

# Deng Xiaoping's legacy

## The Great Stabilizer

# The definitive biography of a diminutive giant of the 20th century

Oct 22nd 2011

**Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China.** By Ezra Vogel. *Belknap Press*; 928 pages

EARLIER this year, as the Arab spring blew through the Middle East, nervous Chinese officials were heard asking Western diplomats and journalists whether they thought (off the record) that China would be next. As it turns out, China has been left unfazed by this mutinous trend for reasons ranging from Internet censorship to the swift arrests of dissidents. But one important damper on protest has been in the works for a while: China's massive economic growth over the past few decades has left enough people satisfied with the system for now. Also, the country does not have a cultish figure like Hosni Mubarak or Colonel Muammar Qaddafi to act as a lightning rod for dissent.

For this the Chinese Communist Party has to thank a little chain-smoking man who died nearly a decade and a half ago: Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader from 1978 to 1992. Ezra Vogel's new biography portrays Deng as not just the maker of modern China, but one of the most substantial figures in modern history.

If Chairman Mao was the architect of an assertive, socialist China, Deng pulled off the even tougher feat of reversing most of what Mao had done and calling it "socialism". Mr. Vogel, a professor emeritus at Harvard University, has written a meticulously researched book that concentrates mainly on the story from the mid-1970s to the 1990s. He could have subtitled the book not the "transformation" but the "stabilization" of China, as he describes Deng's impressive calming strategy at home and abroad. Deng placated the near and not-so-near neighbors, whom Mao had angered or terrified, continuing his unfinished diplomacy with America (leading to one of history's most incongruous photo-ops as Deng donned a big cowboy hat), and mending bridges with the Soviet Union. A messy war with Vietnam in 1979 was the exception that proved the rule of avoiding military confrontation.

On the domestic front, Deng established free-trade zones, dismantled collective farms and wooed foreign capital. This represented a breathtaking ideological reversal, which Deng characterized pragmatically, because the party had no money to spare: "We will give you a policy that allows you to charge ahead and cut through your own difficult road." And in the aftermath of the Beijing spring of 1989, when conservatives in the leadership tried to chill the pace of reform, Deng struck out by taking a "vacation" in China's free-trade zones. His aim was to kick-start the economic growth that was heading toward double digits by the time he died in 1997. He missed by a few months the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China, which he had negotiated, and which burnished his nationalist credentials.

Deng also dismantled the cult of leadership that had culminated in Mao's Cultural Revolution. Ironically, he used his own strength of personality to diminish the importance of a charismatic leader. His successor, Jiang Zemin, was chosen for his technocratic skills and ability to compromise, not for his charm. Deng's work habits helped manage this transition from Maoist political culture. His regular morning schedule was breakfast at 8am, followed by assiduous reading of ministerial reports, 15 domestic newspapers and a range of (translated) foreign press materials. The quest for total knowledge, along with his own revolutionary credentials, enabled him to outmanoeuvre colleagues who wanted to preserve their own fiefdoms within the leadership. Deng initiated China's system of regular political succession, which is expected to see another transition of power in October next year.

Mr Vogel knows China's elites extremely well, not least because of his years as an intelligence officer in East Asia for the Clinton administration. This book is bolstered by insider knowledge and outstanding sources, such as interviews with Deng's interpreters. But this vantage tends to give Deng the benefit of the doubt, and the author works hard to diminish the stain on his reputation left by the notorious killings in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Mr Vogel points out that other developing economies such as South Korea engaged in state violence of a comparable scale at the time.

Although Deng commendably brought stability to China, violence was central to his formation. As Roderick Macfarquhar and Michael Schoenhals (a former Harvard colleague of Mr Vogel's) have shown in their epic book "Mao's Last Revolution", Deng was responsible for purges in the later years of the Cultural Revolution that matched the Gang of Four for brutality. In 1975 he ordered the army to crack down on a Muslim village in Yunnan province, an action which resulted in 1,600 deaths including those of 300 children. Deng's response to the student and worker protests 14 years later was hardly out of character.

Much of this book contains previously unheard and highly indiscreet quotations. For example, Deng thought Mikhail Gorbachev was an "idiot", according to one of his sons. So this tome is unlikely to be published in China anytime soon. Still, the manuscript was read by Chinese political insiders for accuracy, making this the definitive account of Deng in any language. Mr Vogel eloquently makes the case for Deng's crucial role in China's transformation from an impoverished and brutalised country into an economic and political superpower. Three and a half decades after Mao's death, the next generation of Chinese will have no personal memory of the little man from G

**The New York Times**

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The Opinion Pages

# The Legacy of Deng Xiaoping

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Physical frailty had relegated Deng Xiaoping to a backstage role in recent years, but he remained a decisive factor in China's politics right up to his death yesterday at the age of 92. Although he retired from his last official post in 1989, none dared risk his displeasure or criticize any of his major decisions so long as he remained alive.

Mr. Deng's longevity in power was a tribute to his political skills and the dynamism of his reforms. But his inability to transfer ultimate authority while alive and the uneasy succession likely to follow his death are telling reminders of how incomplete and therefore tenuous those reforms remain.

Power in China remains personal, and leadership requires a capacity to rally the disparate interests of Communist Party barons, army generals, economic technocrats and the general population. Mr. Deng, like Mao Zedong, did this through personal ties forged over decades of leadership dating back to the Long March in the 1930's. That revolutionary generation has now departed and its successors will not be able to rule the same way.

Formal leadership now passes to a handful of temporarily united party functionaries under President Jiang Zemin. All agree on a general formula of "continued reform." But those plastic words are subject to radically different interpretations. While Mr. Deng gave primacy to accelerating economic development, Mr. Jiang seems more inclined to revitalize key tenets of Socialist ideology and flex some of China's new-found military muscle.

Deng Xiaoping, whose career began in the 1920's, was not always a reformer. In

the 1950's he helped lead the Anti-Rightist Campaign, an orgy of denunciation and punishment that ruined hundreds of thousands of lives. A decade later, during the Cultural Revolution, he was himself purged as a rightist. After a brief return to power, Mr. Deng was purged again in 1976 as "an unrepentant capitalist roader."

Those experiences inoculated him against Maoist mass mobilizations, but did not teach him tolerance. His own legacy is stained by the relentless persecution of democracy campaigners like Wei Jingsheng, and most dramatically by his dispatch of tanks against peaceful protesters in Tiananmen Square. China's official verdict on that shattering and costly episode may be re-examined in the years to come.

But Deng Xiaoping is likely to be best remembered for his economic reforms. These transformed China from an impoverished country of giant agricultural communes, inefficient state industries and bureaucratic barriers to trade and investment into a global growth leader with rapidly rising living standards for many of its 1.2 billion people.

These reforms, however, are incomplete. Building up a market economy within a framework of central planning and alongside a still-huge state sector has brought shortages of raw materials, systematic corruption and chronic inflation. Meanwhile, foreign investors have discovered they cannot always count on Chinese law or contracts.

The late stages of Mr. Deng's rule brought policy inflexibility as major decisions about China's future direction were simply deferred. Now those issues must be faced, starting with the succession itself. Others include what to do about unproductive state industries, widespread dislocations of agricultural labor, shrinking government revenues and the absence of an adequate safety net for the millions made insecure by rapid economic change. China's new leaders also must attend to a soured relationship with Washington, demilitarize relations with Taiwan and manage the absorption of Hong Kong.

The long era of rule by Communist China's founding generation has finally come to an end. The world will now learn whether the regime it left behind is capable of leading China to a stable, prosperous and peaceful future.

## EDITORIALS

## Deng Xiaoping's lasting legacy

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Last Friday marked the 110th birthday of Deng Xiaoping, the man who in many ways is the architect of contemporary China. A partner and occasional victim of Mao Zedong, he broke with his predecessor in critical ways upon becoming China's supreme leader. Deng cast aside the ideological dogma that marked Mao's reign, embracing instead a pragmatism that serves as the foundation for Chinese policy today. A victim of Mao's periodic campaigns against enemies, he blunted the sharpest edges of political struggles that occurred while he was in power.

While he held no top positions of the Chinese state or the Chinese Communist Party — he was chairman of the China Bridge Association (the card game, not the infrastructure project) though — he was unable to end the cult of personality that marked Mao's life: No important political decision could be made without his say so. Moreover, Deng's status 17 years after his death is testimony to the role played by “the great man” in Chinese politics. His thought remains the lodestar of China today, and his legacy is the mantle to which all Chinese leaders aspire.

Four principles guided Deng's thinking. The first was “emancipate the mind, seek truth from facts.” This was sometimes translated to the more folksy aphorism that “it doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.” He rejected the ideology that had served as a straitjacket for Chinese policy during the Mao years. Deng was a pragmatist above all who focused on results.

The second principle, which extended from that first motif, was “to get rich is glorious.” (Many question whether Deng actually said that: A more accurate translation is likely “let some people get rich first.”) This mentality served as the cornerstone of China's reform and opening up policy, inaugurated in the late 1970s and jump-started with his southern tour of 1992. Deng was foremost a nationalist and he sought to build and ultimately project Chinese power. He rightly concluded that the fervor and commitment of a billion Chinese paled beside the economic and military strength of smaller nations. Reclaiming China's place on the world stage meant establishing the material basis for the assertion of its international status.

A close examination of the record showed that more open economies performed better than

the autarkic planned economies of the communist system. He thus launched a series of reforms that propelled China, a desperately poor country with an average national income of roughly \$300 when he succeeded Mao, into the ranks of leading nations, the world's second largest economy and the center of the global production network.

China's economic performance has also transformed perceptions of China as well, burnishing its model of economic development and financing its international largesse. China's wealth allows it to generously finance aid and assistance programs around the world. In addition, Chinese companies now reach across the globe, doing business, making friends and extending China's influence. Growing national wealth has also financed more than a decade of double-digit defense budget increases, yet another means by which China is transforming perceptions of its place and status in the world.

Wealth has been accompanied by a new confidence among Chinese, an attitude that is sometimes seen as arrogant or aggressive. This would seem to violate Deng's important third principle, one that guides foreign policy: Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.

Most attention has been devoted to the second half, which urges leaders to lay low and avoid confrontation. That logic appeared to guide Chinese thinking until 2010, when the Beijing leadership suddenly seemed more ready and willing to confront nations with which it had a dispute or difference of opinion. Some attribute this new approach to a misreading of the global balance of power and a belief that the United States had been fatally wounded by the 2008 global financial crisis, both economically and in terms of its ability to project leadership. China, which had weathered the downturn with considerably less economic damage, seemed ready to fill the leadership vacuum — or at least seemed less concerned about the negative effects of its increasing assertiveness. Deng would not likely approve of policies that have triggered a steadily growing chorus of concern among Chinese neighbors.

Those who would conclude from these first three principles that Deng is a moderate should remember his fourth guiding principle, however: the Chinese Communist Party is the only true leader of China. Pragmatism, economic development and keeping a low profile were all means to the larger end of asserting Chinese interests in the world and only the CCP could properly assert them. Wealth and power were tools to legitimate CCP role. This is the man who ordered tanks into the streets in 1989 to crush dissent in Tiananmen Square, risking civil war to preserve Communist Party authority. A decade earlier he launched an invasion of Vietnam to teach Hanoi a lesson.

Seventeen years after his death, Deng's grip on China remains as tight as ever.

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