

Can China Research be Free of Official Chinese Historical Interpretations?
Review of *China in the Deng Xiaoping Era* (vols. 1, 2, and 3)*

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Viewing China's current international status, one cannot but confer great historical significance upon the reforms that made such development possible. The representative figure behind this historical change is none other than Deng Xiaoping. In official Chinese appraisals, Deng is known as the "grand architect of opening and reform." But such appraisals propagate misunderstandings of the processes involved in opening and reform. Is it indeed the case that reform and opening were pursued in a manner perfectly consistent with Deng's designs? As manifest in the Tiananmen incident of 1989, implementation of opening and reform was not without complications. In the initial stages of this process, rural residents implemented agrarian reforms voluntarily with the firm support of provincial leaders. Subsequent reforms proceeded, but were subject to repeated interruption and resumption as they were fiercely debated within the central government.

The term "bamboo curtain" was often used to describe China in the past. This was because, on the outside, information regarding China was

* *Deongshaoping sidaeui jungguk.*

so difficult to attain. But even now, when much information is made public and the Chinese media has become much more approachable, it remains difficult as ever to gain access to important information and the movements of high-level officials. It is thus quite common within China research to depend on official Chinese statements or analyses for primary sources. The majority of official analyses, however, possess political objectives. The most representative instance is the “Resolution regarding various Historical Issues since the Founding of the PRC” composed in June 1981. In this document, the party reevaluated its past policies and actions as well as Mao Zedong and Maoist ideology, invalidating Hua Guofeng’s “Two Whatevers” (the party must acknowledge and uphold whatever Mao decided and instructed). Thus, this resolution allowed the Deng Xiaoping leadership to end the confusion surrounding communist party ideology and theories since the Cultural Revolution. The issue is whether such official analysis and evaluation completely convey the facts of history. Researchers must strip away the political veil of official statements and analysis and view the facts with a critical eye. Such is the approach adopted by Cho in his book, which refutes official Chinese interpretations of the Deng Xiaoping era.

The Deng era is typically synonymous with the reform era, with the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (hereafter Third Plenary Session), by which Deng took a decisive hold on power, officially recognized as the starting point of opening and reform. This event is thus interchangeably referred to as “The Zunyi Conference of a New Era,” “The Second Revolution,” or “The Great Transition.” In the author’s view, however, it was the Eleventh Party Congress in 1977 that marked the actual initiation of opening and reform in China, pointing to Hua Guofeng as the genuine advocate of reform. As well, regarding the issue of Deng’s reinstatement, the author is critical of existing studies portraying Hua as opposed to Deng’s reinstatement. With respect to economic matters, there was little disagreement between the two. If such was the case, then what was the

source of conflict between Deng and Hua? It was historical reappraisals, reinvestigations of regrettable incidents, and the “Two Whatevers” engendering their mutual antagonism. The author argues, then, that the prevailing emphasis on the Third Plenary Session is meant to portray Deng Xiaoping as the grand architect of opening and reform.

Opening and reform in China did not unfold over a specifically designated period, nor was it the purposeful project of the central government or a few central leaders therein. Rather, it emerged accumulatively out of the myriad experiments and experiences implemented voluntarily across various regions. Opening and reform then gained in strength through Deng’s ratification and support of such experiments and experiences, ultimately becoming the basis of the party and the state. The author thus argues that the Third Plenary Session was significant insofar as it marked the commencement of Deng’s leadership rather than opening and reform.

Accordingly, mobilizing and comparing vast amounts of material, the author deviates from official Chinese interpretations to elucidate the Deng Xiaoping era. Such an endeavor is not without precedent in Korean scholarship pertaining to China. As with Ahn Chi-young’s *The Birth of the Deng Xiaoping Era (Deongsiaoping sidaeui tansaeng* [Changbi, 2013]), some have already explored the starting point of the Deng regime. Ahn’s work, however, does not encompass the entire Deng era.

The most illuminating aspect of the author’s work is his treatment of the Tiananmen incident. There exist a plethora of valuable materials pertaining to this incident, including the leaked “Tiananmen Papers” featuring secret conversations among the top leadership in China and various testimonies of the many who directly participated in the occupation of Tiananmen Square. But since testimonies can contradict one another and memory is not always accurate, it is extremely difficult to present such evidence as factual. The author, on the other hand, compares and contrasts countless materials in order to uncover the truth.

The book is not a mere account of historical facts. It also reflects

the effort to understand the Deng regime on a theoretical basis. That which is most representative of this endeavor is the exposition of the Deng regime's political character. The author is critical of past characterizations of the structure of power under the Deng regime that represent it with the concepts of a "three-horse carriage" or "twin peaks." He instead presents the concept of a dual political structure composed of the politics that take place in the official sphere and those that take place among elderly statesmen. According to this view, one can more easily understand how Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, who each occupied the highest official position within the communist party, underwent such rapid downfalls at the hands of veteran statesmen.

Regarding Deng era factions, typically represented in terms of reformist and conservatives, the author offers a discussion meticulously categorized by period and subject. Following the Third Plenary Session, a tacit agreement was reached that Deng would oversee political issues while Chen Yun would exercise authority over economic issues. By 1981, however, as economic reforms began to progress in earnest, the consensus between the two proceeded to dissolve with respect to economic policy. Chen Yun was a proponent of balanced growth while Deng advocated unbalanced growth. Therefore, the conflict between Chen Yun and Hu Yaobang, who supported Deng's policies, was inevitable. But unlike the conflict characterizing economic matters, Deng and Chen were all but identical in the realm of politics; they each supported the conservatism represented in the Four Cardinal Principles. Thus, conflict arose in the political realm with Deng Xiaoping on one side and Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang on the other, but was resolved with Hu and Zhao's respective dismissals from the position of General Secretary.

With China's rise, the craving for knowledge of China grows ever stronger. Unfortunately, not only are these volumes immense in length but also somewhat inaccessible to the general reader. It is thus difficult to foresee this book having any mass appeal. Nonetheless, as a work neither

written by a Western scholar nor reflective of official Chinese interpretations, it is a welcome addition to Korean scholarly research on China. One can only hope that Korean scholars studying China will continue to produce such fruitful research into the future.