Jeremy Brown, original pre-publication draft

Michael Dillon
DENG XIAOPING
The Man who Made Modern China
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Alexander V. Pantsov with Steven I. Levine
DENG XIAOPING
A Revolutionary Life
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Biographers of any of the last four Chinese Communist leaders—Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and current President Xi Jinping—face a considerable challenge: the dullness of their subjects. The problem is that Mao Zedong was far more interesting and colourful than his successors. Mao's personal doctor testified that the dictator's sexual appetites were "enormous". When the doctor suggested that Mao take a bath for once in his life, Mao dismissed the idea, saying "I wash myself inside the bodies of my women". Less stomach-churning—but more directly related to China's modernization—was the way Mao talked about politics, peppered with vulgarities and obscure references to classical Chinese history. Mao consistently forced his confused colleagues to guess about what he wanted; he was never boring.

Deng Xiaoping, who oversaw China's "reform and opening" after Mao's death, was different. Unlike his predecessor, Deng worked mostly during the day and slept at night. Presumably he also took baths. He was terse and spoke simply. Part of the difference between images of dull Deng and colourful Mao is a matter of personality and disposition, but it also has to do with historians' access to sources. Only after the Mao Zedong era ended was it possible for eyewitnesses to reveal what they knew about Mao's dance parties and groin massages by male attendants, and to speak out about devastating famine and widespread persecution.

It seems unlikely that especially revealing stories about Deng will emerge any time soon, because in a sense China is still in the middle of the Deng Xiaoping era. Deng died in 1997 but his framework for China's development—economic growth without political reform—still guides the Communist Party today. Only after China experiences meaningful political reform will the Deng era truly end. At that point the release of ugly (or even humanizing) details about Deng might allow for a complete picture of the second-most important leader of China's difficult twentieth century.

Alexander Pantsov (writing with Steven Levine) and Michael Dillon, the authors of two new biographies of Deng, decided not to wait for regime change in China. They instead make do with the sources they could get their hands on. The unavoidably incomplete results, as well as the sources the authors draw from, are strikingly different. Assessing Deng's life hinges on big questions. What was it about Deng that allowed him to shift course and push China toward a more market-oriented economy? At what point in his life did he become favourably disposed toward private business and trade? To what extent was he at odds with Mao during the worst debacles of the socialist period,

including the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, the Great Leap Famine (1958-1961), and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)? How involved was Deng in the decision to kill civilian protesters in Beijing in June 1989?

Put together, the answers to these questions could depict Deng as a heroic reformer, a dictator bent on persecuting critics and crushing dissent, or place him somewhere in between. Interestingly, Pantsov and Dillon arrive at opposing answers to each question. Where Pantsov is dark and skeptical, Dillon is rosy and apologetic. They nonetheless share the same broad assessment: Deng had significant accomplishments but also made big mistakes. Focusing on how Pantsov and Dillon arrive at divergent answers to specific historical questions is therefore more revealing than looking at their ostensibly shared conclusion.

Alexander Pantsov and Steven Levine's *Deng Xiaoping: A Revolutionary Life* is the more weighty and critical of the two books. Pantsov and Levine previously coauthored *Mao: The Real Story*, which aimed not to praise or to blame but instead to be an "objective" biography based on newly unearthed documents from the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History. In turning their attention to Deng, the authors adopt the same "objective" approach and again play up the uniqueness of their Russian sources.

Achieving scholarly objectivity is impossible, but Pantsov is to be commended for allowing readers to come to their own conclusions about Deng rather than leading with a preconceived agenda. The Russian sources (which I cannot read or judge) strengthen the narrative, especially in detailing Deng's time as a student in Moscow in the 1920s, and even more so in highlighting his fierce sparring with Nikita Khruschev and other Soviet leaders during the early 1960s.

Pantsov and Levine's deep familiarity with Mao, however, is far more central to understanding Deng than their claims about objectivity or their use of Russian sources. Their main argument is that Deng was consistently, enthusiastically, and "slavishly" loyal to Mao. Rather than quietly trying to moderate Mao's more radical policies, Deng bent over backward to do what he thought Mao wanted, exceeding quotas in ordering the killing of "counterrevolutionaries" during the early 1950s and personally directing the persecution of "rightists" later in the decade.

For Pantsov and Levine, it did not matter much what Deng himself thought about private trade and business. As long as Mao was alive, Deng had to remain subservient to his boss's focus on class struggle and the command economy. Deng might have liked the relatively open and decentralized New Economic Policy (NEP) that he saw in action in Moscow during the 1920s. And in 1962, Deng did endorse private household agriculture as a way to recover from the Great Leap Famine, famously saying: "It doesn't matter if the cat is black or yellow, as long as it can catch mice it is a good cat".

Five years later, propagandists criticized Deng for allegedly advocating capitalism, revising the axiom and turning the "yellow" cat "white". But Deng, even during his exile to a tractor repair station during the Cultural Revolution, groveled and abased himself in written self-criticisms addressed to Mao. As long as Mao was alive, Deng was a committed Maoist.

Deng was eventually able to implement NEP-inspired reforms in China. But according to Pantsov and Levine, Deng, for whom "such fundamental virtues as human dignity, pride, and principle meant nothing", had "become as capricious and intolerant as Mao" by the 1980s. The authors also argue that Deng was ultimately responsible for

the violent crackdown against student demonstrations in 1989. Even though Pantsov and Levine's purportedly "objective" account of Deng's life mentions that he had a lot to do with China's impressive economic growth since the 1980s, the overall picture is convincingly negative.

To their credit, Pantsov and Levine mined Russian archives for fresh material and quote heavily from Deng's daughter's memoir to add telling details. (Deng could be friendly and talkative when playing bridge with old comrades, but at home he spent hours sitting quietly, declining to speak with his family members.) In contrast, Michael Dillon's biography of Deng—half the length of Pantsov and Levine's—relies primarily on official Chinese chronologies of Deng's work activities. These sources aim to prove Deng's wisdom and cover up his faults. They anachronistically look under every rock that Deng Xiaoping set foot on for the roots of China's economic reforms, strain unconvincingly to show that Deng secretly disagreed with and tried to undermine Mao, and present tedious accounts and attendance lists of Communist Party meetings.

Although Dillon claims that his goal is to avoid hagiography and demonology in equal measures, he reproduces the shortcomings of his sources. His book is therefore more of a reference work than it is a historical biography: it provides a condensed English-language summary of Deng's official activities and shows readers how Communist Party scholars have attempted to hide Deng's warts and burnish his legacy. On one page about Deng's leadership of the Taihang revolutionary base area during the early 1940s, Dillon blithely and repetitively writes that "Deng had taken the lead in...implementing a formula for appointing government officials", "Deng faithfully implemented central policy", and "Deng was the good soldier". Readers have no way of assessing these statements because Dillon provides no evidence to support them—no footnotes, no sources. More important, the only reason Dillon seems to be writing about Deng's allegedly excellent leadership is that he does not want to omit details that official Communist Party chroniclers have deemed significant. Rather than choosing an analytical framework for himself or deciding for himself what merits mention, Dillon accepts what the censors have given him, which results in such plodding section titles as the back-to-back "Reviving the National Economy", "Restructuring the Railways", and "Iron and Steel".

There is a place for encyclopedias in any library. The more serious problem with Dillon's book is not that it is encyclopedic but that it contains major inaccuracies and mischaracterizations, all of which make Deng look better than he deserves. In a 2011 article in *China Quarterly*, Taiwan-based scholar Yen-lin Cheng convincingly argues that Deng played a leading role in persecuting and punishing people labeled as "rightists" in 1957. But Dillon asserts that Deng's strategy during the Anti-Rightist Campaign was to "acquiesce in Mao's rhetoric while trying to put in place practical policies and procedures that mitigated its effects". Not surprisingly, Dillon is unable to mention any specific mitigating factors because none existed. Nor does Dillon cite any evidence in support of Deng's purported moderation. As Cheng as shown, Deng himself oversaw the day-to-day details of labeling and punishing "rightists", and he gained political capital in the process.

On this and many other key points, Dillon is led astray by his sources. Deng oversaw the Communist occupation of southwest China in 1950, which led to widespread uprisings against the People's Liberation Army. Dillon celebrates Deng's firmness in ensuring that the Communists met their grain collection targets, ignoring

critical, evidence-based scholarship that links anti-Communist resistance to predatory double-taxation and terroristic executions, both of which Deng endorsed. Dillon also erroneously asserts that Deng had been planning a market-based economic reform programme since the 1950s, implausibly claims that Deng was not a dictator during the 1980s, and shifts blame for the Beijing massacre of 1989 away from Deng, who was allegedly "manipulated" by his younger colleagues.

To learn which meetings and conferences Deng attended and to see the official Communist line about Deng in English, read Dillon. For a critical, evidence-based biography, turn to Pantsov and Levine. But even Pantsov and Levine tacitly admit that their account will not be the last word. Instead of investigating a claim that Deng impregnated a nurse after he was hospitalized for a broken leg (he apparently slipped while playing billiards), they throw up their hands, asking "who knows" whether Deng had an affair. Pantsov and Levine again ask "who knows" whether Deng's family members have illicitly enriched themselves since the 1980s.

Someone knows. Somewhere, either in writing or stored away in a witness's memory, lie the details about how Deng became the first leader in world history to break a bone in a billiards accident (was he drunk?), whether the nurse was indeed forced to have an abortion (as Mao's doctor claims), and what standard Deng held his family to as other Communist leaders throughout China used their official positions for personal gain. After the Deng era ends, the answers to these and many other important questions will become easier to unearth.