

VIEWS

China and the World Roundtable | The 120th Anniversary of the Birth of Deng Xiaoping

Editor's note: Deng Xiaoping is the pioneer of exploring socialism with Chinese characteristics. Now, China has started a journey to advance the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Two experts share their views on the issue with China Daily.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn

Deng Xiaoping and the legacy of third plenums

The 120th anniversary of the birth of Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's reform and opening-up policy that brought about China's "miraculous" economic development, comes barely more than one month after the historic third plenum of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, which established the road map for China to achieve full socialist modernization by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. That the two milestones are contiguous in time, and that it was the third plenum of the 11th CPC Central Committee in 1978 that launched reform and opening-up, invites a deeper look at the relationship.

Deng changed the course and history of China

And so it came to pass that Deng Xiaoping, a diminutive man in his 70s re-emerging from his second purge, came to change the course and history of China. Deng's powerful aphorisms challenged the rigid ideology of the time, and everyone understood that new thinking was afoot. The Chinese people were ready for renewal.

Deng's speech in December, 1978, is hailed as the singular event that marked the beginning of reform and opening-up in China. Titled "Emancipate the Mind, Seek Truth from Facts, and Unite as One in Looking to the Future", the speech made powerful points, including to stay away from old doctrines and to let some people get rich first — breaking the sacred dogma of total equality for all classes. "This is very courageous" one of the drafters of Deng's speech remembered thinking at the time.

Deng's speech became the Party's new manifesto, changing its mission almost literally overnight from class struggle to economic growth, setting the agenda for decades to come. The government also adopted an "opening-up" or open-door policy, welcoming the participation of foreign interests (trade and investment) in the modernization process. It also began the process of gradually loosening controls on Chinese society, allowing the slow flowering of personal freedoms.

The Four Modernizations — agriculture, industry, national defense, science and technology — became the cornerstone of Deng's program. From here on, the achievement of economic goals would be the measure of success or the mark of failure. Policies and careers would rise or fall on quantifiable tests of growth and development. "If we do not start reform," Deng said, "then our goal to modernize socialism will be buried."

Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, the new era of reform and opening-up was ushered in, and the "three-step" strategy was put forward: One: solve the problems of

food and clothing shortages (by doubling the 1980 GDP by 1990); two: realize a comfortable life for the people (by quadrupling the 1980 GDP by 2000, a goal achieved by 1995); three, complete the nation's modernization (raising per capita GDP to the level of an intermediate developed country, and achieving a fairly well-off life for the people).

After 1979, Deng Xiaoping was leading largely from "behind the curtain" — he held no formal titles but had enormous influence on those who did. He would give his grand thinking and others would do the implementation. By the early 1990s, Deng was no longer much involved — he was more than a figurehead but less of a factor. Though he continued to be revered as an icon in China, Deng's actual power and influence had waned. Also, he was enjoying retirement: dining with his large family and playing bridge, a game at which he excelled.

Yet China's "paramount leader" remained deeply dissatisfied with the pace of development. Before he died, he yearned to see his country irreversibly on the road to greatness.

And so, as 1992 began, at age 87, Deng Xiaoping decided to go it alone. With failing senses, but with a will of steel, this short-in-stature elderly man emerged from his life of leisure to do political battle one last time.

To breathe new life into the economy, Deng told confidants, he needed to leave Beijing. And so he did, barnstorming around southern China, stumping for reform — a passionate, personal journey to force reform open and revitalize the nation. Deng's journey would later become known as Nanxun, or the Southern Inspection, tours of far-flung provinces — and which also suggests the significance of a journey now recognized as a defining event in making China what it is today.

At his first stop in Wuhan, Deng got straight to the point. "Here's what our problem is right now: it's called 'formalism', which is a kind of excessive bureaucracy," he told Hubei provincial leaders who met him in his private rail carriage at the train station. "Our leaders look like they're doing something, but they're not doing anything really worthwhile," he went on. "When I watch television, all I see are meetings and ceremonies — our leaders must think they're television stars. The meetings are excessive and the speeches have repetitious content and no new ideas. We should give priority to deeds not to words."

The characteristics of true reform

The resonance with President Xi Jinping, from formalisms to reform, is clear. To appreciate President Xi's leadership on reform, one must begin by understanding what China means by "reform". It does not mean less



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government and more private sector, as it usually does in the West. It does mean optimizing both government and markets and both State-owned enterprises and private companies, which includes creating an even playing field for private companies and State-owned enterprises. In a word, when China says "reform", it means "improvement".

So, when President Xi streamlined the government bureaucracy (in 2018) by combining ministries and reducing their numbers, that was reform. When he transferred

the management of the local courts to the provincial governments, that was reform. When he directed the restructuring of China's healthcare system, that was reform. When he instituted the relentless anti-corruption campaign in the Party, that was reform.

To understand China's next stage of comprehensive and economic reform, one must begin with President Xi's thinking regarding "new quality productive forces", China's new guiding phrase, and understand how it fits within the nested concepts that frame China's economic vision and future.

This is how it goes. China's grand goal is the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", which is achieved by advancing "Chinese modernization". Chinese modernization is energized by "high-quality development". High-quality development is powered by "new quality productive forces". And "new quality produc-

tive forces" are driven by "indigenous innovation", especially in science and technology.

"New quality productive forces" now headline economic directives at the central and local government levels as China pivots to a growth model that prizes high quality over high quantity. It stresses scientific innovation to drive economic transformation, the re-invigoration of current industries, the accelerated development of future industries, and the insulation of the country from the volatilities and vagaries of global economics and international tensions.

Implementing "new quality productive forces" requires breakthroughs in science and technology, which introduce disruptive technologies, fuel emerging industries, enhance industrial chains, and expedite green transition — all empowered by intelligent informa-

tion. Equally important is system reform, especially modernizing sci-tech management and removing bottlenecks.

In announcing the third plenum decision, the CPC Central Committee stressed that advancing Chinese modernization requires law-based governance. Major reforms must be supported by law.

To analyze major Party policies, I seek to distinguish what strikes me as novel and fresh, even if nuanced and subtle, from the oft-repeated, unchanging principles, such as upholding the Party's overall leadership, promoting high-quality development, ensuring the people's well-being and protecting the environment, among others.

From the third plenum communique and reports, what I found sufficiently different to qualify as significant were the following:

Using the term "grave" as well as "complex" to describe the international environment and the arduous tasks of advancing reform and development and ensuring stability at home;

Upholding fundamental principles and breaking new ground, which encourages new thinking by seeking to ensure that it does not undermine core ideology;

Taking institution building as a main task, which stresses organizational continuity as opposed to individual fiefdoms;

Exercising law-based governance on all fronts, which makes it clear that there are no exceptions;

Applying systems thinking, which recruits a modern management system and best practices.

It was in April 2023 that President Xi set the overarching guiding principle, emphasizing that "comprehensively deepening reform should be regarded as the fundamental driving force for promoting Chinese modernization".

Regarding China's road map, I find great significance in the three dates proffered; 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, which has long been the aspirational target for the full realization of Chinese modernization; 2035, set at the 19th CPC National Congress in 2017, which is the aspirational target for when China will "basically" realize socialist modernization; and 2029, set at the recent third plenum in July, which gives a tight, five-year timetable for implementing all the reforms required to achieve the 2035 and 2049 goals.

It is this 2029 date that is particularly interesting, because it now establishes the temporal criteria by which officials will be held accountable. It represents how profoundly China is committed to basically realize socialist modernization by 2035. This should not be taken lightly.

Deng Xiaoping would be smiling.

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JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

Victor Gao

Deng's philosophy inspires Chinese modernization

The best way to observe the 120th anniversary of the birth of Deng Xiaoping is to celebrate his invaluable, monumental contributions to China's economic development and thus global economic progress. No doubt, his leadership enabled China to perform an economic miracle.

In helping change China's economic landscape, Deng demonstrated wisdom, vision, courage, conviction and confidence, defying all odds and overcoming challenges. He initiated reform by first making the country's then leadership to resume the college entrance examination and restore college education for millions of Chinese youths in 1977.

While no one doubts the importance of college education today, back in the late summer and early autumn of 1977, the questions for China were whether to reopen the

colleges that recruit competent students and, if yes, when and how. Following the agreement among the leaders at that time on the initial point, Deng eventually managed to steer China toward resuming *gaokao*, in the winter of 1977.

I was one of the students who took the college entrance examination in 1977, which was later described as "a year without winter", because millions of Chinese youths, instead of enjoying the winter vacation break, were scrambling to get the needed books and studying day and night to clear *gaokao*, turning the winter of 1977 into a period of intellectual revival after a decade of political upheaval. The college classes for the 1977 educational session started only in February or March of 1978, though.

In one stroke, Deng changed the course of China's history, and thus, world history.



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Deng's sense of urgency in modernizing China through the implementation of reform and opening-up was palpable. Restoring *gaokao* in 1977 was an important first step in unleashing the intellectual power of the Chinese nation, paving the way for China's transformation into a major economic powerhouse of the world. Science and technology always figured prominently in Deng's plans as the most important driver of China's economic development and modernization, which still is at the core of China's

development program.

The difference between 1977 and now is that in the late 1970s China didn't have much capital, manufacturing capability, well-trained professionals or skilled workers, or a workable road map for economic development. Deng launched initiatives to ensure China acquired or developed these material capabilities and qualities as quickly as possible. On the other hand, China today is a global economic powerhouse, the second-largest economy, the largest manufacturing and trading nation, and the largest producer of about 200 major products, accounting for more than 50 percent of the global production for many of them.

Also, China is the leading producer of electric vehicles (EV) and biggest EV research and development center in the world, making significant contributions to the global fight against climate change. Yet

the country's current leadership, like Deng, still attaches great importance to science and technology, as it considers sci-tech to be a main driver of future development. Accordingly, it has been investing handsomely in R&D in order to become a global leader in science and technology.

China is now focused on developing new quality productive forces, in order to achieve high-quality development and make breakthroughs in science and technology to benefit all of humankind.

Deng changed China's economic and social landscape in the late 1970s, impacting the course of world history and contributing to global development. Similarly, China today, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, is committed to making greater contributions to the world by building a community with a shared future for mankind.

In this ambitious endeavor, the main driving force will be new quality productive forces, which will promote innovation and help achieve scientific and technological breakthroughs, including in new technologies such as artificial intelligence.

The road map for China's modernization chartered by Deng more than four decades ago has been upgraded and enriched by the subsequent generations of the Chinese leadership. And the current leadership with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core will continue to inspire hundreds of millions of Chinese people, especially the younger generation, to strive for excellence and greater achievements, and overcome new challenges to ultimately realize greater prosperity and maintain lasting peace.

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