90 years, 80 million strong
China’s Communist Party needs fresh ideas to engage the young

By Wang Guangwu

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrated its 90th birthday on July 1. There is joy but also soul-searching in China. Many are incredulous that the party can claim “four generations under one roof” and is 80 million strong.

The party insists that people are its primary concern. It even goes further, in arguing that China’s future and progress depends on the people. Thus, it is the Chinese people who make the country admired or feared. They can make China an advanced country that evokes admiration and respect. Or they can attract attention to themselves as being concerned only for wealth and power, at once self-centred and arrogant.

The emphasis on support from the people was part of the party’s earliest history. The CCP began in 1921 with men of ideas who were inspired by the Russian revolution four years earlier. The Chinese had an earlier revolution in 1911, but that faltered badly, with its ideas criticised for being inept and its leaders hobbled by elitist tradition.

The young men who met in Shanghai started the CCP thought that the model of an armed party disciplined enough to gain support from the working classes was the answer to the country’s woes. At that time, China had many enemies, and the first priority was to unite the country by any means possible. The young CCP helped the Kuomintang against warlords but were unceremoniously betrayed on the eve of victory. Its members were driven to the countryside where they fought desperately to survive. Fortunately, for them, the Japanese invasion distracted the Nanking regime and the two erstwhile comrades were persuaded to come together to defend the country.

The CCP sent its army out to keep the Japanese invaders busy through guerrilla raids but it also used the opportunity to sharpen its ideological focus. Under Mao Zedong and his comrades, it emerged after 1945 ready for the civil war they knew they still had to fight. By any account, their final victory against the Nationalist government was well deserved.

But it needed new ideas to translate victory in the battlefield into success in uniting people and managing a broken economy. The party turned to the Soviet Union for help. Together, they confronted their Cold War enemies led by the United States. In turn, China’s socialist partners extracted a heavy price by drawing China into the Korean War.

The toughest test, however, came from within the party, which was split on the key issue of whether it should focus on rebuilding a prosperous China or whether it should have grander ambitions to be the vanguard of world revolution.

To Mao Zedong, the world was the new Tianan. “All under Heaven”, and he hoped to prepare a socialist China to lead that world. Not everyone agreed and the inner party struggles began.

The party came to invest too much power in one man – Mao. His absolute power and rigid ideas led the party to unprecedented mistakes. For more than 20 years – through the Great Leap forward that caused famine and the Cultural Revolution that victimised the ‘bourgeois’ and the educated class – millions of talented people with independent minds were ousted and many more millions lost their lives. By the 1970s, the party was beset with ideals and in tatters.

Deng Xiaoping led the reversal of what Mao had done and gave the party a second chance. The people were tired of being revolutionary and poor; that was not the socialism they died for. Deng mobilised the Chinese people’s pragmatism and entrepreneurship that had made them bold and inventive in the past. He opened the country to the outside world and offered the Chinese people freedoms they had not had for decades, and access to new ideas.

The CCP’s 90-year history shows it has the capacity to reform itself, and to take decisive action to do so. It has survived internal ideological battles and a challenging external environment. It has been able to open the economy to foreign investment, allowing its people the opportunity to learn from advanced economies.

Its policy of opening up the economy has brought the country spectacular success. But when it feels threatened, the CCP is still wont to take one or two steps back for every step forward. It still believes that it is the only institution that can empower China and save it from disorder or disordered collapse.

What is next for the party in its 90th year? It faces new challenges. Rapid development has created new problems, most notably widespread corruption aggravated by secretive institutions. As standards of living rise, gross income inequities have become obvious. And while the country has produced more lawyers and judges, the justice system remains suspect.

Not many people seem satisfied by the party’s own call for more democracy within its ranks. The party, which prides itself on the strength of its ideological appeal, will need fresh ideas to bring it into its 10th decade. To do so, it needs to attract and institute talented young people and induct them into its socialist heritage.

China today has returned to the leading position in the world that it enjoyed at the end of the 19th century. But that powerful position did not save the country from succumbing too quickly to division and ruin.

Today’s success cannot guarantee safety. For China, this is not the time for complacency. The party wants members not only to celebrate its past 90 years but also learn from the mistakes that generations of Chinese leaders have made.

This is a wise reminder.

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