

Book launch comments by Professor Ross Garnaut for Rowan Callick's *'Party Time: Who Runs China and How'*.

Rowan Callick tells us to think of each Chinese Province like a European country, with all of its cultural, linguistic and economic difference. He tells us twice, in the middle and at the end, that for every proposition that is correct about China, there is an opposite proposition that is also true.

He's right.

China is a complex, varied country. It helps you get to know it if you spend lots of time in many of its parts, listening to lots of people.

Rowan does that for us. By recording the views and prejudices of many different people, their stories of where they came from and what they think about where they are now, we share his years in China.

The title says the book is about the Party. But it is more about contemporary China and Chinese, with the Party playing a big role in that China and in the lives of those people. But maybe not as big as it looks. The author reaches back into Chinese history and explains that some things that look like the Party were there centuries before: the hukuo, official secrecy, utter separation of leaders from ordinary life.

We are invited to regard with Dickensian eyes the people to whose stories we are being introduced. To see the dynamism, the excitement, the technological transformations, the creation of material wealth at an unprecedented rate and scale within the same vista as a great underbelly of grime and exploitation. To see it as Britain in the industrial revolution. "Oliver Twist, meet Gao Feng".

Some conversations make us aware of how highly the expanded personal freedoms of the past several decades are valued. Other conversations remind us of that other Chinese focus more on the restrictions that remain.

Rowan doesn't do the sums for us, and I haven't tried to add up the positives and negatives, but I think the hopes have it over the despairs. The rising economic tide covers a lot of trash. But the balance of positives and negatives is not the point. As the Professor from People's University observes, "Since the economy is doing well, people think, the political system can't be bad either". The point is the variety of the human condition in China and the wide range of future possibilities.

The book is a bit unfashionable in presenting a fairly positive view of the recently retired Party General Secretary Hu Jintao and soon to retire Premier Wen Jiabao, seeing reassuring Confucian roots in Hu's "harmonious society". It is unfashionable because those pushing for Chinese political modernisation are disappointed by the absence of change in the constitutional superstructure, and the slow progress on the human rights that can only be protected by an institutionally strong legal system. Rowan introduces us to both views.

Good outcomes are possible, Rowan explains, because the Party has shown an impressive ability to adapt to changing circumstances. We are introduced to business figures who were allowed into the Party through Jiang Zemin's initiatives of the 1990s. We are left wondering who will change whom; will business perspectives change the Party, or will the Party strengthen its grip on market economic

activity by its embrace of business leaders. We are left thinking that both outcomes are possible; maybe even both at the same time.

While the book is not mainly about the Party, the insights into the motivations, views and experience of a range of Party members are fascinating. The Party itself selects for offers of membership the best and brightest: the intellectually able, the charismatic, the altruistic, the ambitious; and some for their parents. Few who are offered membership decline. Maybe eight percent of China's adults are members; a great tribe of Platonic guardians whose interaction with each other will shape the future of China. Once inside, there is Jesuistical purpose in the experience of Party life: the top-down flow of information and the constant self criticism, designed to ensure a sense of vulnerability rather than entitlement.

Some people see their membership as a ticket reliably to a good job and place in society; some as a way of giving life meaning beyond the material prosperity that is the most obvious output of successful economic growth; a few as a way of serving an abstraction. China, the Middle Kingdom. Some of the conversations of which we become part introduce us to some of the darker possibilities of nationalism in a great China.

Where will it all end? Rowan's story is that there are many possibilities. Being alerted to the many possibilities introduced by the characters we meet in this book, my mind wanders to thoughts about how much it matters to all of humanity which of the possible Chinese wins. People in the west are inclined to think that the history of successful economic development will end in a democratic franchise. But to a thoughtful Chinese, such an outcome has to stand up against the infirmities of Australian democracy revealed day by day in the New South Wales ICAP hearings and in the stories of the resource tax gutted by self-interested business pressure on policy. It has to stand up against the United States policy deadlock that threatens to send the country over a fiscal cliff. Some of the insights from the book suggest that a successful Chinese Communist Party that continues to adapt to evolving circumstances may be able to hold its own against the unhappy recollections of the fateful great lurches that have occurred in the absence of the checks and balances of a widely democratic franchise.

But as Rowan tells us, there is no reason to expect an early end to the history of the Chinese Communist Party as the Government of China. And no reason to expect the abandonment of centralised power, or to the limited but substantial surviving commitment to socialism, with more than genuflection to a large role for state enterprises in the economy.

A few things don't ring true. I used to be favoured over other leaders as a golf partner, sometime appearing with them on TV, because I alone in the diplomatic corps was similarly raw in that new game; and saw no desire to hide either the interest in the game or the leaders' rude talents. Hu Jintao was not quite as unknown and humourless as portrayed in this book: when as a little known Party Secretary in Guizhou we arranged for him to spend a couple of weeks as a special visitor to Australia, he reported that the highlight was the night in a Victorian Government House bed in which the Queen of England had slept before him. I would add the economy to "the environment and, to a degree, corruption" as issues that journalists are given some room to explore. But these are small things, and most of the human stories in this entertaining and easily readable book ring with authenticity.

So if you don't have the years to visit many parts of China and talk to many people in each place, read Rowan's book. It's another way of learning about the rich, varied, contradictory contemporary human reality of China.

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