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Keep calm and carry on

Nov 5th 2009 | BEIJING
From *The Economist* print edition

How Deng Xiaoping neutralised the country's worst moment



AP "THE East German people are now strengthening their unity under the leadership of the party." So declared China's Communist Party mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, in October 1989. A month later the Berlin Wall fell. Even today, China's leaders find the memory painful.

China's state-owned media have mostly avoided the subject, as they have also stayed silent about the anniversary in June of China's own pro-democracy upheaval of 1989—tumult that was witnessed by Mikhail Gorbachev, Russia's leader, and which was bloodily suppressed only when he had gone home. They are probably obeying instructions from the Central Propaganda Department of the party. The party's keen interest in the cause of national unification (in its case, reclaiming Taiwan) has not helped ease its qualms about the fate of East Germany.

But freedom stirs, even here

Yet China's ruling party has devoted considerable energy to dissecting the causes of communism's collapse in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Official publishing houses have produced several works analysing them and drawing lessons from them. The first shock over, the party was quick not only to cement ties with eastern Europe's new democracies but also to develop strategies for avoiding their predecessors' fate.

In late 1989 China's anxiety was so profound and its diplomacy in such confusion that it was difficult to imagine it would ever come to terms with the new world order. Fresh unrest seemed unavoidable. It was far from certain that Jiang Zemin, a little known leader who had been appointed party chief in the wake of the Tiananmen Square unrest, was on firm ground.

China's dogged insistence that nothing untoward was happening in eastern Europe ensured that its awakening would be harsh. In early October 1989, even after thousands of East Germans had fled their country, China sent a senior leader to East Germany's official celebration of four decades of communism (a "glorious" 40 years, the *People's Daily* called it). East Germany's 77-year-old leader, Erich

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Honecker, was a conservative much respected by China's own gerontocrats, and a backer of the crackdown in Tiananmen. His resignation that October was appalling to them.

It was an appeal for cool heads by China's 85-year-old senior leader, Deng Xiaoping, that helped China's rulers weather the storm. In September 1989 he told them—in a speech only published years later—to be “calm, calm and again calm” and to carry on with China's (mostly economic) reforms. Mr Deng's advice, and its later elaboration, remains China's guiding philosophy. Its central message is often summarised as *taoguang yanghui*, meaning “concealing one's capabilities and biding one's time”. Mr Deng wanted China to get on with building its economy and avoid ideological battles. The economy, in effect, would save the party.

David Shambaugh, an American scholar, wrote in a book published last year that China's most important conclusion from communism's ruin elsewhere was that an ossified party-state with a dogmatic ideology, entrenched elites, dormant party organisations and a stagnant economy was a certain recipe for collapse. The Chinese party, he argues, has been “very proactive” in reforming itself and adjusting its policies to new conditions.

Not everyone is satisfied. A website set up by a German group to gather internet users' comments on the Berlin Wall anniversary, www.berlintwitterwall.com, has been deluged with postings from Chinese complaining about China's “great firewall”, as the country's state-managed internet filtering system is often called. Access to the website has been blocked by China's internet censors for several days.

But China's media controls are not as impermeable as they were when the Berlin Wall fell. One magazine, *Southern Metropolis Weekly*—known for its risqué reporting—devoted 19 pages to the Berlin Wall in its October 30th issue. “Among those who love freedom, efforts will never cease to tear down walls that block and restrict interaction,” said one of the articles. Another said that no matter what difficulties Germans now faced, “there are probably very few who want to return to the days before the Berlin Wall's collapse”.

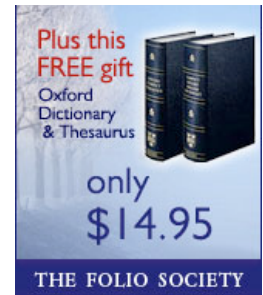
When President Barack Obama comes to China on November 15th, he will diplomatically avoid any public suggestion that China's party should disappear like its east European counterparts. In July, addressing a meeting of senior Chinese and American officials in Washington, Mr Obama noted that the tearing down of the Berlin Wall had unleashed a “rising tide of globalisation that continues to shape our world”. Perhaps to avoid embarrassing a crucial economic partner, Mr Obama did not mention the event's impact on communism. Mr Deng's strategy has paid off nicely.

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