CHAPTER 1

Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping in the Early Period of Reform and Opening

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Abstract

Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun were two key figures operating at the central policymaking level in the early period of Reform and Opening. A broad-sweeping look indicates that their relationship was primarily complementary and cooperative, and that disparities and differences of opinion constituted a minority of interchanges. Their differences of opinion were not over whether to reform and open, but rather over how to reform and open. Their identical positions on a series of major issues constituted the ideological basis for their cooperation in launching Reform and Opening. Through the course of Reform and Opening, they supported, complemented, and coordinated with one another, causing all undertakings to proceed rather smoothly. When faced with differences of opinion, they put the big picture of Reform and Opening first and sought broad agreement despite minor disparities. Their cooperation not only laid a good foundation for Reform and Opening but to this day still exerts a long-lasting influence on Chinese political life. Their cooperation has become a precious political inheritance left to their successors.

Keywords

Chen Yun – Deng Xiaoping – Reform and Opening

Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun had the longest political lives of anybody in China’s core policymaking echelon. They also played the most key roles on the political stage in the early period of Reform and Opening. Thus, their relationship during Reform and Opening naturally became the most important

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relationship between leaders in the Party and State at that time. However, most academic research into that period discusses the two men separately; those which do put them together for comparison do so only in the context of one concrete incident. Although academics outside of the Chinese mainland place importance on comparative research of the two, they often place too much emphasis on their differences and disagreements. Some even exaggerate their conflicts. None of the aforementioned situations can completely, truthfully reflect their relationship; they are also not beneficial to objectively understanding the history of China in the early period of Reform and Opening. Thus, in this essay I shall attempt to speak from Chen Yun’s perspective of his understanding of his relationship with Deng Xiaoping during the early period of Reform and Opening.

1 Relationship One: Jointly Launching Reform and Opening

The promotion of any policy requires the following few prerequisites: one, the proponents of the policy must possess enough appeal among supporters; and two, the proponents of the policy must be in a decision-making position. On China’s political stage following the dissolution of the “Gang of Four,” of all leaders who could propose new policies and knew the majority of high-level cadres, the most qualified was Deng, followed by Chen. The only question was how to get them back into decision-making positions fast enough.

Chen and Deng were both early members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as important leaders. At the Eighth Party Congress in 1956, Chen was selected as a vice chairman of the Party Central Committee, and Deng as its secretary. After Lin Biao was selected vice chairman of the Party Central Committee at the Eight Party’s second plenum in 1958, the ranking of members of the Central Standing Committee was as follows: Mao (Zedong); Liu (Shaoqi); Zhou (Enlai); Zhu (De); Chen (Yun); Lin (Biao); Deng (Xiaoping). Chen was severely censured in 1956 for his “opposition to rash advances.” In 1962 he was politically ostracized for advocating for the household responsibility system. During the “Cultural Revolution,” Chen was purged from the Politburo. Deng was labeled the “number two capitalist roader” early in the “Cultural Revolution” and was subsequently thrown down from power. Although he was rehabilitated and put back in use in 1972, he was again stripped of all Party and State titles in 1976 for his alleged “blowing right and style of overturning precedents.” At that point, with Liu Shaoqi persecuted to death, Lin Biao dead from an airplane crash trying to flee his betrayal, and Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and Mao Zedong dying in rapid succession from illnesses, the only two remaining