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- **Destroying *Dark Emu***
- **The Leadership of the Communist Party of China**
- **New Development of Marxist World History Thought**
- **Building the party of the new type in the Australian context**



**IDEAS  
THEORY  
POLICIES  
EXPERIENCE  
DISCUSSION**

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# The Leadership of the Communist Party of China

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A distinctive feature of China's socialist democratic system is the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In this article, I will explain how the CPC's leadership works, and I will do so by drawing primarily from Chinese Marxist sources. These sources distinguish between two types of CPC leadership: one is based on the founding of the New China, and the other concerns governing China today. These may also be described in terms of historical and practical legitimacy. While historical legitimacy, derived from founding the New China in 1949, should be obvious to most, it is the practical legitimacy entailed in governing today that is crucial. On this matter, the emphasis is that the CPC does not rule directly, but rather indirectly: the will of the CPC can become government policy and the law of the land only through the rule-of-law statutory processes found in the entire socialist democratic system in China.

## Context: The System of Socialist Democracy in China

While the main part of this article explains how CPC leadership works, we need to be aware of a couple of preliminary points. First, Chinese sources specify that China's socialist democracy has a number of integrated components: electoral democracy; consultative democracy; grassroots democracy; nationalities policy; rule of law; human rights; and the leadership role of the Communist Party. While this overall system of socialist democracy has deep roots in pre-Liberation practices in the Red Areas, it is also seen as a constant work in progress that is superior to antagonistic capitalist democracy.

Second, what does “democracy [*minzhu*]” mean in China? The key term used to describe democracy is “people as masters of the country [*renmin dangjia zuozhu*]”. The phrase means that the people (*renmin*) act as the master of (*zuozhu*), or take responsibility for, the affairs of the house (*dangjia*) – the “house [*jia*]” in question being the country as a whole. From the CPC's eighteenth congress onward, we also find “people centred” or “according to the people as centre [*yi renmin wei zhongxin*]” (Hu 2012, 21; CPC Central Committee 2014,

6). But how does this people-centred approach relate to the leadership of the CPC? For a Chinese Marxist approach, the two are not seen as either-or, which is a typical Western liberal approach, but as both-and: the leadership of the CPC is enhanced by and ensures that the people are the centre and masters of the country; so also does the democratic rule of the people ensure and strengthen the CPC's leadership.

## Founding and Ruling the New China

The CPC's leadership relies on the fact that it represents the vast majority of the people, initially rural and urban workers and now also the 500 million middle-income group that has arisen as a result of the thorough poverty alleviation program. This foundation is only the beginning. Chinese scholars go much further, distinguishing between founding and ruling. The first – founding – relates to the historical fact that the CPC was responsible for prevailing in the long revolutionary struggle and establishing the People's Republic in 1949. As is often said in China, there would be no New China without the CPC. At the same time, the CPC has since that time become responsible for the construction of socialism and thus ruling the country. The CPC cannot simply rely on the historical fact of founding the New China more than 70 years ago; it must continue to rule today during the ongoing and lengthy task of constructing socialism.

For a Communist Party that has ruled for so long, the question of legitimacy is crucial. This leads us to the next distinction: while the CPC's core role in founding the New China provides it with *historical* legitimacy, the shift to governing the country entails *practical* legitimacy. Any political system and indeed any political party requires legitimacy to function and to rule. At this level, the CPC is no different. Where it does differ is that the very definition of socialist democracy requires the Communist Party in question to be the ruling party. This point leads to two questions: how does a Communist Party enable the transition from historical to practical legitimacy? And how does practical legitimacy work? The transition from historical to practical legitimacy relies on the legitimacy generated by the necessary Communist practice of consultation and the mass line. Initially, this consultative legitimacy provided the groundwork for Liberation and establishing the New China, but it also provided the necessary background for the transition to the practical legitimacy of ruling.

## The Statutory Procedures of Indirect Leadership

In regard to practical legitimacy, can the Communist Party simply enact its decisions directly and simultaneously maintain legitimacy among the people? Obviously, the answer is no. Instead, the CPC's "will is sublimated into that of the state through the state's organs of power by virtue of a specific logic and the systemic structure directed thereby" (Ma 2015, 15; see also Guo 2009, 6). In other words, any proposal or decision by the CPC does not automatically and directly become law: it must go through a complete statutory procedure in order to become a decision of the state as such, finalised by the National People's Congress. Thus, the CPC's leadership is indirect rather than direct. A shorthand for this statutory procedure is "ruling the country according to law [*yifazhiguo*]."

This indirect process through statutory procedures did not appear suddenly: it required a rather lengthy process of development. We need to go back to Deng Xiaoping's initial emphasis that the CPC's "functions should be separated [*fenkai*] from those of the government" (Deng 1986, 177). In other words, the government of the country, embodied in the many levels of people's congresses and people's political consultative conferences, would become separated from the role of the CPC. Deng was, of course, responding to the aberration of the 'Cultural Revolution' when the will of one person was taken as law – known as "rule of a person [*renzhi*]." While Jiang Zemin (2002, 553) would take this a step further in emphasising the crucial role of a socialist rule of law as the way to ensure the mutual role of CPC leadership and socialist democracy, it fell to Hu Jintao to spell out exactly what this meant. One of Hu Jintao's most important points was that the whole structure of socialist democracy would ensure that "the Party's proposals become the will of the country through statutory procedures [*fading chengxu*]" (Hu 2007, 13; see also 2012, 17). How so? As Hu put it in 2012, the "basic strategy by which the party leads the people in governing the country is through governing the country according to law [*yifazhiguo*]" (Hu 2012, 9).

It would fall to Xi Jinping to clarify that these processes are required for democratic centralism to work at a country-wide level. Xi Jinping also stresses the need to improve even more the CPC's indirect leadership through the legal or statutory procedures of rule of law governance (Xi 2012, 142; 2015, 17; 2019, 3). When the Party's policies become state laws, "the implementation of the law is the implementation of the Party's will, and the implementation of the Party's policies is to act in accordance with the law" (Xi 2015, 18). All of this entails that the organs of state power are independent, proactive, and

responsible in terms of adhering to the constitution and relevant laws. For Xi, this is nothing less than democratic centralism, which relies on the reality that the "authority of both Party and state" are distinct (Xi 2015, 20; 2017, 28).

I have had to summarise a rather complex development, but let me quote Ma Yide's description of the basic logic of China's system of governance:

First, the Party's leadership is political leadership, and the Party's views are a combination of historical and practical legitimacy based on multi-party cooperation and political consultation. Second, the Party's views, which have solid legitimacy, are transformed into the will of the state through people's congresses, and the concrete expression of the will of the state is democratic legislation. During this process, the people re-examine and substantiate the Party's views through the system of people's congresses. Third, as the legal procedure for transforming the will of the Party, democratic legislation constitutes the basis for governing the country according to law, and is the governance basis for the direct links between the modern state and citizens. Fourth, the leadership of the Party should advance with the times through consultations between the Party and the masses and social consultation, thereby entering the logical chain of direct governance consisting of legitimisation of the Party's views and their transformation into the will of the state and thence into the rule of law, thus successfully coordinating state governance and social development.

(Ma 2017, 31)

All of this leads to a dialectical point: the full system of socialist democracy does not weaken but strengthens the CPC's leadership; conversely, only through the CPC's leadership are the institutions of socialist democracy strengthened.

## Inner-Party Governance

This inescapable connection between country-wide socialist democracy and CPC leadership means that there is always a great emphasis on democratic supervision, transparency, clean governance. In fact, this emphasis is far greater than in any capitalist democracy. But it also means that inner-Party democracy must be even more rigorously practised by all members so that all views are aired and extensive criticisms made. This is to ensure either that mistakes are not made, or that mistakes can be corrected in time. In this sense, inner-Party democratic centralism functions as a vanguard for practices in the

country as a whole (CPC Central Committee 2009, 4; Ren 2011, 20–22).

Of course, the CPC has not always lived up to this high standard. Recall the chaotic deviation of the “Cultural Revolution” and its “rule of a person [*renzhi*],” or the deep corruption that resulted from a split between the masses and the Party during the “wild 90s” and persisted for almost a decade later. But these were not systemic problems. Chinese Marxist scholars point out that the problems were incidental or cyclical, and so do not characterise China’s political system as a whole (Lo 2007, 121–22). The fact that the excesses of the ‘Cultural Revolution’ could be corrected, and that the gap between Party and people that led to the problem of corruption has been addressed in the most-consistent anti-corruption campaign since Mao Zedong, indicates a democratic self-correcting process that lives up to the high calling of “governing the country according to law.” That the CPC’s esteem is higher than it has been for a long time – as witnessed in one international survey after another – is clear testament to this reality (Yang 2017, 20; Cunningham, Saich, and Turiel 2020).

It should be no surprise that a constituent feature of speeches and texts by CPC leaders typically conclude with a section dealing with improving the Party’s functioning, mass line, unity, and representative nature. This feature was already found in the Soviet Union. Depending on the circumstances, the speeches may focus on improving inner-Party democracy, dealing with excess and corruption, promoting clean living and hard work, or on Party unity (Xiao and Yu 2012, 18). Occasionally, such points may have been window dressing, but to ensure they are followed a leader is needed who is a “needle hidden in silk floss [*mianli cangzhen*],” who has “firmness cloaked beneath gentleness [*rouzhong yougang*],” as Mao advised Deng Xiaoping (Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi 2003, 1674). In other words, it needs a leader who can be tough when needed and so can ensure that the measures are enacted through systemic, law-based procedures. Ultimately, the point is that a Communist Party simply cannot continue to lead without a robust democratic system – democratic centralism.

## Conclusion

How does the CPC lead China’s socialist democracy? It does so indirectly, with a clear emphasis on the statutory procedures of socialist democracy in all its components, but with a particular emphasis on rule of law. Clearly, China is not at all a ‘party-state’ or ‘one-party state’, as Western caricatures sometimes suggest. Indeed, it is extraordinarily difficult for those who have been brought up in capitalist bourgeois political systems, with their overwhelming emphasis on elections between antagonistic political parties, to understand how China’s socialist democracy works.

Let me conclude with a final question: why has China not adopted a Western-style competitive capitalist democracy? The overwhelming response of Chinese Marxist scholars is that such a system would simply not work in China. Why? It would not suit China’s historical and socialist conditions (Lin 2009, 7–9; Fang and Zhou 2010, 14; Wang 2010). This is a specifically Marxist point: political systems arise from their socio-economic base, and are determined by the overall system in place (Zhu 2016, 26–27). Thus, to impose a competitive superstructural political system on a socialist system that functions with non-antagonistic contradictions would be a very poor fit, leading to chaos and disorder (Lu, Zhang, and Sun 2009, 14–16; Xie 2009, 28; Jiang and Zhao 2010, 4; Hou 2015, 7–9). In fact, this competitive capitalist democracy, which arose in specific conditions during the expansion of capitalism in Europe, is increasingly emerging as a crude and ineffective form of state governance (Qiu 2010; Yang 2017, 16). It should be no surprise that more and more developing countries are looking to learn from the Chinese model as an alternative.

Perhaps we can let Deng Xiaoping have the last word:

What is the democracy that the Chinese people need today? The democracy that the Chinese people need today can only be socialist democracy or people’s democracy, not bourgeois individualistic democracy.

(Deng 1979, 175)

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