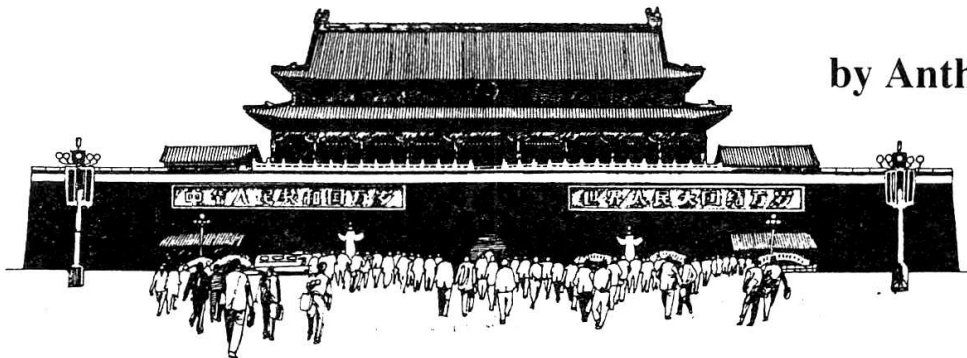


POLITICAL OVERVIEW OF CHINA

by Anthony B. L. Cheung



(Editor's note: The following address by the author, who is a senior lecturer in the Department of Public and Social Administration at the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong was given during a China Seminar held at the Maryknoll Fathers' Center House in Stanley, Hong Kong, on the 15th of February, 1989.)

I wish to thank you for inviting me to give this presentation today on the subject of the current political situation in China. As you know, I'm not a political journalist who follows events in China closely on a day-to-day basis, nor am I considered to be a "China watcher". It is, therefore, not my intention here, indeed it is beyond the scope of my ability, to give you clues as to what is going on in the latest political struggles or debates now taking place in China. Nor can I give you hints about the rivalries that exist within the present Party-State leadership.

Rather, I deem it my task in this presentation to trace some of the general trends which underlie political developments in China during the past decade or so, and, in the process, to offer a few points of personal observation which, in my view, are crucial to a better understanding of politics in that country. My comments are mainly based on a general analysis of major events and changes which have occurred in China over a period of time, particularly in the course of the past decade when "reform" and "opening up" have become the catchwords of the day. In so doing, I may be only offering an outline of the forest without providing a detailed description of the trees, and I hope my presentation might be received in the light of such limitations.

Let me start with a fundamental structural consideration, or determinant, of Chinese politics since the establishment of the communist

regime in 1949. That is, we have a state system in China founded explicitly on Marxist-Leninist principles and devoted to the building up of socialism.

According to Marxist theory, after the overthrow of the capitalist order by a proletarian revolution, a political form will still be present, known as the dictatorship of the proletariat. Its task will be to facilitate the transition from a capitalist society to a Communist society.

In the early post-revolutionary stage of such a socio-economic transformation process, i.e. during the socialist stage, "the proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest by edict all capital assets from the bourgeoisie, centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the state, i.e. of the proletariat organized as the ruling class, and increase the productive forces as rapidly as possible." (The Communist Manifesto). Hence, the new 'state', or the 'proletarian dictatorship' will take on the tasks of (a) appropriation of capital; (b) centralization of production; and (c) economic expansion; all of these in order to enhance the production and wealth of society to such a level where transition to a higher stage of communism is possible. By then, because of the highest levels attained through modern productive forces and a superabundance of material wealth, it will be possible to reward 'according to need' and not in accordance with 'bourgeois right'. With the total abolition of social class distinctions and conflicts and the destruction of the exploitative relations of production, the state can "wither away".

Thus goes the logic of communist revolution and the Marxist conception of the communist state. It is the ideology in which all socialist regimes are rooted. The precedent of how such a communist state is or can be organized was set in the Soviet Union. According to the Stalinist model which the PRC borrowed after 1949, the Communist Party is the vanguard of the proletariat and other labour classes, dedicated to the protection and development of the socialist system, and, therefore, must form the core of the leadership of all the social organizations and state apparatus of the labour classes. The proletarian dictatorship hence was expressed in reality as the hegemony of the Party over all spheres of social and political life. However, it was argued that following the revolution, with the abolition of the oppressor classes, the proletariat in effect would embody the universal interests of society. Therefore, the proletarian state would in essence be the state of 'the people' and would be non-alienative, as opposed to the capitalist state before the revolution.

Upon the founding of the People's Republic, Mao Zedong described the form of the political system of China as the "People's Democratic Dictatorship", which was to serve as the transitional phase prior to advancement to a higher stage of proletarian dictatorship. This was in recognition of the political realities of that day, when the CCP managed to secure national power only with the aid and support of the petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeois classes. However, by 1956, with the gradual shift of Chinese politics to the left, the CCP began officially to talk of having a proletarian dictatorship, and China was in high gear on her road to socialism.

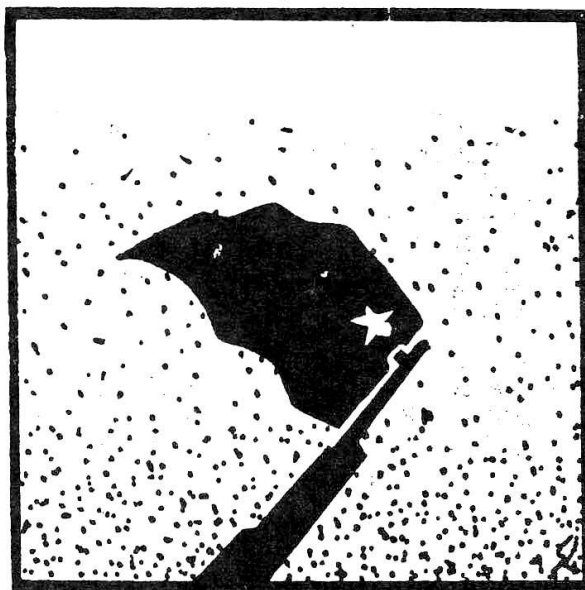
Partly due to the transplant of the Soviet model in the early 1950's, and partly derived from China's own elitist and centralizing traditional political culture (now given further justification by the Marxist-Leninist theory of state) the Communist system which developed in post-1949 China was in essence a highly centralized one, with all power emanating from the Centre, which is also the core of Party leadership. Under the principle of unitary command by the party, all institutions, be they military or economic, cultural or social, were all placed under strict state control and subject to the unilateral control of the Party organization. The economy was subject to state central planning. The law was placed in a subordinate position to Party doctrines and policies. Conflicts and disputes were resolved by means of the Party line rather than through any resort to judicial litigation by the courts.

However, the revolution did not bring about a unified and peaceful society. Indeed, the new society was not devoid of conflicts and contradictions, but remained filled with social strife of all kinds. This is, of course, only natural. We find the same thing happening in all developing societies which are trying to move from a condition of poverty and have to develop their economies in the midst of much internal contradiction and external constraint. The failures of a command economy, along with the intermittent adoption of inappropriate plans and strategies also give rise to new contradictions based on the 'socialist system' itself. These contradictions and conflicts, when they become linked to divergent political views on how to build socialism, formed the basis of factionalism in China which was so prevalent during the 1960's and 1970's. Increased factionalism went hand-in-hand with the rising level of intra-elite conflict and the declining level of political institutionalization within society. The fact that the socialist nation was considered to be unitary, and of the people, precluded the recognition of social conflicts and divergent views as right and proper. Although in 1957 Mao did highlight the importance of dealing with internal contra-

dictions among the people, he also qualified his concern with the dictum that such contradictions were non-antagonistic in nature. Intra-society conflicts of interest and competition for resources and power were still to be officially suppressed, and all conflicts were to be treated as a clash between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces, i.e. in essence, they were to be viewed as part of the class struggle.

It must also be borne in mind that the nature of the Chinese communist state, with its associated social organization, dictated the banning of autonomous organizations which might otherwise contest the Party's power. This resulted in an authoritarian form of economic and social collectivism, with political participation being very much geared toward extreme vertical relationships. As the existing political order prevented the formation of autonomous organizations on the intermediate level of society (i.e. between the state and the masses), the Party left itself open to direct confrontation by the masses, which it sought to influence, absorb and mobilize through state-sponsored non-autonomous organizations, such as trade unions, and officially inspired mass campaigns.

The direct confrontation of the Party-State with social forces also meant that interest conflicts and rivalries for the allocation of resources and power were ultimately focused on a single point—the Party. Disputes had to be resolved with the Party through intensive political means, hence the importance of the concept of the party 'line'. On the other hand, since the Party-State dictated the welfare of the people, social and economic plans devised by the bureaucracy were not simply blueprints for national development or targets for socialist construction, but they directly determined the distribution and allocation of values and material benefits among institutions and social groups and sectors. Again, the Party was at the centre of social conflict.



The post-revolutionary period which lasted until the late 1970's and which was so much characterized by social and political upheavals and intense political struggles, can be said to have been sociologically determined by the form in which society was organized on the original premise of building socialism.

Things only started to change after the Cultural Revolution and the return to pragmatism under Deng Xiaoping's leadership. But changes have come not so much from Deng's reformist innovations as from the dictates of prevailing circumstances. In other words, the Chinese leadership was not presented with any viable choice after the debacle of the Cultural Revolution except reform. Reform was the only route left open to it.

The Cultural Revolution undoubtedly brought about great damage and immeasurable social turmoil within Chinese society. But viewed from a more historical perspective, it was only the excesses of the Cultural Revolution which finally led people to a serious reflection on the prevailing socialist system. The Cultural Revolution had brought to the forefront a great crisis within Chinese Communism -- a crisis, in my view, of legitimation. China in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution was in a state of great confusion and uncertainty. People began to lose faith in communism and to cast doubts on the Party leadership. Many took on a pessimistic view about the future. Hence, the crisis was at one and the same time a crisis of the legitimation of communism as well as the legitimation of Communist Party rule.

During a legitimation crisis, what the state can do to regain credibility is either to seek ways to strengthen popular support, or to buy people off with increased delivery of goods and services. In other words, either the state introduces political reforms to accommodate more participation, or it must deliver better economic performance so as to retain and secure its acceptance by the governed.

Viewed from this perspective, it would be reasonable to say that China under Deng is trying to do both to solve the legitimation crisis. She first started with drastic economic reforms with a view to improving people's standard of living. With the reputation of the Party more or less shattered after the Cultural Revolution and as it was no longer possible to reactivate people's enthusiasm through high sounding revolutionary slogans or political campaigns, it could only be a pragmatic gesture to use material benefits to gain back the minds and hearts of the people. The adoption of an opening-up strategy in economic development, with a reduced emphasis on state control and a corresponding effort to increase private initiatives, marks not only a repudiation of the command economy model which had proved to be a failure, if not a disaster, in the post-revolutionary period. But a deliberate attempt was also made to remove unnecessary dogmatic restrictions on activities so that productive forces might be fully liberated to bring about a speedy increase in distributable output. It can further be suggested that as the Party began to realize the limitation of its capacity to deliver, it

would see economic liberalization with full Party endorsement as an acceptable means to lessen the Party's burden.

Political reforms in the 1980's are partly a response to the legitimization crisis through efforts to gain popular support. In the past, the hegemony of the Party was above challenge. The Party was viewed as the liberator of the nation and the vanguard of the revolution. However, by the late 1970's there was a widening credibility gap between the Party and the masses whose interests and inspirations it was supposed to embrace. No longer able to count on its ideological superiority and moral leadership, the only way to secure political support was to open up the political system to incorporate more participants and to make the system more representative. The revival of the work of the National People's Congress and the People's Political Consultative Conference, together with reforms of the nomination and electoral procedures are obviously part of this general effort toward political liberalization. But more importantly, political reforms also take the form of decentralization of power, the separation of Party from the State, and the readjustment of the State-Society relationship.

Decentralization of power is partly a logical consequence of economic reforms in which enterprises are to be freed from direct Party and State control and given autonomy in production and management decision-making. In the process of breaking up centralized power, not only do enterprises get more decision-making power, but provincial and local governments are also delegated more authority. The process of economic liberalization in the name of building a socialist commodity economy has led to a gradual emergence of economic pluralism (plurality in production mode, in ownership, in distributive patterns, as well as in management). This, in turn, is giving rise to a greater span of divergence in social interests. A more interest-based social organization is bound to emerge which would be in contradiction to the previous assumption of unified popular interest represented by the Party. In these circumstances, the Party is running into increasing difficulty in maintaining its all embracing hegemonic position and has to get itself out of the centre of conflicts, to stand above them and to play the role of mediator or arbitrator. The separation of Party from State can, therefore, be seen as a move in that direction, to reduce the role of the Party to a more appropriate and manageable one that is compatible with the changed external environment. From now on, the Party will exercise only political leadership and will not directly meddle with the management of state institutions or enterprises. Its task is to ensure that state power still follows closely the Party line which should represent the paramount interest of the nation. The Party continues to control the

national direction, though such control will have to be realized through properly legitimized constitutional means and procedures. An outcome of Party-State separation is the reconstruction of the State power organization -- the National People's Congress and local congresses, and the State Council -- as a relatively autonomous power base able to counterbalance and, if necessary, to restrain the Party apparatus.

Under the present political rethinking, not only is the power and role of the Party to be redefined, but the power of the State vis-a-vis society is also undergoing a process of readjustment. There is currently a move to reverse the 'Big Government; Small Society' situation which was very much identified with an orthodox socialist order. With the increasing commodification of the economy, where the market will be mainly responsible for the distribution of economic interests, the role of the State has but to be reduced to the extent that it only looks after the political order and provides the necessary state regulation to ensure a healthy operation of the market.

In line with the above major themes of political reforms, administrative and organizational reforms are also being contemplated which would, if successful, produce a more institutionalized cadre system based on merit-performance and be more subject to control by law. The state will in due course adopt a civil service system, part of which will be modeled on the professionalised civil services of the Western democracies.

The reforms outlined above are mostly still at their conceptual stage and it remains to be seen whether they can be implemented as intended and what new problems will arise during the process of implementation. Undoubtedly, any changes or reforms will mean that some may lose while others may gain. Hence it should not be assumed that reforms can be carried out without facing suspicion or even opposition, sabotage or distortion. Already, the economic reforms are running into trouble, with the people having to cope with rising inflation and increased corruption even before they can expect to enjoy the benefits of sustained economic growth. Political reforms are no less easy or straightforward.

However, what I have been trying to point out in this presentation is that these reforms have firm sociological roots in the current crisis of legitimation in communist China. The present package of reforms may not fully succeed, but that should not be a cause for pessimism because so long as the crisis persists, the system must find its own way to redress the imbalance and reforms are but the order of the day.