

Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China

BY EZRA VOGEL

CAMBRIDGE, BELKNAP PRESS, 2011

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Reviewed by Edward Friedman



This most important political biography of Deng Xiaoping argues that only Deng's unique leadership strengths made China's extraordinary economic rise possible. Senior scholar Ezra Vogel focuses on the period from 1969 to 1992. During Mao's vigilante violence against and purges of people perceived as disloyal to Mao and his dogmas, a period known as the Cultural Revolution, Deng was sent to a rural factory, supposedly to review his political errors. Instead, Deng, Vogel finds, tried to figure out

where Mao had gone so terribly wrong and what could be done to reverse China's fortunes.

Based on a command of prior scholarship, revealing memoirs, and unique interview access to Deng's family and supporters, Vogel offers a richly detailed and nuanced analysis of Deng's relation to and involvement in intraparty struggles both from 1969 to 1977 and from 1981 to 1989. Vogel teaches many new and crucial things. This work is a major contribution.

Vogel also has much to teach on Deng's central role in Chinese foreign policymaking, offering numerous insights. The chapters on China and Taiwan, the USA, Việt Nam, and Russia are all very good indeed, but the chapter on Japan is absolutely magnificent. Vogel not only depicts how deeply involved the Japanese were in the early years of China's post-Mao economic takeoff, but he also shows how much Deng and his colleagues borrowed their growth policies from Japan and others in East Asia. That is, there is no unique China model.

Vogel's exciting study is very much worth the while of any specialist in Chinese politics. Its 800 or so pages offer vivid and profoundly informed analyses of Chinese policymaking, both domestic and foreign. Grappling with the marvelous material that Vogel has unearthed is imperative for all specialists.

But it is not so clear that this biography is of such value for the educated generalist who is more interested in the larger picture rather than in political particulars. Vogel's omissions and categorizations construct a context that misleads.

One would never know from this biography that Mao's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) copied Stalin's policies and institutions, that Mao was considered China's Stalin, and that Deng was a zealous henchman in Mao's purges, murders, and inhumanities to the point that Deng won the trust of China's Stalin. The author seems not to have probed these institutionalized cruelties in his interviews. Mischaracterizing the system also produces distortions in describing the period after the CCP conquered state power in 1949.

In February 1956, Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, denounced the crimes of the Stalin era in order to help put Soviet Russia on a far less inhuman course than Stalin's. However, Deng, Vogel tells us, concluded only that Khrushchev's attack on Stalin's systemic abuses of fundamental human rights could "weaken the authority of the . . . Communist Party" (39). To Mao, "Khrushchev had savaged Stalin's reputation" (140).

Soon thereafter, as Mao came to stress mobilization of the will instead of incentives and education, Deng's commitment to modernization turned Deng, in the politics of China's Maoists, into China's Khrushchev, someone who might one day choose to criticize Mao's policies of irrational economics, mass murder, and violent vigilantism. Deng might do this in order to legitimate a better economic road ahead for China (193). To hold power in a CCP of Stalinists and Maoists, Deng had to tread carefully so as not to challenge what Vogel euphemistically labels, "the traditional orthodoxy," a phrase that obscures the Stalinism that infused the CCP and its power holders, including Deng (213).

In 1957, when Mao launched a vicious campaign against more liberal Chinese, Deng was put in charge (90). Most of the victims died in labor camps, China's Stalinist gulags. Vogel records that by the 1970s, Deng no longer wanted to destroy educated talent (201). But Vogel does not tell us that Deng, in power after 1977, blocked a blanket forgiveness for these innocent victims of the monstrous Stalinist campaign that Deng himself had led. This dark, defining Stalinist context is not illuminated by Vogel's interview access.

The book offers no evidence of any interest by the author in asking questions that would clarify or add details to an understanding of Deng's role in their cruel Stalinist practices. Vogel's misleading contextualization of Chinese politics cannot convey the continuing Stalinist practices among China's ruling groups; a situation soon infused by chauvinistic hates and thought management intended to get Chinese to believe that only the Stalinist party could save Chinese from foreign forces supposedly out to keep China down, to control China, and to block its return to glory.

Deng's role in the Stalinist system likewise is hidden in discussing the deadly Great Leap Forward policies of 1957–58 that killed at least 35 million Chinese trapped in a system of Stalinist totalitarianism, brilliantly shown in Yang Jisheng's book, *Tombstone*.¹ Vogel simply notes that Deng was an "obedient official" who by 1960 was involved in efforts to save China from "the excesses of the Great Leap" (42). Once again, Vogel seems not to have sought to learn what Deng actually did, this time between 1957–58 and 1960–61, in order to prove himself a zealous Maoist-Stalinist actively promoting murderous policies.

Euphemisms and little interest in Deng's Stalinist deeds obscure how power works in China and where China may be heading. Vogel does not probe the 1977–1981 struggle over Mao's legacy in which liberal reformers hoped to move China out of its Stalinist ways. Vogel merely asserts that Deng was "pragmatic" in siding with those who would "tighten control" to prevent a "breakdown of order" (250). Although Vogel accurately reports that senior liberal intellectual Yu Guangyuan saw Deng's siding with the Stalinist old guard in this initial post-Mao struggle as a key turning point (257), Vogel apparently did not enquire into the causes and consequences of Deng's alliance with the Stalinists, a term Vogel never uses. Instead, for Vogel, Deng merely would not weaken "the party's authority" (260). Such terminology obscures harsh and repressive continuities.

The book suffers similarly in the description of Deng right after he ordered the 1989 slaughter of democracy supporters in Tiananmen Square. From then until Deng reignited growth early in 1992, he had to defeat the economic preferences of Stalinists who saw economic reform as following the path of Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev—the last leader of the USSR—that is undermining the arbitrary monopoly of power held by the single-party dictatorship. However, in politics, Deng embraced Stalinist continuity.

Vogel does not probe how Deng could have won in arguing with CCP anti-Khrushchev Stalinists. In what Deng saw as a great reversal in the USSR, the Communist Party fell because conservative party officials prevented Khrushchev from persevering with his economic reforms. How then did

Deng persuade his allies, senior Stalinists, to allow him to unleash economic reform energies in China as never before seen in a Leninist party dictatorship? Vogel isn't interested. His descriptions of inner-party struggles in the two decisive periods, 1977–1981 and 1989–1992, have none of the rich, new knowledge of Vogel's great research on inner-party struggles from 1981–1989.

In sum, Deng's economic boldness in 1992 changed China and the world, just as Vogel's wonderful book argues. But Vogel misleads readers by not clarifying how much Stalinism and chauvinism were institutionalized in the CCP by Deng's policy choices and allies. Ignoring all this reality, Vogel's vision of China and its future seem overly optimistic. Deng's legacy to the Chinese people and the world may not be as glorious as Vogel suggests, unless Vogel is right that China will do best when a politically disengaged Chinese people happily welcome super-patriotic Stalinists dominating politics. That perception is not a view shared in China by Han victims of land theft, Han workers virtually enslaved in mines, Han people who rage at corruption and polarization, Uighurs, Tibetans, Christians, spiritualists, political reformers, and promoters of human dignity. ■

NOTES

1. Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

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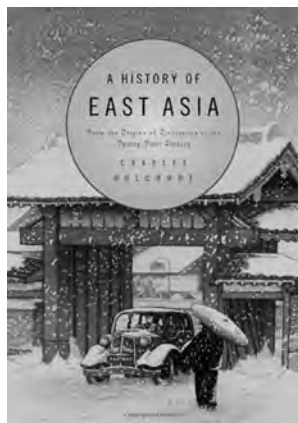
A History of East Asia From the Origins of Civilization to the Twenty-first Century

BY CHARLES HOLCOMBE

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456 PAGES, ISBN 978-0-521-51595-5, HARDBACK; ISBN 978-0-521-73164-5 PAPER

Reviewed by Keith N. Knapp



Charles Holcombe has given instructors of East Asian history courses and world history teachers a welcome gift: his book, *A History of East Asia*. This volume is packed with both information and insights. The author provides interesting facts that will spice up lectures and illuminating statistics that will give students a vivid sense of East Asia's size and progress in relation to the rest of the world. He is particularly adept at showing how interactions between China, Japan, and Korea shaped the East Asian world. The book's primary

limitation is that it is much weaker in describing East Asia's ties with other civilizations.

One of the book's overall aims is to provide an integrated view of East Asian history. On this score, Holcombe admirably succeeds. In his *The*

Genesis of East Asia: 221 B.C.–A.D. 907 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), Holcombe persuasively demonstrates that, during China's early imperial period, East Asia became a coherent region by means of the adoption of the Chinese written script, Chinese government institutions, Confucianism, and Chinese-style Buddhism. In this book, the author uses these insights to create a history of the entire East Asian world from antiquity to the present. The results are stunning.

With the exception of the second chapter, which solely discusses the history of China during its formative period from 1045 BCE to 280 CE, each chapter substantially discusses the history, society, and culture of China, Korea, and Japan. Holcombe particularly highlights the historical interactions between these three countries. He tells us that, during the Tang dynasty (618–907), the Korean kingdom of Silla (?–935) dominated maritime trade in Northeast Asia and that a number of Tang cities had “Sillan wards” or “Sillan villages.” He notes that “Some eighty-eight Sillans are known to have passed the civil service examinations in China during roughly the last century of the Tang dynasty. Several of them served in Tang government offices before returning to Korea, where they became voices for the promotion of Confucian ideals” (113). It is through such concrete information that Holcombe demonstrates how East Asia was interconnected, allowing cultural forms to pass from one country to another.

Instructors will love this book because Holcombe fills the text with a wealth of information and statistics. He assiduously provides beginning dates for phenomenon that we see as characteristic of that culture. For example, in China, the seasonal ancestral rites and worship of Confucius at Confucian temples that are often viewed as hallmarks of Chinese culture only reached their mature form in the Tang dynasty (98). The quintessential Japanese food sushi first appeared in nineteenth-century Tokyo, while the national sport *judo* was only invented at the end of the nineteenth century (8–9). He is particularly good at using statistics to give the reader perspective on the affluence and size of East Asia in relation to the rest of the world. He notes that, in the early 500s, Nanjing was probably the largest city in the world, with a population of 1.4 million (64). The pre-modern porcelain workshops in the Chinese city of Jingdezhen probably employed close to 70,000 workers, making this city the largest industrial complex in the world. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, China exported to Europe alone more than a hundred million pieces of porcelain (192). In the early eighteenth century, Europe's largest city, Paris, had more than half a million people, whereas Edo (Tokyo) had more than a million (185). By the eighteenth century, the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) ruled perhaps as much as 40 percent of the world's population (171). These statistics are a good tonic to Western ethnocentrism and remind us that East Asia's postwar resurgence is not an anomaly but rather a return to a normal state of world affairs. Holcombe also uses statistics to give his reader a concrete look at the sizes and structures of East Asian societies. For instance, he reminds us that, in the tenth century, Japan probably had six million people, but only 20,000 people were fully literate, and the imperial academy only had 400 students (118). He illustrates the growing significance of the Chinese civil service examinations through numbers. In the Tang dynasty, about thirty men per year obtained the coveted *Jinshi* (Presented Scholar). By the Southern Song (1127–1279), four to five hundred did so. By the Ming-Qing (1368–1911) period, at any given time, a million men were engaged in preparing for or taking the examinations, and degree-holders accounted for 1 to 2 percent of the population (131–132). Useful statistics like these make his prose sharp and informative; students are not fed vague pronouncements that merely give them a hazy idea about these societies.

Despite having to paint East Asia in broad strokes to cover all of its history in one volume, Holcombe still finds time to enliven the text by

Deng returned home in 1927 to join the Chinese Revolution on the ground floor. In the fifty years of his tumultuous rise to power, he endured accusations, purges, and even exile before becoming China's preeminent leader from 1978 to 1989 and again in 1992. Perhaps no one in the twentieth century had a greater long-term impact on world history than Deng Xiaoping. And no scholar of contemporary East Asian history and culture is better qualified than Ezra Vogel to disentangle the many contradictions embodied in the life and legacy of China's boldest strategist. Once described by Mao Zedong as a "needle inside a ball of cotton," Deng was the pragmatic yet disciplined driving force behind China's radical transformation in the late twentieth century. CONTINUE READING. View PDF. Ezra Vogel's encyclopedic *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* is the most exhaustive English retelling of Deng's life. Vogel, an emeritus professor at Harvard, seems to have interviewed or found the memoirs of nearly every person who spoke with Deng, and has painstakingly re-created a detailed and intimate chronology of Deng's roller-coaster career. Joshua Kurlantzick, *The Nation*. A virtue of Vogel's book is that it collects and organizes a huge amount of material on the struggles within the elite power circles in China over several decades. In these accounts Deng Xiaoping - the architect of modern China - received both the respect and the criticism that he deserved in Vogel's well-researched book. The author skillfully tied the ups and downs of Deng's personal life with those of the country that Deng so deeply loved and by doing so, crafted a piece of work that is no country underwent greater changes in the second half of the twentieth century than China and no man was more responsible for these changes than the subject of this incredible biography. Even so, his *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, by Ezra Vogel, is a fabulously written biography of one of modern China's most well-regarded politicians. What some consider Ezra Vogel's crowning achievement, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (DXTC), is more a political history of China's opening and reform under Deng's leadership than a biography. As a history of China's transformation, Vogel's account focuses on Deng's involvement in the power struggle over which agenda would emanate from Beijing. Deng eschewed politics of the masses and the revolutionary fervor whipped up by Mao. Those Deng promoted to the upper echelons of the Party - cadres who suffered during the Cultural Revolution - had a natural inclination against Maoist politics. Deng's reforms did not go unchallenged.