China has managed to respond to them.”

“And of course, in the 2007-08 financial crisis, when China’s dependency on exports was much bigger, it managed to respond quickly, and shifted its economic dependency away from low value exports, allowing wages to rise, and the renminbi to appreciate, which together with a massive domestic infrastructure stimulus, allowed the economy to shift to a more domestically driven position. And then in the past 15 months, despite the initial devastation that the COVID-19 pandemic caused in China, a nation of 1.4 billion people, the country has seemingly got to grips with it, and got back to some normality, unlike much of the rest of the world.”

“At the centre of this is not only clear decisive leadership of the CPC, but also a team of civil servants and bureaucrats that are well-educated and trained. This is something many other nations have not managed. So in this regard, this is perhaps something other nations can learn.”

My own remarks in the China Daily interview concluded: “The CPC has achieved much in the past 100 years.... It succeeded when it was able to respond to changing circumstances and to adapt its policies. Like any political party, it was able to keep in touch with common people and to reflect their opinions to the leadership. In my view, these communication channels are most important.”

It is surely important for the CPC to listen carefully to comments and criticisms from its own citizens and from other countries. The same could be said of our own government. It is also vital that Australians be open-minded and objective in their assessments of China’s achievements as well as its failings.

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