

BOOK REVIEW

Bruce J. Dickson, *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century* (Princeton University Press, 2021)

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The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century

Bruce J. DICKSON

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In his book, *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century*, Bruce Dickson, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University, thoroughly scrutinizes China's domestic political system and the inner structure of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Dickson largely limits his primer to the post-Mao period, with each of the book's sections answering specific research questions: "What Keeps the Party in Power?", "How Are Leaders Chosen?", "How Are Policies Made?", "Does China Have a Civil Society?", "Do Political Protests Threaten Political Stability?", "Why Does the Party Fear Religion?", "How Nationalistic Is China?" and "Will China Become Democratic?". Each question he seeks answers to sheds light on the relationship between the CCP and Chinese society. Dickson argues that the CCP has exercised unopposed authority throughout the country since 1949 despite many elite conflicts, economic catastrophes and social unrests. Nevertheless, the party has not always resorted to repressive methods to stay in power. Rather, it is the author's main argument that the main survival policy is the party's ability to be responsive to the demands of Chinese people. For Dickson, the repression-responsiveness dichotomy is the core strategy that made it possible for the CCP to rule China as a single party for decades.

In the Chapter 1, the author clarifies the political structure and fundamental priorities of five generations of Chinese rule from Mao to Xi. For the author, the reason why the CCP has remained in power for nearly 70 years is that the party has Leninist organizational principles. Under the Leninist rules, the party and all other administrative branches are intertwined and inseparable. Moreover, with such unique structural features, the party can control every component of the state including military, government and workplaces through different political means such as ideological education or monitoring activities (p. 41-42). Dickson also asserts that China's unique political structure gives clues regarding how political leaders are chosen. As stressed in Chapter 2, the election of leaders has some democratic procedures, but is far from true representation. Although there are strict institutional regulations and informal norms in the election process, personal ties are vital at top levels of the CCP (p. 80-81).

China watchers mainly underline that the policy-making process is dominated by the CCP. However, as discussed in the chapters 3 and 4, the CCP is not a monopoly in this area. Negotiating and lobbying practices of various actors at the domestic level constitute a crucial part of the decision-making mechanism. Dickson demonstrates that the competing interests of domestic actors complicate the CCP's top-down decision-making practices. To a certain extent, for instance, societal actors or NGOs have an influence that can shape policy decisions of the CCP. He indicates that there are more than 2 million registered and unregistered NGOs in China. Still, they are not entirely autonomous from the state. He also argues that the CCP keeps a close eye on them and prevents them from acting independently (p. 120-128). Like Chinese civil society and the NGOs, as Chapter 5 puts it, public protests are also not completely free from CCP's control. Implementing hard, soft and preemptive measures against public protests, the CCP uses several methods including imprisonment, use of force, blocking the internet, etc. Dickson observes that under the Xi Jinping rule, the CCP has become more repressive and less tolerant of public protests and the NGOs' operations (p. 165-185).

The revival of religious issues in China is the focus of Chapter 6. The CCP considers Christianity and Islam as foreign religions and is skeptical of both. In contrast, Buddhism is recognized by the CCP as a less threatening indigenous one. For the author, the CCP describes all three religions as a challenge to itself. Analyzing each religion cautiously, Dickson evaluates that the CCP implements a variety of informal practices and uses formal institutions to control religious beliefs (p. 210-218). Despite the CCP's efforts, however, the rise of religious beliefs in Chinese society is an undeniable reality. In its present condition, CCP's policies towards religions are mostly repressive, but in some cases, policies are built on tolerance.

Chapter 7 examines the sources and consequences of Chinese nationalism. Dickson is of the view that nationalism has a prominent function in the decision-making process of China's domestic and foreign policy. Considering that nationalist sentiments have an essential place in Chinese politics, he questions whether nationalism is on the rise in China. According to the author's findings based on several case studies and public opinion surveys, there is no question that nationalism currently runs high in China. However, unlike conventional wisdom, he argues that nationalism has lost its importance, particularly among the younger population, and that each new generation is less nationalistic than the previous one. Conversely, CCP's stance on nationalism is slightly different. CCP is determined to instill nationalism in the Chinese people by implementing various types of policies such as the "Patriotic Education Campaign", "Red Tourism" and orchestrating nationalist protests (p. 230-250).

In the final chapter, the author assesses the future of democracy in China. During the post-Mao period, many scholars have claimed the potential for China's democratization by believing that China's economic development would bring about major political and social change. Taking a position against this view, Dickson asserts that Chinese leaders have no intention of democratizing the country. For him, Chinese society is more concerned with issues such as prosperity and security than democratic values such as equality and freedom. Similarly, the international community does not have great enthusiasm for China's democratization. Based on these arguments, Dickson concludes that modernization theory does not completely illuminate the case of China. From Dickson's point of view, therefore, it is unlikely that China will become a liberal democracy in the foreseeable future (p.280-292).

Taken as a whole, *The Party and the People* offers an in-depth and clear-eyed look at past and current affairs in Chinese politics. It is a well-researched piece which covers a comprehensive analysis on how the Chinese political system operates and how the CCP survives as the longest-ruling party. Anyone who intends to understand the contemporary dynamics of Chinese politics will find this well-organized book insightful and useful. Therefore, the book can be recommended to academics, graduate students and researchers as well as any other individuals interested in Chinese politics. On the other hand, despite its positive aspects and valuable contribution to current literature, the book has some limitations. For instance, Dickson's analysis of the foreign policy establishment lacks detailed explanations. Hence, the perspective of the CCP and the Chinese people on major foreign policy issues remains unclear. Similarly, how *sui generis* strategic culture, traditions or customary practices shape Chinese politics is not adequately covered in the book. The reader also cannot find answers to how the CCP and the Chinese people approach China's global and regional ambitions. Despite these weaknesses, the book makes a significant contribution to the literature with its thorough analysis of the distinctive structure of Chinese politics and the persistent political activities of the CCP.