Deng
A Political Biography

By Benjamin Yang

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331 PAGES

"Watch out for that little Man," uttered by Mao about Deng, were hardly the words befitting one of the titans of the twentieth century. Standing in front of the martial law units that had crushed the Tiananmen demonstration, Deng uttered an equally unusual turn of phrase, "What is important is that we should never change China into a closed economy." The death of China's paramount leader of the last two decades on February 19, 1997 brought about an end to Communist China's greatest leader of the twentieth century (notice the qualifications in this statement).

Benjamin Yang's *Deng: A Political Biography* is a scholarly work that traces the life of Deng Xiaoping from his birth in 1904 to his final days. Yang is what we could call more of an insider than most Chinese scholars. One example is his personal relationship with Deng Xiaoping's sons. They were his schoolmates and they served in the same Red Guard unit during the Cultural Revolution. However, as a Western-trained scholar, he bridges the gap between the two worlds. In one of his witty comments in the book that crystallizes the dilemma of researching about China, Yang writes of Chinese historians, "They know what they say is not quite right," and of Western historians, "They don't know what they say is not quite right."

Yang claims to know and to have it right. In fact, much of the book is an attempt to correct past biographies of Deng and past mistakes. This can be quite niggling at times but is probably one of the reasons the book was written. Yang tackles the question of "Why Deng?" by saying that he was an ordinary person who did some extraordinary things.

The use of this book in the classroom would be a double-edged sword. The very fact that it is so richly detailed makes it far too dense for high school and even college students. They would get lost in the names, dates and events that are common to "China hands" but to no one else. Yang makes a comment about this himself where he admonishes those who would ask for an action-packed thriller when he suggests " . . . dropping this unpalatable volume and putting another entertaining kung-fu movie in the VCR." Although the book does an excellent job of Deng's early life in Sichuan, with details like why his name was changed three times, the book fails in one very important aspect: Who is Deng Xiaoping? Yang condemns other writers for going after the events instead of the man, but do we really know any more about Deng's character than we did before? We certainly know more about his decisions, and Yang's main thesis is that Deng Xiaoping was a master politician. The rich information concerning Deng's less than ethical involvement in the Gao-Rao incident, the Hundred Flowers campaign and the Great Leap Forward are rare glimpses into the secrets of the Chinese Communist Party. His material on Deng's lenient exile during the Cultural Revolution showed Deng at his best/worst in his ability to avoid a worse fate. If you can combine Machiavellianism with Daoism, you end up with Deng Xiaoping. We also discover that his twin formula for early success was political pragmatism sans principles and loyalty to Mao. Yang even points out that many would be left to the conclusion that "Deng was a communist politician of maximum intelligence and minimum conscience." However, he then soft-pedals his own statement.

If those chapters that deal with Deng's rise to power are the most satisfying, some of the latter ones are less so. The most unsatisfying one that I had the highest expectations for dealt with the Tiananmen massacre of June 1989. Entitled "Bloodshed at the Gate of Heavenly Peace 1989," it fails to bring anything new to the table about Deng Xiaoping's role or view of the demonstrations, and Yang's contention that he was in full control does not connect well with the chaos from May 20 to June 4 nor remove any aspect of moral responsibility.

Further, there is little in the way of foreign policy and Deng's view of it. There is a limited discussion of Hong Kong, Vietnam, North Korea and a bit more on Taiwan, but little about Deng's view of the United States or anything nearing a view of international relations. The information about Deng's reforms, especially his dramatic 1992 trip to save them, are exceptional and are a must-read for those interested in the "New China."

In fact, by the end of the book one can have great admiration for the scholarly level of information on the Chinese Communist Party and Deng's role, but still be unable to grapple with the personal ideology and character of the man. Then again, perhaps he was the political chameleon whose main interest was China's economic reform and stability. This is why he was such a giant of the twentieth century, for he achieved both. If China under Mao "stood up," China under Deng grew up. This book is useful for those interested in Deng's role in Chinese politics and as a case study in the mastery of politics. Yang is clear that Deng will be remembered as the father of the Chinese economic miracle, but what of China's future? I think Deng's own words would be appropriate: "Any party, any country, or any nation, if its mind is bound by doctrines and superstitions cannot advance, and it will lose its vital life and eventually die away." ■

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