

The “Steel Factory”

A monumental biography of Deng Xiaoping, the doctrinaire pragmatist who modernized China

by EDWARD STEINFELD

WHAT TO MAKE of the elfin man who in 1979 charmed Americans by donning a cowboy hat during his visit to a Houston rodeo, but 10 years later ordered an all-out military assault on unarmed protestors in his own capital? What to make of the revolutionary transformation to which he is justifiably and inextricably linked, a bewildering metamorphosis that has turned China into a global economic powerhouse, a playing field for unbridled capitalism, and home, too, to one of the world's last and most expansive single-party states? As Ezra Vogel, Henry Ford II professor of the social sciences emeritus, points out in his exhaustively researched 800-page biography of the late Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping was not the initiator of China's post-Mao reforms (the first inklings of change actually began un-

der Deng's predecessor, the colorless Hua Guofeng). Nor did Deng during his roughly two decades as China's paramount leader ever grace those reforms with a clearly articulated vision or master plan. But the reforms and China's broader opening to the world were unquestionably Deng's. It was he over time who proved to be the manager, the architect, the motive force, and ultimately, the guarantor. To know Deng Xiaoping, as Vogel makes clear, is to know contemporary China.

Yet Deng, whether for Chinese insiders or observers from abroad, has never been an easy character to pinpoint. As his own children attest, he was a man of few words, somebody who had no interest in, and no patience for, idle talk or flowery ideas. Nicknames, though, say a lot. Mao Zedong was the “Great Helmsman,” the mercurial leader with the grand philosophies, the messianic visions, and the complete disregard for practicalities of implementation or catastrophic consequences of campaigns gone awry. Deng

During a visit to the Johnson Space Center in Houston—a highlight of his U.S. tour in 1979—Deng Xiaoping sits in a model of the lunar rover vehicle.



If **medicine** is your dream
but you don't have the required courses
for medical school,
**we'll help you
get there.**

If you are a
college graduate
we have a program offering:

- Outstanding preparation for medical school
- Expert, individualized advising
- Medical experience with Johns Hopkins faculty
- Linkages for accelerated enrollment in medical school



To learn more about our
Post-Baccalaureate
Premedical Program, visit
www.jhu.edu/postbac
or call **410-516-7748.**

JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY

**Post-Baccalaureate
Premedical Program**



Xiaoping was the opposite, the “Steel Factory”—totally unsentimental, totally grounded in the practical, and totally committed to keeping the operation moving forward, step by painful step. Deng, in Vogel’s telling, was a man who made few friends, shared few thoughts, and revealed little of himself for the historic record. But throughout his life he had a clear and unwavering ambition, to garner for China the prosperity and power enjoyed by France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, and Japan. Mao’s dream for the future was clouded by abstraction— notions of “continuous revolution,” class struggle, and rejuvenation through upheaval. Deng’s, in contrast, was thoroughly concrete.



Deng first experienced the West as a 16-year-old temporary worker in 1920s France. He would experience it yet again on a series of state visits in the 1970s as China cautiously emerged from the isolation and darkness of the Cultural Revolution debacle. The lesson remained starkly similar across the decades: China was desperately behind. Everything the West had, China lacked: modern factories, state-of-the-art technology, gleaming infrastructure, and cutting-edge scientific expertise. For Deng, this wasn’t about abstract institutions like laws, rights, and freedoms, but about the concrete manifestations of societal prosperity and strength. The imperative of catching up—technologically, scientifically, and economically—would become the first inviolable rule of Deng’s leadership.

But by Vogel’s account, Deng divined something else during his early years

abroad: the need for unwavering loyalty to the organization, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). That, indeed, became the second inviolable rule of his tenure in power.

By the time Deng emerged as China’s paramount leader, he was already 74 years old, having spent the better part of his life in intense revolutionary struggle. In his late teens, as a subaltern in the nascent CCP’s European branch, he barely evaded French police arrest by slipping off to the Soviet Union. By his early twenties, he was serving in the Shanghai party underground during Chiang Kai-shek’s murderous purges of communists and leftist sympathizers. By his thirties, he had already served as an official in besieged

At the White House, President Jimmy Carter looks on as former president Richard Nixon shakes hands with China’s vice premier.

communist base areas and on the Long March, life-or-death situations that inevitably involved the ferreting out of enemies from within (whether real or imagined), summary executions, and sustained deprivation. By his forties, he was a seasoned military leader known during the Chinese Civil War for his unflinching willingness to throw tens of thousands of troops into meat-grinder-like, high-casualty campaigns. By his early fifties, as a senior official in the newly established People’s Republic, he headed up the Anti-Rightist Movement, the crackdown and subsequent persecution of hundreds of thousands of urban intellectuals who had taken up Mao’s earlier invitation to criticize the party. And Deng himself paid a price—he was purged from the party leadership three times: first during the early 1930s; second, and most famously, during the Cultural Revolution in 1966; and third, during the dying days of the Mao era in 1976. Throughout, he resolutely soldiered on. Everything for the cause. And for Deng, the cause became at once

the ultimate goal (China’s modernization) and the organization through which it would be realized (the Chinese Communist Party). Nothing could be permitted to come between the two. In the Deng worldview, this was a statement less of philosophical principle than accepted fact. Deng saw no viable path for China’s modernization other than that which led through the Communist Party.

It is easy to see how such doctrinaire views led to the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. It is much harder to understand, however, how they connected to the extraordinary economic and institutional changes which accelerated throughout the 1980s and continue today. After all, these changes, as Vogel points out, were about more than just generating growth. They were about thoroughly undercutting fundamental sources of state control—control over where citizens lived and worked, control over prices throughout the economy, control over production decisions by factories, control over contacts with the outside world, and control over what kinds of people could and could not be recruited to the party-state establishment. These were inherently political changes that at every turn met considerable resistance from party insiders. Yet time and again, Deng—determinedly, tirelessly, and relentlessly—pressed ahead against conservative opposition, including, and arguably most importantly, after the debacle of 1989.

Here, management style met commitment to mission. Deng was steadfastly determined to make China catch up, regardless of any resistance. That meant thrusting open China’s doors to the outside world, importing technology on a massive scale, allowing overseas firms in to compete on China’s own turf, establishing markets, and elevating scientific knowledge and professional expertise across society. No grand plan for the revolution was ever announced in advance. None probably existed. Step by painful step, however, the mission was advanced. When practical questions of policy arose, the question was inevitably asked, “What did the French do, what did the Americans do, what was done in Hong Kong?” As Vogel so carefully documents through an incredible array of primary

Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Belknap Press/Harvard, \$39.95)

Congratulations Harvard!



The Harvard Institute for Learning in Retirement congratulates Harvard University on its 375th anniversary.

At HILR, members enjoy:

- challenging peer-led courses in the sciences, politics, economics, history, literature, music, art and architecture;
- lectures and discussions with distinguished academics and public figures on the issues of the day;
- opportunities to write poetry and memoirs, act in plays and musical productions, perform in HILR concerts and make new friends who share their interests.



**HILR proudly celebrates its 35th year of
membership in the Harvard community.**

www.hilr.harvard.edu

sources and interviews, the process was messy, but the direction never changed. Those who stood in the way were ultimately moved aside. And the risks and uncertainties of what lay ahead—gargantuan though they may have been—were never permitted to impede forward motion. Problems, no matter how large, would be dealt with as they arose. Deng would not permit their anticipation, however, to be used as an excuse to forestall progress.

In the end, this style of management made Deng Xiaoping—this most doctrinaire, yet pragmatic of men—a true revolutionary. As Ezra Vogel notes, “Throughout his life, Deng kept learning and solving problems. In the process, stepping stone by stepping stone, he guided the transformation of China into a country that was scarcely recognizable from the one he had inherited in 1978.” Indeed, he established a tradition of results-oriented policy experimentation that still undergirds governmental legitimacy in China today. And he did all of this in the face of considerable risk—risk not just to his country in the event of policy failure, but risk to the party itself in the event of policy success. That is, in favoring experts over political loyalists, Deng drew into the party establishment people whose talents may have been necessary for furthering China’s modernization, but who did not likely share Deng’s unyielding commitment to single-party authoritarianism. Moreover, in undercutting the party-state’s control over Chinese citizens, Deng—whether intentionally or not—exponentially multiplied the number of voices claiming to speak for China’s future.

As Vogel so eloquently argues in this monumental biography—a capstone to a brilliant academic career—Deng Xiaoping may not have ended authoritarianism in China, but he was willing to risk planting the seeds for its ultimate demise. This most determined and hardened of men—the “Steel Factory” to those who both feared and respected him—was willing to roll the dice to realize China’s ultimate dream, modernity. ▢

*Edward Steinfeld '88, Ph.D. '96, is professor of political economy at MIT and author of *Playing Our Game: Why China's Rise Doesn't Threaten the West* (Oxford). He participated in the magazine's "Changing, Challenging China" roundtable (March-April 2010, page 25).*