

坚持党的基本路线一百年不动摇

Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones *Deng Xiaoping in the Making of Modern China*

Poster of Deng Xiaoping, founder of the special economic zone in central Shenzhen in China in central Shenzhen, China. Source: *The World of Chinese* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yyqv6opv>.

By Bernard Z. Keo

The 9th of September 1976: The story of Deng Xiaoping's ascendancy to paramount leader starts, like many great stories, with a death. Nothing quite so dramatic as a murder or an assassination, just the quiet and unassuming death of Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the wake of his passing, factions in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) competed to establish who would rule after the Great Helmsman. Power, after all, abhors a vacuum. In the first corner was Hua Guofeng, an unassuming functionary who had skyrocketed to power under the late chairman's patronage. In the second corner, the Gang of Four, consisting of Mao's widow, Jiang Qing, and her entourage of radical, leftist, Shanghai-based CCP officials.



September 21, 1977. The funeral of Mao Zedong, Beijing, China. Source: © Keystone Press/Alamy Stock Photo.

In the final corner, Deng Xiaoping, the great survivor who had experienced three purges and returned from the wilderness each time.¹

Within a month of Mao's death, the Gang of Four had been imprisoned, setting up a showdown between Hua and Deng. While Hua advocated the policy of the "Two Whatever"—that the party should "resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave"—Deng advocated "seeking truth from facts."² At a time when China was reexamining Mao's legacy, Deng's approach

resonated more strongly with the party than Hua's rigid dedication to Mao. By 1978, Deng outmanoeuvred Hua by harnessing popular sentiment as expressed in the Democracy Wall Movement (1978–1979), creating alliances with reformers and bringing survivors of the Cultural Revolution back into the fold, cementing his place as undisputed paramount leader of China. Now in charge, Deng had a massive task at hand. Following the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the country was going backward rather than forward. The search for a modern China continued in earnest as Deng



In 1978, some Beijing citizens posted a large-character poster on the Xidan Democracy Wall to promote the fifth modernization political democratization. Source: *Embarrassed* blogspot at <https://tinyurl.com/yc3yxwdu>.

took the reins.³ By studying Deng and exploring the transition from Maoist China to the China we know today, we are given clear insights into how the past—both recent and in the longer term—defines China's trajectory as a nation-state.

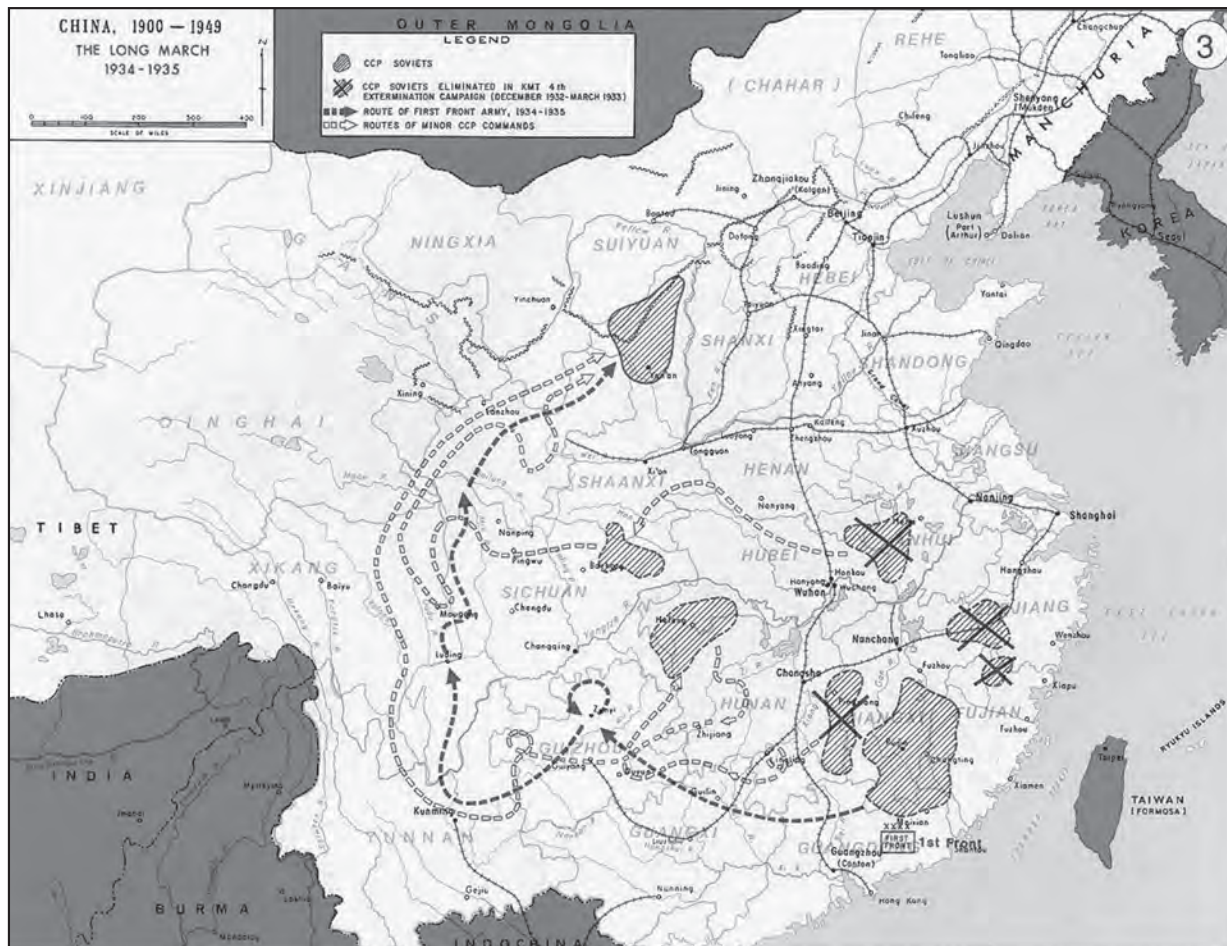
Greatness from Small Beginnings

To understand Deng's approach to reforming China in the post-Mao Era, it is necessary to take a step back and understand how his personal journey shaped his leadership.⁴ Born August 22, 1904, in Paifang, a village in Sichuan Province, Deng, by all accounts, led an unassuming early life. The beginning of his extraordinary career came in 1920, when he traveled to France and developed his lifelong relationship with Communism, joining the Chinese Communist Youth League in 1921 under the tutelage of future premier Zhou Enlai before ascending to the Chinese Communist Party proper in 1924. In 1926, he traveled to the Soviet Union to attend Moscow Sun Yat-sen University, where he received both political and military training. Following his training, Deng returned to China in 1927, where at the onset of the Chinese Civil War—fought between the Guomindang (GMD) and the CCP over who would control the fate of China—he was appointed Chief Secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP and tasked with command of the 7th Red Army. After a series of disastrous defeats, Deng mysteriously left his command in March 1931 and reappeared in Shanghai to face the first purge in his career under accusations of desertion. However, he was rehabilitated, thanks to the intervention of senior party members he befriended in Moscow.

In 1934, following the GMD's encirclement of the CCP, Deng was forced to undertake the Long March (October 16, 1934–October 22, 1935) from Jiangxi with most of the Red Army as they sought to escape the pursuits of the GMD and its allies. His involvement in the Long March cemented his reputation due to the strong relationship he developed with Mao, as well as the personal prestige that emerged as a result of the mythmaking that went into the Long March.⁵ Following the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the declaration of the Second United Front between the GMD and CCP, Deng was promoted as a full member to the central committee and reassigned to serve as political commissar under Commander Liu Bocheng (nicknamed the "One-Eyed Dragon"). The Liu-Deng Army scored many victories against the Japanese and, following the end of World War II and resumption of the Civil War, continued their military success against the GMD. By the end of the war and the founding of the People's Republic of China, Liu and Deng were promoted to chairman and vice chairman of the southwestern regions of China.



Deng Xiaoping at the age of sixteen in France. Source: Post Magazine website at <https://tinyurl.com/y5exz3fp>.



Map of the Long March, 1934–1935. From the History Department of the US Military Academy West Point. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y6y3m5ya>.

In 1952, Deng was transferred to Beijing, earning a series of promotions that made him one of the most powerful men in China, alongside Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhou Enlai. Following Mao's declaration of a crackdown in response to the Hundred Flowers Movement of 1956—ostensibly designed to foster open and transparent discussions regarding the governance of the People's Republic—Deng played a leading role in the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957–1959), launched in reaction to suppress those critical of the government. The evidence suggests that he was one of the most overzealous prosecutors of “rightists,” an ironic twist of fate considering “rightist” would become a label he would carry for much of his later career. Deng followed Mao's orders going into the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) as the party attempted to reinvent China's economy and society through the collectivization and industrialization of the countryside, but from various speeches he delivered throughout the country, he did not seem particularly enthused with the program. By 1962, the Great Leap Forward was revealed to be an unmitigated disaster, as the resultant famine resulted in the deaths of upward of thirty million people, sidelining Mao and allowing relative moderates like Deng, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhou Enlai to rise to prominence as they attempted to repair the damage.⁶

Unhappy with being marginalized, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) with the assistance of People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Lin Biao and the Gang of Four to purge the country of his detractors and reimpose Mao Zedong Thought as the dominant ideology for the CCP.⁷ Deng and Liu Shaoqi were accused of being “revisionists,” “rightists,” and “capitalist-roaders,” which eventually led to both men being purged in 1967. While Liu was stripped of his party membership, Deng was allowed to remain a party member and, under the protection of Zhou Enlai, had a relatively comfortable exile from political life after being sent to Jiangxi to serve as a worker in a tractor factory. Deng again emerged from exile when Zhou convinced Mao to reinstate Deng. Once back in Mao's good graces, Deng climbed the ladder once again, being chosen as the chairman's third-in-command. Mao, ever fickle, turned on Deng in 1976, as he saw Deng's attempted reforms as undermining the legacy of the Cultural Revolution, and replaced him with Hua Guofeng. This was Deng's third and final purge, and brings us back to the beginning of this article, when Deng established himself as paramount leader through his position as the general secretary of the Secretariat of the CCP, effectively placing him in charge of the day-to-day work of the party's leadership.

The Age of Deng

At the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee, Deng laid out the basis for China's future post-Mao. In doing so, Deng turned party policy on its head, replacing the primary objective of class struggle with the modernization and development of China, an ambitious program termed “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” by one of his deputies, Zhao Ziyang.⁸ Yet, in laying out a vision of China's future, the “Age of Deng” was marked not by a smooth trajectory of progress but by an uneven process of going forward much of the time, backward sometimes, and sideways in other instances. The China that we know today is the collective sum of the various experiments attempted during Deng's time as paramount leader that have left long and powerful legacies—both good and ill.

On the broadest level, the most ambitious experiment carried out under Deng was the introduction of the socialist market economy. The introduction of the market into the Chinese economy did not mean the wholesale retreat of the Chinese state from the economy but rather the introduction of a system of supply and demand to complement state economic planning. Combined with this was the limited introduction of liberalization, with small, private businesses allowed to operate and state-owned enterprises sold off or allowed to fail rather than kept afloat through state intervention. This kind of performance-based measure applied not only to enterprises but was introduced to labor as well. In order to encourage workers to be efficient and competent, the state allowed individual enterprises to introduce bonuses and to allow the dismissal of employees, rather than keeping them on to

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Ca. 1967 Chinese poster with the statement “Completely smash the capitalist class and the reactionary line of Liu and Deng!” Source: *Chinese Posters.net* at <https://tinyurl.com/y4qd7gth>.



1991 poster of Deng Xiaoping, "the general architect of reform and opening up." Source: [ChinesePosters.net](https://tinyurl.com/y528gn5d) https://tinyurl.com/y528gn5d.

improve overall production, the government first had to provide enough food for the country. The government began by loosening state controls and providing farmers with more autonomy. Successful reforms in agriculture encouraged state planners to transplant techniques learned from agricultural reform to industry and to conduct further experimentation. The primary development that drew from the field of agriculture was to allow industrial producers to sell surpluses in addition to the amount already sold to the government under procurement agreements. As part of an overall reduction of state intervention in various industries, the state also began decentralizing planning from the central government in Beijing to local and provincial governments, on the basis that cadres on the ground would have a clearer picture of what and how much could be produced. Experimentation of this sort was part and parcel of how party functionaries across China were able to develop reforms that suited particular circumstances, though many of these were often unsuccessful. Yet, through successive experimentation and learning from other examples, the state gradually learned new and better techniques to implement across a wide spectrum of areas.

By the time Deng took power in 1978, science and technology had stagnated, as education was completely disrupted during the Cultural Revolution, resulting in the creation of an entire "Lost Generation" of Chinese students. To reverse course, Deng introduced a crash training program for over 800,000 researchers in priority areas like energy production, computers, optics, space technology, physics, and genetics. Coupled with this new intensive training program was a massive increase in funding research centers to upskill existing staff and train the next generation of scientists and technologists, who were being recruited from a completely revamped education system. Under Mao, the policy was for China to be completely self-reliant. Deng, on the other hand, encouraged students and researchers to travel overseas to gain technical and scientific education. In 1978 alone, more than 480 students were sent to study overseas in over twenty-eight countries. As part of this broader reopening to the world, post-1978 China also saw experimentation with foreign technology directly incorporated into production processes or reverse-engineered so that they could be produced domestically rather than procured externally. Not all these experiments were successful, but those that worked well played a vital role in the advancement of China's manufacturing capacity and its rise as the world's factory. In national defense, Deng focused on the technological modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). To do so, he demobilized millions of military personnel in order to replace a large standing army with a professionalized and better-armed military. To further assist the development of the PLA, the CCP also invested heavily in dual-use programs that developed technology used in both civilian and military capacities.

When he set out on his ambitious task to build a modern China, Deng was aware he needed to make changes in the arena of politics as well. Much of this work involved dismantling the last vestiges of the Cultural Revolution, which had severely damaged the people's confidence in the institutions of the state. The first step in rebuilding these institutions was an assessment of the legacy of the Cultural Revolution. Deng, while reaffirming the importance of Maoism, organized the party to deliver verdicts on the Cultural Revolution and began fully rehabilitating the many victims of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁰ As part of this campaign, Deng brought back many officials disgraced and purged from the party. This worked on multiple levels in Deng's favor, as he regained trusted allies to push through reforms, and brought back experienced personnel that had the skills necessary to carry out his reforms. This coincided with the rise of Deng's two deputies, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, who were appointed by Deng as party chief and premier, respectively, in order to consolidate his control over the party.

maintain full employment, a program that Deng inherited from Hua's modest attempts in 1977. While detractors criticized these reforms as state capitalism, Deng and his allies justified their experiments with market capitalism by arguing that China was still in the primary stage of Communism. Because the Chinese Revolution took place in a semicolonial and semifeudal setting, China had to first go through a stage of capitalist development before reaching the Communist ideal.

To facilitate this, China had to undergo "four modernizations" in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense.⁹ As part of the first phase, Deng began by introducing agricultural reforms, reasoning that to

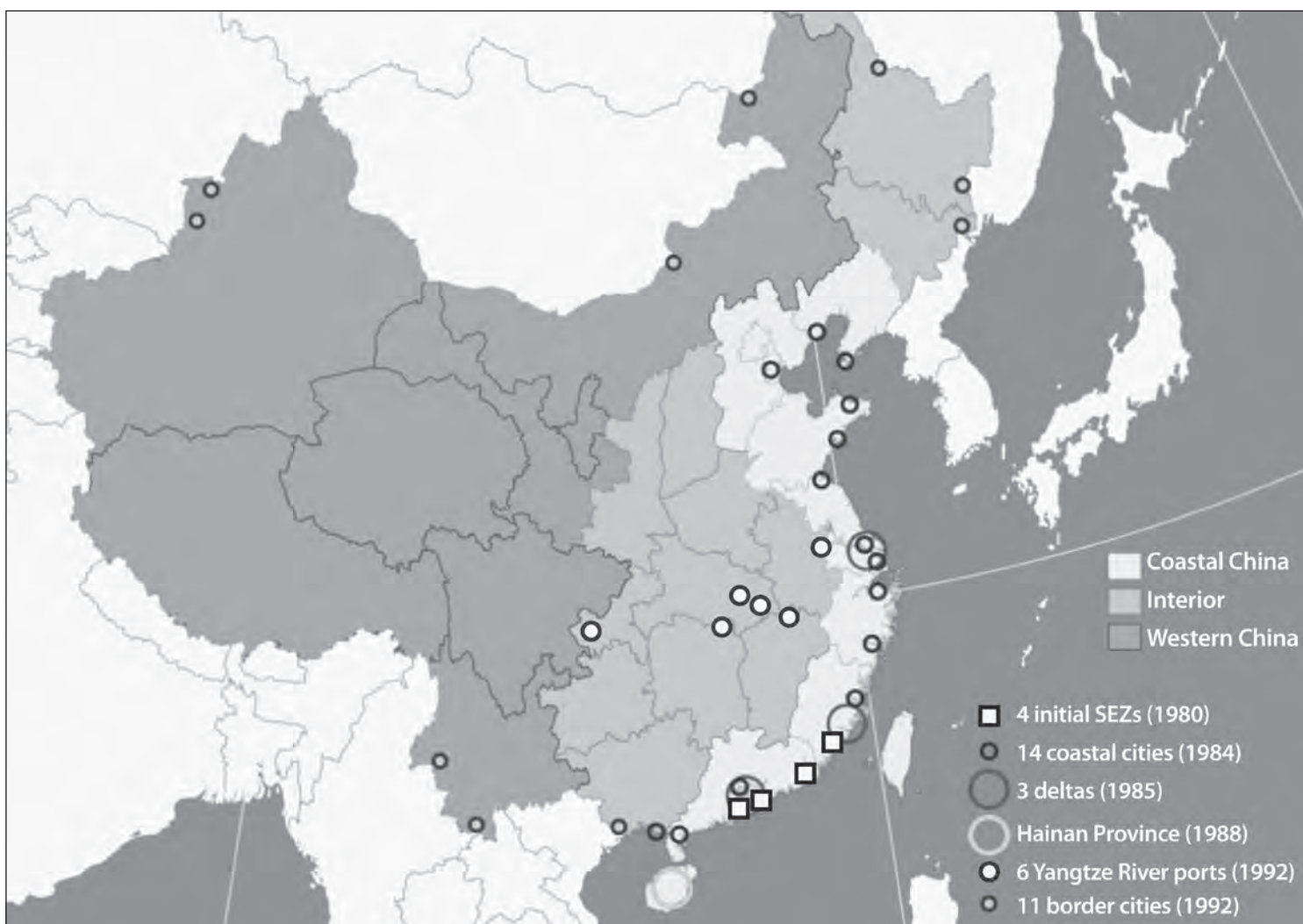
Teaching Asia's Giants: China

Related to this was a loosening of the extensive security apparatus put in place during the Cultural Revolution, particularly the dismantling of large networks of informants that police and security officials developed. More importantly, the party launched scathing criticisms of the practice of informing, as many had abused the system to settle scores, remove rivals, or get ahead. To top it off, Deng also took aim at the cult of personality that had developed around Mao during the Cultural Revolution. In particular, he pointed out that although Mao was indisputably the great driver of the Chinese Revolution, he was not infallible and had made mistakes along the way. As Deng famously concluded “scientifically,” Mao was 70 percent good and 30 percent bad.¹¹

Having made progress in undoing the damage of the Cultural Revolution, Deng moved on to the task of rebuilding and improving the institutions of the state. The first step was to clearly delineate the responsibilities of the party, the army, and the government, which had been inextricably linked since the foundation of the PRC. To get on with the task of governing, Deng pushed through reforms that reduced the role of the party and the army, and commensurately enlarged the role and powers of the government. This coincided with Deng’s push to reduce the state bureaucracy. At the top, he attempted to rejuvenate the highest echelons by forcing the resignation of elderly leading members to make way for younger members more conducive to reform. To go along with rejuvenation at the top, there was also a mass retrenchment of functionaries at all levels of government, partially to streamline the reform process by making the bureaucracy leaner and reduce the burden that such a large bureaucracy had on state coffers.

The third pillar of Deng’s push to modernize China involved reopening China’s doors to the world and attempting to get it to reenter the international system. To facilitate the improvement of China’s economy, Deng settled on an export-led model of development that had worked for Japan and some of the Asian Tigers, namely Taiwan and the Republic of Korea, through the opening of special economic zones (SEZs). By significantly reducing state regulation and tax rates, these zones were able to attract foreign firms to do business in China. The experiment that took place in the four initially opened SEZs had mixed outcomes, with Shenzhen serving as the prime example of the

China’s SEZs, 1980–1992. In 1980, the first four were established in proximity to Hong Kong (Shenzhen), Macao (Zhuhai), and Taiwan (Shantou and Xiamen). Source: J. P. Rodrigue, ed., *The Geography of Transport Systems*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), <https://tinyurl.com/yynjo2fs>. Minor adjustments were made to the illustration for clarity.



Shanghai 1985



Shanghai 2013



Shanghai was one of the fourteen selected SEZ coastal cities in 1984. Source: *Techno Crazy* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y42rex9o>.

successes possible under the SEZ model, while Zhuhai never recorded the same levels of spectacular growth. Nevertheless, the success of Shenzhen set the tone for accelerating economic development and resulted in the expansion of the program to huge swathes of China. In short order, fourteen more coastal cities were designated SEZs in 1984; three “development triangles” in the Pearl, Min, and Yangtze river deltas in 1985; the entirety of Hainan Island in 1986; and six ports on the Yangtze River and eleven border cities in 1992. Similarly, in 1990, Shanghai and ten other cities on the Yangtze River were designated “open cities” that allowed direct overseas investment. To begin with, the Chinese government encouraged the investment of capital and technical skills from the overseas Chinese.¹² As such, much of the first wave of foreign investment in China came from Hong Kong and Taiwan, with a second significant wave from Southeast Asia, particularly Singapore. Following the normalization of China’s relations with the US and Japan, China also saw incremental increases in investment from both countries, as well as Europe and the rest of the developed world, though they were still dwarfed by overseas Chinese investment for much of the twentieth century.

Reopening to the World

To go along with reopening China to the global economy, Deng presided over a major overhaul of China’s foreign relations.¹³ Building on Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger’s engineering of rapprochement in 1972, Deng negotiated the establishment of full formal diplomatic relations between the People’s Republic of China and the United States in 1979. The normalization of Sino–American relations was a stunning coup, as the US promised to break off formal relations with the Republic of China



Premier Zhou Enlai (Left) with Henry Kissinger in Beijing, China, July 1971. Source: CGTN website at <https://tinyurl.com/yxv8vdef>. © CGTN photo.

(Taiwan) and recognize only the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, the so-called One China Policy that continues to be the cornerstone of US–PRC relations. An important caveat is that the same year, the US—through congressional action that President Jimmy Carter signed—provided Taiwan with continued national security and economic guarantees. The US–PRC bilateral relationship was cemented further following Deng’s historic visit to the United States in 1979, signaling to the United States—and the world—that China was now reopened for business.¹⁴

In addition to the US, Deng also presided over the improvement of Sino–Japanese relations. Japan and China had negotiated a limited level of Japanese investment into the Chinese economy after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1972, but this increased substantially following Deng’s elevation to paramount leader. Deng recognized that to ensure his reforms could succeed, he needed financial and technical support from Japan. Conversely, Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda saw deepening relations with China as



On January 31, 1979, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and President Jimmy Carter signed diplomatic agreements between the United States and China. Source: *Jimmy Carter Library* at <https://tinyurl.com/y25s5rnm>.



Tiananmen Square protesters waving a banner reading "Freedom and Democracy Enlightenment" under a funeral portrait of Hua Yaobang. Source: *AsiaNews.it* at <https://tinyurl.com/y4mvvekm>.

an excellent opportunity to draw China closer to Japan and the West, and thus help reduce potential future conflict.

Under his leadership, China also negotiated the future return of Hong Kong from the British in 1984—completed in 1997—and the future return of Macao from the Portuguese in 1987—completed in 1999. To facilitate this, the PRC formulated the principle of “one country, two systems” whereby there would only be one China, but special regions could have a high degree of autonomy, maintaining their political and economic systems while the rest of China remained under Communist rule. The constitution was thus amended to allow for the establishment of special administrative regions (SARs), which would have the highest degree of autonomy from the central government.

Perestroika, but not Demokratizatsiya

Yet there were limits to reform. In 1986, within the background of widespread dissatisfaction over inflation and the perception of corruption within the Communist Party, Astrophysics Professor Fang Lizhi conducted a lecture tour across China to speak about human rights, democracy, and the separation of powers, arguing that for China to truly become modern, it needed to democratize. This sparked a series of short-lived student demonstrations that were resolved peacefully. Nevertheless, for his public support of the students, Deng's most liberal-minded lieutenant and his intended successor, Hu Yaobang, was dismissed from his position as General Secretary of the CCP. Three years later, Hu died suddenly from a heart attack, kicking off the Tiananmen Square protests as mourners gathered to grieve his passing, using the occasion of his death to push for political liberalization, repeating an earlier episode that took place in 1976 following the passing of Zhou Enlai that the party had pronounced as correct in 1978. The CCP was divided over how to respond, as liberal elements sympathized with the demonstrators while the conservative faction saw the demonstrations as a threat that needed to be dealt with decisively. Though supportive of the Democracy Wall Movement in 1978, when he was attempting to play Hua out of power, Deng appeared to reach his limit for political reform in 1989.

On June 2, Deng agreed with the hardliners, who had pushed for the square to be cleared to restore order to the capital. The PLA moved in, opening fire on protestors and any civilians that blocked their way, eventually surrounding it. The protestors negotiated with the PLA to withdraw,



May 13, 1989, student protest leader Wuer Kaixi protested among a crowd of students during a demonstration on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China. Kaixi wore a headband that reads *Jueshi* (“hunger strike”). Source: Alamy Stock Photo. Photo: Edgar Bauer/dpa.



COMRADE DENG XIAO-PING IN HIS SOUTH INVESTIGATION TOUR TO SHENZHEN

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but as they were shepherded out, they were beaten bloody. Due to the controversial nature of the events, the real figures for casualties of the Tiananmen Square Massacre are unavailable, but most estimates put the figures somewhere between a few hundred to a few thousand killed and more than 10,000 wounded, with civilians bearing the brunt of the casualties. In the aftermath, although the CCP received widespread international condemnation, it managed to hold on to power by reinforcing its position and cracking down on dissidents.

Deng delivered a speech outlining the party's official line, praising the PLA for their bravery in handling the protestors, who were "counterrevolutionaries" attempting to overthrow the government.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he made clear that the economic reforms put in place more than a decade earlier would not be stopped. Tainted by bloodshed, Deng chose to retreat from public view. His final public act would come in 1992, when he conducted a tour of special economic zones in the south—including Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shanghai—as a symbolic gesture to reinforce that his reforms would continue even after he was gone.¹⁶ By the time of his death in 1997, Deng had retreated fully from leadership, but his reforms and his legacy were secure, as the country remained in control of his handpicked successors.

A Study in Contradictions

Twenty-three years after his passing, Deng's shadow continues to loom large over China, but what to make of his legacy? In assessing his contributions to China's development, it often looks like a study in contradictions.

His decision to liberalize the economy through privatization has boosted development and growth significantly but raises an ideological challenge. Can China continue to call itself Communist after introducing capitalist measures? Moreover, despite calling itself a socialist country, class has returned to the lexicon, commensurate with the rise of a burgeoning middle class in China. Since the introduction of his reforms, China has transformed from a stagnating economy into a bona fide economic superpower. Privatization and the introduction of the market have simulated entrepreneurship and productivity in the Chinese economy but have helped create increasing levels of corruption as ranking party members and their family and friends exploit their privileges to make a profit. Moreover, the introduction of the market has seen an end to the "iron rice bowl," as job security and subsidies for food, housing, and medical care have been dismantled. While the introduction of competition benefits the most competitive, there are those who are not so lucky.

The political reforms he engineered to dismantle the last vestiges of the Cultural Revolution in the wake of his return to power saw a retreat of the party from the spheres of society and culture, allowing citizens to once again have some semblance of a private life. Yet this was temporary, as the CCP did not retreat entirely. It continues to stay firmly in charge of most aspects of life in China (for an example, look no further than the Great Firewall of China) and is willing to step in whenever it feels the party or China is threatened.

Finally, and most importantly, Deng was willing to carry out drastic economic liberalization but was unwilling to allow for any political liberalization, a lesson learned from the outcomes of Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts at reform in the Soviet Union. As an unnamed ranking member of the party colorfully expressed in a Politburo Standing Committee meeting, "If we find a Gorbachev in the Chinese Communist Party, we will shoot him!" While the rest of the Communist world saw economic

1992 poster commemorating Deng's visit to Shenzhen. Source: ChinesePosters.net at <https://tinyurl.com/y4kzjb62>.



Deng Xiaoping on the “Man of the Year,” January 1st, 1979, *Time* magazine cover. Source: *Time* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y2gg3d2s>.

and political liberalization as intertwined, Deng refused to undermine the CCP’s control of the state. And perhaps the course of history has proven him right. While the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union collapsed from 1989 to 1991, the CCP remained firmly in charge, then and now.

How do we understand the age of Deng? How do we explain his eclectic approach to reform? Firstly, despite his willingness to be pragmatic in his quest to fix the Chinese economy, he was a staunch and devoted Communist. As he himself laid out, Deng saw Communism as consisting of two halves, that of the material world and that of its spiritual civilization. In the material world, pragmatism was necessary to push China forward. In the material world, Deng and his allies in reform were, above all, technocrats. They believed that the only way forward for China was through technical solutions, regardless of their origin. At the same time, China needed to stand fast to the Four Fundamental Principles (i.e., being devoted to the socialistic path, to the dictatorship of the proletariat, to the leadership of the CCP, and to Marxism–Leninism and Mao Zedong thought). As such, Deng attempted to chart a middle course between reform and maintaining the CCP’s control.

Secondly, despite being considered the grand architect, Deng himself readily admitted that he never had an all-encompassing plan to get China where he wanted it to be. He had a vision of where to go but not a map of how to get there. As he often said, his approach was “crossing the river by feeling the stones.” Ezra F. Vogel astutely characterised Deng as the general manager of China’s transformation.¹⁷ Deng himself admitted he lacked the skills, knowledge, and experience in many fields, and so left them in the hands of more capable subordinates. He handpicked teams and set broad goals, but the nitty-gritty was done on various levels by clever and enterprising individuals all over China. ■

NOTES

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