

# Chinese History Revised: a New Tale of Deng Xiaoping

Claudia Astarita

*Deng Xiaoping and the transformation of China* / Ezra F. Vogel. - Cambridge : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. - xxx p. - ISBN 978-0-67405544-5

*Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* is the most comprehensive and informative biography that has ever been written on one of the most mysterious Chinese leaders. According to the author, Deng Xiaoping deserves a central place in the pantheon of 20th century leaders, as no one in this century has had a greater long-term impact on world history. He not only launched China's market-oriented economic reforms, the ones that lifted so many Chinese out of poverty, but he also accomplished something that had eluded Chinese leaders for almost two hundred years: the transformation of the world's oldest civilisation into a modern, leading industrial nation. Last but not least, Deng managed to implement his new and unconventional strategy for China after convincing all party bureaucrats that he was just doing what the party and the country needed.

Vogel argues that Deng's rate of success was significantly helped by his special relationship with Mao from the very beginning of his political career. Not only did the Great Helmsman identify him as one of his potential successors in the early 1950s but, while subsequently purging him twice, he never destroyed him, "setting him aside for possible use later" (9). According to Vogel, thanks to his proximity to Mao and the purges he went through, Deng Xiaoping was able to understand better than any other how to deal with the Great Helmsman and his memory, a skill that significantly helped him become a successful leader. Throughout his entire career, Deng was close enough to the top tiers of power to be able to observe, from the inside, how leaders responded to different situations. At the same time, during the three and a half years he spent in the countryside to be "re-educated" after being accused of "pursuing the capitalist road", from 1969 to 1973, he clearly understood "what went wrong with China's old system and what needed to be done" to change it (2).

With a personality that was neither as charming as Zhou Enlai's nor as

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Claudia Astarita is Adjoint Professor at John Cabot University and researcher at CeMiSS, Rome. Email: [astarita@graduate.hku.hk](mailto:astarita@graduate.hku.hk)

philosophical, irrational or vindictive as Mao's but direct, pragmatic, straightforward and open, he capitalised on his unique experiences and learned from what he considered Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's biggest mistake, de-Stalinisation. In 1978, at the age of 74, when he emerged as China's *de facto* leader, Deng realised that when a political system treats its leaders as deities, bringing them down to 'human size' can have a highly destabilising effect. Accordingly, he was smart enough to leave the gods in place while focusing his energies on "putting economy first", that is improving people's daily life and pursuing modernisation. In just a few years, Deng succeeded in dismantling Maoism to liberate China's economy from the burden of ideology, while continuing to refer to the Great Helmsman as the great man who bravely united China under the red flag of communism.

According to the author, the way in which Deng Xiaoping handled the Tiananmen protests helped him to prove to his critics that his priorities were the people and the party, whose legitimacy had to be preserved at all costs because, according to Deng, only the Communist Party could keep China prosperous and stable. In resorting to the use of force to suppress the student demonstrations in Beijing, the Chinese leader succeeded in gaining a crucial edge over his conservative opponents inside the Party, who never stopped accusing him of neglecting the Party's priorities to follow his unconventional reforming path. Thereafter, thanks to the Party's new endorsement, he was finally free to focus on his mission: embracing modernisation and globalisation to make China richer and stronger. Although the book highlights that the initiator of the economic reforms was Hua Guofeng, Mao's immediate successor, Deng is introduced as

the real engine of the reforms that transformed the lives of so many Chinese. The man who, after having systematically identified China's weaknesses as its economic backwardness, isolation from the international scene and poor education, successfully solved all three problems.

Vogel's book is an encyclopaedic look at Deng's career rather than a racy read, but it has the advantage of including feedback from the extensive interviews he conducted with Deng's family members, colleagues and Party historians. Some critics have argued that 'Deng the man' is almost invisible in Vogel's book, but it has to be acknowledged that the Chinese leader did not leave much behind, making Vogel's work of deciphering and explaining his personality and ideas even more important. Vogel's brilliant interpretation of the little information available about Deng's personal history helps to reveal some of the characteristics of the China that Deng eventually created. According to the author, Deng's brief experience in France convinced him of the importance of strengthening China's foreign relations and of the need for the Party to study foreign ways for development – a belief that pushed him to fight for the consensus needed to allow foreign investment in Special Economic Zones. Similarly, according to Vogel, the years spent in the Soviet Union in the 1920s induced him to implement a model similar to the New Economic Policy in China sixty years later. The author argues that Deng's authoritarianism was also clear from the early 1920s, when he stated that centralised power flows from the top down and that it was absolutely necessary to obey directions coming from above.

Some critics have argued that Vogel's extensive use of interviews to people once close to Deng made him slightly deferential

to his judgments on Chinese politics. However, this does not mean that Ezra Vogel does not mention the darker sides of the story. The author has made an enormous effort to try to tell the world Deng's

story, and he cannot be accused of being in awe of his subject for having explained so outstandingly to his readers the unfathomable logic behind the Communist Party's decisions during the Deng era.