CHAPTER ONE
THE PROGRESS, EXPERIENCE, AND PROSPECTS OF WESTERN DEVELOPMENT

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Former General Secretary of the CPC Jiang Zemin initiated China’s Western Development program in 1999. In 2000, the central government issued the first programmatic document on Western Development. Since then, the government has successively released the “Revitalization of Northeast China” and “Rising of Central China” regional strategies. Together with the strategies of “Eastern China Taking the Lead” and “Western Development,” an overall national development strategy has been formulated. Over the past seven years, the Western Development Strategy has made many achievements, helping China gain experience and learn important lessons, but there are more challenges ahead. In the context of changing historical conditions and the entry of China’s economy into a new stage of development, what are the important experiences and lessons that can be derived from the Western Development Strategy and how can it continue to be improved? This paper will discuss these issues.

1. Reviewing the Progress of Western Development

1.1. The Proposition and Initiation of Western Development

The Western Development Strategy is the concrete incarnation of Deng Xiaoping’s “Two Overall Strategies” (两个大局) theory. As early as the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping put forward the idea of the “Two Overall Strategies,” which aimed to rectify the serious economic imbalances between Eastern and Western China. According to him,

One of these overall strategies is for the Eastern coastal areas, with a total population of 200 million people, to accelerate the process of opening to the outside world and develop before other areas. Central and Western China should conform to this strategy. The other overall
strategy is, once the Eastern coastal areas have reached a certain level of development, for the state to make more focused efforts to accelerate the development of Central and Western China. The Eastern coastal areas should also conform to this strategy… One can imagine that once China has become a moderately prosperous society at some point in the next century, there must be some real efforts to make breakthroughs on this issue [Western China’s development].

By 1999, China had undergone 20 years of rapid economic growth brought by the reform and opening. The East had developed especially rapidly due to its opening up to the outside world. As a result, the East became wealthier and more developed while the gap between Eastern and Western China widened. Thus, in accordance with Deng Xiaoping’s thinking on the “Two Overall Strategies,” Jiang Zemin led the CPC Central Committee to make the decision to launch the Western Development Strategy. In 1999, Jiang Zemin, serving as the general secretary of CPC, put forward the strategy at several meetings, indicating that the “time was ripe.” On March 3, 1999, during the “Two Conferences” (the Conference of National People’s Congresses and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference), Jiang Zemin spoke to the CPC leaders attending, “Sooner or later, we must make efforts to initiate large scale development in Western China. Without development, how can the country realize modernization? How can China become a strong economic power?” On June 9, 1999, at the national working conference on poverty-relief, Jiang Zemin again made it clear that the time to kick-start development in Western China was nigh,

Since the beginning of the reform and opening, Eastern China has made rapid economic and social progress and accumulated considerable strength by taking advantage of its own sound economic foundation, superior geographical location, and certain special policy measures. The time for promoting development in Central and Western China has come. The necessary conditions have been met. If we do not seize this opportunity, it would be a historic mistake.

On June 17, 1999, at a conference regarding reform of state-owned enterprises in the northwest, he went further in indicating his goals.

As we approach the turn of a new century, we must make it clear to the whole party and people throughout country that we will lose no time

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