

BOOK REVIEWS

## Forging Leninism in China: Mao and the Remaking of the Chinese Communist Party, 1927–1934

Joseph Fewsmith. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. x + 214 pp. £22.99 (e-book). ISBN 9781009070157

Steve Tsang

SOAS University of London, London, UK

Email: [st82@soas.ac.uk](mailto:st82@soas.ac.uk)

Joseph Fewsmith has written a valuable, concise and very readable overview of the key forces that shaped the transformation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), from the collapse of the First United Front with the Kuomintang in 1927 to when it was forced to abandon the Jiangxi Soviet in 1934. It is a powerful reminder that we should all take the Party's narrative of its history with a large pinch of salt. By committing an act of "historical nihilism," Fewsmith has done a great service to scholarship and to the understanding of the early history of the CCP.

One of his key findings that stands out is how misleading it is to embrace in broad-brush terms the widely repeated view that Mao was very successful in working with and winning over the peasants by adopting a rural-based, rather than an urban-based approach to the Communist movement in China. Fewsmith has shown convincingly that this was just not true of the Party's formative years. He has demonstrated that by "adopting radical land policies (confiscation) Mao lost the support of the peasants" in the rural Jinggangshan base area (pp. 165–167).

The second finding that jumps out is Fewsmith's conclusion that "[u]ltimately, the Communist Movement in south Jiangxi failed not only because of the military pressure put on it by the GMD [Kuomintang] but primarily because of the tension within the party and between the party and local society" (pp. 168–169). The point is not that changed military tactics adopted by Chiang Kai-shek's forces could not have driven the Communists out of the Jiangxi Soviet. It is that even in the heyday of Mao's power in Jinggangshan, it never enjoyed the kind of support from the rural population widely assumed to be true. The fact that the CCP was able to hang on to power longer and more effectively in the countryside than in the cities in the early 1930s should not be taken to imply it enjoyed wide popular support among the peasants.

The third revealing finding is the scale of brutality of early Maoist rule, in addition to its very heavy reliance on military power. The brutality is directed not only against landlords and the richer peasants but also against fellow Communists. By Fewsmith's count, the *sufan* (suppress counterrevolutionaries) movements in Jiangxi and Hubei "resulted in the execution of some 100,000 Communist Party members" in a relatively short space of time (p. 163). It not only substantially depleted the ranks but, above all, showed what camaraderie under the Communist Party meant in practice in this period. What Fewsmith has not explained is why so many in the Party remained so willing and committed to its cause, despite the scale and viciousness of its fratricide.

These sobering findings are presented in a highly readable narrative and are summarized clearly in the concluding chapter. Fewsmith has made it easy for readers to understand how the CCP dealt with the countryside and intra-party contradiction in an important period of its transformation.

Where I quibble with Fewsmith is in the choice of the main title of the book, *Forging Leninism*. The sub-title "Mao and the remaking of the CCP 1927–1934" correctly sums up its principal focus, whereas the main title raises an expectation that is not fully met. As Fewsmith acknowledges in the

conclusion, the CCP was not fully forged into a powerful and united Leninist party capable of seizing national power until after Mao completed the Party rectification in Yan'an, a decade after it was forced out of the Jiangxi Soviet. The book does not explain in full how the Party was forged into a Leninist instrument, but it does explain powerfully what the process of forging Leninism entailed in its earlier stage.

In short, this is a well-written and insightful book that is highly recommended for students and anyone who seeks an unvarnished account of how Mao approached the Communist movement when he first got an opportunity to do so in his first primary "revolutionary base area." Knowing this helps readers to gain a better perspective on how Mao could have done what he did to China and the CCP after winning power nationally in 1949.

doi:10.1017/S0305741024001504

## The Chinese Communist Party: A 100-Year Trajectory

Edited by Jérôme Doyon and Chloé Froissart. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2024. ix + 454 pp. AU\$59.95 (also available Open Access). ISBN 9781760466237

Jean Christopher Mittelstaedt

SOAS University of London, London, UK  
Email: [cm87@soas.ac.uk](mailto:cm87@soas.ac.uk)

*The Chinese Communist Party: A 100-Year Trajectory*, edited by Jérôme Doyon and Chloé Froissart, examines the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), marking the 100th anniversary of the CCP's founding in 1921. The proliferation of books on the CCP in recent years is understandable, given its complexity and significantly increasing impact both within China and internationally. Indeed, understanding the CCP is a prerequisite for understanding not only China's domestic politics, but also its foreign policies that are rooted in an organizational and ideological framework. Focused analysis is therefore essential but challenging, as this volume ambitiously covers the CCP's century-long history. In their introduction, Doyon and Froissart aim to move beyond the traditional periodizations (Mao, post-Mao) and the debate over the CCP's resilience. They emphasize how the CCP evolved through "leaps and bounds, setbacks and unexpected moves" (p. 7). To examine this, the volume is structured into four thematic clusters: the first two follow Franz Schurmann's classic distinction of organization and ideology in Communist China, and the latter two address China's path to modernization and territorial control and nation-building, described as the CCP's "two central historical missions" (p. 8).

Jean-Pierre Cabestan's contribution examines the CCP's often overlooked constitution, provocatively questioning whether the Party can democratize itself or China, ultimately concluding with a definitive "no to both questions" (p. 40). Remaining ultimately Leninist, the Party will remain "opaque and undemocratic" and rely on "a low degree of institutionalisation to survive" (p. 41). Patricia M. Thornton and Frank N. Pieke build on this theme by exploring the Party's expansion into civil society and the international arena. Thornton discusses the "party-state-society trichotomy," noting the CCP's encroachment on the autonomy of the state and voluntary sectors. In a somewhat similar vein, Pieke warns that the CCP "intends to remould the world to its own image" (p. 75).