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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### REVIEW ESSAY

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#### ***Of Leaders and Governance: How the Chinese Dragon Got Its Scales***

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Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, 928 pp. \$40 (cloth).

It may be best to begin this big book at the end. To find out what this hefty volume (some 700 pages of text and over 130 pages of appendices and notes) has to offer, the last chapter (chapter 24) serves well. Here Ezra Vogel spells out what his decade-long effort to chronicle the political life of post-Mao China's preeminent leader, Deng Xiaoping, has produced. The book begins with Vogel's promised mission: "I wanted to write a book to help Americans understand key developments in Asia" (xi). Chapter 24 enumerates the help Vogel has to offer his chosen audience, having taken the political career of Deng from the 1970s until his death in 1997 as his window into the transformations of Asia's largest country and now-dominant power.

For Vogel, Deng Xiaoping's life traces the transformation of China from the isolated, troubled, distinctly unprosperous, autarkic state socialist society of the early 1970s to the stable, prosperous, powerful, and influential international actor active in global organizations and financial markets that we see today. The story is not simple, but it is coherent. Vogel is a sociologist and so eschews easy rhetorical moves to reduce these changes to the influence of Deng or any single or few leaders. Vogel acknowledges, and the book details, the impact of numerous other factors: Chinese traditions of statecraft, the scale and diversity of Chinese society, the nature of world institutions across these decades (pointing to the unraveling of Cold War-order binaries), and the openness of the global system to sharing technology and

managements skills (i.e., the emerging neoliberal global market). He also points to the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself and the contributions of numerous active and intelligent Chinese and their ideas (693). Vogel even tips his hat to the work of Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun, acknowledging that Deng Xiaoping did not start the “reform and opening” that began and defines this transformation; his predecessor, the somewhat colorless Hua Guofeng (Mao’s immediate successor in 1976), did. And yet, Vogel believes it is worthwhile to focus on one person because Deng Xiaoping was “the general manager who provided overall leadership” (694).

The term “general manager” gives us entry into Vogel’s purposes and suggests just which Americans he wants to address. The corporate management model is a useful metaphor for Westerners unfamiliar with the management duties of a party leader in China’s authoritarian political system in the post-Mao period, which are something like those of a manager in a large corporation. Once again, Vogel is clear and articulate. Deng as general manager “helped package the ideas” and led his team to get them accepted; he “provided a steady hand at the top” to give people confidence through trying changes; he oversaw the selection and guidance of “the team of colleagues that worked together” to manage this transformation we call reform. Deng was a problem solver who helped forge a robust and capable administration that could implement plans and survive political and popular challenges. He led in setting priorities, but he delegated; he articulated the core ideas, but in a way the general public could appreciate. When controversies arose, Deng managed the process to minimize cleavages. He made sure public promises were realistic and likely to work for enough people to secure ongoing public support. He managed relations with other and competing units (states, but in this description it could easily be “firms”) to protect his own unit and to avoid wasteful conflict and destabilization of the international system. In all, Vogel could be describing the virtues of one of his *keiretsu* (business group) leaders in *Japan as Number One*, his famous study of Japan’s rise, published in 1979.

But I don’t think Vogel is speaking to transnational corporations particularly, beyond the de-Orientalizing familiarity of “general manager” as a corrective to the image of “Communist China’s autocratic leader.” Rather, Vogel is speaking to the political elite of America, circles in which as a Harvard professor and not infrequent adviser to the U.S. government he has traveled for decades (for example, serving on the National Intelligence Council under President Clinton). This is not simply a plan for the prince. Vogel offers this picture of Deng Xiaoping as China’s

general manager after the disorderly reorganization or bankruptcy of the Cultural Revolution as a window to understanding how China came to its current role—and therefore how American (and Western) leaders might most effectively engage this key player in our international lives. However, this also serves as an object lesson more generally for his compatriots in America’s political elite on the virtues of good governance in the twenty-first century. There are shades here of Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit recommendation of Chinese governance to European monarchs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This time, however, the lesson consists of examples of rational management with Chinese characteristics to improve America’s political management, rather than civil service exams and rational political ethics to temper the absolute monarchy.

We see the book’s first, and explicit goal, most clearly in the conclusion, where Vogel highlights the five transformations of the Deng Xiaoping era—all of which counter the popular image of China as dictatorial and dangerous. The first is the transition from a Sinocentric stance in foreign relations to participation in current world organizations as simply a nation-state (albeit a very important one). The second is the movement from a revolutionary party led by an unpredictable charismatic leader and disruptive national campaigns to a ruling party led by teams of party managers in an orderly system of delegation and supervision. The third is the shift from a bureaucracy in which position is determined by revolutionary experience, or “redness” loyalty, to one in which position is determined by merit, particularly civil service exams and performance reviews. The fourth is “the transition from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban society and the spread of a common national culture” during Deng’s general management, which “are among the most fundamental changes that have occurred in Chinese society since the country’s unification in 221 BC” (706). And the fifth is the transformation from state plan economic dysfunction to the “Wild East” market dynamism that Vogel compares favorably to the dynamism, lack of consumer protection, and egregious abuse of labor in America’s Progressive Era a century ago—suggesting a common path and a future of social legislation to parallel those of twentieth-century America. Vogel does not make the mistake of painting China as “more like us” (the trope, and title, of James Fallows’s thoughtful critique of American misunderstandings of Japan in 1990), but he does paint Deng’s China and China today as recognizably human, modern, and intelligent, albeit with very different social and political characteristics that are *unavoidable* due to the structural inheritance and social experience of leaders and populace alike chronicled in the seven hundred pages of detail in this book.

This picture is clear and points to the second, and implicit, goal of the book: Don't try to change China. Don't waste time chiding or denouncing aspects of China you (the American leader to whom this book is addressed) don't like or think voters don't like. Pursue American ideals and interests *pragmatically*, based on an appreciation of the system, its key players, and the history that informs those players' practices and assumptions. This mentality puts Vogel squarely in the camp of John King Fairbank and the pragmatic China policy he first articulated in his long-lived text *The United States and China*, originally published in 1948. Vogel was not Fairbank's student at Harvard, though Fairbank played a role in recruiting Vogel to the study of Asia, both Japan and China. Whether or not Vogel was influenced by Fairbank's pragmatic approach to China (and the two men had their differences over the years), that is the approach he takes. This approach is more likely attributable to the fact that Vogel falls into a broader circle of academics and public intellectuals—the Harvard advisers to American presidential administrations. This calls to mind the truism in intellectual history, nicely articulated by J.C. Levenson in his book *The Mind and Art of Henry Adams* (1957), that “any act of the mind, while it is the responsibility of the individual, is the product of a community.” Vogel's establishment intellectual community is not limited to Harvard professors, of course (one thinks of the political scientists Michel Oksenberg and Kenneth Lieberthal, who most often works at the University of Michigan, and the historian Frederic Wakeman Jr., the senior China scholar at Berkeley from the 1970s—and many more). There has been a circle of American academics in China and Asian studies who have spent some of their professional time advising the U.S. government along the same general lines that Fairbank staked out: international pragmatism informed by cultural knowledge in the service of limited policy goals geared to avoiding war and promoting as much common prosperity as possible. This is part of the long-standing divide in American intellectual and public life between Puritan idealism and business practicality. In Fairbank's day, the anti-Communist purists included George Taylor and Karl Wittfogel, the apostate Marxist, both of whom were fine scholars. Today we confront China-doubter pop books, as well as deeply informed and intelligent critiques of the domestic and international sins of the Chinese state.

While I hardly think Vogel dwells on the lessons of the American Civil War, this pragmatic approach in American public life can be traced to that domestic storm. As Louis Menand so vividly portrays in *The Metaphysical Club* (2001), leading American intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—such as Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and

William James, among others—developed the idea of *pragmatism* out of the ashes of the Civil War. In that conflict they saw an ideology, and a good one that they supported—abolitionism—drive their country and their families and neighbors into a fratricidal slaughter that marked them for life. In the several intellectual careers that Menand chronicles, American pragmatism in general and social science professionalism in particular, with its hallmark toleration of difference and skepticism toward all propositions, developed out of the moral commitment “that ideas should not become ideologies—either justifying the status quo, or dictating some transcendental imperative for renouncing it” (xii). We see this in the historiographical relativism of the “new history” in New York City from the 1910s onward. Charles Beard’s still-eloquent address as president of the American Historical Association in 1933, “Written History as an Act of Faith” (*American Historical Review*, January 1934) confronted the challenge of relativism in words relevant today. Every historian writes by selecting facts according to some frame of reference, says Beard: “This frame of reference includes things deemed necessary, things deemed possible, and things deemed desirable. It may be large, informed by deep knowledge, and illuminated by wide experience; or it may be small, uninformed, and unilluminated” (227). In short, this pragmatic tradition holds that ideas are social, reasonable people disagree, and human solutions have to be hammered out socially, reasonably, and pragmatically. The struggle against Fascism and the Cold War gave pride of place to the idealist and Puritan stream in American thought, and from the birth of the Cold War Fairbank was part of the response of the pragmatic stream. The long-standing debate between idealism and pragmatism in American intellectual life is unlikely to be resolved in our generation.

This broader context offers some perspective on two of the most critical reviews of Vogel’s book. In the *New York Review of Books* earlier this year, Fang Lizhi, China’s most noted democratic dissident from the 1980s, and especially from the traumatic Tiananmen protests and repression in 1989, takes Vogel to task for not once mentioning “human rights” in a biography of the Chinese leader who suppressed the “Democracy Wall” in 1979 and called in the tanks in 1989, not to mention whose longer career involved leadership in the brutal Anti-Rightist campaigns of 1957 to 1959 [<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/nov/10/real-deng/?pagination=false>]. From another tack, Perry Anderson, editor of the *New Left Review*, goes after Vogel as a co-opted functionary of the U.S. government—an intellectual “organic to the establishment,” we could say in Gramscian terms. In Anderson’s review in the

*London Review of Books*, this biography amounts to “a special kind of apologia, where the standard of merit is less Deng’s record as a politician in China than his contribution to peace of mind in America” [<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n03/perry-anderson/sino-american>].

Substantively, both Fang and Anderson have a point: Vogel does not mention human rights, and while he acknowledges Deng’s participation in hard political repression, he neither dwells on it nor passes moral judgment (beyond noting his personal repugnance to such violence, but only as a personal statement and not, as Fang is demanding, as a core variable in political judgment and therefore of policy). Instead, Vogel tends to note the historical reasons why Deng would not appreciate public criticism (shades of Red Guard “mass criticism” in the Cultural Revolution) and reminds readers of the historical reasons for Deng’s commitments—to a political party that Deng believed could best deliver a better life to most Chinese. Anderson is right that Vogel’s purposes are more pragmatic than historiographical. Anderson’s critique of Vogel’s focus on his American audience brings to mind Richard Madsen’s seminal analysis of this broader issue in American China studies: *China and the American Dream* (1995). Madsen, also a sociologist, reviews the history of China studies from the late 1950s and concludes that much of our work on China is really part of a conversation about the nature of democracy in America, particularly the enduring tension between the goals of community life and individual freedoms. The “heat” in our academic and public debates on China comes from these underlying concerns. From Madsen’s analysis, we can see that Vogel is very much a participant in this Janus-faced conversation, but Perry Anderson is too. I think Perry Anderson would agree that he is an intellectual organic to the progressive movement.

Thus we can accept that Vogel tells a story that makes sense to his community, as in fact we all do. Vogel’s community of pragmatic political advisers in what might be called the current establishment all love it—from those at *The Economist* [<http://www.economist.com/node/21533354>] to most major newspaper reviewers. Those who are committed to keeping human rights front and center in policy debates, and those who doubt the felicity of serving as advisers to the United States or other nation-states that support the current neoliberal order, or who fail to see the practicality of turning a blind eye to the abuses of the system Deng Xiaoping managed, do not love it.

That Vogel, a sociologist, has chosen political biography, and with such a keen eye to contextual detail, changing contexts, a sea of personalities and contingent events—the stuff of

historical studies—is itself an interesting choice. But it is not a choice alien to American political advice. Examples, more than theories, have served to guide leaders in American politics. Vogel is quite right to eschew academic theory and tell a compelling story when trying to influence a secretary of state (current or future).

China scholars should not dismiss Vogel’s book, or any, for having an audience and a pragmatic goal that we might find uncongenial. Rather, it seems fair to judge the book on its advertised contribution. Vogel sets out to explain China’s transformation through a political biography of Deng. Does he do it well?

What historians as teachers or as an individual scholars can do to answer this question for themselves is to engage this debate and see how Vogel does. A practical classroom version of this for undergraduates could begin with Vogel’s chapter 24, read against Fang’s and Anderson’s reviews. I would also recommend the “correct [historiographical] thought” of comrade Charles Beard to guide our thinking (my undergraduates enjoy engaging his plain-English lecture on these fundamental epistemological issues). The tension between idealism and pragmatism, as I have suggested, is long-standing in the intellectual lineage from which Vogel hails. I do not think such a comparison will lead to bland even-handedness. For example, Vogel’s description of the leadership system of the CCP under Deng Xiaoping as characterized by “teams of colleagues who worked together” is hardly an adequate characterization of the often brutal political competition and rough justice meted out by such collective leadership at each level of government in China, past or present, and is belied by the detail of political infighting and maneuvering recounted in the body of the book. Indeed, my reading of this assignment leads me to conclude that Vogel’s lessons on leadership are sound, but their accuracy in describing Deng’s behavior, or that of his senior colleagues or of the system he helped revive, is another matter—to be judged on a case-by-case basis. This points to the second half of any critical engagement.

Starting from bite-sized examples, the critical reader will have to dig deeper, but with a question in mind. In my case, I found myself going back to chapter 13, “Deng’s Art of Governing,” which is much more grounded in Deng’s context and describes virtues considerably at variance with chapter 24’s general conclusions. In chapter 13, Deng is presented not as “general manager” but as “commanding general,” with virtues such as “speak and act with authority,” “defend the Party,” “keep a firm grip on the military,” and “avoid taking blame,” as well as several good management skills (377, 385–93). Further reflections (or class discussion)



might lead to the reasonable assessment that the two chapters address different scales: chapter 13 seeks to describe the case of Deng's leadership from 1978 to 1989 as he was leading major changes in the face of considerable resistance, while chapter 24 is an attempt to distill useful lessons in general and shape the image of China in the American mind—*not* to explain one period in Deng's life. A difference between the body and the conclusion of a work.

Paying attention to Vogel's goals in writing this book also alerts us what *not* to expect, since we will not get it. First, Vogel does not set out to judge the costs of Deng Xiaoping's years at the helm. His implied recommendation of Deng's generalizable skills as "general manager" summarized in chapter 24 do not include any endorsement of his political system or legal regime, or of the hard-line aspects of Deng's leadership style in the 1980s reviewed in chapter 13. Indeed, in admittedly muted tones, Vogel makes clear that he neither prefers nor admires the harsh politics of Deng's world. What Vogel does suggest is that those politics are a given and need to be understood in order to interact effectively with Deng's China and that of his successors. Second, Vogel does not give us a biography in the usual sense of the origins, development, and "life and times" of a whole life. While Vogel maintains that it was at the behest of his publisher that Deng's life from 1904 to 1969 is consigned to a single "background" chapter, the choice is emblematic of Vogel's project: what you need to know to understand this general manager and the "corporation" he led starting in the mid-1970s.

I was invited to reflect in this review on the broader context of the book and of Vogel's scholarly career, but to conclude without acknowledging the quality of scholarship and the value of the book to those of us not interested in advising the U.S. government would be remiss. Vogel has attacked his chosen task with impeccable scholarship in blessedly clear and straightforward prose. The bulk of the book is a highly readable account of the high politics *and* the implementation of reforms that changed China over these years. A highly touted tome on a top Chinese leader brings to mind, of course, the sensation around Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's *Mao: The Untold Story* in 2006. The contrast with Vogel's book is telling. Most simply, Chang and Halliday hate their subject; Vogel rather respects his. Unlike Chang and Halliday's effort, however, Vogel's scholarly apparatus is not fundamentally flawed, and his propositions, while subject to criticism and debate as we have seen, are not outrageous or unsupported. (The scholarly criticisms of Chang and Halliday's book are legion, and many are collected in Gregor Benton and Lin Chun's edited collection, published in 2010, *Was Mao Really a Monster?*) It is

no surprise that Vogel, coming out of Harvard with a distinguished scholarly career researching and writing about Japan as well as China [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ezra\\_Vogel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ezra_Vogel)], has followed the best of scholarly practices in this book. His preface outlines the scholarly literature in generous tones and efficiently informs the reader of the range and variety of his sources, supplementing a clear bibliography and helpful notes and citations that appear in the usual academic manner throughout the text. A mark of the long-standing value of this book is that one can read the body of the book without concern for the intellectual lineage I have reviewed and still learn a great deal of reliable information about Deng and his times from the late 1960s. That Vogel has garnered the services of the redoubtable professor Warren Sun is a further comfort to specialists, as there is hardly a soul in the business of research on this history today better equipped than Warren Sun to get the facts right. Of course, we cannot know to what degree Vogel followed whatever advice or corrections Sun may have offered, but we have no reason to think Vogel would have ignored his substantive concerns. Thus, while China scholars more interested in China than American policy will want to consult other accounts for a comprehensive view of the period or a full picture of Deng's life from the early twentieth century, we can use the details presented in Vogel's account with considerable confidence. Given the concerns of some reviews that Vogel "goes easy on Deng" (and I am inclined to agree), it is reassuring to see in the body of the book that Vogel does not go easy on the system and the political intrigue in China over these years. One does not have to read the angry denunciations of Chang and Halliday to see how bad things were (for politically active people) in Mao's later years. The early chapters of Deng's "tortuous road" back from political oblivion in the early 1970s give a chilling picture of Mao's heartless ways.

We all write with our particular purposes and perspectives, and if we are eloquent we might hope to be persuasive. However, scholarship is designed to temper our motivations so that we may deliver something of use to others beyond our parochial concerns. Vogel's long study of Deng Xiaoping succeeds in both respects.

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