

Julian Gewirtz. *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022. vi + 418 pages. Hardcover, \$32.95.

Most have heard of some event being recast, distorted, or forgotten by history. What if an entire decade can be scrubbed from mass memory? This book details Chinese history during the 1980s from several angles, finding that it was a period in which debates over modernization fostered experimentation, discussion of alternative scenarios, tolerance, and frequent consultation with foreign officials. However, it also depicts the brutal June 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and how Chinese authorities used that atrocity to “rectify” the past.

Author Julian Gewirtz has extensive academic and political background on the topic. He earned his doctorate from the University of Oxford in 2018, and his dissertation and two subsequent books have focused on China. Additionally, he has served as Senior Fellow for China Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations; has taught history at both Columbia University and Harvard University; and currently is China Director on the U.S. National Security Council.

The text of the book is divided into six parts encompassing fourteen chapters; it likewise contains an introductory section and conclusion. In the Introduction, Gewirtz identifies the impressive array of primary sources which he tapped to research the subject, including memoirs, oral histories, propaganda and censorship directives, and internal documents such as briefings. Utilizing this information, he exposed the secrecy in which 1980s leadership discussions took place.

Whereas the Introduction takes the reader to the present period dominated by Xi Jinping—in which the mythical “Chinese model” is promoted—Chapter 1 retreats to the post-Mao Zedong era when Deng Xiaoping came to power. In late March 1979, Deng announced the Four Cardinal Principles guiding modernization. Later, he led a move to pardon previous Communist party officials who had been sidelined during the Cultural Revolution. Part I,

covering two chapters, demonstrates how ideology influenced events during the 1980s. Despite the openness of that decade, Deng and other party officials ordered arrests for economic crimes, cracked down on the “spiritual pollution” of Western culture, monitored campus unrest, and replaced officials who would not adhere to ideological dictates.

Parts II and III of the text deal with China’s economic modernization and technological advancements during the 1980s. Labeled the “readjustment” era of economic development, the 1980s saw China’s leaders seek gradual, consistent and balanced growth in the related areas of heavy industry, light industry and agriculture. The rapid economic growth in that decade can be attributed to several factors, including creation of an industrial policy and establishment of Special Economic Zones. On the technology front, China relied on assistance to catch up, such as through study abroad by its students and purchase of foreign technology. But once ready, the Chinese government implemented programs designed to help selected segments of society. For instance, the Spark Program sought to apply new technology to rural development, while the 863 Program funded advanced aerospace and computing projects.

Part IV is composed of two chapters which cover political modernization in China during the 1980s. Deng was accurate in his diagnosis of major problems facing the Communist government: bureaucratization, excessive centralization of power, patriarchic leadership, and life tenure together with other special privileges for certain members of the party. He was able to achieve some success in amending the People’s Republic of China constitution, through administrative reforms, and in fighting government corruption. However, external pressures caused by the crises in Poland and Taiwan muted momentum for change and stalled proposals.

Parts V and VI of the book consist of a total of six chapters which provide an intense analysis of the Tiananmen Square episode. Gewirtz identifies several factors which had an

impact on the June 4, 1989 massacre of protesters there. First, the protests followed social unrest at the end of 1988. In this environment, discussion groups thrived amid calls for political reform. Second, General Secretary Zhao Ziyang was weakened from his failed price liberalization policies, while reform leader Hu Yaobang passed suddenly in April 1989. Third, the protests heated up just as Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev visited China in Spring 1989. Finally, Deng ordered the deployment of the People's National Army and declared martial law in May, which set the stage for the events of the next month. The number of protesters killed on June 4 varies from 300 to 10,000, but is probably closer to the latter figure than the former. Following the slaughter, Chinese authorities spread lies about the protesters, condemned Zhao, and targeted corruption. Deng's statement about the Tiananmen Square violence reinterpreted the decade, which was then "rectified" by propaganda.

Chapter 15 and the Conclusion trace the period from 1989 to the present. During this span, China has faced a number of challenges. For one, the breakup of the Soviet Union and remaking of Eastern Europe upset stability in other areas as well. Further, after the economic retrenchment of the early 1990s, China's economy grew precipitously. However, as its economy became more interdependent, it also became vulnerable to the same global trends that affected other parts of the world. Third, China has been consistently criticized for its environmental and human rights record over this period. Finally, the "Chinese model" is proudly promoted to show that the combination of authoritarian rule and economic development works. However, in doing so, Deng Xiaoping's role in improving the country has been downgraded, Zhao Ziyang continues to be erased from official history, and the real story of China in the 1980s remains concealed.

There have been other works focusing on the decade of the 1980s in China. Before the new millennium, books by Harry Harding (1984) and Shaun Breslin (1996) examined foreign

policy and national-province relations, respectively. Over the last decade, there has been additional scholarly work on this topic. For instance, Ezra Vogel (2013) offers a biography of Deng and his role in China's transformation. Priscilla Roberts (2020) assesses Deng's reforms from 1978 to 1989. Frank Dikotter (2022) reviews Chinese history from the post-Mao period until the present. Finally, Dori Jones Yang (2020) presents a memoir of 1980s China, written from the standpoint of a journalist.

Gewirtz does a fine job in assessing China's modernization from several perspectives. The sources he employs are invaluable in uncovering 1980s circumstances there, as the secret nature of leadership debates that occurred prevented widespread knowledge of occurrences. But so too have distortions and outright erasures of historical events and personalities since then. The pattern of reinterpretation is cyclical. The warning that Gewirtz's study elicits is that each generation of Chinese leaders had better watch their collective backs.

One haunting question which Gewirtz poses in the Conclusion is what would happen if the Chinese people were allowed to know the country's recent history. Far from wanting to bury the period, it is likely that its truth would furnish an impetus to celebrate 1980s advancements and to commemorate those reformers whose contributions have been minimized or hidden.

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