

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.

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