

Books Review: Assessing Deng Xiaoping

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Deng Xiaoping was one of the most important Communist leaders of the twentieth century. Celebrated by the West for his pro-market reforms, leftists should be more skeptical of his accomplishments.

Review of Alexander V. Pantsov with Steven I. Levine, [Deng Xiaoping, A Revolutionary Life](#), New York: Oxford University Press, 2015; Michael Dillon, [Deng Xiaoping, The Man Who Made Modern China](#), London: I. B. Tauris, 2015.

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Deng Xiaoping was *Time* magazine's favorite communist, named not once but twice (in 1978 and 1985) as Man of the Year. For many leftists, however, he's the man who brought the market to China, helping to build the system of state-managed capitalism that reigns in the country today.

Who was Deng Xiaoping, and how should we assess his legacy? Two recent books, *Deng Xiaoping, A Revolutionary Life* and *Deng Xiaoping, The Man Who Made Modern China*, by veteran and distinguished commentators on Chinese communist history, accept that Deng changed China and the world after Mao's death but take a longer view on his career, questioning his characterization as a moderate reformer and emphasizing his complexity and culpability as well as his achievements. They are Deng's first complete biographies in the West. Expertly researched and important new sources on Deng's role in the Chinese revolution, they nevertheless have serious shortcomings.

The Early Years

Deng was born in 1904. His father, a landowner, had him schooled in a modern college in the tumultuous 1910s, when he drank in the anti-imperialist spirit. At his father's burial, a red-gold snake slid from the newly dug grave, considered a portent.

In 1919, Deng went to Europe on a work-study program designed by anarchists who hoped a Western education would create a cohort capable of reviving China. In France, he worked as an unskilled laborer and absorbed communist ideas, joining the party in 1923. He came under the influence of the older [Zhou Enlai](#), and joined a small circle that in later years protected him. He excelled in practical tasks, gaining a playfully awarded doctorate in mimeography. In 1923, he and his comrades joined the Kuomintang on orders from Moscow, where the Bolsheviks felt isolated after the ebbing of the world revolutionary tide and sought bourgeois allies, including in China.

Deng soon went to Moscow. Like other Chinese there, he resented the students' division into leaders

and led, but he accepted it. He learned like a sponge, reading Marxist books, especially Stalin and Bukharin, and learning the art of self-criticism. He watched at first hand as the Russians introduced the [New Economic Policy](#) (NEP), leading temporarily to a market economy. His party minders noted that he had no “non-party” tendencies, respected discipline, and was a good organizer.

In 1927, Deng returned to China to work for Feng Yuxiang, a military leader courted by the Bolsheviks, and led Feng’s political department. However, Feng sent him away after the Kuomintang turned against the communists.

Deng fled to Wuhan and then to Shanghai, where he did secretarial work for the underground party. In 1929, he went to Guangxi, where the communists were in league with local militarists. Their risings failed, and he fled east to join Mao Zedong in the Jiangxi mountains. Deng reached Jiangxi through Shanghai, where he clashed with Wang Ming, Moscow’s protégé. He engaged in merciless self-criticism of his own “deviations” but was protected by Zhou Enlai, a friend since his days in France.

Deng’s first encounter with Mao in 1931 was difficult. Mao’s comrades were engaged in a bloody purge when Deng reached Jiangxi, and he condemned them for it. However, Mao and Deng’s relations subsequently bloomed. In 1932, Deng applied Mao’s leveling principle in the land war. Mao’s rivals denounced him as “chief of the Maoists,” but he was saved from further attacks by the Long March, when Mao’s group took over from Wang Ming’s faction. Deng shot to the top under Mao, who replaced Zhou Enlai as his protector.

In 1940, the communists launched their Hundred Regiments Campaign against Japan, in which they gained their single biggest military victory in the resistance. Some Chinese commentators ignore Deng’s part in it, but Dillon shows that Deng helped lead the offensive and that it boosted his standing. Pantsov and Levine say nothing about the campaign, a silence hard to square with their claim to have written Deng’s “only complete and objective biography.”

In the war against Japan, the communists made a second alliance with Chiang Kai-shek. In 1942, Deng supported Mao’s [Rectification Campaign](#), which cemented Mao’s leadership. He also supported the idea of New Democracy, which Mao developed on Stalin’s orders — “democracy” under communist rather than bourgeois rule.

Deng rose quickly up the ladder. He believed that Mao and the Chinese revolution were indivisible. Like Liu Shaoqi, Mao’s designated successor before Liu’s downfall, he saw the party’s “entire work” as guided by Mao Zedong Thought.

In the civil war after 1945, the communists prevailed through better tactics, higher morale, and cleverly modulated agrarian reform over Chiang, whose government lost support due to inflation and corruption and whose armies disintegrated. Deng played a major part in the 1948-49 Huaihai Campaign that clinched the civil war in their favor.

Pantsov and Levine argue that Mao represented Stalinism in China and gained his authority from Stalin, so they define his policy in the years of his final rise after 1935 as completely “in line with that of Moscow.” Their earlier Mao book, resumed in this Deng volume, has been acclaimed as decisive proof that Mao’s rise fulfilled rather than challenged Moscow’s plans. However, several of their observations undermine that view.

They show, for example, that Mao led an “independent and autonomous” resistance to Japan — but Stalin’s Wang Ming prescribed a unified command and operations. They write that Mao was “not serious about the united front” that Stalin had ordered, and his goal was socialist revolution —

whereas Stalin doubted that Mao could take power and prescribed a regime of New Democracy. Mao insisted on the socialist character of the revolution as early as 1948, although Liu Shaoqi tried to hold him back. After the communists took power in 1949, Mao accelerated the transition, and by 1952 the “socialist sector” dominated.

Mao’s promotion of Deng to a top state role in 1952 signaled a premature end to New Democracy and the start of socialist construction (although Mao oscillated for a while between leftism and obedience to Stalin). So Maoism grew in important respects not out of Stalinism but despite it.

The Communist Era

After the communists established their capital in Beijing in 1949, Deng became chief in the southwest, where he eliminated several hundred thousand “bandits” — even Mao, a prolific purger, thought he had gone too far. In 1952, Deng returned to Beijing, where Mao praised him as “good at everything.” Between 1949 and the mid-1950s, Mao sped up agricultural collectivization, although Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi disapproved — Deng probably did too, though he does not seem to have said so publicly.

The first test of Deng’s loyalty came in 1956, at the time of the party’s Eighth Congress. Influenced by Khrushchev’s speech attacking Stalin, Peng Dehuai and Liu Shaoqi suggested deleting the reference to Mao Zedong Thought from the party statutes, and Deng agreed. Dillon interprets this clipping of Mao’s wings as a show of independence, but Pantsov and Levine see Deng as blundering into a trap set by Mao. Neither view is proved by the sources. The episode clouded Mao’s relations with Liu and Deng, though Deng continued to enjoy Mao’s support.

In 1956, Mao approved Moscow’s suppression of the Hungarian revolution. Also in 1956, partly in response to the Eastern European crisis, Deng simultaneously prepared a rectification campaign (or purge) and a movement to “Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom,” which urged intellectuals to speak out boldly. The two initiatives were linked, in a cynical provocation. Once the blooming got under way, critics were purged as “rightists.” Today in China, the repression is blamed on Mao, but Deng masterminded it and continued to justify it even after Mao’s death, although he mitigated its consequences. Both books agree that Deng backed the crackdown. Dillon thinks his participation was “unenthusiastic,” but his grounds are unclear.

The Hundred Flowers episode was followed by an even greater crisis in which Deng’s tie to Mao temporarily broke. In 1958, Mao launched the [Great Leap Forward](#), a crash program of industrialization and collectivization in which millions died of hunger. When Peng Dehuai questioned Mao’s scheme, Deng criticized him. Later, however, Deng distanced himself from Mao, joining Liu Shaoqi in opposition. When Mao briefly relinquished power, Liu and Deng spearheaded a retreat. Deng enacted a rural contract system that Mao saw as a step toward restoring capitalism.

Until these two books, little was known outside China about Deng’s role in Mao’s Great Leap. Neither book argues that Deng actively resisted, but he clearly helped engineer the reversion to stable planning and “democratic centralism,” meaning consensus and collective responsibility.

Although Liu and Deng’s measures fell short of a return to private ownership, Mao suspected them of preparing to restore capitalism. Open divisions emerged, and Mao started plotting his Cultural Revolution, to destroy old morals, habits, and ideas and remove corrupt officials. First he sacked Liu, as the “number one capitalist roader,” and then Deng, as Liu’s number two. But Deng suffered less than Liu. His groveling ensured that he was allowed to keep his party membership, unlike Liu, who was expelled. Liu died of illness, while Deng was assigned to “tempering through labor.” He spent

his days in a tractor repair workshop, not unlike his last manual job in France, in the Renault car factory at Boulogne-Billancourt.

Deng returned to praising Mao, and in 1972 his “contradiction” was reclassified as “within the people.” With Zhou Enlai’s help, he returned to the top, recognized as a loyal pragmatist of the same ilk as Zhou, who was terminally ill and would need replacing. In 1974, Deng became Mao’s deputy, a promotion later consolidated. He set about rehabilitating the economy and organizing against the remnants of Cultural Revolution-style leftism.

In January 1976, Zhou died. Deng gave the funeral oration, as Zhou’s successor. Critics of the Cultural Revolution used Zhou’s funeral to stage a “counterrevolutionary mutiny” that prefigured the upheaval of 1989. Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and her “Gang of Four” used the disturbances to get Deng sacked, but when Mao died in September 1976 they were arrested and Deng returned to power.

Back in control, Deng demanded a creative approach to Mao’s teachings rather than their mindless recitation. He called for the freeing of thought, the smashing of spiritual fetters, and the seeking of truth from facts, and even for the flowering of democracy. He warned that it was not enough simply to abide by whatever Mao had said and done — a policy known as the Two Whatever.

Deng’s call for democracy was designed to win support against his Whateverist opponents, and it had important outcomes. He appointed Hu Yaobang, a liberal, to the leadership. In 1978, a “wall-newspaper rebellion” spread across China. Deng encouraged Hu’s emphasis on democracy, spoke out against excessive centralism, and backed the righting of past wrongs for which he himself bore responsibility.

The limits to his democratic conversion soon appeared. In the late 1970s, party thinkers began calling for human rights and resurrecting more humanistic Marxist concepts such as alienation. Conservatives blamed this “spiritual pollution” and “bourgeois liberalization” on Deng’s opening to the West, and demanded a clampdown.

Deng’s response was the Four Cardinal Principles: adherence to the socialist path, proletarian dictatorship, communist leadership, and Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong Thought. The Democracy Wall was closed down and some of its supporters were arrested. Hu Yaobang and Deng’s other protégé, Zhao Ziyang, were blamed for spreading decadent ideas. They resisted the obscurantist tide, but in 1987 Hu was dismissed.

Meanwhile, the economic reforms deepened. Drawing on his knowledge of NEP and of Bukharin, its theorist, Deng told the peasants to enrich themselves. The communes were liquidated, rural and urban enterprises proliferated, and a market economy sprang up, organically tied by Zhao to state macro-planning.

The dissidence of the late 1970s flared up again in 1989 with tragic consequences. Hu Yaobang’s death sparked a movement in support of democracy and an end to corruption. Zhao sided with the protesters, and lost his job. What did Deng do in this the last test of his authority? Conservative accounts implicate him as central to the crackdown, but others (including Zhao) distance him from the carnage in Beijing.

His Road to Power

Both *Deng Xiaoping, A Revolutionary Life* and *Deng Xiaoping, The Man Who Made Modern China*

are serious contributions to our understanding of Chinese communism and the reforms' architect. Both embody prodigious thinking and research, combined into a seamlessly sustained narrative. However, each varies in significant ways in its account of Deng.

What sort of man was he and what role did he play? Pantsov and Levine cast him as a loyal Maoist, Mao's junior partner in crime, an outstanding revolutionary leader who rose to the top under Mao and remained his slavish disciple until Mao's death, after which he continued as a bloody dictator in charge of an all-powerful authoritarian machine.

In their earlier book, Pantsov and Levine portrayed Mao as a creature of Stalin right up to Stalin's death, one whose crimes were the same as Stalin's if not worse. Deng's tie to Mao mirrors Mao's to Stalin — each was bound to the other by his essential totalitarianism, each strove to maintain a grip on power until the end. But by classifying them by this single basic principle, Pantsov and Levine blind themselves to important differences between Stalin and Mao and between Mao and Deng, and play down their specificities.

Dillon is more sympathetic to Deng and stresses his differences from Mao. Yes, Deng resisted political reform, but was he in absolute control? Dillon says we cannot know. He classes Deng as authoritarian rather than totalitarian.

The two books differ markedly in their assessment of the resurgent Deng. Did he undergo a spiritual crisis in the Cultural Revolution, as some observers think? Dillon concludes that he probably didn't, but he notes that during crackdowns Deng was constrained by conservative forces. Although he never condemned the anti-rightist campaign of 1957, he disavowed its excesses, and he liberalized his government by promoting Hu and Zhao. In 1989, when the army intervened, did he wield real power? Dillon finds the evidence inconclusive. Pantsov and Levine have fewer doubts. They see Deng's liberal interlude as a Mao-style ploy designed to expose his rivals, and blame him for the massacre. However, their main source is *The Tian'anmen Papers*, which — as Dillon reminds us — are of questionable authenticity.

Might Deng's experience in the Cultural Revolution have changed his mind about democracy? A democratic wind blew through China after Mao's death. It even blew through party schools, where debates about humanism and alienation first held in the early 1960s, when Liu and Deng held sway, revived.

The Cultural Revolution sparked a democratic ferment for two opposite reasons: its terrible abuse of power, and the sense of liberation that it brought to some young people. Both books acknowledge that the Cultural Revolution was not just a power struggle, but neither explores its character as a mass movement and the role played by its veterans in the protests of the 1970s and 1980s.

But all the authors agree that Deng was no liberal. Pantsov and Levine condemn him as a murderous dictator, but Dillon sees him as a ruler by consent. This consent was not of the people but of the party, from top to bottom. One might add that a party with tens of millions of members deeply embedded at all levels of society can be a source of tyrannical power but can also reflect mass sentiments and aspirations in times of crisis.

Pantsov and Levine are also less impressed than Dillon by Deng's post-Mao record. Did he reform Chinese agriculture? Yes, but only by copying the Fengyang farmers, who spontaneously divided up the land. Did he revolutionize industry and commerce? Yes, but he had a special advantage — the "clan consciousness" and family-based "patriotic feelings" of overseas Chinese, who financed the boom. He had other advantages too over Gorbachev — his officials were less corrupt and Gorbachev was constrained by the Cold War, whereas Deng could play on it.

But these arguments are flawed. That Deng learned from the farmers speaks for his pragmatism, and undermines Pantsov and Levine's belief in his intolerance of autonomy and spontaneity. The argument about overseas-Chinese investors is essentialist — the investors responded not to the homeland's call but to Deng's inducements. Both China and Russia have been plagued by systemic corruption since the market transition, and China's geopolitical advantage was in part a result of Deng's diplomatic skills.

A Contested Legacy

Was Deng a totalitarian, like Mao and Stalin? Did he rule China as sole, undisputed leader using a strictly centralized system of all-encompassing control by the security organs? Many historians reject the totalitarian concept because it implies symmetry between Hitler and Stalin, but that is far from my concern. My objection springs from the belief, derived from a lifetime studying communist history, that the idea is a hindrance rather than a help to understanding China.

The Chinese party has never been strictly synchronized and brought onto a single line. It has always been infected, even thickly riddled, with factions and particularistic interest groups, far more so than its Russian equivalent, though less so in some periods than in others. These groups were based on armies (of which scores and even hundreds flourished in the course of the revolution), formal education, party schooling (including in Moscow), regional provenance, ethnicity, and generation. (Both books note that the "French faction" got Deng out of several scrapes.)

The party's segmenting reflects a broader societal tendency, which in factories, farms, and state institutions used, at least until recently, to take the form of clusters of neo-traditional clientelist networks (replicating old social structures in a modern setting) through which groups and individuals pursue their particular interests.

Without this systemic variance, how to explain the transition from the terror of the Cultural Revolution to the greater freedoms of the Deng years? Without its endemic splits and rivalries, how to explain the leadership's hallmark zigzags and right-left alternation?

The totalitarian idea is incompatible with the reality of a revolution as deep and wide as China's. Pantsov and Levine's treatment of Deng's time as "master of the Taihang Mountains" starting in 1939 provide an example of its limits. "Naturally," they write, "the party continued to run everything" in wartime Taihang. But dozens of studies, in China and the West, show that the party, far from "running everything" in Taihang, released social forces that went beyond its wartime reform program and engaged in land seizure.

As biographies, both books aspire to describe not just Deng's times but the man. Dillon's sketch is relatively charitable. He praises Deng for caring for his wives' graves, whereas Pantsov and Levine blame him for losing his wife's ashes and failing to visit the cemetery.

Both books skip over an even bigger biographic problem, Pantsov and Levine more egregiously than Dillon, concerning Deng's ethnicity. When studying Chinese communism's rural turn after 1927, I often noticed the role ethnic minorities played in it. These included [the Hakkas](#), described by early observers of the "character of Chinese races" as a "distinct and virile strain," latecomers to southern China driven by richer plain-dwellers onto the barren mountains, where they kept their language and were clannish and contentious. Unsurprisingly, they allied with Mao when he climbed up to join them.

Was Deng a Hakka? Many Chinese observers think he was, and Dillon ties this to his role in the

Hakka areas of Guangxi in 1929. Could Deng (from Sichuan) understand Guangxi Hakka? Did Deng's Hakka culture match Guangxi Hakka culture? Could Deng evoke feelings of Hakka solidarity? These are obvious questions of a sort that biographies of important leaders in most countries would be able to answer, but Dillon does not say.

As for Pantsov and Levine, they ignore Deng's Hakka ethnicity altogether and even seem to deny it, implying (in line with their view of Deng as a callow outsider) that the Hakka context baffled him in Guangxi, where he could only mouth hackneyed slogans about universal brotherhood. That they miss this basic fact about Deng, and that Dillon has just two sentences on it, is a measure of how hard it is to write complex studies on Chinese leaders, about whom we often know little more than what state archivists choose to tell us.

As a result, much Chinese communist biography seems flat and shallow. Fortunately, Pantsov and Levine's book is enlivened by quotes from Russian archives. Dillon's is largely based on books and sourcebooks published in China since the 1970s, some of which Pantsov and Levine also used.

Both books read well, though both are bolstered by references to dated secondary studies. Pantsov and Levine's sources include not just *The Tiananmen Papers* but *The Black Book of Communism*, another contentious book that they cite without caveat. The two books approach Deng differently and reach different conclusions. Pantsov and Levine's is passionate and even angry. Dillon's is more measured and constrained, although he shares many of their criticisms.

Was Deng a totalitarian in the Maoist mold, or did he rule to some extent by consent? There can be no doubt that he was the main scourge of liberals and democratic socialists in 1957, and that he orchestrated crackdowns on dissent in the early 1980s and in 1989. He remained a mainstay of party rule until the end, although he usually applied a lighter touch and was rarely a first-mover. He will also be remembered for having paved the way for hundreds of millions of Chinese to escape extreme poverty after Mao's death.

Today, however, young Chinese question not just his denial of democracy but, in the economy, his readiness to allow the growing rift between winners and losers that has led to rule by billionaires —of whom there are [hundreds in the Chinese parliament](#), with a combined wealth equal to the Belgian GDP.

For China's rising generation of critical Marxists, many now in prison for speaking out against capitalism and the government, these two inheritances from the Deng era are inextricably linked — China's massive inequality is the biggest single obstacle to overcoming its democratic deficit, as the rich close ranks and shut down criticism of their wealth.

Gregor Benton

P.S.

• Jacobin, 01.20.2019:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/01/deng-xiaoping-china-mao-communist-party>

• ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregor Benton is emeritus professor of Chinese history at Cardiff University and research associate in diaspora studies, NTU, Singapore.