

One Modernization Too Few

By Robin Munro . Asian Wall Street Journal ; Victoria, Hong Kong [Victoria, Hong Kong]21 Feb 1997: 10.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

In the violent revolutionary annals of the Chinese Communist Party, no human rights paragons are to be found among those senior leaders who, like Deng Xiaoping, stayed the career distance and died peacefully in their beds. Mao's tireless pursuit of convulsive social transformation required a near-constant supply of scapegoats and enemies: the legions of landlords, rich peasants, collaborators, counterrevolutionaries, revisionists and new-born bourgeois elements who fell victim to the Party's "mass campaigns." For the Great Helmsman's closest lieutenants it was a case of purge or be purged.

But throughout his career, Deng Xiaoping showed little inclination to resist the dictates of Marxist class repression in China -- indeed he became one of the foremost exponents of the art. As party general-secretary during the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957, the former Long Marcher helped preside over the systematic destruction of an entire generation of Chinese intellectuals. More than 200,000 of those who had earlier spoken out in favor of greater democracy and pluralism and demanded controls over the party's unbridled dominance were sacked from their jobs, publicly humiliated, beaten and reviled, then sent off to labor camps to undergo forced re-education, often for as much as the next 20 years.

FULL TEXT

HONG KONG -- In the violent revolutionary annals of the Chinese Communist Party, no human rights paragons are to be found among those senior leaders who, like Deng Xiaoping, stayed the career distance and died peacefully in their beds. Mao's tireless pursuit of convulsive social transformation required a near-constant supply of scapegoats and enemies: the legions of landlords, rich peasants, collaborators, counterrevolutionaries, revisionists and new-born bourgeois elements who fell victim to the Party's "mass campaigns." For the Great Helmsman's closest lieutenants it was a case of purge or be purged.

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Deng's own bitter experiences at the sharp end of the proletarian dictatorship during the Cultural Revolution, and his awareness of the drastic decline suffered by the party's popular prestige in that period, led him to place a strict ban on any further recourse to such mass movements following his return to power in 1978. At the historic Third Plenum of that year he promised the nation a new and less punitive dispensation: a program of gradual economic reform and prosperity together with the implantation of "socialist democracy and rule of law." Substantial progress on the first part of the promise was not, in the event, matched by significant progress on the second.

For Deng remained enthralled by the self-fulfilling prophesy, adopted in his youth, of the Communist Party as sole vehicle for the destiny of modern China, and he continued to brook no tolerance of alternative views seeking to question the predefined contours of that destiny. The first test came quickly, in the form of the uppity poster-writers of Beijing's Democracy Wall movement in 1979. Deng at first seemed to waver, telling a Canadian journalist that the criticisms expressed at the Wall were "a good thing." But this appeal to the voice of the streets lasted only for so long as it served Deng in his struggle against remnant hardline party opponents. When Wei Jingsheng pronounced him to be a "new autocrat," Deng's old instincts swiftly returned and Mr. Wei, together with dozens of other grass-roots critics of the party, were unceremoniously consigned to the Chinese gulag.

Throughout the 1980s, Mr. Wei's seminal notion that democracy and human rights were an indispensable "fifth modernization," continued to loom large in the political background. Successive crackdowns on dissent, notably against the nationwide student protest movement of winter 1986 -- together with a mounting onslaught against "serious criminal elements" from 1983 onwards, in which many thousands were executed and whose undeclared aim was clearly to awe the general populace into continued submission -- all failed to dispel this specter.

And then came Tiananmen. Rightly or wrongly, it is the memory of the June 1989 military repression that will undoubtedly stand in uneasy, accusatory juxtaposition with Deng's record of achievement in the economic sphere -- as the enduring historical epitaph of the diminutive political survivor whom Mao once called "a needle wrapped in cotton." Beyond an initial death toll running into the high hundreds, thousands of pro-democracy activists were hunted down and arrested, often beaten and tortured into making false confessions of criminal involvement in what Deng termed the "counterrevolutionary rebellion." After trials marked mainly by extreme brevity and lack of due process, the detainees were then sentenced to terms ranging from several years to life imprisonment. There was to be no real progress toward a system of rule by law for China during Deng's lifetime.

At the close of his 15-year tenure, China remained a repressive police state, albeit one considerably enlivened by the presence of the "socialist market economy." The task of fostering a truly modern sense of national development -- one acknowledging the value of political pluralism and diversity of views, and therefore one more respectful of human rights and the rule of law -- now falls to Deng's successors. In this context, Wei Jingsheng, released in September 1993 after more than 14 years in prison and then reimprisoned shortly thereafter, may yet turn out to have been the Chinese leader's historical and ideological nemesis.

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DETAILS

Subject:	Economic reform
Business indexing term:	Subject: Economic reform
Publication title:	Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong
Pages:	10

Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	1997
Publication date:	Feb 21, 1997
Publisher:	Dow Jones & Company Inc
Place of publication:	Victoria, Hong Kong
Country of publication:	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
ISSN:	03779920
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	NEWSPAPER
ProQuest document ID:	315630669
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/one-modernization-too-few/docview/315630669/se-2?accountid=8330
Copyright:	Copyright Dow Jones & Company Inc Feb 21, 1997
Last updated:	2020-12-26
Database:	ProQuest One Academic

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