



STRONG INDIVIDUALIZATION IN MANAGING ASIAN SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Is individualization typical for most advanced contemporary societies alone? A correction comes from the comparative analyses of the thoughts and historical deeds of two outstanding Asian leaders. In the XX century, Mahatma Gandhi and Deng Xiaoping substantially influenced public thinking and behaviour as well as the institutional framework in India and China respectively. Their achievement is efficiently channelling the national collective action towards gaining the independence of India and the acceleration of Chinese modernization. Both leaders have some similarities and much more differences in their programmes and practical activities. Gandhi and Deng are eager to foster a full-scale transformation of Indian and Chinese societies and to mobilize the active support of millions for societal transformation. However, Gandhi asks for the support of the Hindu traditional religion while Deng orients his intellectual strategy and practical activities on the principles of civic religion. Gandhi relies on his inventiveness and charisma while Deng searches for support from political organizations and the state. The conceptual framework of social actors, relations and processes guides the systematic analysis of structures and actions in the transformation of Indian and Chinese societies.

KEYWORDS

Individualization; Societal transformation; India; China; Gandhi; Deng Xiaoping.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s the European discussion on the topic of individualization started with one important assumption: that the newly identified phenomenon was linked to modern and postmodern Western European and North American societies alone. The hypothesis was that younger people in this part of the world would far less often build their life trajectories by following the traditional criteria of class and status. More and more frequently, they would autonomously make decisions about their life course (Beck, 1983). Obviously, this was a rather narrow individualization concept. In subsequent debates, its content was substantially enriched. Nevertheless, the geographic and temporary preference towards processes involving young generations in the global West was mostly maintained. But the intensive debates had another important outcome: a shared understanding of the multidimensionality of individualization in social reality. Consequently, the complexity of the individualization concept became a commonplace idea in these debates.

This intellectual situation recently received a new challenge. A large group of researchers supported by the German Science Foundation published the results of their studies in the collection “Religious Individualization” (Fuchs, et al., 2019). The publication contains analyses and interpretation of worldwide phenomena surrounding individualization. In parts of the text, one may notice repetitions, unclear formulations, internal contradictions, etc. However, it also includes the results of intellectual mining which continue the development of productive ideas from Max Weber and others, simultaneously opening new vistas for studies on the development of religious ideas. Questions arise which bring outstanding and burning issues to the fore. For instance, does the Western inclination to see individualization as a primarily Western phenomenon still hold true? What is the relationship between traditional Eastern collectivism and religious individualization in the region? What general and more specific interactions take place between the processes of institutionalization and individualization in different countries and regions? etc. (Fuchs et al., 2019, §§ 1-4).

It is obvious that such a broad range of topics cannot be easily synthesized under a common denominator. This is the profound reason why descriptions have been preferred for the building of a concept of religious individualization. Instead, it is defined as a “polythetic term, i.e., as a heuristic tool rather than a clear-cut semantic signifier of specific social dynamics” (Fuchs et al., 2019, §2b). To counteract this misleading strategic decision, the concept of a semantic signifier may be used as a tool for analysing situations, collecting arguments or knowledge systems, and drawing well-substantiated conclusions.

The theoretical considerations and analysis of practical experience result in the current advanced concept of individualization having structural and action dimensions. *The structural dimension of the individualization concept is focused on the adaptation of individuals to the opening of new or broader social spaces for their autonomous orientations, decisions, and practices. The action dimension of individualization refers to the strengthening of individual cognitive capacities and practical skills for autonomous and efficient*

orientation, decision-making, and action ([Genov, 2018](#), Ch. 2). Another important clarification reads that successful individualization might be constructive or destructive in its consequences.

This is a typical universalist and analytical approach to the issues related to the topic of individualization. The approach opens the way for applying the individualization concept in systematic studies of historical situations. Thus defined, the concept might cover a variety of historical processes in pre-modern, modern, and post-modern societies comprising groups and organizations with different identities and aspirations ([Stapley, 2019](#)). The present paper is dedicated to the interplay between individualization and societal transformations under specific historical conditions. The conceptually outlined research strategy will be applied in the analysis of profound social transformations of the world's two most populous Asian societies during the twentieth century. In the first case, the historical analysis will be focused on the transformation related to the establishment of state sovereignty in India. In the second case, the analysis will be concentrated on the consolidation of Chinese society in pursuit of accelerated development at the end of the long twentieth century. In this historical context, two extraordinary cases of strong individualization will be elaborated in detail. The first analysis will examine the contribution of Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi in preparing the transformation of Indian society. The second concerns Deng Xiaoping's role in the transformation of Chinese society after 1979. Only occasional remarks will relate to their personality and the private sphere. The research interest is concentrated on ideology, explanatory models, and directives for action. The analysis has been carried out by borrowing conceptual frameworks from the paradigm of social interaction.

The choice seems to be most understandable. History has already been interpreted as the description, analysis, and explanation of the deeds of great personalities ([Carlyle, 2013](#)). The task is attractive; its results are usually intriguing and informative. However, it is certainly not satisfactory because of the typical underestimation of the influence of structural social changes. The opposite view has a strong emphasis on large collective actors like racial groups, nations, social classes, etc. This strategy of historical analysis typically underestimates the relevance of the participation of leading individuals and very influential small groups in geopolitically relevant processes ([Lukacs, 1971](#)). The systematic description and explanation of historical situations require multidimensional frameworks.

For that purpose, the paradigmatic concept of social interaction offers two major conceptual frameworks. *First*, this structural framework includes concepts related to environmental, technological, economic, political, and cultural determinants of social interaction. In the research field of societal transformations, the concept of interaction determinants helps in identifying their maximum theoretical and practical relevance. *Second*, the action-centred conceptual framework consists of concepts of actors, relations, and processes. This latter framework will be applied in the following analysis and argumentation ([Genov, 2021](#), Ch.2). The two interrelated conceptual frameworks will be used as a template for systematic description, explanation, and possibly prediction of the selected phenomena under scrutiny ([Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021](#)). As far as it is possible, the status of the individual or collective actors should be clarified for the obvious

reason that the ambitions and resources of social actors trigger and support change and might be decisive for its fate.

Religion or religion-like cultural formations occupy a special place in these interactions. No society can function efficiently without the contribution of an integrating religion or religion-like ideology. The following three major research questions will orient the analysis and interpretation of social actions and structures. The first point to clarify concerns the involvement of *social actors* in individualization processes during the first half of the 20th century in India and during the second half of that century in China ([Butzin & Terstriep, 2018](#)). The next issue to be dealt with concerns the impact of *social relations* on the spread of individualization in the societal systems of India and China throughout the 20th century ([Sarkar, 2011](#)). Last but not least, the third centre for discussion will be the relevance of various *social processes*. For instance, the problematic developments of violent resistance in colonial India and the economy of state socialism in China caused the rise of individualization among the leaders of both societal transformations, namely Mahatma Gandhi and Deng Xiaoping.

The analysis concerns two globally relevant societal transformations. The fight for national independence and state-building on the Indian subcontinent is the first historical case to be studied. The research interest is focused on the content and effects of Mahatma Gandhi's leadership in this process. More precisely, the subject of study is the extraordinary individualization of Mahatma Gandhi in the context of the Indian national liberation movement. The second case under scrutiny will be the unique historical achievements of China after 1979. Only several decades after the organizational turn in that year, Chinese society would change from poor and technologically backwards into one of the most productive and aspiring societies in the world. This accelerated societal transformation brought about a historically unique improvement in the well-being of large segments of this most populous country. The profound changes in Chinese society itself and in its international status are regularly put in connection with the strong individualization of Deng Xiaoping.

The societal transformations of India and China deserve detailed studies separately as well as in comparison with one another.

II. DISCUSSION

a) Mahatma Gandhi: Leading India's Societal Transformation

Transformations affect the major structures and practices of a society. In numerous newspaper articles and public speeches, Gandhi tried to elaborate on each important and desirable characteristic of a future independent India. This intellectual development and the intended profound change within the whole of Indian

society had been the dream of generations of Indian intellectuals as well as motivation for the resistance of millions against British rule.

Nevertheless, the tremendous societal change triggered by the ideas and practices of the national liberation movement was substantially prepared and, to some extent, also accomplished under the leadership of Gandhi. He managed to concentrate the cultural energy and potential for practical action among the best people across a huge country in the direction of gaining independence by applying the strategy of nonviolent resistance ([Ahmed, 2019](#)).

Nonviolent resistance has been propagated on various occasions by priests, theologians, philosophers, and politicians in many countries. In this historical context, a nonviolent resistance policy was announced by Gandhi as the mechanism for achieving the aim of independence. Thus, the idea could be effectively applied to the political praxis of the Indian situation during the first half of the 20th century, which was dominated by the cultural horizon of deeply religious masses in India and Britain's colonial power. Under these circumstances, the idea of nonviolent resistance could be efficiently applied to practical struggles. This unique historical experience is the major reason for the widespread respect given to Gandhi and his deeds in India. Due to different historical circumstances, the esteemed leaders of independence struggles in most other colonial countries had to choose violent forms of resistance.

More specifically, Gandhi's cult status in India centres on his extraordinary individualization. It took place under the critical conditions of numerous actors participating in the preparation and implementation of one great event — the announcement of the Indian Independence Act, separating India from British rule on 15 August 1947. For the purposes of the present paper, the relevant *actors* are reduced to three. Besides the Hindu delegation in the negotiations, headed by Gandhi, the British colonial administration of India is regarded as another collective actor. In the collective actor of the Hindu delegation, the most outstanding individual actor was Gandhi. The leaders of the Indian Muslims were pleased to be regarded as representatives of a third collective actor.

The development of extreme individualization on the part of the national hero Mahatma Gandhi took time. Neither the idea of nonviolent resistance nor its practices were ready as concepts prior to Gandhi's accumulation of experience in the struggle for national liberation. Such experience was also accumulated by other intellectuals sharing the same historical circumstances. But nobody else managed to extrapolate the experience into philosophical generalizations concerning the means and ends of the movement for national independence, nor did they reach the necessary historical understanding that a successful mass movement requires as guidelines for action. A fast learner and efficient organizer living under the permanent threat of arrests and imprisonment, he had to develop the spirit and skills of an experienced fighter. Given the usually complicated relationships with the British authorities as well as with other leading participants in the

movement for independence, Gandhi had to become a brilliant negotiator, too. However, the bloody clashes between Hindus and Muslims during the separation of and confrontation between the new states of India and Pakistan could not be avoided, even with Gandhi's impressive intervention (Parel, 2011). His capacities as an *actor* turned out to be insufficient against these complex and controversial circumstances.

The political behaviour of the actors shaping the fate of Indian society between the two World Wars was notoriously inconsequential and unstable. Gandhi was known and respected as a pacifist and leader of the nationalist National Congress Party. The Party had a clear anti-colonial political orientation. But Gandhi had supported the war efforts of the British colonial power during WWI by organizing an Indian ambulance. During the Second World War, he used his charisma and power of persuasion to motivate Indians to serve in the British army, and his propaganda campaign turned out to be quite successful. Thus, internal tensions were present in his position concerning independence issues. Being the leader of the Congress Party, Gandhi considered the possibility of leaving the party for a while because of interpersonal conflicts among its leadership. Despite his human one-sidedness and failures, he managed to be rather consequential in following his basic principles of truth and nonviolence: "In the method, we are adopting in India, fraud, lying, deceit, and all the ugly brood of violence and untruth have absolutely no room. Everything is done openly and above board, for Truth hates secrecy" (Gandhi, 1960, p. 55). This reference to the religious "Truth" is a reference to God. In Gandhi's time, the reference promised moral legitimacy through political action. However, given the numerous religions in India, the only long-term efficient policies had to be universalistic, secular ones. This represented a deep contradiction in Gandhi's conceptual system and his suggested reform policies (Hazama, 2017). Its effect was uncertainty and instability in these policies.

Instability also marked the ideology and practical behaviour of the British colonial administration. Until the mid-1930s, the administration seemed to be firmly against any negotiations with the nationalist opposition. Severe methods of repression dominated its domestic policy. The situation gradually changed until the idea of regular negotiations with representatives of independence movements became a matter of normality. The efforts to postpone an independence agreement or make Indian independence only a formal act notwithstanding, independence could not be avoided. In broad strokes, this understanding of the situation was a personal achievement of Gandhi. And that same achievement became the motivation for an extreme Hindu nationalist who shot Mahatma Gandhi down.

Thus, Mahatma Gandhi's individualization reached its peak with his leading participation in geopolitical decisions of global relevance. One of these decisions was the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan along with the tentative territorial division of the Hindu and Muslim religious groups. This globally important decision and its implementation came about mostly as an outcome of the political activities of Muslim leaders. But part of this dramatic development was also due to unsuccessful negotiations with representatives of the colonial administration. Mahatma Gandhi represented the Hindu community, while

the opposite ideas were represented by politicians of the Indian Muslim community. All these parameters of the dynamic situation are best studied by applying the concept of dynamic *social relations* at the macro-, mezzo-, and micro-levels of the social structure. This stress on the relevance of social relations in explaining and shaping practical action provokes quite an important question: is the building or rationalization of institutions a limitation of individualization? An answer requires the background of the whole paper.

The strong stress on the nonviolent resolution of social tensions and conflicts appeared relatively late in the life trajectory of Mahatma Gandhi. This is a telling example of his long and intensive *learning process* before reaching such a philosophical position. His negotiation skills, praised by many, were another outcome of the same learning process. Long-term organization building and development impacted Gandhi's decisions and practical activities. Through these activities, his ideas were practically tested and implemented in institutional reforms. The task was rather difficult because Indian society was, and remains, a construction of many diverging structural units and patterns of functioning and change (Frauer, 2019).

In order to cope with this complexity, Gandhi developed and applied a series of theoretical concepts and methodological approaches to the study and management of societal transformations. He used his contributions in the field of nonviolent task resolution to stress the nuances of flexibility, openness, and nonviolent speech and action (Ganguly & Docker, 2014). Contemporary efforts to continue Gandhi's ideas about nonviolent task resolution have brought about new conceptualizations (Bode, 1995). Employees and employers are interested in efficient task resolution, despite the restrictions imposed by crisis-stricken societies and supranational organizations. On various occasions, the spirit of the actors involved in crisis management has been rather militant. Gandhi lived in times full of tension and conflict, sometimes rather bloody. Nevertheless, he had heavy arguments in favour of nonviolent conflict resolution:

‘Non-violence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute, and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law — to the strength of the spirit’ (Gandhi, 1960, p. 5).

Gandhi himself developed the initiative to become an inventor, owner, developer, and practitioner of innovations. Overarching links between theoretical constructs and Gandhi's ideas and practices should be established and tested in greater detail. This could be done in the process of further elaboration on the available constructs (Terchek, 2011). The complexity of these discussions is a challenge facing efforts to elaborate on the related theoretical, methodological, and practical issues in a more systematic way. Gandhi advocated for intellectual and moral dedication in the search for truth and in the application of truth. According to him, all our activities should be concentrated on it: “Truth should be the very breath of our life. When once this stage in the pilgrim's progress is reached, all other rules of correct living will come without effort...” (Gandhi, 1927, p. 1). The attainment of truth requires learning and dedication to be able to represent the knowledgeable

and practically efficient citizen. A person holding firmly to the truth (a *satyagrahi*) obeys the laws of society intelligently and of their own free will since they consider it to be a sacred duty to do so. It is only when a person has thus obeyed the laws of society in a more scrupulous way that they are in a position to judge which particular rules are good and just, and which are unjust and iniquitous. Only then do they earn the right to pursue civil disobedience of certain laws in well-defined circumstances. In Gandhi's own words from the final chapter, "Farewell" of his autobiography, the task is complicated but manageable:

'To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means' ([Gandhi, 1969](#), p. 607).

There is no doubt that these seemingly rather abstract semi-religious considerations contain, in reality, the vision of a good society and social-technological ideas about how to build it. This means that, due to the impressive individualization of Mahatma Gandhi, many millions of average Indians (both during the struggle for and after the establishment of independence) already had and will have their chances at the individualization process. Large groups of Hindu society developed some cultural individualization already in the struggles for independence. The process accelerated due to the support of political and economic individualization after the independence of India. The guidance is a mixture of Hindu religion, Western European secularist, and predominantly socialist ideas, as well as universal social technology adapted to the solution of local problems. Some authors see this fusion of ideas as dominated by the Hindu religion. This would mean that Gandhi's conception of secularism and socialism allows for substantial deviations from the European interpretation of both concepts and practices ([Hazama, 2017](#)). Such debates notwithstanding, Gandhi firmly believed that his vision of a desirable future for India would be established in the country after its liberation from British colonial rule. The most detailed vision of an independent Indian good society can be found in the part of his political platform dedicated to the future of the Indian subcontinent.

It was in this cultural and political context that the status of women and their social future in South Africa, Great Britain, and India made it entirely legitimate for Gandhi to develop visions about the future of their status in the context of national interests. Gandhi's ideas for reform in the institutional settings of women's lives in India were materialized to a great extent after the country's independence ([Gandhi, 1988-1999](#)). At the same time, discussions about his questionable ideas and practices in the area of sexual relations continue ([Bose, 2015](#)).

b) Lifting Millions of Poor People into Modest Affluence

What about the number of people positively affected by the measures of the Chinese state for eradicating extreme poverty? At the beginning of the fundamental reforms in China in 1979, the tentative

number of peasants living in extreme poverty was between 800 and 850 million. After a period of 40 years of active state involvement in resolving social issues, the share of people living in extreme poverty has been reduced to less than one per cent of the population. This means that an improvement in the social status of some 20 million poor people has been achieved per year. This radical shift most often included migration from rural areas to towns ([Butcher, 2019](#)).

At the time of the announcement of this highly ambitious project at the end of the 1970s, a typical reaction among mainstream social scientists dealing with poverty and societal transformation was ‘Mission impossible!’. Yet this was exactly what happened during the transformation of continental China after 1978. At that time, the country was still coping with the long-term consequences of the severe Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945), the bloody Civil War (1945–1949), the turbulences of the voluntarist experiments of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), and the trauma of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). As a result of the turmoil during the twenty years between the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the turning point of 1978, the Republic’s annual GDP growth was 3% (Chen, 1980).

This level of economic growth could not be satisfactory for a country with a large number of extremely poor peasants and ambitious leadership. Deng Xiaoping belonged to a ruling group consisting of people who desired radical improvement of this situation. He announced his intentions two years after Mao Zedong’s death, at a Conference of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in late 1978. His mobilizing speech was formulated in the traditional Chinese style: “Emancipate the Mind, Seek Truth from Facts, and Unite as One in Looking to the Future” ([Deng, 1985](#): Dec. 1978). This summoning was timely. Most Party leaders had rich experience in coping with severe crisis situations. Some of them, including Deng Xiaoping, remembered the existential risks of the Long March of Mao Zedong’s Red Army. Many had made their personal contribution to victory in the bloody Civil War. Nearly all members of the Central Committee had difficulties in surviving the extremes of Mao’s voluntarism and repressions. Most of these authoritative people had an understanding of the need for new ideas like Deng’s view about four modernizations and his clear position against aspirations for Chinese global hegemony ([Deng, 1985](#): May 1978). They could trust Deng Xiaoping because the new leadership after the fall of the Gang of Four shared his visions about the future of the CCP and China.

Deng presented the philosophy of his suggested reforms in the strategic article “Building Socialism with a Specifically Chinese Character”, published in the newspaper of the ruling party in 1982 ([Deng, 1985](#): Dec. 1982). The guiding idea of these reforms consisted of linking the socialist organizational pattern of ownership, production, distribution, and consumption with mechanisms of market competition (Boer, 2021). The suggested solution united socialist centralized planning with capitalist planning at the level of companies. The most important step in this direction was the fundamental reform stipulating equal legal treatment of state-owned and private productive properties. In practice, the crucial legal provision of reform was the decision to introduce two types of legal subjects in industry. Already existing industrial enterprises were to remain state

property. Newly established enterprises could be registered as public or private property. Peasants received the right to have private plots and supply the market on their own initiative and responsibility. These far-reaching reforms in industry and agriculture were accompanied by opening the Chinese economy to global markets. For that purpose, economic zones had to be established with special administrative regulations (Evans, 1997). This wave of reforms reached all action spheres, including tertiary education. The reintroduced Entrance Exams legally linked the third level of education to economic and political organizations. The outcome was rising productivity and general well-being among the population.

Therefore, the ideological turn in 1978 became crucially important for the PR of China in a historical context. Approaching the end of the 1970s, the over-centralized Chinese economy was in stagnation. Intellectual and organizational breakthroughs were very much needed. Serious changes were necessary for the legal regulation of social interactions at all structural levels of Chinese society. The repeated slogans to manage scientific and technological progress and to increase productivity no longer had mobilizing effects. The optimism of official speakers notwithstanding, this great nation was held captive by uncertainty ([Hidasi, 1979](#)).

The puzzle seemed to be so profound that the usual solutions were neither attractive nor economically promising. In this void of fresh ideas and practices, the arguments of Deng Xiaoping about socialism with Chinese characteristics could be heard with understanding and support. It was an unusual situation. His rise to the position of leader of the nation took place under conditions in which he had no economic or political decision-making role. He had chaired the powerful military commission at the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. The background of trust Deng enjoyed was his rich biography as a successful military commander and efficient functionary at the highest level of the CCP. The testing and implementation of his ideas about profound reforms became the decisive factor for the recognition of Deng's extraordinary intellectual integrity. He managed to develop and make public the profile of a leading politician with an intellectual proclivity and broad experience in managing civil and military innovation. Thus, even without a formal leading position in the party or state, Deng became the most respected individual *actor* in the most populous country in the world, the father of the reforms which would totally change key parameters of Chinese society and its diplomatic status.

The key reform ideas suggested by Deng were positively received by the ruling elite. His stress on the relevance of strategic economic orientation in the development of Chinese society was an obvious correction of major ideas authored by Mao Zedong without radically questioning Maoism. Moreover, Deng's basic idea, "We Shall Concentrate on Economic Development" ([Deng, 1994](#), Sept. 18, 1982), could easily be interpreted as continuity and innovation in the same ideological and political framework. So, the solution to this extraordinarily important task could not be left to Deng alone. There were Party institutions which were eager to collaborate in the development and application of Deng's highly respected ideas ([Brown & Parel, 2011](#)).

Deng's ideas consequently evolved into Party doctrine. It synthesized ideas about the four major areas of modernization of Chinese society into "a complete scientific system that embraces philosophy, political economics, and scientific socialism. It covers, among other things, the economy, politics, science and technology, education, culture, ethnic affairs, military affairs, foreign affairs, the united front, and Party development" ([ACCWS, 2021](#)). In addition, according to the official point of view, the theory of building socialism with Chinese characteristics covers the following research fields: "path of development, stages of development, fundamental task, motive force, external conditions, political guarantees, strategic plan, leading force and forces to rely on, and China's reunification" ([ACCWS, 2021](#)). As sacralised in this way, Deng's theory of Chinese socialism was intended to penetrate the activities of millions of individual and collective actors. In 1982, the new Constitution integrated these changes into China's economic, political, and cultural life by stressing the variety of innovations triggered by Deng Xiaoping.

The new legal regulations fostered initiative and responsibility among individuals across every action sphere. The results became visible without much delay. The forty years between 1979 and the present have been marked by profound transformations of all *social relations* and institutional practices in Chinese society, as well as in its international status. During this period of forty years, GDP has been growing by 9% on average per year. In 1978, the GDP of the People's Republic of China was \$149.54 billion (2015 value). By 2021, China's GDP was already \$17.73 trillion ([World Bank, 2022a](#)). While the general literacy level was 79.19% in 1983, it reached 98.47% of the population by 2018 ([Statista, 2022](#)).

Even economically underdeveloped modern-day societies are complex administrative constructions. They can transform themselves by means of rationally organized action on the part of the state apparatus. Deng defined the aim of the Chinese state's activities mostly as the modernization of industry, agriculture, scientific and technological development, and national defence. To ensure efficient state intervention in the various action spheres, he suggested far-reaching reforms of the state administration. Having collected significant administrative experience in both military and civil organizations from the positions of a military commander, state and Party functionary at the highest level, Deng developed sophisticated skills of negotiation and persuasion. These organizational capacities were publicly tested on various occasions and under different conditions. His reform program was presented in a simplified and easily understandable way. The content and style of argumentation in his article "China must take its place in the field of high technology" ([Deng, 1994](#), Oct. 1988) are good examples of Deng Xiaoping's quality as a communicator of complicated scientific and political ideas to the public at large.

Analysing all aspects of Chinese society in the search for possible reforms, Deng paid special attention to the multiple causes and multiple consequences of poverty. His interpretation of the problems related to poverty was mostly guided by humanist considerations. However, Deng the politician also clearly defined the risks facing the socialist organization of society due to impoverishment. His article "To uphold

socialism we must eliminate poverty” ([Deng, 1994](#), April 1987) exemplifies the point well. Analysts have made a clear assessment of the development and results of the Chinese reform process after 1978: “These were years in which China moved from being a poor, backward country to achieving living standards above the world average and now approaching those of the high-income countries. Over these four decades, China moved from near economic isolation to be the world’s largest trading economy” ([Garnaut, Song & Fang, 2018](#), p. 1). In fact, there is no other case in human history of such a large society’s peaceful and radical transformation. This happened with the remaking of the extremely poor peasantry into much better-paid industrial workers. The fast reduction of rural poverty was the crucial practical task the reformers around Deng wanted to resolve. They succeeded in a spectacular way ([World Bank, 2022b](#), p. 5).

The economic results provide evidence that the suggested synthesis of market mechanisms and socialist planning brought about a swift and substantial rise in productivity, GDP, and household incomes, not to mention a vibrant cultural life and the catapulting of hundreds of millions of people to a satisfactory standard of living in an organized way. This was a tremendous achievement. Having for centuries been treated as negligible in geostrategic games, mainland China in only a few decades became one of the major global players. As a personal plan, this development was the triumph of the strong individualization of Deng Xiaoping. However, in this specific case, it is also possible to tentatively calculate the parallel rise of the individualization of hundreds of millions of average Chinese citizens. According to World Bank statistics, the average life expectancy in China increased from 64 years in 1980 to 75 years in 2020. This immense contribution of Deng Xiaoping to the all-out development and well-being of Chinese society is widely recognized and celebrated. He is often called the father of modern China ([Vogel, 2011](#)).

Considering the broad public recognition of Deng Xiaoping’s personal contributions to the acceleration of China’s technological, economic, political, and cultural development, some growing problems are rarely talked about if indeed mentioned at all. These concern the unintended destructive consequences of the ideas and practices of Deng Xiaoping and his followers. No doubt, the technological and economic development the country went through had numerous constructive effects on society, the state, and the people of China ([Morrison, 2012](#)). However, the practice of getting rich fast had the effect of rapidly rising social and economic inequality in the country. China’s current Gini coefficient level of 0.48 is a very serious warning to think about deficiencies in Deng’s strategy of accelerated social and economic development, or in the implementation of the strategy at least. Another important dimension of inequality is the territorial imbalance between coastal areas and the huge territories of the underdeveloped Western part of the country. Referring to these and other confusing effects of the reforms, some authors prefer to define the present-day social and economic system in the country not as socialism with Chinese characteristics but as state capitalism ([Yasheng, 2008](#)). Due to the repeated stress on the relevance of research and technological development, the Chinese industry was able to supply global markets mostly with simple, cheap products exploiting the advantage of its

inexpensive labour ([Schreiber, 2019](#)). This situation changed profoundly during the reforms, and the search for more sophisticated products has yet to bring about the necessary balances ([Shi, 2017](#)).

Given the profound changes in international power relations, the normative vision of Deng might be reconsidered ([Daekwon, 2017](#); [Walker, 2021](#)). The bloody suppression of student demonstrations for democracy in Tiananmen Square in the summer of 1989 is not a matter of public debate. Nevertheless, the decisive role of Deng Xiaoping in the event is very well known although rarely questioned. One may speculate that in the deciding moment, Deng compared the prospects of his project for rationally organized improvement of all sectors and segments of Chinese society with the alternative experience from the post-socialist development of some Eastern European societies. In the public mind, both in China and abroad, he is exclusively the father of a very successful societal transformation of Chinese society. At its core was the fast and substantial increase in living standards for millions of citizens in the country.

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analyses of two unique cases of strong individualization return the discussion to the perennial topic of *the great man and his relationship with the social environment*. One may only speculate how the life trajectory of a rather complicated person, both psychologically and socially, like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi might change under different historical circumstances. He could have been an ordinary citizen experiencing tension and conflict within plenty of social environments — the family, neighbourhood, local administration, with local figureheads in business, religious denominations, etc. It was a blessing for him to appear on the historical horizon at the moment when the hot issue of decolonization was increasingly approaching the peak of its economic and political relevance on the global agenda. Someone with his artistic, political, and psychological talents could obviously not miss the opportunity to play a highly visible role in the historical process. This happened, Gandhi is adored as a national hero in India, and he is part of the identity of India on the international scene.

Deng Xiaoping represents a different pattern of a great man in a turbulent historical environment. While Gandhi's case was notably embedded in the Indian religious tradition, Deng was more progressive in this respect. He dedicated his whole life to serving an influential secular religion. Under the precarious conditions of the Long March, the Civil War, and the Cultural Revolution, the intensity of existential risks he took was extremely high. Given this dramatic experience, the final segment of his life brought about the full recognition of his dedicated service to the Communist Party of China and its ideology. The return on Deng's efforts ([Moak and Lee, 2015](#)) in aid of his party were quite substantial. His visions about the past, present, and future of China were called theory and presented as the guideline for solving all the country's intellectual

and practical problems. The value of Deng's ideas and deeds are currently valued so highly that he is regarded as a Chinese hero and his name is mentioned in the Statutes of the CCP.

The striking similarity between the current historical perceptions of Mahatma Gandhi and Deng Xiaoping notwithstanding, the differences in their messages as understood today are substantially important.

First, Gandhi struggled intellectually and physically to create the preconditions for societal transformation. This had to start after Indian independence. Deng had rather different aims. His historical task was to make sure that an inefficiently functioning transformation mechanism would be radically improved.

Second, Gandhi had quite specific personal and institutional (Congress Party) tasks and means of task resolution. In his activities, he regularly referred to religious principles and practices. His respect for science and technological development was based on the search for truth, while the truth was defined as another word for God. Deng's devotion to the ideology and politics of one party was actually devotion to a secular religion. This relationship had far-reaching implications for the content and style of his theories and practical activities. As much as was possible, they were focused on the improvement of the well-being of the population of China.

Third, Gandhi's efforts for coordination of the search for truth-God with the struggle for independence had serious implications for structural stability and societal change in India. In the beginning of the 1940s, the deepest structural division and confrontation was between two parties: on the one side was the imperial administration, together with its military and para-military forces; on the other was the indigenous population of the Indian subcontinent. The positive distinction was "Indian population", and the negative distinction was "non-British population". During the rather historically important forties, the non-British population became increasingly aware of the politically deepening distinction between Hindus and Muslims. The anticipation of future interreligious tensions and bloody clashes fostered the conversion of a feeling of risk to a high intensity of hate and readiness to fight. The processes in China took a somewhat different direction. The hatred of fighting enemies was strong between communists and nationalists during the 1930s and 1940s. Last but not least, the Cultural Revolution reproduced some patterns of hate from the Civil war. The party man Deng was permanently at the very centre of tensions and conflicts. He was often selected to cope with hatred in a nonviolent or, more often, violent way by following the dedication to his civic religion.

Fourth, the growing intensity of diverging feelings of risk indicated the appearance of new qualities within Indian and Chinese societies. It also indicated the strengthening of the individualizing activities of Gandhi and Deng as well as of millions of other Indians and Chinese people.

The implementation of transformation strategies is a process which depends upon various conditions and decisions. The very idea of comparing Gandhi's and Deng's transformation strategies came about due to the profound differences in both actors' content and style of thinking.

Living with the idea of the independence of India, Gandhi accumulated the existential experience of uprisings and other forms of violent resistance undertaken by Indians against imperial rule. The British managed to suppress these uprisings and other forms of resistance. British administrations tried to use the growing division between Hindus and Muslims to strengthen their own position in the independence negotiations. However, these manoeuvrings turned out to be useless once it became clear that the leadership of the Muslim community wanted territorial separation of the subcontinent's two religious' communities. This destructive development, dividing the colony into two mutually hostile states, temporarily ended up with a civil war and has remained a source of permanent tension and conflict. There was a burning need to change the pattern of resistance; Gandhi stepped in with his nonviolent theory of political action. This was an act of radical departure from the mainstream theory and practice of preparing and waging war. The dilemma of the choice between violent or nonviolent resistance against ruling individuals, groups, and institutions or against foreign intervention is real and tested. Deng was certainly confronted with that dilemma many times. One could imagine that his life experience was dominated by memories of bloody battles. His decision to allow armed violence against unarmed people in the summer of 1989 also must have been difficult. Ultimately, he made the decision in favour of the bloody suppression of the students' demonstration by considering the fate of the radical reforms he had initiated ten years earlier.

What can one learn today from this important historical comparison? Regarding Mahatma Gandhi, the answer seems to be more or less clear. On a personal level, Gandhi was a rather specific historical phenomenon possessing the powers of attraction and influence under the historical conditions of colonial India. Under these conditions, his philosophy and unusual behaviour turned out to be meaningful and practically productive. Gandhi's India became a pioneer in the wave of decolonization after WWII. However, the Indian experience of peaceful decolonization was not universal. The independence of other former colonies such as Algeria or Vietnam came about as the result of protracted, bloody wars. Nevertheless, the pattern of the Indian path to independence was nearly repeated in the decolonization of South Africa with the mass peaceful demonstrations organized by the African National Congress and its charismatic leader Nelson Mandela. Some of Gandhi's ideas and practices of resistance guided Martin Luther King and the activities of the mass movement against racial inequality in the United States. Against this historical experience, the ideological and practical experience of Mahatma Gandhi alongside the example of his strong individualization has had universal relevance.

There are various potential ways to repurpose Deng Xiaoping's theoretical ideas or practical decisions and actions. His pattern of individualization is the concentration of interest in and action on practical problems. This action model by Deng Xiaoping brought about unique achievements in the accelerated modernization of Chinese society and tragic experiences with the suppression of the students' movement for democracy. The question immediately arises about the capacity of Deng's pattern of decision-making and actions to be rational and moral at the same time. This question does not concern the individualization of Deng Xiaoping and the modernization of China alone; the same pattern of accelerated modernization has been successfully applied in

South Korea, Vietnam, and other countries. Deng was correct: the colour of the cat is much less important than its ability to catch mice. But an open question still concerns the moral value and definition of the aims and means of human action. This issue is not limited to the efficient development and functioning of actors but includes the value-normative content of goal attainment. Some of the aims and means of action might be morally acceptable, while others may not be.

Finally, the analysis of ideas and practices suggested and carried out by Gandhi and Deng offers arguments in favour of the necessity and possibility of historical studies on past, present, and future individualization. Whether or not religion has fallen prey to progressing individualization might be decided on the basis of long-term comparative studies. The very fact that the strong individualization of the leaders of India's and China's societal transformations is under study says something about the inclination to regard issues of individualization as a Western phenomenon alone. The assumption is false. While the issues of individualization are basically universal, they might be specified according to the local situation ([Rajkai, 2016](#)).

This comparative analysis makes it inevitably clear that the multifaceted issue concerning the relationships between Eastern collectivism and the global trend of individualization cannot be meaningfully studied and discussed in the limited space of an article. The advancement of individualization is accompanied by the strengthening of institutionalization and vice versa. If this mutual control does not take place, the social system is doomed to explode by either over-differentiation or over-integration. Another important conclusion is that the theory of individualization has reference points in Western Europe and North America as well as in Asia. The conclusions of the study can be summarized as follows:

Table 1: Contribution of two strongly individualized Actors to the innovation and integration of societal systems

| Mahatma Gandhi | Deng Xiaoping |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared religious backgrounds • Clear aims guided by God-truth • Reduction of poverty is a central issue • Balanced initiative and responsibility • Rational arguments and metaphors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong shared secular religion • Clear aims guided by a secular religion • Reduction of poverty is a central issue • Balanced initiative and responsibility • Rational arguments and old traditions |
| Dynamics of Social relations in the innovation and integration of societal systems: | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privatization of agriculture • Privatization of industry • De-centralized decision-making • Enhanced coordination of decisions • Rational arguments and metaphors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privatization of collectivized agriculture • Privatization of collectivized industry • Centralized decision-making and control • Enhanced coordination of decisions • Rational arguments and traditions |
| Contradictory Processes in the innovation and integration of societal systems: | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trial and error procedures, corrections • Let peasants migrate to towns and industry • Deepened traditional inequality • Facilitated assistance and insurance policies • Induced cooperation in reform policies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experimentation and corrections • Migration should be well organized • Risks of traditional and new inequality • Managed assistance and insurance • Maintained cooperation in policies |

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