

# COMMUNIST PARTY IMMUNOLOGY

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THE YEAR 2016 could be described as the year of ‘governing the Party strictly’ 从严治党 — a slogan and platform promoted by Xi Jinping at the Sixth **Plenum** of the Eighteenth Party Congress in October. What is both semantically and politically interesting about this phrase is the character 治, a polysemic character (one with multiple, related meanings), which means to govern, regulate, and administer, but is also etymologically associated with 治疗, meaning medical treatment, therapy, and cure. This essay explores the implications of viewing governance as a form of medical treatment.

As literary critic and translator Carlos Rojas points out, both Chinese and Western political thought have discursive traditions of ‘viewing the body as a model for the political com-

munity’ and using ‘medical metaphors ... to comment on a broad range of social phenomena’.<sup>1</sup> In his recent book *Homesickness: Culture, Contagion, and National Transformation in Modern China*, Rojas documents how advances in science and medicine — and the discovery of the immune system and germs in particular — influenced the



Carlos Rojas  
Source: Duke University



**Lu Xun**

Photo: zh.wikipedia.org

language and thinking of China's early twentieth century political reformers, such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超, Lu Xun 魯迅, and Hu Shi 胡適.

Once in power, one of the core missions of the Communist Party was to heal the wounded and damaged body of the nation. According to the official narrative, national strength, territorial integrity, economic growth, and social harmony ultimately depend on the vitality of the Party 'organism' 肌體. Inverted, however, this could suggest that the Communist Party is parasitic on its host, depleting resources from society in order to nourish itself.

The CCP conceptualises itself as a living organism that is self-conscious of its own mortality. In 1949, when the

Party triumphantly seized state power, Mao soberly wrote: 'The Communist Party of China is no longer a child or a lad in his teens but has become an adult. When a man reaches old age, he will die; the same is true of a party.' Continuing in this vein, Communist Party theory is inflected by an awareness of the inexorable 'rise and decay' 興亡 of all incarnations of political power, itself included. This does not mean that the CCP is resigned to going gently into the night. It views political decay as manageable and treatable despite being stubbornly 'ineradicable' 頑疾.

Party discourse demands 'vigilance' 警惕 in order to 'guard against' 預防 any 'hidden dangers' 隱患 (also translatable as 'hidden but serious diseases') that threaten the survival of the organism. This political logic follows a traditional Chinese conception of preventative medicine that, according to François Jullien, 'invites us to attend to the slightest deviation well in advance of the crisis that will someday result from it ... we are surprised by the suddenness of an event only when we fail to perceive the silent transformation by which the malady has logically progressed.'<sup>2</sup>



Li Yunpeng and Chen Xuanchi spent their wedding night transcribing the Constitution  
Photo: Sohu

### Cellular Engineering

According to the Communist Party's political anatomy, each individual Party member 党员 is a 'cell' 细胞 in the 'Party organism' 党的肌体. In 2016, Xi Jinping's phrase of 'cellular engineering' 细胞工程 entered official parlance as an integral component of 'Party construction' 党的建设 — the idea that the Party is never a completed or static entity but a work-in-progress. To achieve its goal of 'cellular engineering,' the Communist Party unveiled new norms and standards for 'intra-Party political life in a new era' under the rubric of 'four speaks, four haves' 四讲四有. These new standards exhort Party members to: 'have faith when speaking about politics, have discipline when speaking about norms, have

moral conduct when speaking about morality, and have accomplishments when speaking about dedication' 讲政治, 有信念; 讲规矩, 有纪律; 讲道德, 有品行; 讲奉献, 有作为. In Xi's vision of a healthy Communist Party, each Party member calibrates their internal thoughts, words, and actions to the standards established in the Party Constitution. Redolent of the monastic exercise of copying scripture, 2016 was also the year when the Party faithful rushed to hand-copy the Constitution, including one couple who spent their wedding night in the ecstasies of transcription.

The Party's cells comprise of three basic typologies: Party member 党员, cadre 干部, and leading cadre 领导 with a vast number of different func-

tions, ranks, and sub-types. Although the basic cellular unit is the Party member, it is the Party cadre who is responsible for day-to-day governance, policy implementation, economic development, and social control. Due to their structural importance, cadres also pose the greatest risk to the Party organism. When cadres pursue private interests and indulge their appetites with arrant disregard for the health of the organism, they can become rogue, cancerous cells. The demand that ‘each cell of the Party becomes healthy’ 党的每一个细胞都健康起来 implicitly acknowledges a pervasive sickness. The scrutiny of individual cells doubles as a form of medical monitoring for abnormal behaviours and patterns.

Since Xi Jinping’s rise to power, the CCP has funded research institutes to study the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Beijing’s autopsy of the Soviet Union, the cause of death began with ‘necrosis of the underlying cellular structure of the Party’ 党的基层细胞坏死了 and ‘loss of [cellular] functionality’ 失去功能了, which resulted in systemic ‘pathological changes’ 病变 and, ultimately, death. It would seem that Xi Jinping is convinced that the CCP must govern/treat its own malignant cells before

they metastasise and spread throughout the Party.

I suggest that Beijing is currently pursuing three different kinds of treatment. The first is preventative — strengthening cadres’ political ‘ideals and convictions’ 理想信念. Here too, Xi Jinping relies heavily on medical metaphors: in 2013, he stated that: ‘ideals and convictions are the *spiritual calcium* of Communist Party members’ 理想信念就是共产党人的精神上的钙; without them, a cadre is ‘calcium deficient’ 缺钙 and will be afflicted by ‘chondropathy’ 软骨病 (a general term for diseases of the cartilage, such as osteoarthritis; in Chinese, the characters literally mean ‘soft bone’ disease).

Xi’s ‘calcium’ 钙 metaphor continues to be repeated, circulated, and elaborated in Party writing. In an article published in the theory section of the *People’s Daily* in December 2013, Wang Xiangkun 王相坤 expounds on the different properties and uses of ‘calcium’ in the body and in the external environment. Underscoring the important ‘contribution’ 功劳 (a character with a political connotation of meritorious service) of guaranteeing physical health, Wang identifies the essential role calcium plays in the creation of ‘flesh, nerves, bodily



Liu Shaoqi

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

fluids, and the protein in bones’ 肌肉，神经，体液，骨骼中的蛋白质。‘Faith in Marxism’ and ‘conviction in socialism and communism,’ he argues, act similarly to ‘calcium in the body.’

The second form of treatment requires self-examination 检查 of one’s thoughts for engrained and emerging harmful ideas, stubborn habits, and unruly desires. In the early stages of Party history, it was plausibly assumed that most cadres were contaminated with unhealthy patterns of thinking and behaviour inherited from the old, pre-revolutionary society. Mao believed that it was possible to ‘treat the disease in order save the patient’ 治病救人. In his 1945 treatise *On the Party*, the future president Liu Shaoqi further developed this notion, writing:

‘as comrade Mao Zedong puts it, we must constantly “sweep the floor and wash our faces” so as to prevent political dust and germs from clouding the minds of our comrades and decaying the body of our Party.’ These tropes are permanent features of Party discourse. In a speech at a Politburo Meeting on 18 April 2013, Xi Jinping exhorted cadres to ‘look into a mirror, neaten their dress, take a bath, and have their illnesses treated.’ The Party’s organic composition has evolved since the Mao era (for example, in 2001, the Party began granting membership to ‘capitalists’). But the health of the Party organism remains dependent on the maintenance of a hygienic political environment and the practice of penetrating self-examination.

For any examination to be effective, the patient must not hide even the tiniest, most innocuous symptom. Mao also frequently quoted the saying to ‘hide a sickness for fear of treatment’ 讳疾忌医 from the classical legal text *Han Feizi* to make the point that cadres ought to be brave and sincere when confronting and admitting their faults. There is also a striking similarity between Maoist discourse and Michel Foucault’s explanation of the role that avowal played in Christianity, which



Yang Jiang

Source: Wikimedia Commons

has ‘bound the individual to the obligation to search for a secret deep within himself and in spite of everything that might hide this truth — a certain secret that, when brought into the light of day and manifested, must play a decisive role in his path toward salvation’.<sup>3</sup> In both conceptual universes, an individual is merely the vessel of a greater truth.

In Maoist China, one of the main instruments to obtain self-knowledge of the secrets (one may not know one kept) lodged deep within was the written ‘self-criticism’ 自我批评. It is still used today. In 2013, Xi Jinping warned that the Party ‘must not discard the weapons of self-criticism and criti-

cism to protect itself and treat its own illnesses’ 不能把我们防身治病的武器给丢掉了. Under the knife of the self-criticism session, the daily routine of self-examination is elevated to a highly invasive, fraught, and often risky process of ‘self-dissection’ 自我剖析.

On 25 May 2016, the novelist Yang Jiang passed away at the age of 104. Her novel *Baptism* 洗澡 (literally, to bathe), translated into English by Judith M. Amory and Yaohua Shi, contains a vivid literary account of self-criticism and ideological disease (see the *China Story Yearbook 2015: Pollution*, Chapter 3 ‘Intellectual Hygiene/*Mens Sana*’, pp.108–112). The story is set at a literary institute in Beijing in the early years of the People’s Republic of China. Its main characters are intellectuals who must perform self-criticisms of their indiscretions and insincerities in order to ‘wash off’ the dirt from the old society. In the novel, the Party cadre Fan Ertan stipulates the guidelines for self-criticism: ‘The first priority is not to fear the shame of revealing those hidden, dirty parts. The second is not to fear the pain of scrubbing those parts clean, or of digging or cutting them out’. One character describes her attitude as a process of ‘cutting my heart open, to encounter the masses sincerely’. An-

other flinches from the pain of seeing ‘the true nature of his rotten flesh’.<sup>4</sup> As Yang Jiang’s novel suggests, such searing political vivisections left behind permanent somatic and psychic scars.

In the Mao era, self-criticisms were frequently read aloud before an audience of the masses 群众, which could range in size from a few co-workers to a packed stadium. The assembled masses judged the ‘sincerity’ of the confession and would often prescribe a deeper investigation, involving another ritual of humiliation and control. These days, high-level cadres found guilty of corruption may have to recant their political sins and recite their written repentances in public — before a television camera. (See the *China Story Yearbook 2014: Shared Destiny*, Forum ‘Orange as the New Black’, pp.317–321.)



Li Chuncheng’s televised confession  
Source: Sina Video

Toward the end of 2016, the Communist Party’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) 中国共产党纪律检查委员会 and **CCTV** co-produced an eight-part reality TV series called *Always on the Road* 永远在路上, showing cadre confessions spliced with gritty biographical details. Mediated and disseminated via networked technologies, self-criticisms are now recorded as performances without an audience, such as in TV studio green rooms, courts, and jail cells. The unstable element — the masses — has been removed from the picture. No longer passionately engaged actors in the pageant of revolutionary history, ‘the people’ have been reduced to passive audiences.

In 2016, the phenomenon of choreographed contrition continued to spread to include ‘troublesome’ journalists, human rights lawyers, and foreign citizens. On a certain level, whether or not these confessions were coerced or voluntary is beside the point; they are intended as demonstrations of Party control and examples of normatively desirable behaviour.

The third form of treatment is amputation. Party leaders must be willing to ‘sacrifice the local [necrotic tissue] in order to protect the whole [organ-



Screen shot from a video showing Xi Jinping taking on 'tigers' (corrupt government officials)  
Source: Tencent Video

ism]’ 牺牲局部，照顾全部。In 2014, Xi argued that the Party needed to ‘scrape the bone of poison’ 刮骨疗毒 and even resemble the ‘warrior who severed his [poisoned] wrist’ 壮士断腕。Both of these phrases originate from classic stories in which a warrior severs a limb to prevent poison from spreading throughout his entire body.

### Harsh Medicine

Official media have described Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign as a prescription of ‘harsh medicine’ 猛药 to cure the Communist Party of its mortal ailments. But it comes with side effects. The ‘cells’ being targeted by this ‘medicine’ might react negatively to it. In March 2016, an anonymous let-

ter signed by ‘loyal Communist members’ called for Xi Jinping to resign from power ‘out of consideration for [his] personal safety and that of [his family]’. People believed to be associated with the letter were, in turn, detained by the State Security apparatus.

There is a significant risk that the Party’s immune system 免疫系统 will begin to act in an auto-immune manner. Auto-immune disorders occur when the immune system goes into over-drive and begins to attack the body’s healthy cells and tissues. According to Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, ‘what is certain is that in all these cases [of auto-immunity], an “overactive defence” of the body in seeking to strike at the enemy also

causes harm to itself'.<sup>5</sup> In both political and medical worlds, the drive to protect life may end up destroying it.

At the end of 2016, the CCP was still undergoing treatment, and had yet to enter a period of remission and recovery. If Xi's anti-corruption campaign continues at such high dosages, it might revitalise the Party organism or substantially weaken it. From an

external vantage point, delivering a prognosis would be unreliable at best and irresponsible at worst. There is already enough quack medicine in circulation. What we can do, though, is listen to the words the Party uses to diagnose itself, for they reveal much about the health of China's political world and how those who govern it are feeling.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook 2016: Control*,  
edited by Jane Golley, Linda Jaivin and Luigi Tomba, published 2017 by  
ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.