

The Japanese Communist Party's Feud With Beijing: Will The Global Left Take Note?

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On July 1st, 2021, the Chinese Communist Party celebrated its hundredth anniversary, and duly received congratulatory messages from political leaders and parties around the world. Japan was no exception. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) vice-secretary, Nikai Toshihiro, a veteran "pro-China" faction leader, personally relayed a congratulatory statement on behalf of his party. However, one minor party refused to join in the festive spirit. It issued a terse press release, with the [following statement](#):

"China's hegemonic actions in the East China Sea and South China Sea as well as its human-rights suppression in Hong Kong and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region are alien to socialism. The Chinese party, conducting such acts is not worthy of calling itself...a 'communist party'".

This fusillade came from Shii Kazuo, Chairman of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). In recent years he and other leading JCP members have not held back from denouncing their Communist Party counterparts in Beijing. So in August 2020, following the arrests of Demosisto pro-democracy activists Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow and Ivan Lam in Hong Kong, Shii posted the following [message](#) on Twitter: "We demand an immediate end to this repression. Such tyranny has nothing to do with socialism, but is autocracy itself...we appeal to the international community to raise its voice against this intolerable outrage".

The spectacle of one Communist Party denouncing another for human rights violations must strike many foreign observers as odd — especially as the JCP has been more strident in its criticisms than Japan's conservative LDP-led government. The JCP has its reasons for this hostility. They derive from a long history of ideological conflict with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, and from the democratic and human rights values the JCP has cultivated during its ideological maturation within Japan's parliamentary system.

Today, as much of the East Asian left outside China remains [divided](#), [marginalized](#) and demoralized, and the Anglophone left's potential for organized opposition to the Chinese Communist Party's repression is compromised by [shallow bothsiderism](#), [misguided anti-racism](#) or [one-sided anti-imperialism](#) against America, the JCP's opposition to the CCP regime is something to behold. It could also be something to learn from.

The oldest political party currently serving in the Japanese Diet, The JCP was founded under the patronage of the Communist International in Moscow in July 1922 - and banned soon afterwards. Its anti-capitalist, anti-emperor and anti-militarist membership was regularly persecuted up until October 1945, when its imprisoned cadres were [released](#) by order of the United States occupation authorities and permitted to regroup.

The JCP initially sought to balance Marxism-Leninism with a gradualist "legal revolution through parliamentary procedure" and succeeded in winning 10 percent of the vote and electing 35

representatives to the Japanese Diet in 1949. But the post-war Japanese Communist Party soon found itself struggling with vicious factional fights, reflecting sometimes conflicting influences coming from Beijing and Moscow. It eventually succumbed to pressure from [Moscow and Beijing](#) to adopt a militant, revolutionary approach to seizing power, leading to an internal split, a purge of the party leadership from public office ordered by the American occupation authorities, and the near-total loss of its parliamentary seats in the 1952 national election.

Under the chastened leadership of Miyamoto Kenji over the next four decades, the JCP reasserted its more parliamentary approach to socialism and sought to manage influence (and interference) from the Soviets and the CCP. This was a complicated task, since the JCP's more electorally successful political rival, the Japanese Socialist Party was cultivating its own relationship with Beijing. It became even more fraught following the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s.

Dramatic events in the 1960s finally led to open ideological conflict with both the Chinese and Soviet regimes. In 1966 Miyamoto headed a delegation of JCP members to North Korea, North Vietnam and China to rally support for a joint communique condemning United States aggression in Vietnam. Some unsatisfactory meetings with CCP leaders in China culminated in a disastrous exchange with Mao Zedong in Shanghai in March 1966, which became a defining point in the JCP's relationship with the CCP. [Mao was dissatisfied](#) that the proposed communique did not explicitly denounce Soviet "revisionism" and demanded amendments. The JCP delegates refused to comply, out of acknowledgement of Soviet assistance to North Vietnam, their desire for a Communist "united front" and also because they saw this as another high-handed CCP imposition. The communique was subsequently scrapped.

This meeting led to an acrimonious break between the two parties, which the JCP formalized in 1967. Accusations from the Chinese side that the JCP had turned "revisionist" grew vitriolic as the Cultural Revolution unfolded. The CCP sought to use its political connections inside Japan to [undermine and divide the JCP](#), and there were also violent anti-JCP incidents in 1967 involving Red Guards and their CCP-aligned Japanese cadres in Beijing and Tokyo. The JCP, for its part, expelled pro-CCP members and restricted membership to Japanese citizens. Though the JCP initially sought to rebuild weakened relations with the Soviets after this debacle, it soon joined other Communist parties in Europe to break with Moscow following the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.

These events sped up the JCP's full acceptance of parliamentary democratic norms, much like its Eurocommunist peers in the 1970s. Miyamoto and a new generation of JCP representatives such as [Fuwa Tetsuzo](#) formally distanced themselves from some key Marxism-Leninist tenets: namely the "dictatorship of the proletariat" ideologies upheld in Moscow and Beijing.

In 1970 leading Japanese Communist Party intellectuals like Fuwa concluded that Lenin had wrongly extrapolated from the repressive, economically underdeveloped conditions of Tsarist era Russia — where there were limited options for organized opposition outside of armed struggle — to conclude that armed struggle led by a revolutionary vanguard should be the norm for Marxist revolutionary movements globally. They insisted that Marx's original ideas in works such as *Capital* supported a very different argument. That is, that capitalism, in its centralizing late stages, enables an inadvertent ["socialization of labour"](#) through which the working class can gradually acquire control of the means of production. Moreover, according to Marx, in representative democratic nations political struggle to assert control over the means of production can take place by ["peaceful means"](#). In those nations, a non-violent revolutionary "transition period" from capitalism to socialism is possible.

Fuwa used this Marxist analysis to argue that the transition period itself could take the political form of a "democratic republic" before culminating in a stateless society. He concluded that the material

conditions for such a democratic transition exist in Japan today. Whatever we may make of this interpretation of the later Marx, or of the aptness of the JCP and its largely middle class voter base to act as an electoral vehicle for a transition to socialism, two conclusions are clear from such arguments. First, the JCP rejects the universalizing of authoritarian Soviet or Chinese Communist style governance even as a temporary phase in transitions to socialism. Second, the JCP believes that democratic processes are a legitimate means to help bring this transition about, at least in nations like Japan.

The JCP has held to this line to this day, though it retains some of the old Marxism-Leninist, top-down [“democratic centralism”](#) in intra-party governance. It has held this line even as other socialist parties across the world dissolved in the years following 1989 — like its larger rival, the Japan Socialist Party — or transformed into social democratic parties. Yet it has also incorporated social liberal and human rights values into its platforms.

However, following peace-making overtures from the CCP, the JCP reached a rapprochement with Beijing in 1998. The JCP dropped previous, Leninist-tinged accusations of “Great Power chauvinism” and “hegemonism” and adopted a cumbersome slogan for recognizing the CCP regime: “beginning a new quest for socialism including the effort to ‘achieve socialism through a market economy’”.

As we have seen, the rapprochement did not last. At its 28th National Congress in January 2020 the JCP dropped that slogan from its party platform, as Shii Kazuo [demanded](#) “that China’s leadership cease its suppression of human rights in Hong Kong and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region”.

Pre-empting criticisms that this decision represented an abrupt about-face, Shii claimed that the JCP had been protesting China’s human rights violations for over a decade, including the 2008 crackdown in Tibet and the persecution of the poet and democracy activist Liu Xiaobo. In 2013, amid evidence of growing authoritarianism under Xi Jinping, the old rhetoric about Great Power chauvinism and hegemonism reappeared, as the JCP leadership [warned](#) of a “danger of a decisive departure from the path to socialism”.

In January 2020 Shii cited the CCP’s “grave reversal” on commitments to eliminate nuclear weapons, its violations of democratic norms in international forums, its “intensified hegemonic actions” in the South and East China Seas, and its “intensifying violations of human rights” in Hong Kong and Xinjiang as justification for concluding that “China’s conduct is wholly incompatible with the principles and ideals of socialism”; that it is now “unworthy of holding the title ‘socialist’”.

So can the JCP’s anti-CCP platform and statements be an inspiration for progressives elsewhere in East Asia, and in the Anglosphere? On the face of it, the prospects seem rather low. The JCP enjoys a deserved domestic reputation for integrity and competence as an opposition party. But it is also a minor party, albeit one that cornered a respectable 11.4 percent of the proportional representation vote in the 2014 national election. It has no history of being in national government and has little visibility outside Japan. In the post-1989 era, the JCP has retained connections to some Communist party governments, including those with a record of violating human rights such as in Vietnam. But it has not cultivated much outreach to non-governmental left political and civic organizations in East and Southeast Asia, or in the Anglosphere.

Moreover, the JCP’s adherence to constitutional pacifism, its repudiation even of conventional military deterrence strategy against China, and its opposition to Japan’s “subservient” alliance with the United States are difficult to swallow for center-left critics of the CCP, who believe military deterrence must also be leveraged to discourage Chinese military designs in Asia. For instance, the JCP has repeatedly [protested](#) Chinese “military pressure” and “intimidation” against Taiwan, and demanded that the “freely expressed public opinion of Taiwan’s citizens be respected”. However, in

line with its strict interpretation of the [Japan Constitution's](#) war-renouncing 9th clause and its criticism of the military alliance with the United States, the JCP advocates only peaceful diplomacy in resolving the "Taiwan problem". It thus also rules out enhancing defensive military capabilities to deter possible Chinese military aggression in East Asia, and [categorically opposes](#) Japanese military involvement if war breaks out between China and Taiwan.

Finally, while the JCP's official adherence to Marxism limits its appeal for many Japanese voters, its Marxism will also appeal less to many younger progressives overseas for whom gender identity and race rather than class are touchstones for political struggle. However, it should be noted that the JCP has joined social movements and coalitions with broader appeal to younger as well as older progressives. It participated in the anti-nuclear power movement which revived with the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant meltdown following the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in March 2011, and issued a "Nuclear Power Zero" [policy platform](#) in 2012. It has a long record of opposing constitutional revisions that would expand government security and military powers, recently signing up to a [joint policy pact](#) with other opposition parties to campaign on this issue in the upcoming Lower House elections. The JCP also advocates for causes which resonate with progressives internationally, including [gender equality](#), [marriage equality](#) and [Black Lives Matter](#).

Putting to one side these issues of international visibility and appeal, the symbolism of the JCP's stance toward Beijing merits greater attention from the international left. The very existence of an East Asian Communist Party which rejects authoritarian Marxism-Leninism, which endorses parliamentary democracy and human rights universalism — that is a powerful rebuke to a Chinese regime which exploits Marxism-Leninist ideology to maintain its hold on power, even as it rejects democracy and human rights as alien, "western values". It is something progressives should take note of if they are ever tempted to parrot such essentialism about western values in Asia.

Confident in its record of [opposition to anti-Chinese chauvinism](#), and in its record of consistent opposition to Great Power hegemony by America or China, the JCP has forthrightly condemned China's human rights violations and infringements against other nations' sovereignty. It has also joined an inter-party group planning the passage of a Japanese [Magnitsky Act](#) for sanctioning human rights violators in countries like China or Myanmar. It has adopted these stances without fear of being denounced for "racism", "Sinophobia" or "pro-American imperialism". Progressive critics of the CCP fearful of such denunciations should take note and draw inspiration.

Shaun O'Dwyer

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