Introduction: The Man and His Mission

In March 1979 Sir Murray MacLehose, the widely respected Chinese-speaking British governor of Hong Kong, flew to Beijing to explain Hong Kong's problems. Told in advance only that he would meet a high official, MacLehose was delighted to learn after he arrived that he would be meeting Deng Xiaoping, who had just been named China's preeminent leader.[1] During an intimate meeting in the Great Hall of the People, MacLehose told Deng about the growing difficulties confronting Hong Kong. As both men well knew, the British had ruled the colony of Hong Kong since the Opium War, but the lease from China for most of the land that was now part of Hong Kong would expire in 1997. Governor MacLehose was measured and diplomatic as he talked of the need to reassure Hong Kong people deeply worried about what might happen after 1997. Deng listened attentively to Governor MacLehose's concerns and then, as they rose after their talk and moved toward the door, he beckoned to MacLehose. The governor, well over six feet tall, leaned over to hear the words of his five-foot host: "If you think governing Hong Kong is hard, you ought to try governing China."[2]

Deng was acutely aware that China was in a disastrous state. At the beginning of the previous decade, during the Great Leap Forward, more than thirty million people had died. The country was still reeling from the Cultural Revolution in which young people had been mobilized to attack high-level officials and, with Mao's support, push them aside as the country of almost one billion people was plunged into chaos. The average per capita income of Chinese peasants, who made up 80 percent of the population, was then only US$40 per year. The amount of grain produced per person had fallen below what it had been in 1957.

Military officials and revolutionary rebels had been moved in to replace the senior party officials who had been forced out, but they were unprepared and unqualified for the positions they had assumed. The military had become bloated and was neglecting the military tasks, while military officers in civilian jobs were enjoying the perquisites of offices without performing the work. The transportation and communication infrastructure was in disarray. The bigger factories were still operating with technology imported from the Soviet Union in the 1950s, and the equipment was in a state of disrepair.

Universities had been basically closed down for almost a decade. Educated youth had been forcibly sent to the countryside and it was becoming harder to make them stay. Yet in the cities there were no jobs for them, nor for the tens of millions of peasants wanting to migrate there. Further, the people who were already living in the cities, fearing for their jobs, were not ready to welcome newcomers.

Some officials were bold enough to suggest that the real cause of the problems China was facing was Mao Zedong himself, but Deng believed that a single person should not be held responsible for the failures of the previous two decades. "We are all to blame," he said. Mao had made huge mistakes, certainly, but in Deng's view the larger problem was the faulty system that had given rise to those mistakes. The effort to gain control of the political system down to the household had overreached, creating fear and lack of initiative. The effort to gain control of the economic system had also overreached, causing rigidities that stymied dynamism. How could China's leaders loosen things up while keeping the country stable?

For more than a decade before the Cultural Revolution, no one had greater responsibility for building and administering the old system than Deng Xiaoping. During his three and a half years in the countryside from 1969 to 1973, no one who had held high positions had thought more deeply about what went wrong with China's old system and what needed to be done than Deng Xiaoping.

In 1978, Deng did not have a clear blueprint about how to bring wealth to the people and power to the country; instead, as he confessed, repeating a widely used saying—he "groped for the stepping stones as he crossed the river."[3] But he did have a framework for thinking about how to proceed.

He would open the country wide to science, technology, and management systems, and to new ideas from anywhere in the world, regardless of the country's political system. He was aware that the new dynamos of Asia—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore—were growing faster than

any countries ever had. But Deng realized he could not simply import an entire system from abroad, for no alien system could fit the unique needs of China—which had a rich cultural heritage but was also huge, diverse, and poor. He realized what some free-market economists did not, that one could not solve problems simply by opening markets; one had to build institutions gradually. He would encourage other officials to expand their horizons, to go everywhere to learn what brings success, to bring back promising technology and management practices, and to experiment to see what would work at home. He would help pave the way by developing good relations with other countries so they would be receptive to working with China.

To provide order during this rebuilding, he believed there was only one organization that could manage the process—the Communist Party. The most experienced leaders available in China in 1978 were the party leaders who had risen to levels of responsibility in the 1950s and early 1960s. They needed to be brought back and young people had to be trained overseas and bring back the best ideas, the best science, the best technology, from anywhere. Bringing in new ways would be terribly disruptive. Even the Communist Party would have to change fundamentally its goals and its methods of operation.

As the paramount leader, Deng did not see his role as coming up with new ideas. He saw his job as managing the disruptive process of devising and implementing a new system. He would have the ultimate responsibility and he needed to make sound judgment calls. He would need to select a core of coworkers who could share responsibility for guiding the system and he would have to set up quickly an organization so they could work together effectively. He needed the best information he could get about what was actually going on in the country and what was happening abroad. He needed to provide hope without raising expectations that were unrealistic, as Mao had done in 1958. He would have to explain the situation to his officials and to the public and pace the changes so that people could accept them and the country would not split apart. Although he had considerable power, he knew he had to be sensitive to the political atmosphere among his colleagues if they were to implement what he directed. He needed to allow a measure of stability in employment and daily life even as the system underwent fundamental changes. In short, Deng faced a tall order, and an unprecedented one: at the time, no other Communist country had succeeded in reforming its economic system and bringing sustained rapid growth, let alone one with one billion people in a state of disorder.

The Man: Deng Xiaoping

Despite Deng's diminutive stature, once he became the preeminent leader, when he appeared in a room he had a commanding presence that made him a natural center of attention. More than one observer commented that it was as if the electricity in the room flowed to him. He had the concentrated intensity of someone determined to resolve important matters. He possessed the natural poise of a former wartime military commander as well as the self-assurance that came from half a century of dealing with life-and-death issues near the center of power. Having faced ups and downs, and been given time to recover with support from his wife, children, and close colleagues, he had become comfortable with who he was. When he did not know something, he readily admitted it. President Jimmy Carter commented that Deng, unlike Soviet leaders, had an inner confidence that allowed one to get directly into substantive issues. He did not dwell on what might have been or who was at fault for past errors; as in bridge, which he played regularly, he was ready to play the hand he was dealt. He could recognize and accept power realities and operate within the boundaries of what seemed possible. Once Mao was no longer alive to look over his shoulder, Deng was sufficiently sure of himself and his authority that with guests he could be relaxed, spontaneous, direct, witty, and disarmingly frank. At a state banquet in Washington in January 1979, when told by Shirley MacLaine about a Chinese intellectual who was so grateful for what he had learned about life after being sent to the countryside to raise tomatoes during the Cultural Revolution, Deng's patience was soon exhausted. He interrupted her to say, "He was lying" and went on to tell her how horrible the Cultural Revolution had been.

For someone who turned seventy-four in 1978, Deng was still vigorous and alert. He still took his morning break with a fast-paced half-hour walk around the garden of his home where he also kept his office. Many Chinese leaders, when seated next to their guest in comfortable chairs that were placed aside each other, would look straight ahead when they talked, but Deng liked to turn and look directly at the person he was talking with. He had an inquisitive mind and was a good listener. When he objected to the policies of foreign nations, foreign officials described him as feisty and "tough as nails." Having observed nations pursuing their self-interest through imperialism, colonialism, and the use of military force abroad, Deng was never naïve about what to expect from foreign leaders professing goodwill. But even when they did not like what he had to say, foreign visitors, from different social positions and different parties, from large countries and small, ended up feeling

comfortable with him. They felt he was someone with whom they could do business.

Some Westerners were so impressed with Deng's directness and pragmatism that they mistakenly thought he was a capitalist at heart and that he would lead China toward a Western-style democracy. He was always ready to learn, but in the end he believed he knew better than they what was good for China and it was not capitalism and Western-style democracy.

By 1978, Deng was hard of hearing in his right ear, and it was awkward for him to take part in group meetings where various people expressed their views. He much preferred to read papers, and he spent every morning sitting by himself reading reports; his office director each day brought him fifteen newspapers and all the important reports; Deng would choose which ones to spend time on. In some ways it was easier for him to meet foreigners, for the interpreter could speak directly in his good left ear, making it natural as he exchanged views with his guests. Deng spoke Mandarin with a strong Sichuanese accent, but it was intelligible to other Mandarin speakers and did not slow him down. The responsibilities Deng faced were daunting, but it is difficult to imagine how anyone could have been much better prepared for the tasks or better suited for them by temperament and habit.

Deng had an instinctive patriotism and commitment to the Communist Party that inspired the confidence of his fellow officials. The patriotism that underlay Deng's lifelong activism had jelled at age fourteen, just when popular nationalism took hold in the country, as he took to the streets of Guang'an county where he was attending middle school. Five years later in France, disappointed with the dirty and difficult factory work assigned to Chinese and the withdrawal of the promise of opportunities to study, Deng joined the French branch of the Chinese Communist Party. He would remain a committed Communist until his death more than seven decades later.

From his five years in France and one year in the Soviet Union, Deng acquired a far better understanding of developments around the world and far more perspective on China than Mao had garnered. Deng had a chance to see industry and commerce in a modern country, and his year in the Soviet Union gave him a chance to see how the first Communist country had tackled modernization.

Already while in France, Deng had an opportunity to take part in the small groups of intellectuals considering overall strategy for the Communist youth movement. From that time on, Deng's association with the grand strategists of the Chinese revolution gave him a unique view, from "commanding heights," of how these theories took hold and influenced events on the

ground. In France, Deng quit his factory jobs and did odd jobs around the tiny Chinese Communist Party office led by Zhou Enlai, who was six years older than Deng. Deng, known then as "Dr. Mimeograph" for his role in producing the simple propaganda pamphlets that publicized the leftist cause to Chinese students in France, became in effect an apprentice where he could observe how Zhou Enlai, already a leader among fellow Chinese youth, with experience in Japan and England, went about building an organization. Though one of the youngest in the group, Deng soon was on the executive committee of the Communist youth organization in Europe. At Sun Yat-sen (Zhongshan) University in Moscow where the Soviets were just beginning to train Chinese for the international communist movement, Deng was selected for Group No. 7, in which the highest level of Chinese leaders were trained for the international Communist movement. At Sun Yat-sen University Deng had an opportunity to understand how the Soviets had built their Communist movement and to learn their views on how to build a movement in China.

For his entire career, with brief interruptions, Deng had been close enough to the top seat of power that he could observe from the inside how the top leaders responded to different situations. Not long after he returned to China in 1927, he was again under Zhou Enlai, in the Shanghai underground, as the party tried to devise survival strategies while Chiang Kai-shek, their former colleague, tried to wipe them out. Not only did Deng take part in the planning to create urban insurrections, but at age twenty-five he was sent to Guangxi province to lead urban insurrections. As Mao began to build up the Jiangxi Soviet base, Deng went there where as head of the party in Ruijin county, he learned how Mao was building up his rural base. On the Long March, Deng got to attend the crucial Zunyi conference where Mao began to emerge as leader. Before the Long March had ended Deng had the opportunity to become a confidante of Mao's. Not long after Mao set up his base in northwest China, Mao entrusted Deng with major responsibilities as a political commissar, providing political leadership within the military. Later in the civil war, he was given responsibility for taking over Shanghai and guiding the transition to Communist rule and was then sent to the Southwest where he was given responsibility for leading one of the six major regions of the country.

Above all, it was at the center of power in Beijing, from 1952 to 1966, that Deng had the opportunity to work closely with Mao to consider strategies for China's development and for dealing with foreign countries. Mao had identified Deng as one of his potential successors, and Deng had taken part in

Politburo meetings and after 1956 in its Standing Committee, along with the other five highest-ranking officials in the country. Deng also became a central participant in the planning and creation of a socialist structure that featured agricultural collectivization and nationalization of industry, and played a central role in land reform in the Southwest. In 1959–1961, he had played a major part in guiding the adjustments to the socialist structure after the failures of the Great Leap Forward. In short, Deng in 1978 had half a century of experience in thinking about strategies used by China's top leaders in guiding the country.

Deng was a military leader for twelve years, and even later described himself as a soldier. He was a political commissar rather than a military commander, but he was party secretary and had responsibility for approving military actions. Working closely with a military commander, he fought first in small guerrilla activities, but then in huge battles in the civil war. During the Huai Hai military campaign in late 1948, he ended up as the party secretary of the front command, responsible for coordinating half a million soldiers in one of the largest battles in military history and one of the key turning points in the civil war.

Throughout his career, Deng was responsible for implementation rather than for theory. His responsibilities had grown from leading a small county in the Jiangxi Soviet to leading the work of several counties in the Taihang Mountains as political commissar in World War II, to leading a border area where several provinces intersected after World War II, to leading the entire Southwest after 1949, to leading the country.

In the 1950s, Deng was responsible for guiding the Chinese Communist Party's relations with other Communist parties, at a time when China had few relations with the West. After he was allowed to return from the Cultural Revolution, Deng served as an apprentice to Zhou Enlai as he accepted responsibilities for leading China's work in foreign relations.

Some say Deng had little experience in economic affairs, but economic activities were always an important responsibility of party generalists. Furthermore, from 1953–1954 Deng had served for a year as finance minister at a crucial stage as China was building its socialist economic structure.

An important part of Communist activity was always propaganda. In France, Deng had been responsible for putting out a propaganda bulletin. In the Jiangxi Soviet, after undergoing criticism, he was put in charge of propaganda for the entire soviet area, and on the Long March he again had responsibilities in the area of propaganda. As a political commissar in the military, Deng found that he was most persuasive when he was direct and gave his

troops a broad perspective, connecting their efforts to the overall situation and mission.

In short, Deng had an enormous range of governing experiences at the local, regional, and national levels that he could draw on. For half a century he had been part of the broad strategic thinking of party leaders. He had held high positions in the party, in the government, and in the army. In the 1950s he had taken part in bringing in new industries and new technology from the Soviet Union, just as he would have responsibility for bringing in new industries from the West in the 1980s.

Deng was very bright, always at the top of his class. He was the youngest of eighty-four students to have passed the examinations to be sent from Sichuan to France in 1920. He had been good at one of the main tasks in his early Confucian training, learning to recite long passages of texts by memory. In the underground he had learned not to leave a paper trail, but to keep information in his mind. Deng could deliver well-thought-through and well-organized hour-long lectures without notes. Mao once called him a walking encyclopedia. Before important events, Deng liked to spend time thinking quietly by himself as he considered what to say so that when the time came, he could give clear and decisive presentations.

Deng had been hardened by seeing comrades die in battle and in intra-party purges. He had seen friends become enemies, and enemies become friends. Three times Deng had been purged, in the Jiangxi Soviet, in 1966 in the Cultural Revolution when he was subjected to blistering criticism, and in 1976. Deng had developed a steely determination. He had disciplined himself not to display raw anger and frustration and not to base his decisions on feelings but on careful analysis of what the party and country needed. Mao once described Deng as a needle inside a cotton ball, tough on the inside, soft on the outside, but many of Deng's colleagues rarely sensed a ball of cotton.[4] His colleagues did not believe he was unfair: unlike Chairman Mao, Deng was not vindictive—though when he judged that it was in the interest of the party, he would remove even those who had dedicated themselves to him and his mission.

During difficulties, Deng was sustained partly by the warm and close relations with his wife and family and by a certain inner confidence that came from overcoming past hardships. But until 1976 he was also sustained by a special relationship with the dominant figure of China's revolution, Chairman Mao. Mao destroyed many of his comrades, but he had a special relationship with Deng from the 1930s after Deng's first purge for being a part of

the Mao faction. Mao twice purged Deng, but he never destroyed him. He set him aside for possible use later.

Deng's colleagues understood that he regarded ruling China as serious business, and although he could be witty, with colleagues he was usually formal. He did not take an interest in their personal lives. He was above petty concerns and instead focused on providing the firm leadership that most felt China needed, as well as a sense of direction for their shared cause. He was clear, logical, and predictable. He was known for thinking about the big issues, and for leaving details to others. He was not a micromanager.

With ordinary citizens, however, Deng was far more approachable than the godlike Chairman Mao; people spoke reverently of "Chairman Mao," but they could call Deng by his first name, "Xiaoping." Deng was also relaxed about his vices, of which, he told visitors, he had three—smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and spitting into the spittoon that was placed on the floor beside him. And he enjoyed them all.

Deng was determined to do what was good for the party and the country, not what was good for his friends. After leaving his home at sixteen, Deng never again visited his parents or his hometown. He made it clear that he did not represent one locality, one faction, or one group of friends. His closest colleagues were comrades working for a common cause, not friends whose loyalty extended beyond the needs of the organization. Though he was unusually close to his wife and children, Deng kept to the code of party discipline: he never revealed high-level secrets to his family, even though his wife and four children were all party members. As a disciplined military officer, when given orders, Deng was known for charging boldly ahead, even when he knew that there would be heavy casualties.

Deng was not admired by all Chinese. Some considered him too autocratic, too ready to take charge and to disregard what others had to say. Intellectuals were unhappy with how he cracked down on outspoken people in the anti-rightist campaign of 1957. Some considered him too rash, too ready to charge ahead, too willing to impose discipline. Like any good military officer, he expected his subordinates to carry out orders. And although he welcomed what he considered constructive suggestions to resolve problems, he bristled when foreigners and political dissidents criticized the party. He vividly remembered the chaos of the civil war and the Cultural Revolution and believed that social order in China was fragile; when he judged that it was at risk, he would respond forcefully. As paramount leader, he was also prepared to undertake bold reforms and opening on his own timetable. In short, by

the time he emerged as the preeminent leader, Deng was a disciplined, experienced official determined to serve the needs of his party and his country.

The Mission: Making China Rich and Strong

For almost two centuries before 1978, other leaders of China, like Deng, had been trying to find a way to make China rich and powerful.[5] The imperial system, which had been established at roughly the same time as the Roman Empire, had been extraordinarily successful. With some interruptions and modifications, it had not only enabled Chinese leaders to govern a larger population for a longer time than any other government on earth, but also produced a great civilization. In such a vast country, where it took a month to get from one end of the empire to the other, officials in the capital could not supervise closely how every town and village was implementing national laws and rules. The leaders had developed a remarkable system of selecting able officials by examination, training them, and providing some supervision while giving them great local autonomy.

By the end of the eighteenth century, rapid population growth, the expanded commercial developments in local areas, and the arrival of imperialist Western powers on the China coast were straining the imperial system. By then each of the roughly 1,500 counties had an average population of about 200,000 and was governed by a single small office. New advances in military, communications, manufacturing, and transportation technologies—gunpowder and ships, for example—gave rise to economic development and social forces that the thin layer of bureaucracy could not contain. In earlier centuries, rulers had limited the growth of local economies in an effort to keep them within the bounds of imperial control, but now rulers in Beijing struggled to adapt the imperial system to cope with the changes.

Complicating their efforts was the sheer size of China. At this point, China had the world's largest population, which had doubled in size in the previous two hundred years and was continuing to grow rapidly, and its geographical area had expanded in those years to the west and northeast. Along the coast and even along some of the land borders, the Chinese military could not stop the advance of foreigners, and civilian leaders could not halt the expanded commercial activities.

As the challenges to the system grew more severe, it remained difficult to convince the rulers in Beijing that their system, which had survived for almost two millennia, was under serious threat. Between 1861 and 1875, just at the time when Deng's frugal grandfather was saving to increase the size of

the family's landholdings, a group of officials under the Tongzhi Emperor was working to overcome growing social turmoil. Failing to realize the depth of change required to cope with the new social forces at home and with the foreigners at their gates, they endeavored to keep the past on its throne. While sending troops to quell the rebellions, they sought to reinvigorate the existing institutions—by strengthening the examination system and the teaching of Confucianism, and by spending lavishly on rebuilding the palace.

The Tongzhi Emperor's successors had their faith in the traditional system shaken, above all, by their shocking military defeat at the hands of their small island neighbor, Japan, in the sea battles of 1894–1895. In 1898, with the support of China's twenty-seven-year-old emperor, reform-minded officials rushed to introduce within one hundred days some forty edicts to create a new order. They opened modern schools and universities and prepared to send people abroad to learn modern Western subjects. But whereas the Japanese had spent decades studying the West and crafting their own new systems, China's 1898 reformers had not built a political or institutional base to support reform. The Empress Dowager, threatened by the changes, placed the emperor under house arrest and stopped the reforms. She later abolished the traditional examination system, tried to modernize the military, and prepared to write a new constitution. But she too failed to forge an effective system. Instead of putting money into building naval ships, she built a marble boat and an expensive summer palace. It was not easy to change the complex and intricate imperial system with its established customs and institutions.

By the time Deng Xiaoping was born in 1904, China's last dynasty, the Qing, was already irreparably weakened by its inability to respond effectively to both interior rebellions and intrusions of foreign powers along the coast. In 1911 a small group of rebels in Wuhan who took control of the office of a Qing governor-general and military commander set off a chain reaction, bringing the imperial institutions to an abrupt end. The events of 1911 are called the "1911 Revolution," but it would be more accurate to describe them as a collapse. They were not the result of a well-organized revolutionary force but instead a response to the failure of the imperial system. Several brilliant Qing officials had thoughtfully analyzed the problems China confronted and had made creative proposals, but overall the rulers failed in their mission to adapt the imperial system to meet the challenges.

In 1911 China, unlike Japan which kept the emperor and Great Britain which kept the king, completely abolished the imperial system and created, on paper, a republic. In fact there was no effective governmental structure to replace imperial rule. Instead, after 1911, a series of leaders—Yuan Shikai,

Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and Mao Zedong—all tried to build a new system to make the country rich and powerful.

Yuan Shikai, the most respected military leader at the time of the 1911 revolution, tried to unify the country militarily. But he was unable to win the support of civilian leaders and failed to overcome all the regional military leaders across the country who had taken up arms to bring order to their local areas as the imperial system had weakened.

Sun Yat-sen, who as a schoolboy had spent many years living with an elder brother in Hawaii, became a great publicist and fundraiser, first promoting the revolution and then trying to create a unified government. He has been called the father of the Chinese republic for his initial role in working with Yuan Shikai to establish a government after 1911, but he quickly lost out to Yuan Shikai. When Yuan Shikai's efforts failed, Sun in 1923 set up a government in Guangzhou that he hoped would become a national government. He formed a political party, the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) to provide political leadership, and on paper set up a national government with the outlines of a democratic structure. Sun attracted promising patriotic youth to Guangzhou, including those who later became Communist leaders—Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Ye Jianying, Lin Biao—who were then also members of the Guomindang. Sun helped strengthen the base of popular nationalism, encouraged young people to go abroad to study, and promoted the mass media. But he confronted a chaotic environment and lacked both the organizational skills and the base of support necessary to build an effective political system. He died in 1925 with his dreams unfulfilled.

Chiang Kai-shek, then a young military official trained in Japan, was brought to Guangzhou by Sun Yat-sen to be commander of the newly established Whampoa (Huangpu) Military Academy. There he was to train a new national military officers' corps that would lead the military unification of the country. Chiang inherited Sun's mantle in 1925, but he had difficulties controlling growing rivalries within the Guomindang between the Communists and the right wing of the party. The rivalry grew into enmity, and in April 1927 Chiang moved peremptorily to attack and kill those who would not give up communism and declare allegiance to the Guomindang. Chiang Kai-shek was a general of considerable talent, but to govern he needed to work with the power holders—big businessmen, landlords, and warlords—who had alienated the common people. He became head of the Chinese government with the support of a shaky coalition of warlords, but he lost support as he proved unable to contain the corruption and inflation that wracked

the country. He lost the ensuing civil war to the more unified Communists, who during the anti-Japanese war had built a strong party, army, and base of support by exploiting the fears of city dwellers panicked from rampant inflation and by appealing to the hopes of peasants expecting to receive their own land from redistributed landlord holdings.

Mao Zedong, a charismatic visionary, brilliant strategist, and shrewd but devious political manipulator, led the Communists to victory in the civil war and in 1949 unified the nation and eliminated most of the foreign-held territories. The military forces he had accumulated during the civil war were sufficiently strong that with the Communist Party's organizational discipline and propaganda, he was able to establish in the early 1950s a structure that penetrated far more deeply into the countryside and into urban society than had the imperial system. He built up a unified national governing structure led by the Communist Party and, with Soviet help, began to introduce modern industry. By 1956, with both peace and stability at hand, Mao might have brought wealth and power to China. But instead he plunged the country into an ill-advised utopian debacle that led to massive food shortages and millions of unnatural deaths. In his twenty-seven years of rule, Mao destroyed not only capitalists and landlords, but also intellectuals and many senior officials who had served under him. By the time he died in 1976, the country was in chaos and still mired in poverty.

When Deng ascended to power in 1978, he had many advantages that his predecessors lacked. In the mid-nineteenth century, few people had understood how deeply the new technology and developments along the coast were challenging the Chinese system. In the last years of the empire, the reformers had little idea of the institutional developments required to implement progressive new ideas. At the time of Yuan Shikai and Sun Yat-sen, there was no unified army and no governmental structure capable of uniting contenders for power. And after coming to power, Mao, who had no foreign experience, could not receive help from the West due to the Cold War.

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. Many high officials realized that Mao's system of mass mobilization was not working, that China was lagging far behind the foreign countries in science and technology, and that it needed to learn from the West. 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.

In 1978, because of the Soviet Union's aggressive behavior following the American withdrawal from Vietnam, Western countries were receptive to helping China loosen its ties with the Soviet Union. With the global expansion of trade that followed, China had access to new markets and advanced technologies—Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore—and nearby examples for how latecomers to the international scene could modernize quickly. And unlike the Communist countries of Eastern Europe, China was already completely independent from the Soviet Union, which meant that its leaders were free to make decisions based on what they believed to be China's best interests.

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.

In pursuing this mission, Deng's role changed fundamentally from one period to the next. Before 1949, he was a revolutionary, and after 1949 he became a builder helping to create a socialist state. From 1969 to 1973, during the Cultural Revolution, he used his time while banished to the countryside to reflect on the need for change. Then, during 1974–1975, while Mao was still alive, he was allowed to help bring order to China, thereby laying the groundwork for what he later achieved. When he returned to work in 1977 he became a reformer, first under Hua Guofeng, and after 1978, as preeminent leader.

While hosting a delegation of U.S. university presidents in 1974, Deng said, "I have never attended a university, but I have always considered that since the day I was born, I have been in the university of life. There is no graduation date except when I go to meet God."[6] 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.