

China Today: Contemporary Issues

Beda Liu Chia-Cheng, S.J.

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Few if any events in the last half of the twentieth century are of comparable significance either to the people of the East, or to the rest of us.¹

Don't we need to learn more about the depth of frustration of the Chinese people who have sacrificed so much for so long in order to gain so little in their search for 'wealth and power'?²

Introduction

For most people the Tiananmen Square Events represent a convenient recent reference point on contemporary China. For seven consecutive weeks from mid-April to early June in 1989, the events which took place in China's ancient capital caught worldwide attention. It has been five years now since the public demonstrations, appeals of intellectuals and student hunger strikes were crushed by tanks and guns. While the events and their impact are still lingering in our minds, China has already embarked on another journey: a renewed drive for reform, opening to the outside world and modernization, marked by the southern trip of Deng Xiaoping, the nation's "great architect of reform," made at the beginning of 1992 and culminating at the 14th Party Congress held in mid-October of the same year. What happened before the Events and since has its roots in the nation's social, political and economic life. Contemporary issues related to China today can be comprehended only through an historical perspective. For this, one has to go back to China's recent past.

Crisis of Faith

On October 1, 1949, on the occasion which marked the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed, "We, the people of China have now stood up."³ On that day the 300,000 people who rallied at the Tiananmen square symbolized the enthusiasm, support and expectation from a large sector of the populace which the new regime was able to generate, even though others preferred to adopt a wait-and-see attitude. According to the official version of the history of the PRC, the Communist Revolution has led the Chinese people to overthrow "three huge mountains" which heretofore have shackled them under the oppression of *feudalism, imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism*. This is the legacy that China's present leadership inherited from its earliest revolutionary days. *"Historical experiences have proved that only the Communist Party can save China, and without socialism there would be no New China,"* so said the official propaganda.⁴

For many at the time, the Communist Party of China (CPC) and its program did represent a better alternative than the decadent Guomindang (the Nationalist Party which retreated to Taiwan after the Communist takeover). The latter was then plagued by corruption and skyrocketing inflation -- ironically a situation that bore certain resemblance to the one faced by the CPC in the years before the Tiananmen Square Events. However, between the two situations, there exists one vital difference: at present, there is no clear alternative inside China besides the CPC.

Initially, the CPC achieved impressive accomplishments in terms of economic reconstruction and the maintenance of social order under the effective control of a strong central government. This lasted through the period of the first Five-Year Plan (1953-1957). Aware of "chaos" created in the process of reform initiated in recent years, many today looked back with a sense of nostalgia to the period of the 50's and the early 60's. For them, these were days of guaranteed welfare and "sham equality." A collective spirit prevailed and Party practices were good. Above all, one did not need to worry about social stability and a price hike on daily necessities.⁵

Yet in the wild attempt to accelerate the developmental

process and in a daring bid to create a "socialist new man" and a new society, the Party committed grave errors epitomized by two great events: the Great Leap Forward (GLF) and the Cultural Revolution. The former is characterized by its slogans: to progress by leaps, *duo, kuai, hao, sheng*, (more, faster, better, cheaper) and to surpass Britain and catch up with the United States; and the latter, by the slogan: *chu si jiu* (to destroy the four olds) -- old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. As a result, some 30 million people died of famine in the "three years of bitter battle" following the GLF. Another 20 million died in the "Ten Disastrous Years" of the Cultural Revolution. In addition, the latter left 100 million scarred victims.⁶

With mass campaigns going on one after another under the regime, we were informed: "There is hardly a family in China that does not bear scars from the wounds recorded during these violent events."⁷ Scholar Anne F. Thurston once described this situation as a "loss of cultural and spiritual values, loss of hope and ideals; loss of time, truth, and life; loss in short, of nearly everything that gives meaning to life."⁸ A similar situation prevailed after the Tiananmen Square Events. In other words, it was a profound "crisis of faith" -- the so called "triple crisis of faith": loss of faith in Communism, loss of trust in the Communist Party, and loss of confidence in the future of the nation's Four Modernizations (industry, agriculture, defense and science/technology).⁹ Consequently, "Only the emergence of a credible alternative system of beliefs and values can fill the void left by the mythology of the Cultural Revolution," as Sinologist Stuart Schram aptly pointed out.¹⁰

Reforms

Mao Zedong, "the Great Helmsman" of the Chinese Revolution, died in September 1976. The Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the CPC held in December 1978, is generally regarded as the event that marked the beginning of China's post-Mao reforms under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. In a more open atmosphere in which contacts with the outside world were made possible, the Chinese, especially the Chinese intellectuals -- traditionally regarded as the conscience of society -- became acutely aware of their country's backward-

ness and her awkward position in the family of nations. Underlying such awareness is the millenium-old Chinese Centralism (the "Middle Kingdom Syndrome") as expressed by Jin Guantao and his wife, two of China's leading intellectuals:

Our deepest impression about Mainland China is its extreme poverty. China has too little influence in the world This is not commensurable to her destined position in the world. In view of this, it is absolutely necessary for China to open herself and embark on reforms.¹¹

Thus, reform and revitalization along with an opening towards the outside world were the order of the day. In Deng's words, this is something equivalent to the making of a revolution: "If we do not make revolution not only will there be no future for the Four Modernizations, but the Party and the nation might perish as well."¹² In other words, the regime's legitimacy was at stake.

Economic Reform

Economic reform was initiated through the introduction of the "Agricultural Responsibility System." Its essence consisted of two elements: the first, creating a linkage between the amount produced and individual reward; the second, granting greater autonomy for decision-making concerning production and distribution. As a result, agricultural production increased dramatically and the economy in the countryside was revitalized. The annual income of peasants rose from 120 *yuan* in 1978 to about 400 *yuan* in 1985.¹³

Encouraged by good results in the countryside as well as faced with the gradual leveling-off of incremental gain, the government sought to extend the "Economic Responsibility System" to enterprises in an effort to shift the country's economic system from the rigid Stalinist-type central planning to a system characterized by the slogan: "the state regulates the market, and the market guides the enterprises." In October 1984, the Third Plenum of the 12th Central Committee declared that China's socialist economy was a *planned commodity economy based on public ownership*.¹⁴ Accordingly, the new system was to replace the previous practice of "enterprises eating from the state's big pot, and workers eating from the

enterprises' big pot." So far this practice has been the backbone of "sham" egalitarianism and the resultant lack of initiative on the part of workers.

In 1978 the Chinese economy was almost entirely run on a planned basis; in comparison, as of 1988, almost half of it had become open to the play of market mechanisms. By the end of 1988, the proportion of products which were placed under a state-fixed price was about 40% of agricultural products, 64% for essential raw materials, and 45% for industrial consumer products. The rest were under guided pricing or free pricing.¹⁵

In these circumstances, cadres and people engaged in the private economy enjoyed considerable opportunities to become rich either by operating in the "free market" or by manipulating goods through political influence or by the use of "bureaucratic privilege" in the so-called "commercialization of power." In any case, the Chinese "two-track system" unintentionally provided loop-holes for many abuses called *buzheng zhifeng* (unhealthy practices), old and new.¹⁶ Corruption, bureaucrat-speculators (*guan dao*), inflation, rising prices, the unequal share of benefits created by the reform and other related issues together with problems such as the negative impact on public morality and social discipline, etc., became sources of public resentment.

This happened in a society noted for its increasing plurality in public demands and its rising expectations due to the new policy. Public expectations, however, were increasingly marked by polarization -- commoners wanting security, intellectuals demanding freedom and cadres looking for a sense of achievement. Initially, in 1984-85, the people's dissatisfaction was directed toward issues of wages and prices. Gradually it was broadened to include discontent over corruption, unequal opportunities and cadres seeking private gain.¹⁷

As one expert prudently noted, "these popular demands for justice and accountability were cries for reform rather than expressions of out-right opposition to party rule."¹⁸

Therefore, it was not purely rhetoric when in May-June 1988, a year before the Tiananmen Square Events, Zhao Ziyang, then premier and acting Secretary General of the Party, expressed his sentiment in a Politburo meeting: "Our ship has steamed into a stormy sea. We are in a grim situation."¹⁹ In October of the same year, *China News Analysis* made the fol-

lowing observation and comment: "The whole economic mechanism is seized [clogged] up and the People's Republic enters its fortieth year facing intractable issues which may well be among the most difficult challenges in its history."²⁰

Political Reform

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci wrote: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot yet be born; in the interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."²¹ These words can be well used to describe China's situation at the time. While the economic reform was making its impact on the nation's life, there was no corresponding reform in the political structure. Although Deng's proposal on the "Structural Reform of Party and State Leadership," was accepted in a secret Politburo meeting held from August 18-23, 1980, it was not until 1984 and thereafter that various forums were opened for enthusiastic discussion and debate on the subject of political reform. As a result, political reform gradually developed momentum.

We come to the increasing realization that, without political and cultural reform -- a comprehensive reform to match the one made in economy -- it would be difficult not only for us to proceed, but also difficult to preserve what we have already achieved.

The above quotation is from Hu Qili spoken in a meeting of academic circles in Shanghai in April 1986. Hu was then the head of the Secretariat of the Party's Central Committee. Since he was a close ally of both Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, it is little wonder that his star also fell after the Tiananmen Square Events. Along with Zhao, he was removed from the Standing Committee of the Politburo.²²

In a similar vein, Wan Li, then a Vice-premier who was later made the Chairman of the National People's Congress, spoke of "democratization and scientification of decision-making." Reportedly, in a meeting with Party Secretaries of central government organs, Wan said:

Being the ruling Party we should open [ourselves] widely to accept popular supervision, fully expand democracy, seriously

put democratic centralism into practice, and achieve self-perfection through self-criticism. Without this, the Party will be corrupted because of the absence of an opposition party. [In that case,] bureaucratism comes first, then corruption, and in the end, the people rise up and knock us down.²³

Ironically, the life of a regime, which has adopted the motto "to serve the people," is seriously threatened by bureaucratism and corruption. The extent to which bureaucratism has developed under the present regime was once summarized by Deng as having reached "an unbearable degree."

In any case, the momentum culminated in the blueprint of political reform adopted by the 13th Party Congress held in October-November 1987, the Congress that has been characterized as "a Congress of reform and opening." By then, in the areas concerning the direction and concrete steps towards political reform, there were signs of speculation regarding lifting of the ban on the "forbidden areas" (*jinqu*) which had been closed for more than three decades. Academic discussions were lively. Inevitably, discussion touched a highly sensitive (and dangerous) issue: reform of public ownership. In some enterprises, the separation of ownership rights and management rights was put into practice. One of the various forms it assumes is shareholding management.

Space does not permit me to go into details about the program of political reform, let alone its appraisal. Briefly stated, it includes the following aspects: separation of Party and government, delegating powers to lower levels, streamlining the administrative structure, the reform of the personnel system related to cadres, and socialist legality and democracy.

The Dilemma

The overall guiding principle behind China's contemporary reform is: "one focus, two basic points" (*yige zhongxin, liangge jibendian*). "One focus" refers to the economic reconstruction; and "two basic points" refers to the upholding of "reform and opening" while also upholding the "Four Cardinal Principles." The "Four Cardinal Principles" consist of the socialist road, people's democratic dictatorship, leadership of the Communist Party of China, and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. This overall guiding principle was canonized at the 13th Party

Congress and was reconfirmed at the 14th Party Congress held in October 1992 as "the foundation for the Party's basic line."²⁴ The Party and government take pains to make it clear that the purpose of the reform is not to weaken, let alone abolish, the Party's leadership but to strengthen it. "This revolution is not intended to change the nature of the socialist system but to improve and develop it," said Jiang Zeming, the Secretary General of the Party, in his report to the 14th Party Congress.²⁵ In this regard, the Party has been acting rather consistently. Basically, it practises what it preaches even though at times it conveys the impression that, in China, pragmatism reigns. This in turn gave rise to over optimism among some "China watchers," regarding the path China might follow both in the short and long run.

On the whole, the history of the PRC has been characterized by remarkable continuity both in terms of its guiding principles and its practical approaches to political power. Within this paradigm, many "new born things" were allowed and tolerated by the post-Mao leadership so long as they remained within the boundary of the Four Cardinal Principles even though they were defined and perceived in increasingly flexible and sometimes vague terms in recent years. A case in point is the term "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics." Not until the 14th Party Congress did it receive rudimentary theorization and become a "theory."²⁶

Whenever things appeared to have gone beyond the set boundary, merciless force was used to suppress the "counterrevolutionaries." "Just as I've always said, 'there will be absolutely no compromise on the Four Cardinal Principles.'" These were Deng's words for other leaders of the country.²⁷ Both Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang were charged with *inter alia*, laxity in their upholding of the Four Cardinal Principles.

The paradigm underlies the discernable cyclic pattern of "*shou-fang*" (tightening control and liberalization) so characteristic of the regime in terms of its general policy and concrete implementation of that policy. In this context, the Tiananmen Square Events, their aftermath along with the latest developments surrounding the 14th Party Congress can be viewed as the latest episodes in this historical drama of *shou* and *fang*. Here is Lucian Pye's observation:

If a blend of moderate policy success and a compromised ideo-

logical tradition are not enough to ensure the successor's political security, the likely alternative will be increased institutional repression. While there is nothing in Chinese pragmatism that makes political liberalism a desired value, political tolerance is perfectly acceptable so long as it causes no "inconvenience" for the authorities.²⁸

Pye further pointed out:

Since the rhythm of Chinese politics is not the left-right swings of Western systems but the up and down notion of tightening and relaxing controls, of centralization and decentralization, any increase in anxiety on the part of leadership is likely to translate into a greater degree of repression. This would probably be accompanied by the regime's efforts to attain great ideological justification.²⁹

Leadership Difference

Another issue notable in recent years is the differences among the nation's leaders. Apart from the diversity of personalities, these differences manifest themselves in policy preferences concerning a host of issues such as the pace, scope, strategy, benefit and cost of reform, its impact on social discipline and public morality, consideration of national unity and stability, international relations, and the theoretical justification in terms of basic Marxist tenets, etc. However, in all these matters, Deng's role remains pivotal. More than two years before the Events, Deng, then referring to the Anti-bourgeois Liberalism Movement which toppled Hu Yaobang, in a *neibu* (internal) document made it clear that the "struggle" would continue for "at least two decades," and Chinese leaders should ignore what people in other countries might think or say.³⁰ As happened later, it is the same Deng who, despite having retired from all Party and government posts, still managed to blow a "whirlwind of reform and opening" at the beginning of 1992. A question related to leadership succession is: What will happen after the aged leader "goes to meet Marx?"

Post Tiananmen Square Events

By the fall of 1988, China's overall reform was already in deep trouble. The authorities prescribed economic rectification.

Thus the key tasks of reform and construction for the next three years (1989-91) or even a longer period would be "to improve the economic environment and to rectify the economic order." The "belt tightening" policies of the Government have succeeded in cooling the over-heated economy and lowering the inflation rate from some 18% to less than 10%.³¹ However, stringent austerity policies also brought the number of people engaged in individual businesses down by 3.61 million to 12 million in 1989 alone. In addition, one million workers employed outside the government plan were dismissed as a result of various measures such as reduced demands, cutting down on large-scale infrastructure projects, the restriction in making loans, the suppression or reduction in production in as many as 30%-40% of the factories. As a result, the unemployment rate reached 3.5% contributing to a 50 million "floating population" seeking jobs. In recent years, this large "itinerant population" has become an important source of social instability. Frequently they become victims of social evils.³²

Furthermore, the program for political reform adopted by the 13th Party Congress largely came to a halt as stability became the overriding priority in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Events. Much of the Government's attention was diverted to the issue of "cleaning up the government and combating corruption." Since as many as 69% of government organs are staffed by Party members, the task cannot be pursued without cleaning up the Party at the same time. The official jargon for this is "the task of Party building" -- a rather formidable task that involves some 50 million Party members.

Apparently, in the wake of the Events, it suddenly dawned on the leaders that there did exist a huge gap between the "vanguard" Party and the people whom it was supposed to lead. Accordingly, Party members were once again exhorted to come close to the people, to get in touch with local realities and "listen to the cries of the people." The Party also reiterated its formula for "multi-party cooperation." Since 1982 the Party has defined its relationship with other small "democratic parties" as "longtime coexistence and mutual supervision, trusting each other with all sincerity and sharing weal or woe." A major document publicized in early 1990 designated, for the first time in the history of the PRC, the status of the democratic parties as "parties participating in government affairs." As can be expect-

ed, in all these attempts, the Party's absolute supremacy remained intact.³³

Concerning the events in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Chinese leaders spare little effort making it clear that the nation needs to safeguard itself against "peaceful evolution" (*heping yanbian*). They regard this as a new form of foreign molestation which, in the past, made China fall into a miserable condition. China, therefore, must wage a long-term struggle against bourgeois liberalism, and above all, strive to preserve national unity and stability. The Minister of Public Security named six kinds of "hostile forces". These included Western tactics, Taiwan and Hong Kong subversion, and "illegal" religious organizations and activities.³⁴ In a *neibu* document against peaceful evolution, the United States was accused of using "various channels, including the mass media, and broadcast agencies, as well as cultural and academic exchanges, to carry out infiltration against China, searching from the inside for new agents." Moreover, the United States was accused of using "human rights" -- a question the Chinese authorities regard as a matter which is within each country's sovereignty -- as an excuse to create international anti-Beijing sentiments.³⁵

Thus, "class struggle, even though it is not the principle contradiction in China's socialism, will continue to exist within certain limits for a long time." Moreover, "under certain circumstances, it could become very acute." This is a struggle between "infiltration and counter-infiltration," and between "subversion and counter-subversion." Furthermore according to some of the leaders, any unstable elements which may appear, "should be resolutely nipped in the bud."³⁶

As a concrete measure, beginning on January 15, 1990, all publications were required to go through reregistration procedures. Those which did not toe the Party line were subject to "rectification" or simply ordered to close down. The authorities also called for education in patriotism and unselfishness, collectivism and socialism. In February 1990, the State Education Commission issued new restrictions for students going for post-graduate studies and studying abroad. University graduates are required to "serve the country" before they are allowed to study abroad. Moreover, for those already abroad, concrete measures were also prescribed for better political controls.³⁷

In numerous political sessions, participants were subject to

indoctrination and required to express their attitude supporting the government's crackdown on the democratic movement. "It makes me sick," is the way one university lecturer put it, "but I have to do it." In the same vein, a teacher at the Communist Party School said, "We are a nation of actors. We all wear many masks."³⁸

Yet, to the dismay of the authorities, according to the opinion survey, administered by the Party Committee of Beijing University on the eve of the 1992 National Day, over 50% of the freshmen who had just completed one year military training before entering the University, chose "disappointed" and "fairly disappointed" on the question about personal confidence in the Party's leadership.³⁹ One recalls what the great leftist writer Lu Xun wrote in 1926 after personally witnessing the police open fire on unarmed students: "Lies written in ink can never conceal facts written in blood."⁴⁰

The Crisis Continues

Thus the crisis which the reform was originally designed to address is far from being solved. On the contrary, it has been deepened and broadened. For some, instead of chanting "without the Communist Party there would be no new China," they are beginning to contemplate the birth of a New China without the Party.⁴¹ In mid-May, 1990, in an article written for *The New York Times* entitled *When Marxism Died, It Left a Vast Emptiness*, Nicholas D. Kristof reported:

An age of secular faith appears to have collapsed in China, turning into a time of despair and doubt in which many people have no heroes and nothing to believe in This sense of emptiness has been on the rise in recent years, but many Chinese, interviewed in different parts of the country, say it has become particularly acute since the suppression of the democracy protests last June 3-4⁴²

This sense of despair, emptiness and purposelessness has been well captured in the movie *The Year of Our Fate*, which depicts how to live in a state of "no energy" -- "no energy to do something, no energy not to do something; no energy for going to class ... no energy to live, no energy to die."⁴³

Ironically, under the circumstances, various "hot topics"

have been catching on among students and some other sectors of the population. These include "Western thought fever," "Qiong Yao fever" (Qiong Yao is a popular female novelist in Taiwan), "karaoke fever", "ballroom fever," "bar fever," "movie fever," "commercial fever," and "reluctant-to-stay fever," etc.⁴⁴

An overall result: "Not only has China's market weakened, but her spirit has weakened as well," as one delegate to the Chinese Peoples Political Consultative Committee noted.⁴⁵

The preparatory work for the 14th Party Congress took place in this kind of atmosphere-- in a moment that more or less marked the end of the three-year period of "belt tightening." Reviving the dynamics of reform required Deng's personal efforts, and thus his southern tour made at the beginning of 1992 and the subsequent tugs of war with the hardline conservative forces in the Party.

The 14th Party Congress (Oct. 12-18, 1992)

The Congress duly acknowledged that, in the present (early) stage of socialism, the principle contradiction in Chinese society was the one between "the material and cultural needs of the people" and "the backwardness of production." Deng's "building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" was written into the revised Party Constitution. The change from "socialist planned commodity economy" to "socialist commodity economy," and Deng's explanation for it was hailed as a "brilliant thesis" and "a great breakthrough" in China's understanding of the relation between planning and market regulations."⁴⁶ Regarding the Party line, attention was directed against both *right* and *left* tendencies, but *mainly* against the *left*, although both have the potential to ruin the Party. Certain aspects of Jiang Zeming's report to the Congress are worth noting here.

The report called for the optimization of economic structures and the deepening of the reform of the system for managing foreign trade. It expressed the hope that China could quickly set up a new system which conformed to international norms. For the revitalizing of the economy, the Congress deemed it necessary first and foremost to promote the development of science and technology. Accordingly, education was made a top priority. Intellectuals, "by their better scientific and general education" are regarded as "advanced production forces" [notice here

the underlying mentality of pragmatism and instrumentalism]. In addition, the report also encouraged "independent study" [whatever this may mean].⁴⁷

Jiang's report to the Congress was entitled *Accelerating the Reform, Opening to the Outside World and the Drive for Modernization, so as to Achieve Greater Success in Building Socialism With Chinese Characteristics*. To sum up, economic reform: yes; political reform: yes, but with great reservation. Notably, the Congress kept silent about the separation of Party and government while giving encouragement to the separation of government and enterprise. "It would be absolutely wrong and harmful for anyone to doubt, weaken or negate the Party's position in power and its leading role," said Jiang. He also made it clear that a "Western multiparty parliamentary system" is out of question.⁴⁸

Apparently, the 14th Party Congress opened another cycle of the *shou-fang* drama. At this point, one is wondering how the "center" (economic construction) could be realistically hinged on the "two basic points" (reform and opening, and upholding the four Cardinal Principles)? Already in 1986, Michel Okesenberg, a distinguished China scholar, predicted that the long-term chances of China's reform succeeding with the Communist framework are between 35% and 40%.⁴⁹ In the eyes of some Japanese analysts for whom China is somewhat unpredictable, Westernization has made political instability in China inevitable.⁵⁰ Thus one may have good reason to wonder whether the seed of another "Tiananmen Square" is not already being planted in this latest round of reform, opening to the outside world and the drive for modernization.

Population: A Major Problem of Development

Both China's geography and the size of her population constitute major obstacles to development. For the purpose of this paper, a few statistics suffice to provide a clue to the problem of population.

At present, China's population exceeds 1.13 billion. An increase of 130 million was recorded for the period 1982 to 1990. This is due largely to the slackening of birth control measures especially in rural areas where approximately 80% of

the population lives. The increase represents a birth rate of 15.56 per thousand, 3.56 higher than the planned figure.⁵¹ As of 1990, of the total 400 million farm laborers, 180 million were considered superfluous. It has been estimated that, in order to provide jobs for them in the non-farming sector, an additional 720 billion *yuan* (approximately US\$150 billion) investment is needed. On the other hand, for the past few years, about 4.5 million new urban workers enter the labor market each year creating a further burden for the state.⁵²

On the "quality" side (a term used by the Chinese themselves), the regime has scored a great achievement by reducing illiteracy from the 80% of the Pre-liberation days to the present 15.88%. However, the number of illiterates or semi-illiterates is as high as 35.9% in the countryside. Of China's work force of 500 million, only a tiny 5% are skilled technical personnel. Moreover, with a 13.07% national birth defect rate, there are 30 million people who suffer from hereditary defects. About one fifth of China's families have a member with a debilitating illness. For the care of 2 million mentally retarded owing to hereditary factors, each year the nation needs to spend 10 billion *yuan* (approximately US\$2.1 billion).⁵³

Furthermore, according to an estimation made by the World Bank in 1988, of the 800 million people living in dire poverty all over the world, about 250 million were Chinese. China's own source indicates that, in western China alone, there are some 200 million people living below the poverty line.⁵⁴

The statistics cited above reveal an important fact: Chinese leaders of the present regime, not unlike the "Son of Heaven" in the past, are still preoccupied with carrying out the traditional mandate of feeding and clothing their people. In such a huge land often visited by natural calamities and the consequences of grave human errors, whatever the land produced is largely eaten by its numerous population, and, beyond this, not much is left. Closely linked with the problem of size are other developmental concerns: the lack of infrastructures: modern equipment for telecommunications, energy and transportation--any of which can constitute a developmental bottle neck for China.

In the course of reform and opening to the outside world, hosts of problems and issues emerged. Newspapers and magazines for years have addressed disparity in the development of different regions, unequal distribution, corruption and economic

crimes, gambling, fighting, sabotage, theft, hooliganism, drugs, drinking, pornography, prostitution, egoism and a "money-above-all" attitude. Others of more recent concerns have been become increasingly alarming. One example is the ecological issues, most notably the quick depletion of natural resources (soil, forest ...), air pollution in cities and pollution of waters. For 1988 alone, the ecological damage throughout the whole country amounted to approximately 10% of China's GNP.⁵⁵ Still, compared to the problem of size, such issues seem secondary. Thus, it is perhaps not without a grain of truth that, in November 1991, the State Council's white paper on *Human Rights in China*, pointed out: "To eat their fill and dress warmly were the fundamental demand of the Chinese people who had long suffered cold and hunger." Moreover, "the right to subsistence" is "the foremost human right the Chinese people long fight for."⁵⁶

A Lasting National Agenda

From a long-term perspective, reform, opening and the renewed drive for modernization along with its accompanying crisis can be viewed as the latest episode in China's long quest for modernization. "Modernization is the main thread that runs through China's modern history," as one Chinese scholar noted.⁵⁷ Yet, for China, modernization is only a means and not an end in itself. Rather, her goal is to "make it" -- "to catch up" with the modernized countries in order to restore her balance in terms of her position and role in the world of nations. This is the "unfinished business" that China has been trying to resolve ever since the mid-nineteenth century when she was defeated and humiliated by the advanced, yet, "barbarian" Western powers and later by Japan, her former disciple. This "inner journey" of the nation is revealed by Jiang Zeming in his recent report to the Party Congress: "Modern Chinese history and the realities of the present-day world show that as long as a country is economically backward, it will be in a passive position, subject to manipulation by others,"⁵⁸

The CPC rose to power with the rising tide of Chinese nationalism and by championing the national cause, particularly during the anti-Japanese War (1937-45)⁵⁹. Even during the

Cultural Revolution, China, as the preeminent champion of socialism, sought to be the "Center of World Revolution" ⁶⁰

Circumstances today have dictated that the old version of "Chinese Centralism" is no longer realistic. The Chinese people have realized this even though they may still believe in the superiority of socialism. Instead, a modified version is in the making: China is a member, but a unique member, of the global community, destined to play a unique role commensurate with her "greatness" in terms of her population, geography, long glorious history and cultural tradition. For her, modernization remains the key. The present leadership does not fail to grasp this point: "Nowadays the competition among the various countries is, in essence, a competition of overall national strength." ⁶¹

Given the qualifications required for membership in a global community of modernized countries, China's sense of crisis comes primarily from a realization of her backwardness and her insecurity stemming from her concern for long-term survival. In this context, the CPC has little choice but to champion the national cause: modernization. This was duly recognized by the 14th Party Congress: "A great number of countries and regions, especially our neighbours, are speeding up their development. If we fail to develop our economy rapidly, it will be very difficult for us to consolidate the socialist system and maintain long-term social stability." ⁶²

Limitations of space do not allow me to elaborate on the impact of Hong Kong and Taiwan, both regarded by authorities as "an integral part of China's territory," on China's modernization and the role they might have in the future. I will only say that in the long run it is possible that the CPC will, either because of subjective choice or compelled by the necessity of objective circumstances or both, revert to being a "means" rather than an "end", a condition which has now prevailed for more than four decades. The Party might well become not only "the means," but also "one means" among others. As a matter of fact, this is what has happened to the KMT in Taiwan, which is the CPC's twin party born from the same principle of Leninist Party organization. The position of the CPC then would be decided by its effectiveness in steering the country along the course of modernization.

An Emerging Issue and Agenda

A phenomenon that has surfaced in the course of China's reform and opening to the outside world is the sense of self-doubt which accompanies the current crisis. It is something that has rarely occurred to the Chinese in the past, but it has become increasingly discernible in recent years. Thus, in its last issue of 1989, *China News Analysis* pointed out, "China's identity problem which is the core of its legitimacy difficulties, is manifestly obvious, but few in China dare to give voice to it."⁶³

Earlier Orville Schell, a Western observer wrote:

Filled with self-doubt over the chaos and violence it had visited on the Chinese People ... so that by the mid-80s what it meant to be a citizen of the People's Republic of China was once again up for grabs.... The Party was, of course, aware of the problem, although unwilling to fully confess its own role in the destruction of Chinese culture and its people's national identity.⁶⁴

From a Chinese perspective, this sense of self-doubt can be further spelled out in three ways. The first is doubt over the correctness of the reform strategy. Has not China made some fundamental mistakes in the past? Who (and what) can guarantee, then, that she will be immune from repeating the same mistakes? The second is doubt over the effectiveness of socialism in providing a solution to China's problem. Has not socialism in general come to a dead end? Has not the forty-year practice of socialism proven that it is not particularly workable in China? Lastly, there is a doubt over the values inherent in Chinese culture. Have not China's traditional culture and the structure of rights and obligations based on it proven to be an extra problem, if not a "heavy burden," for China's modernization?⁶⁵ Nicholas Kristof wrote in mid-May 1990:

The loss of faith has been complicated because it has not only discredited China's political leaders but also the value of Chinese the cultural legacy itself. Whatever their political beliefs, China used to share a common pride in a 4,000-year-old heritage, but now more and more intellectuals worry that China's poverty and authoritarianism are rooted in the culture itself.⁶⁶

China's gigantic present and future task is to rebuild her confidence by the creation of a new self-identity. This will in turn enable her to join the international community as a true member without being overburdened and hampered by deep-seated fear and insecurity, which often are little more than the other side of an outmoded superiority (or inferiority) complex, itself a result of past history.

Epilogue

Way back in 1960, the late pioneer China observer, Fr. Laszlo Ladany, commented:

What China... need[s] is a new creative political and legal thinking. But mere thinking and planning would be only a beginning. One would have to go on to implant new general convictions, a new mental outlook concerning the human person, society and political life.... How a renewal will, or can, bring this about, nobody knows.⁶⁷

Do we know better today? What kind of service can, could, and should the Church render to China as she walks her tortuous path towards modernization?

Notes

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7. Laszlo Ladany, *The Communist Party of China and Marxism, 1921-1985: A Self-Portrait*, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1988, p. 174.
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25. *Beijing Review*, Oct.-Nov. 1992, p. 10.
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- 1990, p. 2; Sept. 1990, pp. 8-9.
33. For this and the next few lines, I rely heavily on my previous work which appeared in *China News Analysis*; no. 1407, April 1, 1990, see esp. pp.6-8. See also no 1409, June 1990, pp. 1-3, 7-8.
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