

Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China

Ezra F. Vogel

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No one in the twentieth century had a greater impact on world history than Deng Xiaoping. And no scholar is better qualified than Ezra Vogel to disentangle the contradictions embodied in the life and legacy of China's boldest strategist--the pragmatic, disciplined force behind China's radical economic, technological, and social transformation.

Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China Details


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From Reader Review Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China for online ebook

Jordan says

It wasn't a easy read. Not because the writer was not talented. In contrast this book provided a fascinating account of Deng's life.

The event leading up to the tragic Tiananmen square was covered in details. The things I learned about Deng from this book: He doesn't like to talk, he's short, he was a oversea student in France, he suffered three purges under Mao, one of his sons was crippled due to Cultural revolution.

Deng was a ultimate political survivor. What ultimate helped Deng was Mao believed Deng was loyal to him because of an episode during the civil war struggle against Nationalist regime. When Deng took over the country was in ruin because of Cultural Revolution. Deng quickly pushed aside Hua Guofeng and was established as the paramount leader.

He wasn't concern with formal expression of power rather then with informal accumulation of power. Deng never hold high position in the State. His power was derived from being the chairman of Central Military Commission.

Throughout his career, Deng was known as a good diplomat. Nixon had good impression of him. Deng also forged close tie with Bush Sr. Deng negotiated the return of Hong Kong. He was widely popular early in his regime. His pursue of economics reform ultimately to inflation which caused the student uprising. The crushing of student uprising tarnished his reputation.

Overall, his economics reform improved quality of life of billion of Chinese but it also led to widespread political corruption that is still plaguing China's current government.

Bou says

When considering the modern history of China and to understand the current, modern China, we need not look at Mao Zedong, but at Deng Xiaoping, the architect of modern China. To understand China is to understand Deng Xiaoping.

In his book, Ezra Vogel gives a detailed account of the life of Deng Xiaoping. He starts with his early life, how he became a communist, his rise and downfalls during Mao Zedong and ultimately his rise after the death of Mao Zedong and the transformation of Mao's Chiona to the China we now know today.

By the time Deng came to power, Mao had already unified the country, built a strong ruling structure and introduced modern industry - advantages that Deng could build on. However, he had left the country devastated after the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. More fundamental change was called for, and Deng could rely on help from disgraced former senior officials who had been removed from power but not eliminated. These returning revolutionaries stood ready to unite under the leadership of Deng and the Communist Party, providing a ready resource of skills and energy, a useful transition to a new generation better trained in modern science, technology, and administration.

Yet all the favorable conditions that China enjoyed in 1978 would have been insufficient to transform the huge, chaotic civilization into a modern nation without a strong and able leader who could hold the country together while providing strategic direction. Deng was far better prepared for such a role than Yuan Shikai, Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, or Mao Zedong had been. It was he who would finally realize the mission that others had tried for almost two centuries to achieve, of finding a path that would make China rich and powerful.

Deng Xiaoping was born in 1904 in Paifang, Guang'an county, Sichuan. His schooling was - quite remarkable for that time - done in France. In France, Deng discovered the West, Marxism, the world of work, the organizational work of the party, the place of China, social and regional diversity, and his place in the world. His experiences would prove useful in time to come.

In 1927, after the split between the Communists and the Kwomintang, he went back to China as a hardened communist where he met - for the first time - Mao Zedong. From that moment on, the two men would become entangled in a love - hate relationship. Three times Mao removed Deng from the political stage, but after each removal Deng was able to come back.

During the Sino - Japanese war, Deng Xiaoping was made first secretary of the Southwest Bureau, representing the last of the six major regions, with its population of 100 million, to come under Communist control. Deng was to remain in this position until 1952, when major regional leaders, and their responsibilities, were transferred to Beijing. In 1952, when regional leaders were transferred to the central government that now ruled the country, Deng was appointed vice premier in the central government.

During the Great Leap Forward, Deng, like many other party loyalists, aware of Mao's unwillingness to tolerate dissent during the Great Leap Forward, restrained himself from criticizing Mao. But the disasters of the Great Leap Forward had widened the gap between the unreconstructed romantic visionary and the pragmatic implementations.

During the Cultural Revolution, Deng was banished to the country side, which he used to consider directions he would pursue to achieve reform. From now on, the question for Deng became not only how to work with Mao while he was still alive—since as long as Mao was alive, Mao would still dominate—but also how to maximize any decision-making leeway that Mao might tolerate. He knew that time for change would only come after Mao would die.

After Mao's death, Deng became de facto leader of China. However, Deng reassured his colleagues, who were aware of his differences with Mao, that he would not become China's Khrushchev: Chairman Mao had made extraordinary contributions to the party and the party should not launch an attack on Mao like Khrushchev's attack on Stalin. Instead, they should focus on the modernization of the economy. The main question for Deng was how much could the boundaries of freedom be expanded without risking that Chinese society would devolve into chaos, as it had before 1949 and during the Cultural Revolution? This question remained a central and divisive one throughout Deng's years of rule.

In the events leading up to the Tiananmen Square tragedy, Deng showed that he still believed in the Communist Party. Economic progress was achieved, but limits on the freedom had to be set. It was Deng (behind the scenes) who ordered the crack down on the square in 1989.

This book gives a detailed overview of Deng's life, politics and thoughts. For anyone who wants to understand modern China, this book is highly recommended.

Zach Zhao says

No country underwent greater changes in the second half of the twentieth century than China and no man was more responsible for these changes than the subject of this incredible biography. Deng Xiaoping - the architect of modern China - received both the respect and the criticism that he deserved in Vogel's well-researched book. The author skillfully tied the ups and downs of Deng's personal life with those of the country that Deng so deeply loved and by doing so, crafted a piece of work that is both academic and accessible, both objective and heartfelt.

This is a thorough examination not only on Deng Xiaoping the man, but also on the many turning points in China's recent history, for which Deng was often responsible (the reform and opening policy, the normalization of relationships with the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the war with Vietnam, the return of Hong Kong, the estrangement between the Communist Party and Dalai Lama, the tragedy on Tiananmen Square, etc.). As a person, Deng was warm yet guarded. As a leader, Deng was progressive yet restrained. As a spokesperson for China, Deng was witty yet manipulative. The book portrays Deng as a paramount leader whose virtues and flaws are equally visible and whose influence is unparalleled - a portrait that is most likely not very far away from the truth.

There are nevertheless some minor issues I have with the book. Vogel chose not to follow a strictly chronological order when recounting Deng's life story, but instead structured the book based on the nature of Deng's various policies. While this approach certainly helps the readers connect the dots between different periods of Deng's life, it occasionally becomes confusing especially since so many events and characters are involved. There were also some translation errors that I have noticed, the most egregious being when Vogel tried to explain the significance of Hua Guofeng's adopted name. Vogel claimed that it means "Chinese vanguard against the Japanese". However, "Hua" means China, "Guo" means nation, "Feng" means vanguard. How Vogel managed to see "Japanese" in these three characters is a mystery beyond my comprehension. But if one could look past these minor mistakes, one would certainly have an enjoyable read.

Neotony21 says

I finished reading this book this morning feeling quite satisfied. Many points of my curiosity about more recent Chinese history had been addressed by Ezra Vogel in 'Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China'. This well-researched book covers extremely well Chinese leadership from 1969 to 1992. When one thinks of the situation in China in 1969, and compares it to the situation in 1992, there is a natural curiosity about how this remarkable evolution of the governing processes of China took place. And there was no one more involved in this evolution than Deng Xiaoping.

Vogel's presentation is very methodical. He details how Deng Xiaoping was involved in many of the crucial events of the time such as the handling of the difficult situation after the death of Mao, the negotiations for the return of Hong Kong, the turmoil in Beijing in 1989, the expanded presence of China on the international stage. He also covers in detail the internal governmental struggles of those, including Deng, who favored rapid expansion of the Chinese economy, with those favoring more conservative economic growth policies. Because Deng was at the center of so many issues, the book seems almost as much a history as a biography. In the book's concluding chapter titled 'Deng's Place in History', Vogel leaves us with an interesting summary, which touches on a key issue for Chinese management success that was close to Deng's heart, the fostering of a modern meritocracy for the development of the future leaders of China.

Steven Peterson says

A wonderful biography of Deng Xiaoping. There is more emphasis on the later as opposed to earlier years of his life. He was a survivor, having been purged twice by Chairman Mao Zedong. But Mao was not to be finished with Deng--keeping him on the backburner in case he needed his skills later on.

The book provides background for his ultimate leadership of China. Deng was "taken down" during the Cultural Revolution, an enormous upheaval of Chinese society orchestrated by Mao. Deng and his family were essentially "exiled." When the time came for Mao to recall him and address excesses of the Cultural Revolution, Deng was slowly put back into harness for a short period of time. The time came when, again, Mao began to distrust Deng and even put the cold shoulder to Zhou Enlai, Mao's long time lieutenant. After a brief exile, Deng was again readmitted into a leadership role.

The book then goes on to outline how, through political acumen and skills at coalition building, slowly became the # 1 leader, leaving Mao's successor out of power. The book has several areas where it explores Deng's career as leader. His role in upgrading the state of science and education is one focal point. There is a nice discussion of his reaching out to other countries to bring China up to speed in modernizing its economy, its military, and so on. The book also considers economic his economic policies, as Deng tried to jump start China's economy, based on fairly rapid growth (with the risk of inflation). His tactics to do this are described well. There is also discussion of his role in the military. He knew that the army was too large, too many senior officers had outlived their usefulness, and the war technology was not up to modern armies. How he was able to make progress in these (and other) sectors is fascinating.

The book also addresses what appear to be some difficult choices that suggest some problematic decision making by Deng. His invasion of Vietnam is portrayed by Deng as a major factor in addressing Vietnam's aggressiveness. I think that the book's author might have had a somewhat more critical take on this event. Too, there is Deng's decision to bring the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to Beijing to put down the Tiananmen Square protests.

After his retirement, his successors became, in Deng's mind, too cautious with the economy. There is a fascinating tale told of how he used his political skills to get China on a pathway toward more rapid growth. It shows Deng as a wily political figure, who even in his eighties could bend events toward his desires.

All in all, a detailed biography, overall well done, of one of the most important figures in the late 20th century. The book might have been even better with a more critical assessment of Deng's work at some points. Still and all, an important work.

Andrew says

Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China, by Ezra Vogel, is a fabulously written biography of one of modern China's most well regarded politicians. Deng Xiaoping was a fascinating character, who put the framework in place that China has used to modernize and bring millions of people out of poverty. He redesigned China's political landscape, radically altered its Marxist economy and put the necessary reforms in place to put China on the path to its current position in the world. Even so, his tenure in politics is not

without controversy. He spent decades under Mao loyally towing the party line, took part in purges, and was responsible for purges of his own, including the notorious Tiananmen Square crackdown of 1989. Vogel has written an authoritative biography, chronicling the ups and downs of Deng Xiaoping with a neutral tone, fantastic sourcing and research, and intricate depth and detail often uncommon in a biography.

Deng Xiaoping was born in 1904 in Sichuan province, then under the control of China's final Imperial dynasty, the Qing. The Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1911, and China was thrown into turmoil as warlords competed for power and influence in the nation. The Republic of China (ROC), founded in 1912, was hard pressed to create stability in a nation in such turmoil. During this period, Deng Xiaoping grew up in Sichuan, and eventually went to Paris, France with an exchange program for Chinese youth. In Paris, Deng joined a Communist youth league, and became a devout Marxist. He engaged in political activity in France, and eventually fled to the Soviet Union, where he received further education. He returned to China in 1927 and worked with a warlord who was supported by the Soviets. He became knowledgeable in military tactics through campaigns against the Kuomintang (KMT, or Nationalist Forces), and aided urban workers uprisings against the ROC. His forces were eventually defeated, and he fled to Jiangxi to join up with Communist forces. Deng's military skills were when the Japanese invaded China in the run up to World War II. Deng originally supported the unity government of Communist-Nationalist forces against the Japanese, and after the war ended, continued the struggle against KMT forces. Deng eventually ended up commanding the 2nd Field Army, and was instrumental in assisting Communist forces in succeeding in 1949. Thus the modern regime in China was formed.

Deng began his political life as a mayor of Chongqing, but by 1952 he was a rising star in Beijing. He held posts as Minister of Finance, Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and numerous other important posts. He became known as an excellent reformer, helping to stabilize the Chinese economy in the 1960's, and was also a well respected diplomat, as he was instrumental in negotiating an opening of relations with the United States, and was critical of the Soviets during the Sino-Soviet split. Mao had high hopes for Xiaoping, but as with many rising stars, Deng Xiaoping ended up being purged by Mao. The Chinese Chairman was nervous about the reformist faction in China gaining too much power, and ultimately, would end up purging Deng multiple times - in one such purge during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970's, Deng's son was thrown from a University tower by radical Red Guards, and crippled for life.

It seems unlikely that, after Mao's death in 1976, the 72 year old Deng Xiaoping would re-emerge as a prominent politician in China. Mao had handpicked Hua Guofeng as his successor, and Hua was similarly reform minded as Deng, while also being more well-liked by the radical Mao faction in the Chinese Communist Party. Hua ended up purging the radical elements of the Party, having the notorious Gang of Four arrested, and began to tentatively offer reforms while trying to maintain the cult status of Mao Zedong. However, many Party veterans who had been mistreated under Mao, would have none of it, and Deng, as a party veteran and well regarded reformer, quickly marginalized Hua and took power informally. He never held the highest title in China, but his word became law in 1977.

This is where Vogel's book really begins to shine. Most of this large biography is dedicated to the many reforms Deng instigated during his 15 year rule. Deng began to encourage market reforms from the bottom up, rescinding the collectivization of previous decades, allowing local corporations to begin operations, developing industry and ultimately encouraging an export-focused economy. His task of modernizing China was immense, and many hurdles remained. Deng began by reforming China's education system to encourage technical knowledge over political doctrine. He sent politicians and industrialists abroad to Japan, the US and Europe both to learn new techniques for management and organization, as well as to open the eyes of China's Party to just how far China had fallen behind. Deng also had to balance the competing forces of rapid modernization with slow growth. Both sides had valid arguments, but Deng worried that growth too rapid

would encourage inflation, corruption and an erosion of Chinese stability. Slow reformers, on the other hand, espoused more traditional party doctrine, and were often hostile to reforms.

Deng was also faced with a bloated and inefficient military at a time when Vietnamese and Soviet forces in south-east Asia were threatening Chinese interests in the region. This led to a rapid strike on Vietnam, a la the Indian border conflict, to teach the Soviets and Vietnamese that China was not to be tampered with. Although Chinese forces performed poorly during the war, Deng used this as a pretext to retire a number of Chinese officers from the bloated military structure, and focus on improving equipment and organizational structure. The excess savings from cutting back on military spending also allowed Deng to shift more money into developing the economy.

During this period, China's economy began to flourish. Market led reforms and a rationalization of government organizational structures and management practices encouraged rapid growth at the Industrial level. Chinese GDP doubled multiple times under Deng, and would skyrocket toward the new millennium. This was because Deng focused on training new managers and bureaucrats, supported Chinese technical advancement, and re-focused the Chinese economy on manufacturing and processing. China received technical aid from Japan in a big way, and also looked to the United States - then on friendly terms with China, to offer new ideas in management, labour organization, engineering and R&D. China began to develop its transportation systems, encourage market-led initiatives to promote economic growth, and opened up the system to greater economic freedoms for ordinary citizens. He did not go too far, however. Deng was hostile to democratization, feeling it would be too soon to allow China to become a democracy, and instead focused on guided capitalism to grow the economy. Special Economic Zones (SEZ)'s were created first in Guangzhou, to compete with Hong Kong, and then in Shanghai and numerous other areas. These SEZ's were allowed to step away from party doctrine and experiment with new economic and political techniques to both encourage growth and develop tools and techniques for the rest of China.

Deng also focused on integrating peripheral regions of China. Although he never saw Hong Kong returned to China after its 99 year lease to the United Kingdom came to pass, he was instrumental in negotiating the terms of its return, and developed the One Nation, Two Systems principle to stabilize its return. Hong Kong was (and remains) an important hub for trade, finance and high tech industry, and Deng promised Hong Kong's systems, including its free press, local democratic organization, and free-market system would remain for 50 years. This Two Systems principle was also directed at Taiwan. Deng made great efforts to try and see Taiwan returned to China, and China's friendly relations with the US were encouraging. China was able to negotiate down the US commitment to Taiwan marginally, but ultimately Deng was unable to see Taiwan merged with the mainland - a situation that remains to this day. The other major area of concern was Tibet. Tibet was, and remains, a controversial part of China, as its cultural history is quite different from that of China. Tibet has been restive under Chinese rule, and its people adept at gaining sympathy from Western press. This made Tibet difficult to control. Deng sought to encourage respect for local customs, but also encouraged rapid development in Tibet to try and encourage stronger ties between Tibet and China. These systems did help develop Tibet, but the results were mixed, as Tibet remains restive and hostile to Chinese rule.

Deng was also a key participant in the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. This was a time of turmoil in Asia, as the President-come Dictator of Philippines, Marcos, was overthrown by popular protest. This incident had a resounding impact in both China and Taiwan, both authoritative at the time. Chinese students demonstrated in favour of political reform and democratic transition. This movement for rapid reform was too much for even the reform-minded Deng, and a crackdown was authorized. This led to over 200 deaths, as Chinese PLA forces and police units moved in to the Square and forcefully cleared it. Deng had previously enacted two crackdowns in the early 1980's as well, both against vocal critiques of the PRC.

Deng Xiaoping is one of China's great politicians. Reform-minded, determined and possessing an intense passion for his nation, Deng led China through a difficult period of transition as China emerged from its dark years and began to motor down the road to reform. China's economy has skyrocketed in recent decades, with millions of people brought out of grinding poverty. Although China remains controversial in many ways, not least its working conditions, it has still made leaps and bounds both economically and politically. Deng created the framework for these reforms, and pushed China in new directions. Although not free of controversy, and supportive of authoritarian systems, Deng is still widely respected as China's great Reformer, and his reputation is well deserved. Vogel has written the definitive biography of Deng Xiaoping. It is neither glowing, nor overly critical, and instead focuses solely on facts and results. Vogel's biography is extremely easy to read, fascinating, well sourced and full of incredible detail. This biography is easily recommended for those hoping to learn more about one of China's greatest politicians, as well as those interested in modern Chinese politics. This is the best biography on Deng Xiaoping around, and I could certainly recommend it to anyone looking for an excellent and in-depth read.

Betty Ho says

If you are going to read one book about modern China, this is the one. Here's why:

- 1) To understand China nowadays, one must understand Deng Xiaoping. Perhaps, this is the only book in the market with such detailed account (around 900 pages) of how/ why China was transformed (both in a good and bad way) under Deng's leadership. However, those who are looking for untold stories of Deng will be disappointed.
- 2) Most western-authored books about China have their underlying question of "China – what's it in for us" while this book is a rare exception that focuses only on the well-researched facts.
- 3) This book about China has beaten Henry Kissinger's title "On China" on the Lionel Gelber Prize in 2012.

Some may find Ezar over-sympathetic towards Deng, after all, under western eyes - Deng will always be remembered as a villain who was against democracy. For instance, Fang Lizhi criticized the book as "*systematic nonconsideration of human rights*" which most Deng's critics will draw the same conclusion. From my point of view - this book does not intend to tell us what is right or wrong, it simply presents all the facts and views from different observers. Its objectiveness makes it one of my favorite books I've read so far.

Alex MacMillan says

My appreciation of this book, one of the best I read this year, is well expressed in the meme format. (broken link)

To me, the only major downside of this book was that after having read Mao: The Unknown Story and Gang of One: Memoirs of a Red Guard, I was surprised that the author downplayed some of the nastier elements of Mao and Deng's CCP. For example, the One-Child Policy initiated by Deng's administration, one of the cruelest and most significant social policies in human history, gets two pages. I suspect this may have something to do with the widespread self-censorship of Western China scholars, i.e. Vogel's access to the

sources needed for his research probably required a bit of tit-for-tat. We get only a cursory summary at the beginning of the book of the often violent roles Deng played while in pursuit of a utopian Maoist society with his comrades; this book is more about how a master statesman achieved his Transformation, rather than Deng himself.

To be fair, Deng was not as awful as many of his compatriots and it's my word against that of one of the world's foremost experts on this topic. It makes any tome more enjoyable to read when the head of one of the most brutal and repressive regimes on the planet can be depicted as a protagonist to root for. He gives a detailed description of the events surrounding the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 with a mournful, almost Shakespearean tone. Like a climax in any well structure fiction, the hundreds of pages leading up to the shootings provides the proper context for a truly holistic understanding for a Westerner like me.

Washington Post says

Ezra Vogel's masterful history of China's reform era is perhaps the clearest account of the revolution that turned China from a totalitarian backwater into the power it has become today. John Pomfret, a former China correspondent for The Post reviewed this biography for Book World, which made our top 10 list for 2011.

Read Pomfret's review here: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

Hadrian says

An enormous, fascinating view of the man who had, after a century and a half of agony, brought China into the modern age, and brought hundreds of millions out of poverty.

Deng is not an easy man to write about, due to the nature of his work, his government, and the fact that he didn't take notes and instead memorized everything. Many Chinese government archives also remain off-limits.

After spending less than a hundred pages on the first fifty years of his life, the next six hundred are devoted to his rise to power, diplomatic relations, and economic reforms. His leadership and reforms were not wholly certain - he had to outmaneuver the bloodthirsty 'Gang of Four', and one of Mao's chosen successors in order to gain power. But then, he took a collaborative approach, and refused to recreate a personality cult.

Deng did not merely throw open the gates and declare 'free markets' as Gorbachev did. Instead, he prepared his power base, experimented on a small scale with cities, worked carefully with foreign governments to create favorable conditions and a well-trained and equipped workforce. His most famous quote, taken from a country proverb, that the color of the cat doesn't matter so long as it catches mice, is a signature of his leadership. Pragmatism before ideology. "Don't argue, try it. If it works, let it spread."

Deng brought China prosperity, but not democracy. It is disconcerting to note that Deng was a key figure in some of Mao's worst excesses. The most unfortunate blot on his memory is the Student Uprisings and Tiananmen. He retired soon after. But he is not unique in that regard. Nearly every Asian country in the 20th century (to say nothing of any country) has had its own troubles.

But a more firm testament to his memory came later - when he went to visit the cities of the Special Economic Zones he helped create, as a sort of post-retirement vacation, he was still spontaneously welcomed as a hero and an 'uncle/grandfather' to the people. After all, one can give his policies the credit of saving hundreds of millions of people from poverty.

There is still much to be done, and the continued monolithic power of the CCP is by no means certain - its economic rise is continuing. It has surpassed Germany and Japan with ease, and now is second only to the United States in GDP. Deng brought China forward and made it prosperous. It will be seen if someone as visionary as him makes it free.

Jonathan says

"As long as it catches mice, it doesn't matter if the cat is black or white." Thus Deng Xiaoping on the centrality of utility in his great goal and achievement: laying the foundation of the opening and modernization of China's economy. This process, a world-historical event whose effects we are just starting to feel, is Deng's lasting legacy to the Chinese people and the world. Professor Vogel traces the life and times of this remarkable leader who survived three purges but always returned to the center of things, lastly to become China's supreme leader. Vogel is careful to place everything in context and does a masterful job of story-telling as well. Not to be missed, if you have any interest in modern Chinese history.

Ed says

Tremendously insightful bio of probably the most important figure of the 20th century in terms of long term impact: Deng Xiaoping. Very little about him is part of common knowledge outside China and this a great detailed account of his early life but with most detail devoted to the late Mao era and then his surprising take over of China and his profound strategic redirection of its whole future course. Incredibly well researched and a compelling narrative with lots of analytical insight as to why what he did was possible when he tried it. A lot of insights in the nature of the Communist Party of China and many for the future, though few in the current leadership in China seem to have his strategic wisdom and combination of caution and boldness....

Ray says

Ezra Vogel wrote a really really long biography of Deng Xiaoping, the second Emperor of the Communist Dynasty. It's massive, packed with detail, enormously interesting, and more than a bit scary. So Deng Xiaoping was one of those elemental badass guys who's a lot of fun to read about, and very scary when you realize that real people had to deal with him and the consequences of his actions. Much like his old boss Mao Zedong, that way, except that where Mao was more of a crazy mad warrior poet dictator, Deng was more of a Determinator.

Deng was born in a village somewhere in central China. The book says where, but it matters not, because he so dedicated himself to the Party and the Cause that he never went back - it wouldn't do to have divisive regional loyalties. He was a good student, so he went overseas to France, where his scholarship fell through, and seeking a way to better himself, he joined the Chinese Communist Party. Evidently, that was a thing students did back then. He was a political commissar during the Revolution, and ended up governing several

provinces in southern China during the transition, after which he joined the governing bureaucracy, ending up as General Secretary of the Party, where he helped execute Mao's Great Leap Forward, and then tried to ameliorate the aftermath.

He got purged during the Cultural Revolution, and got sent to be a mechanic on a farm workshop for several years. He spent those years making up a list of things to be changed in China in his head, in between writing very obsequious letters to Mao and smoking a lot. Mao eventually brought him back as a possible successor; he showed his loyalty to Mao by mercilessly denouncing Zhou En-lai, his old friend of 50 years standing. This wasn't enough, and he got purged again anyways.

His years as Supreme Leader were marked by the utmost pragmatism. He sent 250,000 troops into Vietnam on an explicit burn and destroy mission to check Vietnamese expansionism. He wanted China to move forward, and to open up, and do whatever worked to improve the economy and the technology. This meant that he could be friendly and cheerful, but also merciless. He pushed his minions to take political fire so that he could be the sage leader and backer of only those reforms that worked, and he threw Hu Yaobang overboard when he drew too much fire from diehard Communist ideologues. Then there was Tiananmen Square, where he made it pretty clear that threats to the Party were not to be tolerated.

His first wife and child died when he was away trying to foment a Communist revolution (that was crushed) in Guangxi province. He joined the Maoist faction early, and was purged for it, and his second wife left him for his purger. His third marriage lasted until his death, but his son was defenestrated by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (which didn't keep him from demonstrating his fealty to Mao over and over to get back into power). In true Confucian fashion (although he would undoubtedly reject the comparison), he never wavered in his faith in the Communist Party and the Cause.

Deng was a pretty scary guy.

Carl says

This is probably the longest book I've ever read, but recommend it to anyone that wants to learn more about China, or who has a general interest in history or business. Personally, it has given me a lens through which I can better interpret modern China.

It paints a balanced and nuanced picture of modern Chinese history, and is a story of extreme pragmatism, making difficult decisions, and masterful political navigation both domestically and internationally.

At a macro level, I think business and politics are very similar. Both involve organizing people around certain goals, and at its core, it's always about people. Therefore, lessons from the political sphere are often applicable in business.

BlackOxford says

Continuity as Illusion

I question whether even the Chinese understand China. Perhaps because if they did the result might be mass suicide.

Much better to, like the Catholic Church, re-shape the meaning of words to the needs of the day while keeping the form constant. A sort of rationality can thus be maintained within the most irrational of situations.

Deng's practical repudiation of the Maoism that almost killed him while maintaining the forms of Maoist 'thought' is the theme of this breath-taking political biography. Among other reasons for reading it is that none of the Chinese literature of the last 30 years is comprehensible without it.

Could it be that the Communist Party of China, indeed the entire Chinese political system, is merely an enormous irony enacted for the edification of unknowledgeable foreigners who believe that there must really be some underlying logic to Chinese society? Its purpose then would be to keep us busy (or entertained) by expressions that mean precisely the opposite of their literal translations. Either that or they really are mad.
