

# China's new personality cult surrounding Deng Xiaoping

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One of the achievements for which the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping is officially praised is his abolition in the late 1970s of the “personality cult” surrounding his predecessor Mao Zedong. Deng’s “reform” was part of the wholesale turn to the capitalist market that transformed the country into a giant cheap labour platform for foreign investment in the 1980s and 1990s.

A new cult is in the making, however. The 100th anniversary of the birth of Deng was celebrated in grand style in Beijing’s Great Hall of the People on August 22. Those present included President Hu Jintao, eight other members of the Politburo Standing Committee, former president Jiang Zemin and other retired Stalinist leaders; all of whom hailed Deng, who died in 1997, in an effusive manner.

The elevation of Deng as a “great visionary” is completely bound up with his open promotion of private property and the capitalist market. The assembled Stalinist bureaucrats displayed a genuine enthusiasm for Deng’s legacy that sanctioned the emergence of a small, wealthy elite, which has accumulated vast fortunes over the last two decades, often through the plunder of state enterprises.

Beijing unleashed a tidal wave of media glorification to coincide with Deng’s birthday anniversary. Countless books, poems, paintings, plays, dance performances, television programs, forums and academic meetings were held throughout the country to commemorate this “giant of the century”.

A copper statue of Deng was erected in his hometown in Sichuan Province and unveiled at a ceremony led by Hu and Jiang on August 13. In Shenzhen, southern China’s “special economic zone” and home to one of the world’s largest collection of sweatshops, 200 pianists were mobilised—reportedly a world record—to play a composition written in praise of Deng.

An editorial in the official *People’s Daily* gave the flavour of the new personality cult surrounding Deng. “Comrade Deng Xiaoping is publicly recognised as an outstanding leader by the entire party, army, nation and people of all ethnic backgrounds,” it enthused. “A great Marxist, great proletarian revolutionary, politician, military strategist and diplomat, the general architect of China’s socialist reform, opening up and modernisation, the founder of Deng Xiaoping Theory, he is highly regarded in the party, in the country and internationally ...

“He has contributed his whole life and energy for the cause of

Chinese people and have made unforgettable historic achievement for the enterprises of China’s revolution, construction and reform. ‘Not forgetting Mao Zedong for liberation, not forgetting Deng Xiaoping for getting rich,’ this is from the heart of the Chinese people,” the newspaper continued.

Deng was not a Marxist nor a revolutionary, politician and military strategist of any note but a Stalinist bureaucrat whose main achievement was to abolish the limited social reforms ushered in by Mao and to open the door for foreign investors. Even those steps required no great insight. Rather the economic measures inaugurated by Deng flowed directly from Mao’s bankrupt nationalist program and a revolution that was neither socialist nor proletarian.

Deng’s “theoretical contribution” is best summed up in his well-known exhortation: “To get rich is glorious”. His policies were not a radical break from Maoism, but a logical extension of the Stalinist “two stage theory”. Whereas Mao put off socialism for decades, Deng insisted that at least a hundred years, or even centuries, of capitalist development was needed before there could be any talk of socialism in backward China. Mao’s failure, Deng told the party, was that he attempted to jump over the necessary stage of capitalism and the market.

Deng simply accelerated the opening up of the Chinese economy to foreign investment, which had already begun in the 1970s under Mao following Beijing’s rapprochement with Washington. His open embrace of the market was bound up with the international turn to globalised production that was undermining the previous policies of national economic regulation and import substitution that had prevailed not only in China, but in other so-called Third World countries like India. Deng dismantled the previous central planning mechanisms, de-collectivised agriculture and sold off or shut down nationalised enterprises and encouraged the leadership to “jump into the sea” of business.

Many bureaucrats or their sons and daughters took Deng’s advice and amassed enormous wealth. At the same time, social tensions sharpened amid rising levels of poverty and unemployment. Under Deng, all the social evils of “Old China” re-emerged: child labour, prostitution, drug abuse, gangsterism, official corruption, overtaxed farmers and cheap labour sweatshops. In response to growing social instability, the regime sought to establish a social base among the emerging middle class while not hesitating to unleash police state repression.

In 1989, the Beijing bureaucracy initially responded to student

protests with pledges of political reform. But as the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square began to encompass workers and the urban poor, Deng branded the movement as “counterrevolutionary” and ordered the army to ruthlessly crush it, killing hundreds, if not thousands of people, on June 4, 1989. Jiang Zemin was elevated following the bloodbath, instituted a heavy-handed ideological campaign against “bourgeois liberalisation” and imposed tight social control. The massacre signalled to global capital that Beijing would use any means to suppress opposition and was followed by a flood of foreign investment into China.

The current attempt to build a new personality cult around Deng stems from the fact that the explosive social and political tensions exposed in 1989 have not diminished but intensified. The transformation of China in the 1990s into the “workshop of the world”, as it is described in international financial circles, has produced ever-greater dislocation for tens of millions of workers and peasants. Protests, petitions and other signs of unrest are flourishing despite ruthless suppression.

A sharp factional battle has opened up in the Beijing bureaucracy over how to deal with this political instability. Jiang Zemin and his supporters insist there can be no departure from the regime’s police state measures. Those around Hu Jintao, who was installed as president last year, have revived discussion of “political reform”. They argue that repression alone is creating a social time bomb and say that limited democratic and even social concessions are needed to defuse social tensions.

None of the issues can be discussed openly for fear of opening up a broad public debate. Each faction is seeking to claim the legacy of Deng as it manoeuvres in grubby bureaucratic infighting to defeat its opponents. All of this was on display at the ceremony in Beijing to commemorate Deng’s birthday.

President Hu, also the general secretary of the Communist Party, delivered a lengthy speech stressing that Deng’s great contribution to China was the abolition of “lifelong tenure for officials and leaders, in which he set a personal example.” While he maintained Deng’s crackdown on “political turmoil” in 1989 was correct, Hu stressed the importance of Deng’s liberal conceptions of “collective leadership” or “democracy”.

The thrust of Hu’s speech was not hard to decipher. Even though Hu has taken over as president, Jiang Zemin has retained the powerful post of chairman of the Central Military Commission. Deng did the same in the 1980s, holding onto the same position until 1989 before relinquishing it to Jiang. Hu’s message to Jiang is to follow Deng’s “personal example” and step aside.

To reinforce the message, Deng Lin—Deng’s eldest daughter—who rarely makes political statements appeared on Central Television in early August. When her father handed over his work, she said, “he put his trust in his successors and let them mature on the job. He believed they would not make progress if he meddled.” She then added that “abolishing lifelong tenure for cadres and beginning to establish a democracy in China, a country that has never had a democratic tradition, was the greatest contribution that Deng Xiaoping made to China in 20th century.”

Senior party leaders have also expressed their support for Hu. Zhou Ruijin, a former editor of the *People’s Daily*, wrote in a recent issue of the Shanghai-based weekly the *Bund*: “Compared

to economic reform, our political system lags far behind. Now the calls for political reform from every quarter of society are very loud.” Two Deng-era officials, Tian Jiuyan, a former Politburo member and Ren Zhongyi, former Guangdong party boss, wrote essays in the August issue of the political journal *Yanhang Chunqiu* hailing Deng as the pioneer of “political reform” even though he was unable to carry it out. “A society ruled by guns and hack writers can never be a democratic one, and it cannot enjoy lasting stability,” Ren wrote.

The supporters of Jiang have responded by pointing to Deng’s decision to unleash the army on the Tiananmen Square protest as justification for their policies. Having come to power in the wake of the massacre, they have long rejected any liberalisation, however limited. Well aware that their factional opponents have no intention of enacting genuine democratic rights, they argue that any concessions will only lead to a snowballing of demands and end in turmoil, as happened in 1989.

The *People’s Liberation Army Daily* emphasised on July 27 that troops must be made aware of “the political conspiracy of ‘westernisation’ and ‘differentiation’ from western hostile forces” and “reject the wrong ideas of ‘a non-party army’, ‘army de-politicisation’ and ‘army statisation’”. Similar comments were made by Politburo Standing Committee member Li Changchuan—one of Jiang’s protégés—in a discussion meeting on Deng Xiaoping’s ideas on August 21.

Calls for the party to maintain its grip on the army and to oppose “westernisation”—that is, any democratic concessions—marks a return to the hard-line rhetoric that followed the Tiananmen Square crackdown and underscores the sharpness of the factional battle underway. The struggle is likely to come to a head at the next plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee due later this month.

In the final analysis, the factional differences no matter how bitter are purely tactical. Whatever their particular emphasis, all of these leaders share the same outlook as Deng: a determination to enrich a narrow wealthy elite by vigorously encouraging the capitalist market, and, at the same time, a willingness to ruthlessly deal with any serious political challenges, particularly from the working class, through police state measures.



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