

## Why Would One Join the Communist Party of China?

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2015

Over my many years of engagement in China, I have met countless members of the Communist Party of China, of all ages and of nearly all ranks. During this time, I have had many conversations with these comrades and have often asked the reasons why they joined the CPA and why they are members. This article is a distillation of these conversations.

A few basic facts will help set the scene. The CPC (Communist Party of China) itself has a little less than ninety million members. One cannot simply join the party by paying a membership due and gaining admission. Instead, it requires significant preparation, with the usual path requiring precursors in the youth organisations. As with other communist parties, the two main organisations are the Pioneers (中国少年先锋队), for children in schools up to the age of 14, and the Communist Youth League of China (中国共产主义青年团), which has members between the ages of 14 and 28. Only when people have attained the age of 28 may they become full members of the communist party. Membership – particularly of the Youth League – requires courses of study and then entry examinations, testing one's knowledge of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

Yet the key question is why children and students are attracted to such organisations. Are they picked out early and then 'brain-washed' to join – as a foreigner once suggested on a boat voyaging down the Yangze River (Chang Jiang) – thereby ensuring the continuity of the party? It seems not, although this may come as a surprise to many outside China, even those among the international Left.

In my interviews, a breakthrough moment came when one of my interlocutors suggested that socialism is becoming, or has actually become, integrated with Chinese culture at deep and almost unnoticeable levels. In other words, it has become part of Chinese tradition, along with Confucianism and Buddhism. How does this work? What are the reasons why young people want to join the youth organisations?

An almost universal, albeit knee-jerk, response to this question is that young people decide to join for the sake of a better job. For some, this reason is presented as a dismissal of the youth organisations and the party itself: membership is thus a self-serving act with little interest in socialism as such. For others, the reason is perfectly legitimate, although it needs to be seen in light of a wider collection of reasons. Indeed, the prospect of a better job is a relatively minor feature. When hearing this answer, I cannot help comparing it to the appeal of Christianity when it was the ideology of a state. Many are the reasons for joining in, not least being the opportunity to improve one's lot in this life. And the church wisely knew that people join the movement for myriad reasons.

A second reason, I have been told, is that membership – especially of the Young Pioneers – is seen as a sign of merit. If a school child is recommended to join the Pioneers, it is a clear distinction among one's class mates. Particularly noteworthy is an invitation by teachers to be among the first to join the Pioneers.

In non-socialist education systems the signs of merit are usually academic and sporting achievements. In China, a crucial if not primary sign of merit is to be invited to join the Pioneers. Yet, such a desire for signs of merit can be misread at an individualistic level in terms of a meritocracy: in the incessant competition fostered by schools from an early age, signs of merit can be seen as merely person achievements.

This misreading brings me to the deepest reason: I have been told again and again that the focus is heavily collective. This focus takes two forms. One depends on the wider family, which in day-to-day life is the most obvious collective reality. At times, the emphasis on the family can have a negative effect, as when corruption takes place. A corrupt official does not skim off riches for him or herself, but for the sake of the family. Thus, when arrests are made for corruption, it involves more than one member of a family.

But I am more interested in how the family can encourage a young person to join a youth organisation. Often a young person wishes to become a party member because someone in the family is a member. It may be a grandfather, as one young woman told me. He inspired her through his model of integrity, honesty and directness – typical old communist virtues. Or it may be parents who are members, which means that a child and then young adult too will become a member as a way of continuing a family tradition and showing respect to his or her elders. Or it can be parents and grandparents and even great-grandparents; in such a situation it is a foregone conclusion that the child will wish to join. Not to do so would entail a significant break in the family. In this respect, the crucial role of the family in Chinese society has also become part of a wider socialist identity. That is, socialism has become ingrained even within family patterns.

Another form of the collective focuses on Chinese society itself. Indeed, it became clear among my interlocutors that this form of the collective is the most deeply ingrained. Here the influence of socialism's emphasis on the collective runs deepest. To be sure, it also connects with a Chinese tradition infused with Confucian and Buddhist values, but it is presented and understood as a primarily socialist value. Thus, the merit for a school child is understood as a sign of one's contribution to a greater collective good. Or a university student – of all types, from comprehensive universities to specialist universities and colleges – feels that joining the party provides an opportunity to make an improvement to the collective.

That collective, I am told, is primarily China as a whole. The danger here is that such an emphasis can become another manifestation of nationalism, which then twists the socialist stress on the collective to some of the more rebarbative features of nationalism. Yet, not all nationalisms are regressive, and socialism has found again and again that it needs to come to terms with nationalism in its progressive forms – not least being the modes of anti-colonial struggle. Discernment is obviously the key.

Closely connected with China as a collective is the communist party itself, which is still regarded by most as a collective project, even if they feel the party is not living up to expectations and could do with some improvement. Indeed, this need for improvement is crucial to the collective incentive to join the party or one of its youth organisations. One seeks to influence the collective in a positive direction.

In light of all this, it becomes clear that if a school child should refuse the invitation to join the young Pioneers, it is seen as a very strong anti-social, anti-collective statement, challenging the good of China itself. This is a tough call, and few do so. And it becomes difficult to refuse the pull of the Youth League, especially if one seeks a better job, comes from a family tradition of membership, and feels the pull of contributing to collective good. It is not for nothing that more half of the students in my classes at the university have joined the Youth league or are studying to do so.

Of course, not all are interested in the party, for many also are focused simply on getting married, establishing a family and finding a stable job. And there are plenty who are interested primarily in material gain – also a less desirable feature of Chinese traditions. Further, some long-time members do seem to develop a sense of cynical distance from the party. It may be the cynicism of age that affects their sense of the party; it may be a disappointment that the party does not always live up to its ideals on a wide range of issues; it may simply be a feature of long-standing membership of a socialist party. But this does not lead them to give up their membership or their involvement, nor does it mean they will let such cynical distance influence the decisions of their children concerning the party. Others are more firmly opposed to the party, not due to some vague notion of bourgeois democracy, but because that party – they feel – has betrayed its socialist roots, especially in relation to workers and farmers. These people may be seen as part of the Left Deviation, which feels that the party has veered too much to the right. Yet, I cannot help noticing that their opposition is predicated on the same collective reasons that leads others to join the party.

Even with these caveats, it seems that the insight I mentioned earlier does have some truth to it: socialism has been and continues to be increasingly integrated within Chinese culture. This reality has finally enabled me to make sense of a feature I have noticed for some time. More often than not, the research undertaken by the people I know – from postgraduate students through to scholars – focuses on a specific problem in China and seeks to find a solution. It may be economic, environmental, social, cultural, technological, and so on. And it obviously entails criticism of what is happening now in such areas. But the underlying motivation is a deep desire to improve the collective good.