Xinyue Selina Xu

Professor William Kirby

SW 49

April 5, 2018

Book Review: The Party

For an outsider writing about China's inner sanctum, Richard McGregor delves into the fascinating ties of the Chinese Communist Party to China's many transformations in the past three decades with a motley of examples, quotes and insider sources. While making no claims to be an exhaustive, definitive study of how the Communist Party rules, the book seeks to explain how the Party, through its various functions and structures, exercises political power. Though it's a tall order, McGregor impressively meets it. Behind the Party's looming control and obsession with maintaining power, the overarching question that I am left with is one of legitimacy: how legitimate is a Chinese government that is tied so irrevocably with the Party? Bearing in mind current developments of the role of the Party in the state, how accurate are McGregor's predictions of the Party's continuing methods of buttressing its legitimacy? On a more marginal note, how does *The Party* shed light on China's legitimacy as a great power in the eyes of a global audience? I would like to argue that, based on McGregor's conclusions, the underlying driver behind the Party's ever-evolving system and engagements is a strategy of performance legitimacy.

Before I seek to draw my conclusions about legitimacy, I would like to inspect the accuracy or prescience of McGregor's major claims about the Party's characterization. Written in 2009 and published in 2010, right after the Global Financial Crisis in 2008—or what some would term, tongue-in-cheek, as the Western financial crisis—*The Party* draws its most recent

conclusions from the Hu Jintao administration. However, the fact that most of its conclusions on the Party's operations seem to still hold true today under Xi is testament to McGregor's masterful grasp of the Party's fundamental priorities. McGregor artfully stakes out the penetration and almost omniscient presence of the Party in Chinese modern life, from its absolute dominance in governance to its obvious hand in state enterprises, from its delicate but imperative relationship with the People's Liberation Army to its carefully calibrated relationship with entrepreneurs, from its internal workings to its external reach. McGregor argues that the Party's greatest fear is the phenomenon of 'peaceful evolution', the process through which the Party's grip could be slowly eroded by groups not under its sway. For instance, the Party tightly controls religion, "mandating only five official faiths and demanding that all services be registered with the local branch of the religious affairs bureau" (211). This fear of organized groups outside of its ambit—such as private enterprises, social groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other groups which can operate at scale—functioning as incubators for rival centers of power certainly has an element of prescience in light of current trends. However, legal manifestations of this fear are much more nuanced than a simple restriction of civil space. I would like to bring up a legislative example that displays the complexity of the Party's stance, in the years after *The Party* was published. In the realm of NGOs, the Charity Law passed in March 2016 seeks to uncork an expansion of civil society. Not only does it smooth the way for nonprofit groups to legally register and raise funds, but it also makes it legal for groups to exist even without registering (Chin). At the same time, the Law encourages more giving by improving tax incentives and making it easier for the wealthy to establish charitable trusts. However, around the same time, the Law on the Management of Domestic Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organizations passed in April 2016, proposing harsh restrictions on

foreign non-profits; all foreign NGOs were put under the control of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), China's huge internal security apparatus (Sidel). What such an example demonstrates is that the Party manages a delicate act in the arena of civil society—on one hand, it welcomes the active participation of NGOs in places where the Party or the market could not serve the people; on the other, it draws the line at foreign groups that were hard to penetrate and operated outside of its orbit of control. McGregor's claim that the Party has a "manic desire to be everywhere", therefore, needs to be qualified. Indeed, while it may seem that the Party is obsessed with absolute control in the non-state arena, current developments show a Communist Party that is savvy and subtle, with distinctions drawn between different types of groups within even the same sector.

What then forms the basis for such distinctions? An intriguing and compelling idea forms the backbone of McGregor's fleshing out of the Party's motivations: performance legitimacy. According to McGregor, the twin foundations of the Party's power are economic growth and resurgent nationalism. He argues that "in large part, the Party's legitimacy still depends on the economy", sustaining living standards, policy flexibility, the internal patronage network and global leverage (269). As the argument goes, economic growth also buttresses the pride that many Chinese feel about "the revival of a great civilization humiliated by the West" (270). Firstly, from the Hu to the Xi administration, the observation of economic growth has held true—to prove to its people the Party can deliver performance, the authorities set an annual GDP growth target of around 7 or 8 per cent (Yu); in March 2018, Premier Li Keqiang said that China will further reduce the poor rural population by over 10 million, including 2.8 million people who are to be relocated from inhospitable areas (Xinhua). Beyond that, however, the Party cares equally about other aspects of good governance, or what some would call the public opinion

(*minyi* 民意) and hearts and minds of its people (*minxin* 民心). Since Hu, the Party has launched a comprehensive reform of its health-care system and other social services such as pension. Under Xi, to prove it was a good governor, the party launched an anti-corruption campaign and promised to "govern with strictness" and to rule the country by law, as declared by Wang Qishan—the top official in charge of the Party's anti-corruption drive—to some 60 foreign dignitaries at the Party and World Dialogue 2015 (Yu). As Wang remarked in his most recent inspection tour of Hunan in early September 2017, the most serious challenge to the CCP was in the effective supervision of power (Bo). This increased emphasis on aspects beyond economic growth shows a politically savvy expansion of the metric of performance legitimacy used by the Party in recent years. The Party is, as McGregor calls it, "adaptive", which makes predicting its policies growingly difficult (270). In a study titled "Performance Legitimacy, State Autonomy and China's Economic Miracle", the authors argued that the Party is compelled to make policy shifts quickly because performance constitutes the primary base of its legitimacy, and the Chinese state, which the Party rules, is able to make policy shifts because it enjoys a high level of autonomy inherited from China's past (Yang and Zhao 1). This extends McGregor's characterization of the Party as one focused on using the autonomy it has as the ruling political entity to constantly shift its policy in order to preserve power and maximize legitimacy—an example that McGregor sets forth is Beijing's policy shifts towards its provinces that vacillates between decentralization and centralization based on its share of national tax revenues and confidence in its authority: "Decentralization leads to disorder; disorder leads to centralization; centralization leads to stagnation and stagnation leads to decentralization" (178). A pivotal example that demonstrates the unexpected turns that the Party can make in less than a decade is the emergence of Xi Jinping, who contravenes McGregor's conjecture that the Party is "no

longer a one-man show" (154). With Xi's eradication of the two-term, ten-year limits on Presidency (*zhuxi*), the Party and China have both been brought down an utterly different trajectory than what McGregor could have ever envisioned from his vantage point in 2009. What still holds true—thereby demonstrating the percipience of McGregor's understanding of the Party—is that Xi's watershed policy shift is still based on a rhetoric of performance legitimacy: the extension of his tenure indefinitely beyond 2023 would allow him to navigate China through its crucial years up till 2035 when it fulfills its global ascendance under stable leadership. The ends—a stronger China—would justify the authoritarian means.

Under such a metric of performance, the Communist Party painted in McGregor's work can be seen as legitimate by Chinese norms, which emphasize on performance legitimacy, while absolutely illegitimate by Western norms, which focus on procedural legitimacy—all authoritarian government processes are thus seen as illegitimate. A People's Daily article aptly lays out the difference between performance and procedural legitimacy: "While legitimacy in western style democracies comes from elections, the CPC's legitimacy is derived from determination to build a just and equal Chinese society. In the eyes of the average Chinese, Chinese socialism is the perfect embodiment of democracy and the Communist Party means liberation from backwardness, disease and poverty." (Kato) Although McGregor does not come out clearly on either side of this debate, his in-depth exploration of the Chinese norm of legitimacy is illuminating. While the West values inputs and processes, the rights of the individual and the universality of one set of norms, the Party emphasizes outputs and performance, the rights of the collective and that norms are culture-bound. McGregor's *The Party* itself represents the entrance of a new view of political legitimacy as embraced by the Party into Western-dominated global discourse.

One emerging faultline for the Party, which will impact this discourse on legitimacy, is the divergence between national interests and party interests that McGregor briefly touches on in his Afterword. As McGregor points out, the Party doesn't so much control public opinion on hot-button issues such as anti-Japanese sentiment as harness and channel it, in line with its prevailing political priorities (271). While the natural resurgence of strength in East Asia is in the national interest of China, the Party is often inclined to act on what is good for the Communist Party, by establishing myths of legitimacy that are highly nationalistic. This tension between party and national interests will only become starker in the coming decades as the Party navigates a narrower path towards securing legitimacy, in the absence of a shared ideology—as Rupert Murdoch declared in the book, communists are hard to find today in China (17)—and with rising popular expectations on standards of living.

In conclusion, what *The Party* succeeds in capturing is not just the intricacies of the Communist Party system, but also the norms of performance legitimacy that drives its contemporary evolution and that which it bases the verdict of its rule upon. Although McGregor doesn't offer us any clear answers as to the future of the Party, and although we as readers too emerge with more questions than answers, there are still conclusions that can be drawn. For a ruling party as preoccupied and legitimized by performance as the Chinese Communist Party, its role in the state will serve the political priorities and performance goals of its own, instead of Western norms of democratic procedure. Viewed through this lens, it's no longer surprising that Xi Jinping consolidates his power constitutionally through various policy shifts, which appalled many Western commentators. After all, the Party is a regime that profoundly appreciates its limited legitimacy and fragile mandate in its own domestic audience, and beyond its "boisterous, boasting exterior", that's the core to understanding its present-day actions (265).

Works Cited

Bo, Zhiyue. "Commentary: The changing meaning of political legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party." *Channel NewsAsia.* 7 Oct, 2017. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/commentary-chinese-communist-party-congress-political-legitimacy-9275052.

Chin, Josh. "The Good — And Bad — About China's New Charity Law." *The Wall Street Journal,* 16 Mar. 2016, https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/03/16/the-good-and-bad-about-chinas-new-charity-law/.

Kato, Ronald. "The Communist Party of China: A Hard Earned Legitimacy." People's Daily, 9 Aug, 2017. http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0802/c90000-9250222.html

McGregor, Richard. *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers.* Harper Collins, 2011.

Sidel, Mark. "It Just Got Harder to Make a Difference in China." *Foreign Policy*. 29 Apr, 2016. http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/29/it-just-got-harder-to-make-a-difference-in-china-harsh-new-ngo-law-clamps-down-on-foreign-organizations/.

"China to lift over 10 mln people out of poverty in 2018." *Xinhua*. 5 Mar, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/05/c_137017038.htm.

Yang, Hongxing, and Dingxin Zhao, "Performance Legitimacy, State Autonomy and China's Economic Miracle." *Center on Democracy, Development, and The Rule of Law*, vol. 132, pp. 1.

Yu, Verna. "Communist Party powered by history? Why China's one-party rule is facing a legitimacy crisis." *South China Morning Post*. 10 Oct, 2015.

http://www.scmp.com/print/news/china/policies-politics/article/1865965/legitimacy-crisis-facing-chinas-communist-party.