

Review - Following the Leader

Written by Francis Grice

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Following the Leader: Ruling China from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping

By David M. Lampton.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Understanding the complex intricacies of modern Chinese politics has always proved difficult for Western scholars and policy makers. Decades of propaganda, censorship, and the deliberate exclusion of foreigners by Mao Zedong's government set the tone on this front, from the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 until the death of Mao in 1976. Despite being somewhat more welcoming to the outside world, subsequent Chinese administrations have also evaded external scrutiny by conducting most of their decision making behind closed doors and eschewing public debates.[1] This has led to a concerning dearth of reliable information about Chinese politics within the West. With China rapidly burgeoning into a global superpower – it already has the world's largest active military, most numerous population, and (arguably) biggest economy – it is crucial for the discipline of International Relations that this knowledge gap be rectified.[2]

Given the difficulties involved with studying Chinese politics, the drive towards achieving greater awareness in this field must necessarily embrace multiple strands of scholarship, ranging from systemic level International Relations theory to intensive scrutiny of China's political system itself. It is towards this latter stream of research that the recently released book by David Lampton, *Following the Leader: Ruling China from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*, makes a significant contribution.

Lampton's opus is divided into four main sections. The first provides a succinct account of the evolution of post-Mao politics in China from 1976 until the present day. This is followed by an appraisal of China's governing body and its processes, including consideration of how the varied personalities of China's leaders have shaped policy making, which other factors influence political decisions, and the ways in which China's foreign policy goals are selected and pursued. Next, the book delves more deeply into several specific subfields of Chinese government, including potential threats to political stability, civil-military relations, and negotiation styles. The book concludes with a summary of its core themes, while also linking its arguments to a number of additional issues in Chinese politics.

Underpinning his analysis, Lampton draws upon decades of conversations, interviews, and group meetings with Chinese policy makers, scholars, and other relevant individuals across the spectrum of Chinese society. This is supported by an extensive explanation of the interviewing techniques and data management system used in an appendix to the book. Lampton's approach represents a major strength, as well as a potential weakness for the work. By leveraging his extensive network of contacts and reaching out to numerous officials and scholars in China, Lampton has been able to access and share both official and unofficial perspectives about China's political system. This adds crucial new knowledge to the field and should be immensely useful for Western policy makers and scholars in the future. Unfortunately, the sensitivity of many of the topics that he discusses means that Lampton is unable to disclose the details of a number of his sources. While there is no doubt about their legitimacy, it would nevertheless have been helpful for readers to be able to see not only the contents of some of the anonymous remarks cited, but also the specifics of exactly who made each comment. This is, unfortunately, an inevitable problem for any research that seeks to engage with the perspectives of insiders within China's closed political climate.

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Several sections in Lampton's book stand out as especially worthwhile. In his assessment of the competing pressures that influence Chinese foreign policy, Lampton clearly and effectively examines the role of multiple drivers, such as domestic politics, public opinion, and economic forces. Similarly, the chapter on negotiation is captivating, as the author advances many intriguing insights into the ways that China's leaders conduct themselves during diplomatic encounters. This includes the emphasis that these politicians place upon the selection of appropriate venues for their discussions with foreign states, as well as the way that they view both hard and soft power as useful tools for these negotiations.

The book's analysis of civil-military relations is particularly insightful and informative, as it offers a sophisticated yet comprehensible breakdown of the structure and dynamics of the relationships between the civilian administration and the armed forces. This is supplemented by a thoughtful discussion of the alignment of a growing number of businesses in China's private economic sector with the military, which is fuelling the gradual development of an industrial-military complex. Understanding the complexities of decision making regarding China's military is becoming an increasing priority for Western analysts because, as the Economist noted in 2012, "China worries the rest of the world not only because of the scale of its military build-up, but also because of the lack of information about how it might use its new forces and even who is really in charge of them."^[3] Lampton's research on this topic is, therefore, especially welcome.

There are, however, two areas of difficulty in the work. The first is that the book is inconsistent with the level of detail that is allocated to each leader for the various subfields that it covers. When examining "Chinese Leadership through a Weberian Lens" (pp62-65), for example, the book concentrates predominantly on Deng Xiaoping and gives scant consideration to his successors. In "Chinese Leadership through the lens of James MacGregor Burns" (pp65-68), in contrast, the author devotes most of his attention to Jiang Zemin. A more balanced approach, in which a roughly equitable amount of scrutiny was given to discussing the characteristics of each subfield under each Chinese leader, might have been beneficial. The second relates to the range of subjects addressed in the book, which seem somewhat arbitrarily selected and rather truncated. While Lampton analyzes some subfields in impressive depth, he omits or makes only fleeting mention towards others. It is surprising, for example, to see little coverage given to the politics of the environment, energy, and health. These pressing issues are referenced in passing, but never in any detail.

Regarding potential audiences, the comments on the jacket of the book suggest that the content will be suitable for both new and existing scholars and students who are interested in China. The latter claim seems reasonable, as Lampton provides fascinating new information and perspectives that hold significant value for the field of Chinese politics. The former assertion is less convincing, however, as the book supplies only limited background knowledge about Chinese history, politics, and society, instead appearing to assume that readers will already possess a certain degree of familiarity with these areas.

In conclusion, Lampton's work has many positive qualities, but also several minor detractors. It unquestionably adds new knowledge to the field of Chinese government, and will help scholars and students with an existing background in this area to deepen their comprehension of this important subject. The book's omission of some mainstream areas of Chinese politics, along with an unstated assumption that readers will already possess existing background knowledge about China, does however prevent the book from acting as an introductory text for individuals who have not previously studied the country.

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Francis Grice is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Studies at McDaniel College in Maryland, where he has worked since 2014. Prior to this posting, he worked as a Teaching Fellow at King's College London. He has a PhD in Defence Studies from King's College London (2014). His thesis critically examined the originality and transnational influence of the teachings of Mao Zedong on insurgent warfare.