



FITZGERALD, John. 2022.
Cadre Country: How China Became the Chinese Communist Party.
 Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.

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John Fitzgerald's *Cadre Country* is a highly readable book, meant for a general audience, on the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese nation. As reflected by its title, this research focuses on cadres, the insiders who work for the Chinese Party-state. Inspired by Milovan Djilas' work on the development of a "new class" of bureaucrats in European socialist states (1957), Fitzgerald exposes how Chinese cadres dominate the country and maintain their privileges as a self-reproducing elite – or, in other words, what makes them "China's largest special interest group" (p. 6). They were, for instance, particularly well placed to benefit when the economy took off in the reform era.

For Fitzgerald, the dichotomy between regime insiders and outsiders defines the Chinese political system. The cadre system established by the CCP "institutionalises" inequality around participation in public life. For the author, the disparity is social, political, and economic, as outsiders are unable not only to influence political decisions but also to enjoy the benefits of China's economic rise. Based on his analysis of this institutionalised exclusion of most of the population from the political system and its perks, Fitzgerald questions the central claims the CCP makes about itself and its successes. While the Party presents itself as a meritocratic bureaucracy, selecting its leaders based on their competence and expertise, Fitzgerald stresses that this narrative helps to legitimise the exclusion of most people from decision-making, as they are depicted as unqualified to participate in public life. Similarly, against common narratives about "reform and opening," he argues that the Party-state practice of planning, whether in the social, family, or economic spheres, also reflects its willingness to maintain its grip over the Chinese people. And this system of exclusion can be responsible for disastrous consequences. Some are long-lasting, such as deepening economic inequalities, while others are linked to specific events: the author exposes, for example, how the limitations on public debate contributed to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake tragedy.

While the centrality of the Chinese Communist Party and its insiders to Chinese politics is well known, Fitzgerald's book provides rich developments on the symbolic aspect of this domination. *Cadre Country* explores the meaning and implications of the progressive fusion of the country-Party-state tryptic. As the Party absorbs the state, a phenomenon that has accelerated under Xi Jinping, its insiders become the nation. The author provides a telling example: only CCP-sanctioned organisations can include the terms *national* or *China* in their names. This leads the author to state that "to the party *Zhongguo* has come to mean, not China, but the Chinese Communist Party" (p. 53). The CCP instrumentalises history to maintain its domination: Party history becomes national history, and loyalty to the Party the defining element of Chinese patriotism. These arguments are presented in 15 thematic chapters, ranging from a discussion on meritocracy to an analysis of national imaginaries and the CCP's hunt against historical nihilism. The argumentation is supported by a rich bibliography and snapshots of Fitzgerald's experiences in China.

As a historian, Fitzgerald is well-equipped to highlight the origins of China's "insider complex" (*tizhinei de qingjie* 體制內的情結, p. 24). He stresses, in particular, the continuities in terms of elite status or polity between late imperial times and the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as the elements the Communist Party-state borrowed from republican governance. I found particularly interesting the sections on the contemporary challenges of the cadre system and how they echo the debates among late imperial scholars and officials about how to reform the way the country is governed. Fitzgerald also provides a stimulating discussion on the role of ruling "red" families in the PRC, making insightful comparisons with the Confucian emphasis on family relations. While the Party tends to present itself as a big, inclusive family, it often appears to be run by a few families. The parallels with imperial times are also apparent in the ways in which outsiders are excluded through language. From Mandarin to "cadre speak" (p. 41), the language of politics has remained detached from the language of daily life for large parts of the population.

All in all, *Cadre Country* adopts a very macro perspective on Chinese politics and history, and on the cadre system. While it provides insights into the cadres' status, it paradoxically says little about the individuals in question, their life and their aspirations. It also offers little empirics on the actual workings of the Party-state, including how, on a daily basis, the Party maintains, or struggles to maintain, the system of domination described and the illusions that come with it. Yet, these are the – often necessary – pitfalls linked to such a wide-ranging endeavour. This ambitious book will appeal to anyone interested in contemporary Chinese politics, and while it sometimes appears written with the Australian public in mind, it will likely find a wide readership.

References

DJILAS, Milovan. 1957. *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger.