

COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Deng Xiaoping

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(1904-1997)

Communist leader of the People's Republic of China from the late 1970s until his death in 1997, Deng Xiaoping is credited with transforming a listless Chinese society into a strong industrial power by incorporating elements of the free-market system.

Excerpt from *The Commanding Heights* by Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, 1998 ed., pp. 194-198.

When the French liner docked in Marseilles in December 1920, most of the group of Chinese students on board stood about dazed, confused, not knowing what to do. One, however, was immediately busy, organizing their luggage, arranging their disembarkation. The young man, just 16, was Deng Xiaoping, and he was already demonstrating the take-charge organizational skills that would make him the dominating figure in China 60 years later. In the last two decades of the 20th century, he would set his country on a course to create a capitalist economy within a communist political system and turn it into a major force in the global economy. This was remarkable in that he was 74 when he finally became the paramount leader and launched China on its era of reform. No less remarkable was the extraordinary resilience he displayed in the face of the enormous setbacks, challenges, deprivations, and falls from favor that preceded his final rise to power.

Deng was the son of a prosperous landowner-turned-local-government official in the populous inland province of Sichuan. As a boy, he started in a traditional Confucian school, but then, amid the tumult and fragmentation that followed the Chinese Revolution of 1911, switched into a school equipped with both a more modern curriculum and links to France. That is how he came to be sent to France for further study. His education there proved to be spotty, and he held a number of jobs, working in a Renault plant and steel and rubber factories, and also doing time as a kitchen hand and as a fireman on a locomotive. He developed two lasting passions in France—one was for croissants; the other was for communism. The two were not totally unconnected: It was Ho Chi Minh, later the leader of North Vietnam, who would tell him where in Paris to get the best croissants.

The spread of communism among the handful of Chinese students in Europe was inspired by the May 4 Movement in Beijing, which had erupted in Tiananmen Square on May 4, 1919, to

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protest the humiliation of foreign domination of China in the aftermath of the Versailles treaty. Communism became a powerful vehicle for Chinese nationalism. For Deng it became a vocation. One of his chief sponsors and mentors was Zhou Enlai, who had imbibed Marxism while a student in Japan, before moving to France and becoming a leader of the tiny Chinese communist movement in Europe. Years later Deng was to call Zhou "my elder brother," and Zhou, as a good older brother, would shield Deng from the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. During their French student days, Zhou put Deng in charge of producing the communist newsletter, which led to his being jokingly granted a Ph.D. in mimeographing. In February 1926, the French raided the house where Deng lived, but they were too late. He had left for Moscow the day before.

In Moscow, Deng studied at the University of the Toilers of the East and Sun Yat-sen University. These were the days when China's Nationalists and Communists were collaborators and not yet enemies. Their shared objective was China's modernization and renewal. The Comintern, Stalin's international apparatus, was teaching the Nationalists how to construct a revolutionary party, and members of the Chinese Communist Party were also active Nationalists. Wealthy Nationalists were financing the training of young revolutionaries in Moscow who would restore China's dignity. Among Deng's fellow students was Chiang Ching-kuo, son of the Nationalist Party leader Chiang Kai-shek. Much later, in the 1980s, the younger Chiang would succeed his father as president of Taiwan.

Deng returned to China a convinced Communist, prepared to dedicate his life to the revolution. His organizational skills quickly carried him forward. By the age of 23 he was chief secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and then became an organizer in the countryside. China was in violent disarray. Warlords were battling for control of various regions, and the Nationalists' alliance with the Communists broke down as they competed for power. The Communist Party itself was riven by deep factional splits that spilled over into bloodshed. Deng, following Zhou, allied himself with the faction led by Mao Zedong. At one point, Mao's enemies within the Communist movement imprisoned and interrogated Deng, probably tortured him, and repeatedly tried to force him to recant political "crimes." Deng was part of the Long March of 1934-35, the 6,000-mile trek that Mao led to escape the Nationalists. Over its harrowing course, the Communists were decimated. The march began with 90,000 Communist soldiers and ended with a paltry 5,000. Yet that experience was to

provide the myths and cohesion that, within a decade and a half, would help to carry the Communists to victory and rule over all of China.

The Japanese invasion of China in 1937 created the circumstances for the renewal of Communist power vis-à-vis the Nationalists. That war also turned Deng into a soldier. Once again his organizational talents brought him to the fore, first against the Japanese and then against the Nationalists after 1945. He became one of the most prominent military leaders; indeed, he played a key role in the Huai-Hai campaign, which broke the back of the Nationalists in 1949. This battle, which destroyed a Nationalist army of 500,000, is considered one of the most important land battles of the 20th century. Deng's wartime role enhanced his credibility as a leader and established a network of relationships and connections that would bolster his political position and—at crucial times—protect him.

During his wartime administration of the Taihang region, in Northwest China, Deng also laid out a set of pragmatic economic precepts that would prefigure his policies of the 1980s and the 1990s. Economic incentives were appropriate. "Some comrades say this is too much, but I don't agree," he told senior cadres during the war. "If they've acquired it through their own labor and not corruption it's entirely appropriate. Those who are lazy and unenthusiastic should suffer." Economic change should come gradually; people should feel the benefits directly. And—of critical importance—socialism depends upon proper organization and economic strength, and must be built upon "capitalist production." In other words, capitalism was not the total enemy of socialism. But where Deng did not waver was in seeing the party as the necessary instrument of modernization.

After the victory over the Nationalists in 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Deng emerged as one of the most senior leaders of the Communist Party. He became secretary general and number four in the hierarchy. When Mao led a delegation to Moscow in 1957, he pointed Deng out to Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, and said, "See that little man there? He's highly intelligent and has a great future ahead of him."

Deng, for his part, remained deeply loyal to Mao, though he stood aside when Mao launched the Great Leap Forward. It was supposed to channel the enthusiasm of the "masses" so that China could do in 15 years what the capitalist nations had taken 150 years to accomplish—and

to secure complete control over the countryside. Farmers throughout the country were herded into regimented communes, and backyard pig iron furnaces became the symbols of the Great Leap. As it turned out, however, it proved to be a great leap into disaster. Undertaken without any regard for fundamental economics, it did nothing to advance China's economy. On the contrary, tens of millions of people died of starvation as agricultural and industrial production and internal trade—all totally disrupted—plummeted.

Deng was one of the chief figures who had to pick up the pieces. Gradual investment was to replace mass mobilization; education and expertise were again to be respected. It was at this time that Deng, not known for his aphorisms, made his most famous statement: "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white so long as it catches mice." Although he himself would later say he was not sure exactly what he had meant, it was very clearly an affirmation of pragmatism in economic policy in the aftermath of the fanaticism of the Great Leap. It was also a phrase that would find resonance around the world.

This pragmatism was held against him in the mid-1960s, when Mao launched the Cultural Revolution. Mao was deeply dissatisfied with the lack of ideological zeal in the country, and apparently very angry that he was no longer receiving the veneration due him as the paramount leader. Mao complained that Deng and his colleagues "had treated me like I was their dead parent at a funeral." In revenge, Mao mobilized young people in a savage assault on the established order. The number-one target of the Cultural Revolution was the party. This was heresy to Deng. For him, the united Communist Party was the foundation of China's regeneration. The chaos of the Cultural Revolution threatened everything he had devoted his life to since the early 1920s. Once offered a copy of Mao's Little Red Book, the bible of the Cultural Revolution, Deng unceremoniously turned it away. For his part, Deng was attacked as a "capitalist roader" and subjected to intense abuse; he spent two years in solitary confinement. He and his wife were both put to work in a tractor repair plant. His son was paralyzed as a result of a physical assault by Red Guards. What saved Deng from even worse was the network he had established through the army and his personal camaraderie with his "elder brother," Zhou Enlai.

In the early 1970s, after the Cultural Revolution had run its course, he came back into the leadership. During his time in confinement, he had spent many hours pacing the courtyard,

asking himself how modernization had failed and how it could be restored. Now he could put his hard-earned conclusions to work as he helped direct the economic recovery. He returned to the principles he had favored before—education and economic incentives rather than ideology and exhortation. But criticism mounted against Deng for bowing to capitalism, and once again, with Mao against him, he was stripped of power. The death of Zhou made Deng's position very precarious, and he was forced to sign yet another self-criticism. He was portrayed as everything evil—from a counterrevolutionary to a "poisonous weed" who was trying to undermine the glorious revolution. But again his old comrades from the army shielded him.

The death of Mao in 1976 liberated Deng. The "Gang of Four" (including Mao's wife), who had masterminded the Cultural Revolution, were arrested; and Deng returned to the center of power. He immediately became engaged in the bitter struggles that followed Mao's death. Hua Guofeng was Mao's designated successor. "With you in charge, I'm at ease," Mao had told Hua. Deng, however, challenged Hua, who was known as the "chief whateverist." ("Whatever decisions Chairman Mao made, we resolutely support," said Hua. "Whatever instructions Chairman Mao made, we will steadfastly abide by.") If he was to have his moment, Deng realized, this was it. He carried out the battle against Hua with every resource available to him. By the end of 1978, Hua was out, and Deng emerged as China's paramount leader. Yet again he was in the position of picking up the pieces. Out of them he would lay the foundations for China's real great leap forward.

In subsequent history, December 1978 has come to rank with 1911—the Chinese Revolution—and 1949—the Communist victory—as one of the great turning points in 20th-century Chinese history. The Third Plenum of the 11th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party assembled that month, and although a series of major decisions was made in the months before and after, the plenum encapsulated the fundamental decision: to reorient China toward the market.

There was no grand plan, but rather certain practical steps. In their entirety, they reflected a break with Maoism. The shift bore Deng's imprimatur. Whatever worked economically was more or less all right with him—as long as the party remained in control. Results were what counted. Deng wanted to create a wealthy and powerful China, not a utopian or messianic

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paradise. He was a nationalist, and communism and the party were the mechanisms by which to reach that objective. And behind it all was a straightforward decision. "I have two choices," said Deng. "I can distribute poverty or I can distribute wealth." He had seen enough of the former under Mao.

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