

## Tiananmen, revisited

cheong suk wai

The day was 4 June, 1989. American Sinologist Ezra Vogel was, as he puts it, “furious” as he watched on television Chinese soldiers firing on pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square.

Beijing’s crackdown on the student-led protesters was a “terrible tragedy”, says Professor Vogel, an emeritus don in social sciences at Harvard University. The man many blamed for the bloodbath was paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, who had ordered the crackdown.

Yet when Vogel sat down in 2000 to begin writing a dispassionate biography of Deng, he found “a logic” in how and why Deng did what he did. He says Deng, already 84 years old in 1989, had to quell a “perfect storm” of factors that threatened to derail his 10-year effort to modernise China. The storm had started two months earlier with the sudden death of widely-respected former Communist Party of China (CPC) chief Hu Yaobang.

Deng sanctioned no public unrest and reviled anyone he felt was disloyal to China and the CPC. He had fallen out with Hu, whom he considered too liberal on political and economic reforms.

The paramount leader’s stance angered Hu’s many admirers, who were mostly students and poorly-paid workers. They were buckling under soaring inflation, which Deng felt then Premier and CPC general-secretary Zhao Ziyang had failed to manage. Deng’s differing views with Zhao on reforms hastened their split in May 1989.

Vogel, 81, shared these views with The Straits Times last week, on the eve of the 23rd anniversary of the 4 June incident. Chinese officials say about 200 people, including many soldiers, were killed. Vogel, was here for two weeks as the Singapore Management University’s Ho Bee Professor in Chinese Economy and Business.

After more than a decade of research, Vogel published his 745-page book in September last year. Titled simply Deng Xiaoping And The Transformation Of China, it received mixed reviews.

Many praised his even-handed approach to the steely, taciturn pragmatist who set China on the path to economic supremacy. But critics found him too sympathetic to Deng. They were riled most by Vogel’s conclusion on the 4 June events: “What we do know is that in the two decades after Tiananmen, China enjoyed relative stability and rapid ~ even spectacular ~ economic growth... than at any time in Chinese history.”

Of his critics, Vogel says: “Many... were reporters in Tiananmen Square on June 4 and Deng did such a horrible thing that they see anyone who explains why he did it, and how China has grown rapidly since, as soft and dumb.”

Deng, a thrice-married Sichuanese and father of five, went in 70 years from leading a small county to steering south-west China and then the entire country. Along the way, he was purged twice from the CPC, first for supposedly being a capitalist and then for being a counter-revolutionary. But Deng, who Mao Zedong once likened to a needle in a ball of cotton, rolled with the many political punches.

Ironically, Vogel learnt none of this from Deng himself.

The closest he got to the leader was seeing him from across a crowded room. Also, Deng wrote almost none of his thoughts down, having learnt from his days in the underground not to leave paper trails that might damn him.

Does all this not leave his book wanting? Vogel responds: “I don’t think I missed that much. Even if I had met him, he wouldn’t have told me all the answers to the key questions, such as ‘What were you thinking on June 4?’, ‘What did you really think of Mao?’ and ‘How did

you take power?”

Still, he allows, he is “not 100 per cent sure” about his interpretation of Deng, even after having interviewed Deng’s youngest daughter Deng Rong, China’s former president Jiang Zemin and Singapore’s former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, among others.

Vogel says Lee, in particular, helped shape his reading of Deng’s controversial 1979 invasion of Vietnam. Many had charged that Deng did that just to gain control of China’s army; at that time, many of the country’s high military officials were still in thrall of the late Mao and were resisting Deng, who they believed would betray China by making it embrace capitalism.

But Lee, who discussed Deng only once with Vogel some time in 2002, gave a clear-eyed account of Deng’s “intense worries” that the Soviet Union, with Vietnam’s help, would encircle China ~ with a view to conquering Southeast Asia.

Deng not only told Lee all this when he visited Singapore for the first time in November 1978, but also asked the Singapore leader to stress to the United States how imminent that threat was. Lee did so. A year later, China invaded Vietnam, staunching the Soviet tide in Asia.

Vogel first met Lee in the early 1970s, when he hosted the then Prime Minister at Harvard’s East Asia Centre on the latter’s official trip to the USA. The Harvard don found Lee “extremely bright, vigorous and a real intellectual as well as a confident leader”.

And, he adds, although Lee was 19 years younger than Deng, the latter respected Lee for what he had done with Singapore. “Deng was learning more from Lee than vice versa,” says Vogel, “because by then, Singapore’s leaders had a more settled political structure and learnt how to keep their city attractive”.

With such lessons in hand, Deng steered China to economic success. Who might be its next Deng, then?

Vogel says: “Nobody ~ and it’s not just a question of talent; it’s structural.

“Deng was a revolutionary and war hero who came to power in an unstructured time, so he had a special authority. But people in office in peacetime are not war heroes. It’s a natural development.”

Is China’s often corrupt nouveau riche a natural development of Deng’s reforms too?

“Well, you could say that,” he allows, “but just before he stepped down in 1992, somebody asked him about a corruption case and Deng said, “We must move with two fists - one for pushing reform and the other for improper behaviour”.

The most notorious example of that today is the CPC’s former top official in Chongqing, Bo Xilai and his lawyer wife, Gu Kailai. Vogel says that with the hard-to-handle Bo gone, China’s top and emerging leaders will now work together more closely to weed out corruption in their ranks and speed up political reform.

Vogel is now in talks with China publisher San Lian to release a Chinese language version of his book in China. He says: “Many intellectuals in China would like to talk about the background to Tiananmen, but they would have more trouble than a foreigner would in doing so. So my book would hopefully increase the range of freedom they have to write about it.”