What Can the Chinese Communist Party Learn from Chinese Emperors?

To Appear in *The China Questions: Critical Insights into a Rising Power* (Edited by Jennifer Rudolph and Michael Szonyi)

Yuhua Wang

In 1912, at the age of 19, Mao Zedong's high school teacher gave him a book that became his lifelong favorite. He read it during the Long March, in his cave house in Yanan, and during his train rides across China. A copy of the book could always be found on his bedside table so he could read it before sleep. He told people that he had read it 17 times, and he frequently referred to the book during conversations with party officials.

The book is *Zizhi Tongjian* (*Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*), which was edited by Sima Guang, an intellectual and politician in the Northern Song Dynasty, and published in 1084. It is a 294-volume, three-million-word chronological narrative of China's history from 1046 BCE to 960. The emperor asked Sima to write this book to examine the lessons learned from previous emperors, so that future emperors could learn from them, avoid their mistakes, and become better rulers.

Why was Mao so obsessed with a book written almost a thousand years ago? China under Mao was certainly different from its ancient past: the economy was rapidly industrializing, the state was tasked with more complicated functions, and, with the rise of the Western world and Japan, China was no longer the "Middle Kingdom" at the

center of the world. However, the core challenge Mao faced was very similar to that faced by Chinese emperors: *How to stay in power?*

China today is even more different from its ancient past. Its traditional agrarian society has gradually collapsed, and more people now live in urban than in rural areas. Once a secluded empire, China is now the world's largest exporter and second-largest destination for foreign direct investment. Wealthy merchants, once despised in ancient China, can now sit in the Great Hall of the People and are worshipped by the public. However, top Communist Party officials still keep asking themselves: *How to stay in power?*

Their worry is justified. Around the world, 67 autocracies have collapsed since 1972, including many military regimes in Latin America, personal dictatorships in Africa, and the communist regime in the Soviet Union. During the Arab Spring, some of the most durable authoritarian rulers, including Libya's Gaddafi and Egypt's Mubarak, were overthrown, then killed or put in prison. Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist, has even claimed the rise of liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

How can the Chinese Communist Party survive these worldwide "waves" of regime changes? The experiences of other communist regimes are not very informative. Cuba and North Korea have been ruled by the same families, Castro and Kim, respectively, since their founding, while Vietnam and Laos are trying to follow China's steps to maintain communist rule with a market economy.

Perhaps the party can follow Mao's wisdom to learn from history. From the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE) to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), China has been ruled by 282

emperors across 49 dynasties. The ups and downs of these ancient rulers and polities might instruct the party what it needs to do to stay in power.

What are the key lessons from over two thousand years of Chinese dynastic rule? Fortunately, we don't have to read *Zizhi Tongjian* 17 times to learn the lessons. With digitized data and modern statistical techniques, we can now systematically study the patterns behind the rise and fall of historical rulers.

Analyzing a dataset of dynasties and emperors compiled from a variety of historical and biographic sources, I draw four key lessons from Chinese history.

Lesson one: *No dynasty can rule forever*. The 49 dynasties lasted for an average of 70 years, with a wide-ranging variation from the Heng Chu (403–404), which lasted for less than a year, to the Tang Dynasty (618–907), which ruled China for 289 years. Assuming the Chinese Communist Party is still in power in 2019, it will reach this 70-year average.

Lesson two: *Elite rebellion is the most important cause of dynastic fall.* Most dynasties were overthrown not by foreign enemies or the masses, but by political elites who were part of the old regimes. For example, the founder and first emperor of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE), Liu Bang, served as a patrol officer in his hometown, Pei County, before he joined the rebels against the Qin government. Along with Liu Bang, another rebel group led by two peasants, Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, never made it to the capital. The Tang Dynasty (618–907), one of the strongest dynasties in Chinese history, was founded by Li Yuan – a governor in the preceding Sui government. Meanwhile, many of the rebels led by peasants in the late Sui Dynasty were either defeated by the Sui army or eliminated by Li Yuan. Even the 1911 revolution that ended

China's dynastic rule was led by a group of elites, many of whom were local military leaders in the Qing government, rather than peasants. Peasant leaders, such as Zhang Jiao in late Han, Li Zicheng in late Ming, and Hong Xiuquan in late Qing, never seized the crown despite their fame in folklore. Statistical analysis reveals the same pattern: it was neither the nomads nor the masses; over time, political elites have posed the greatest threat to China's various regimes. Elites have more resources and knowledge to mobilize the masses, and they are more familiar with how the system works. They also know where the garrisons, arsenals, grain warehouses, government files, maps, and treasuries are. While the state capital seems like a maze to peasant rebels who have never visited big cities, political elites can easily find their way to the emperor's bedroom. Xiao He, one of Liu Bang's chief advisors and previously a magistrate's secretary in the administrative office of Pei County, managed to seize all the maps stored in the Qin palace immediately after Liu's troops entered the capital.

Lesson three: *Only half of the emperors left office naturally*. Table 1 shows the method of exit of the 282 Chinese emperors. While half of the emperors descended by natural death, another half exited office unnaturally. Among these unnatural exits, about half were deposed by the elites (murdered, overthrown, forced to abdicate, or forced to commit suicide). The next big category is death or deposition in civil wars, while very few emperors (seven) were deposed by (or in) external wars. The cause of ruler exit is similar to that of dynastic collapse: the biggest threat was from within the regime rather than from the society or foreign countries.

Table 1: Exit of Chinese Emperors (221 BCE – 1911)

Cause	Method of exit	Frequency	Percent
Health	Natural death	152	53.9
Elites	Murdered by elites	34	12.06
	Deposed by elites	24	8.51
	Forced to abdicate by elites	17	6.03
	Committed suicide under pressure from elites	1	0.35
	Subtotal	76	26.95
Civil War	Deposed in civil war	20	7.09
	Died in civil war	10	3.55
	Forced to abdicate facing internal threats	1	0.35
	Committed suicide during civil war	1	0.35
	Subtotal	32	11.34
External War	Committed suicide during external war	4	1.42
	Forced to abdicate facing external threats	3	1.06
	Subtotal	7	2.48
Family	Murdered by son	5	1.77
	Murdered by concubine	1	0.35
	Subtotal	6	2.12
Other	Elixir poison	4	1.42
	Volunteered to abdicate	4	1.42
	Accident	1	0.35
	Subtotal	9	3.19
	Total	282	100

Lesson four: *Emperors who designated a competent and loyal successor lived longer*. Among the 282 Chinese emperors, 130 (46%) designated a crown prince as their successor, and more than half did so in the first five years of their reign. And because there was no religious control of royal marriage in ancient China, the emperors could

choose a successor from a large number of male heirs, so the chosen son was usually the most competent rather than the oldest. My statistical analysis shows that emperors who had a designated successor were 64% less likely to be deposed than those who did not. Those who did not designate a crown prince either did not have a son or relied on other types of succession rules. For example, the Mongolians relied on a combination of lateral successions (principles of seniority among members of a dynastic clan) and elections to choose a new leader (the great khan). As a consequence, only 33.33% of Mongol emperors were the sons of their predecessors, and Mongol emperors' average tenure was 10.8 years, much shorter than their Han counterparts' 17.8 years in the next dynasty (the Ming).

Why was having a designated successor helpful for the emperors? As the economist Gordon Tullock argues, the benefit of appointing a successor is that the elites begin planning their own maneuvers on the assumption that they will spend much more of their life under the rule of the successor than under the rule of the current dictator. However, appointing a successor also comes with a risk. As Tullock points out, the basic problem that the dictator faces in this context is that if he formally anoints a successor, this gives that successor both a strong motive to assassinate him and reasonable security that he will get away with it. This is often dubbed the "crown prince problem," and Mao Zedong learned this lesson the hard way when his designated successor Lin Biao tried to blow up his train. Tullock therefore suggests that hereditary succession provides regime stability during and beyond the ruler's lifetime because the son is wise to simply wait for his father to die.

These four lessons are certainly not the only ones we can draw from the rich accounts of Chinese history. They do not inform us how to develop the economy, how to manage natural disasters, how to alleviate poverty, or how to build a strong army. However, they provide two important insights that help answer the question of how to stay in power.

First, the biggest challenge to regime durability is neither foreign enemies nor the masses, but elites within the regime. Political elites have both the knowledge and resources to organize a coup against the ruler. And even during so-called mass revolts, the elites usually play a leading role in mobilizing the masses. The Communist Party does not seem to fully appreciate this historical pattern. While it is paranoid about foreign influence and mass protests, the current regime under Xi Jinping is obsessed with an anti-corruption campaign to agitate the elites.

Second, succession is an extremely important issue. Although modern autocrats can rarely pass their throne to a son (with the exception of the Kim family in North Korea), it is critical for the incumbent leader to choose a successor who is both loyal (so he can patiently wait) and competent (so the elites can rally their support). The turmoil in Chinese politics in the 1970s can be interpreted as the consequence of Mao's choosing a disloyal successor (Lin Biao) and then an incompetent successor (Hua Guofeng). The post-Mao leadership has handled the succession issue with great care. Deng was believed to have chosen both his own successor (Jiang Zemin) and his successor's successor (Hu Jintao), and Jiang Zemin seemed to have played a role in choosing Xi Jinping. At the time of writing, it is unclear who will succeed Xi Jinping. His handling of the succession

issue will be a good indicator of what the political landscape in China will look like in the next 10–15 years.

On his 73rd birthday, Mao convened a meeting of some of his closest allies and told them that the easiest way to capture a fortress is from within. Without a viable son, Mao struggled with the succession problem, but he clearly got the message from reading *Zizhi Tongjian* that the people around him were the most dangerous. Has the party learned the same message?